

The Persecuted

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Chapter 1

IT HAD RAINED FOR THREE DAYS. Even the well beaten path running down the centre of the village had turned into a muddy mess. One brave figure marched down the road. The hood of his cloak was pulled deep over his face. The tattered hem of the cloak dragged along the ground, gathering mud and moisture with it. It was not the right length for its wearer. His boots were more mud than leather.

He looked at the signs hanging from the various shops along the street, though he didn't need to do so. Even in the rain the smell led him to the bakery.

The warmth that greeted him when he opened the door was a welcome change to the coldness of his wet clothes. Just as he turned to pull the door shut the rain started to die down.

Figures.

He didn't pull down his hood as he inspected the bakery. There was a counter that separated the customers from the business side of it. There were baskets laid out on tables, filled with various breads and other goods they sold. The smell of it all made his stomach growl.

The owner appeared from the back room with a tray full of fresh bread that still had steam rising from it. He frowned at his customer before putting down the tray.

"What can I do you for young man?" the baker leaned against the counter. He was a big man not only in girth but height as well. Even when he frowned at the mud that had been dragged in you couldn't call him a frightening sight. The flour that had stuck to his skin made him look paler than he should have.

Keeping his hood over his head and looking down he dug some coins from his pocket. A silver head and three copper hands landed on the counter. "I'm travelling so give me what ever you have that stays good for a while. How ever much I can get for that amount."

His voice was on the brink of breaking. The sign of a boy turning into a man.

The baker grabbed the coins and gave his customer a look. He wasn't tall

and underneath the clothes it was hard to tell anything else about him. The way he kept looking down was suspicious though. He wasn't from the town, that was certain.

Still, money was money.

"What's your name boy?" the baker asked as he started gathering what he thought fit the description.

"Adan."

The baker nodded. A good name. "You travelling alone? Where you headed?" He stuffed a piece of flat bread in the wrappings along with the buns he'd already put there.

Don't tell him too much. Don't tell him where you're going. Not that even I know.

"Just me," Adan admitted.

When no reply came to him about the destination the baker shrugged. Some people liked their secrets. "I should warn you, we've had some problems with a bunch of local hoodlums. Young kids like yourself. They like to pick on kids whose parents have sent them out to buy some things. They'll take the money or goods, sometimes rough up those who say no. So watch out for them, you hear?"

The baker wrapped up the goods and handed the package to Adan.

"Thanks for the warning," he said and wrapped the thing in an oiled up cloth before hiding the goods underneath his cloak. Without saying any more he left the shop, leaving the baker shaking his head before returning to his chores.

The rain had completely stopped. Though the sky was still covered in grey clouds, looking at the horizon you could see the blue sky starting to shine through cracks in the clouds.

Damn fall weather. Stops raining just when I could have gotten a roof over my head.

Not that he had money to pay for a room at an inn. He'd spent all his coins on the food. It was best to keep moving. That was the lesson life had taught him.

It wasn't a big town he'd arrived in. Maybe a hundred buildings all together which didn't make it a small one either. Now that the rain had stopped people started to emerge from their houses to tend to chores that had been put on hold.

It made Adan hasten his steps and finally veer off the main street into a smaller, less travelled one. He didn't want to run into anyone.

He navigated through the maze the buildings formed, from one small alley to another. The package under his cloak gave some warmth in the otherwise chilly day. The damp clothes did nothing to help it.

“Well, what do we have here?” came a voice from the shadows. Adan stopped and three boys appeared to block the way out of the alley. Looking back he could see two more behind him.

Shit.

He was trapped.

The biggest of the three boys stepped forward. Adan thought him maybe a year older than him. Broad shoulder and unusual height made him look older. You could tell he'd been put to work by his parents by the muscles on his arms.

“What have you got there under your cloak? Something your parents sent you out to get?”

“It's none of your business,” said Adan, gripping the package tighter.

“Show him what's what, Jerome.” One of the the three in front said.

“Yeah, let's kick his ass,” came a voice from behind Adan.

“You hear my friends here,” said the big one called Jerome. “Everything that happens on this alley is our business. So hand over what you're hiding under there.”

Adan sighed.

Cocky brown eyes are the worst.

“If you want it, come and get it.” Adan moved his hand under the cloak. The package he stuffed under his weaker arm.

Jerome gave his friends a look before stepping forward. He reached out to grab Adan by his hood.

There were three things Adan was good at.

Killing was one of them.

He ducked under the boys arm and pulled out his long knife. It sunk in the boys throat, the sharp side of the blade pointing out. Adan ripped it back towards him, cutting through skin and veins. Blood spewed out.

He'd been quick, but the movements he had to make were enough to throw back his hood. The rest of the boys watched in shocked silence as their leader slumped to the ground, twitching and struggling for air for the last time.

Adan stared right at the two boys in front of him. They stared back, their brow eyes wide.

That's right. Look at my eyes. Realize what I am.

His eyes had brown in them, but that was where the usual appearance stopped. His eyes were like three spoked wheels. Three sections of brown, cut through by three spokes. The first spoke, silver in colour, went straight up from his pupil. The second one, green in colour, went down towards his nose. The third, amber in colour, went down towards his cheekbone. The pattern repeated on both his eyes.

"His eyes!" the other boy in front of him shouted.

Adan glanced back at the two remaining ones. They froze when they saw his eyes. The other one made a sign to ward off evil – with one finger, he drew a circle starting just below his ribcage that covered most of his chest and when he returned to the starting point he whipped the finger straight up towards his throat and right shoulder where the line finally stopped.

A grin passed Adan's lips. He dashed forward towards the boy that had shouted about his eyes.

"Run! Get the adults!" shouted the boy next to him and turned around.

Adan's knife sunk into the gut of the boy who'd noted his eyes. He pulled the blade out and as he passed him sunk it in his back. He hoped to hit a lung. The blade was long enough for it. Not wasting time, he pulled the knife back out and continued running.

The rest of the boys had scattered. He could hear their shouts. He'd soon have the entire town after him.

Always the same. I should have learned by now. Don't visit towns or cities.

He navigated the maze of streets. At least the town didn't have any walls surrounding it so escape was easy enough. He ran past the last building in the more densely built area and ran straight for the forest that started not far away. He'd be able to hide there. And at least he now had some food. The package

remained safely under his weaker arm.

The stretch of land separating him from the forest was easy land to pass. Flat grassland didn't hide many places for you to trip, but at the same time it left him exposed. Anyone looking would see where he was going. The shouts he heard just as the forest swallowed him told his pursuers had seen him.

Hide.

He tried to find a place. The panic of getting caught started to rise within. He knew what they'd do to him. They'd summon a priest of the church to conduct the ritual. He was too old now to be simply killed. No. They'd make a display of it. It would take a long time as they ripped him apart for all to see.

God's justice was never easy on the guilty.

And Adan was guilty. Guilty of being born with unusual eyes. That was all it had taken for his village to turn their back on him. They'd left him in the woods, for the animals to kill and eat.

There.

The tree was large, easy to climb with its low branches. The leaves were still thick on it, though they were losing the lush green and slowly turning to the rusty brown autumn brought out. Climb high enough and they wouldn't see you even if they looked hard. Looking back, Adan was pleased to see no obvious tracks he'd left behind.

He holstered the knife and secured his packet of food under his cloak before starting to climb. The rain had made the tree slippery, but it wasn't the first time Adan had to climb one. He'd grown proficient at it; he knew where to grab and where to put his feet. It wasn't long before he was high above the ground, hidden by layers and layers of leaves.

He found the last thick branch and stopped there. Resting his back against the trunk gave him a comfortable enough position. He steadied his breath and waited. It was all he could do.

I hope they don't have dogs.

He listened closely, ignoring the thumps of his beating heart. There was no sign of a chase.

They were hoodlums. Maybe the villagers didn't believe them.

But he'd killed two of them. They'd find the bodies and no matter what they'd want to catch someone who killed a few of theirs. Towns could be strange like that. They'd hate you for being there, but if some stranger came and relieved you of them, they'd hunt you down just as well. You'd killed one of them after all. Allowing that to go unpunished was not an option.

Noises from the distance made his ears perk up. He strained to hear. Shouts. He couldn't make out what they were saying, but it didn't take a genius to figure that out. They were arranging a search party.

A lynch mob more like it.

His heart skipped a beat when the sound he had feared echoed through the forest. Dogs.

Realizing the tree would offer him little protection against the keen noses of the canines, Adan scampered down the tree. The noises coming closer gave him speed, but made him less attentive. Putting his foot down on a branch had him slip and lose his grip on the tree. He hit the ground hard, back first. It knocked the air out of him and for a moment all he could do was groan and try to pull in air. Forcing himself, he sat up and finally pulled himself up to his feet. The pain in his back made him wince, but with gritted teeth he started forward.

He checked the food package was still there.

At least he had not lost what got him into trouble in the first place.

The barking and howling got closer. Adan hastened his steps.

Climb a tree? What a brilliant idea that was.

A louder than usual bark startled him.

I hate dogs.

He clambered over a fallen tree. A frightened rabbit sprang from its hiding place and rushed into the woods. Adan found himself laughing.

They're hunting me like a rabbit, but I can't hide in a hole.

The sound of rushing water gave him a glimmer of hope. If there was a river he might be able to lose the dogs there. It was a long shot. He'd tried it once before and it had failed miserably. The dogs and the hunters had found him as if the river had not been there. But he believed the mistake was he had not travelled far enough down stream with the river. They'd found the place where

he'd gotten to shore too easily.

Past a few more trees he emerged to see the brown snake that slithered beyond a bend. The water flowed with a certainty and force that made him reluctant to try and brave across it.

Great. I can't cross that.

He looked around. A fallen tree trunk seemed to offer the solution. A portion of it had been broken off, leaving behind a piece of wood that looked light enough for him to move. A few steps took him to it and a test shove had a portion of it splash into the water. Looking around for one last chance to avoid throwing himself at the mercy of the currents he found no hope. The sounds of the chase got closer and closer.

With no more time to waste he pushed, pulled, and shoved the tree trunk until it started to float on its own. The water was up to his knees when he guided the log closer to the centre of the river. A sudden change in depth had him completely submerged and reaching out for the log and the help it offered in staying afloat. He managed to grab hold of it and pull himself to the surface. Gasping for breath and holding to the log with all his strength allowed him to look around.

The strong current had already carried him to the bend in the river. There was no way the people chasing after him would find him if he stayed with the current for a good while.

In a panic he felt around, seeing what he had lost with the water.

The package from the bakery was gone and with it his food for the next few days. The knife was still safely in its place as were the other small items hidden in the pockets of his cloak. They were secured so even water wouldn't wash away the contents.

At least I'm still alive.

It wasn't much consolation when it looked like he'd be starving if the water didn't kill him. Scavenging for food in the woods was hard work in the autumn and he didn't have much in the way of equipment for it. Simple traps might yield some rabbits, but you needed more than meat to keep your teeth from falling off.

With slight worry Adan noticed the current was getting stronger. The log

popped up and down, splashing water over him, sometimes making it hard to maintain a grip. He could see the water rising up in front of him as it washed over rocks.

Great. A rapid.

Bracing himself for the inevitable, Adan grabbed hold of the log the best he could and tried to manoeuvre it so the rocks would smash first into the wood instead of him. It was hard to do in the water and he didn't quite make it in time. The first rock crashed into the log, ripping it from his grip.

Adan crashed into the same rock a moment later. He barely had time to register the pain before the water pushed him off and below the surface. He felt more rocks hitting and scraping him.

His head popped to the surface. A quick gasp for breath was all he managed before the water pushed him below once more.

He hit his head on a rock.

The current carried his limp body onward.

Chapter 2

THERE WERE THREE THINGS ADAN WAS GOOD AT.

Surviving was one of them.

His life had been nothing but survival. He had barely escaped his mothers womb before his father carried him off to the woods for the wolves to eat. The local priest had demanded it and his father being the devout man he was did as told. He'd carried him off to the woods and left him on a small clearing.

He had not even looked back when he'd walked away.

Adan had survived it. None in the village had thought crazy Adele would be wandering around there. She'd heard his cries and taken him in as her own son.

It was the memories of her rambling that finally made Adan snap awake.

His head throbbed. That was the first thing he realized. The second was all the other spots of pain around his body. There'd be bruises for certain, maybe some broken bones.

I'm alive.

Pain always had a way of confirming that to you. There'd be no pain once you died. The Church might have you believing otherwise, but Adan didn't give much value to what the priests taught. They were wrong about him so it stood to reason they would be wrong about other things as well.

Opening his eyes he realized he wasn't where he expected to be. Washed up on the shores of the river was where he expected to be, but instead he found himself in a dimly lit room where the fireplace provided both warmth and light. He laid in bed, under layers of blankets and with a soft pillow under his head. A table sat not far from the fireplace and a window next to it let in some light from behind the shutters. His clothes hung on a string tied to a support pillar and a hook in the wall, by the fire. A door was not far from the window.

Adan tried to sit up, but the effort sent a jolt of pain through his body that made him yelp. He lurched down into the bed, breathing heavily, grimacing with eyes closed.

He heard the door open. Footsteps went to where the fireplace was. Chunks

of wood clattered as they were piled into their storage place.

What to do? If they wanted me dead I'd be dead. No reason to think they're out to harm me.

Adan started to open his eyes.

Everyone is always out to hurt me.

That single thought made him close his eyes again.

"You awake boy?" The voice was that of an old man. Footsteps came closer. Adan felt the blanket lifted. Fingers grabbed the skin of his arm and twisted.

He had no choice.

With a yelp his eyes opened and stared up at the dark bearded man. He was younger than his voice would have had you thinking. His black hair hung on both sides of his face, desperately begging for a good wash. The beard covered much of his face, but you could tell his nose had been broken at some point and he hadn't had anyone to set it properly. Brown eyes stared down at him.

"So, you're a World Destroyer?"

Adan didn't reply. There was no use denying it. He'd seen his eyes.

The man smiled briefly. "Nothing to say to the man who saved your life?"

That's right. He saved me despite knowing who I am. If he wanted me dead he'd have let the river do its job.

"Thanks." It was said in a low tone while looking down. He'd grown accustomed to not looking at people directly. It was a condition pounded in by survival instincts.

The man grunted and walked away. "My name is Gan. This is my cabin. You're welcome to stay here until you get yourself healed up."

Adan looked up. Gan was by the fireplace, ladling soup from a black iron pot that hung over it. "Why?"

Gan walked over and offered the bowl of steaming soup to him. Adan pushed himself against the head of the bed so he sat up. The man looked at his grimace, but didn't offer to help. Finally, Adan grabbed the bowl and stirred it around with the wooden spoon. He didn't recognize half the things in it, but at least it smelled edible.

He took a spoonful and didn't find the taste too offending.

"I'm not like the Church, boy. I don't judge you just because you were born with different eyes than the rest of us. This whole 'they will destroy the world' nonsense is just that, nonsense. At least until you decide to actually do it. Then I'll believe them."

"I'm not going to destroy the world," said Adan and looked down into his bowl.

Gan laughed and took a seat by the table. "Tell me, what can you do? Do you have the strength of ten men? Can you create fire out of thin air? Does looking into your eyes send men's souls straight into Desolations arms?"

Adan knew the stories. Rumours. Lies the church told of people like him. None of it was true.

"I'm not special," he said and took a spoonful of the soup. His stomach was starting to get full and that had him feeling a bit better about everything. "All I can do is run and survive."

"Not the skills with which to destroy the world then," said Gan, amused.

"Why aren't you afraid of me?" asked Adan and gave the man a look. "Everyone else is. The moment they see my eyes everyone turns from friendly to bloodthirsty."

Gan snorted. "Bunch of brainwashed gullible fools. They follow blindly the words of priests, not questioning what they're asked to do and why. I'm not like that."

Adan examined the man more closely. The lighting wasn't the best, but he did manage to get a glimpse of his forehead from under the long hair. The brand on his forehead told the story behind his attitude.

"You're an outcast?"

Gan grinned again. "Sharp eyes you've got there, boy. You're right. The Church cursed me and the villagers drove me to the woods. So here I live."

"What did you do?"

The man shrugged. "I asked too many questions. The priests don't like that. It's not a big enough offence to rile up people into killing you, but it's enough to get you branded an outcast. For many that's as good as death. But not me. I know how to get by on my own."

Adan ate the last of his soup. Though his host was an outcast there was still little reason to trust him. The brand on his forehead was real, but it wouldn't be the first time an outcast did something to try and get back in the good graces of the Church. At least he spoke with enough bitterness to be convincing, but it was better to be cautious than simply trust them based on one conversation.

“How did you end up in the river?” asked Gan after the silence had grown uncomfortably long. For a hermit he was talking a lot. Maybe he had some bottled up need to hear another humans voice.

“I was chased by some villagers,” said Adan. There was no reason to hide that fact, though he decided it was best not to tell the man he'd killed two kids to start it all. Best he thought it was because of the eyes. “I made the mistake of going to town to buy some fresh bread with money I'd gotten. They found me out.” He also decided it was best to not tell how he'd gotten the money.

“So they cornered you and the river was your only escape?”

Adan nodded. “I had a log to keep me afloat, but then the rapids came and I lost it all. Even the food I'd bought.”

Gan shook his head. “You're lucky to be alive. That river is dangerous not just because of the rapids, but because the flow is strong and there are currents that can suck a grown man under.”

“I'm good at that. Surviving.”

Gan laughed. “Well, being what you are, you'd need to be to live as old as you have. Most don't get past their second breath.”

“You're really going to let me stay here until I heal?” The promise made sounded incredible.

“I told you so, didn't I?” said Gan. “No one comes around here. Some blue eyes maybe pass through on their hunt, but they won't even notice. You'd think they're blind to us brown eyes.”

Blue eyes. Nobles. They ruled the land. If you were one of them you were guaranteed a good life amongst riches the brown eyes could only dream of. You'd have land and a station that would open the doors of the royal court to you. You would be respected. All because you were born with blue eyes.

Because the Church told they were the chosen ones by God.

Adan had never run into them, but he was certain it would not be a pleasant experience. The brown eyes were bad enough.

Gan gave him a look over. "Get some rest, kid. You were pretty banged up by the rocks. I figure you have a broken rib and enough bruises to make people think the plague has you. I'll be outside working."

With that the old man stood up and walked out, not giving Adan a chance to say anything. Still, with a full stomach he felt like sleeping anyway. So he settled into the bed and closed his eyes.

I'll take up your offer, old man. But if you try anything I'll slit your throat.

It was two days before he felt good enough to get out of bed. Gan appeared now and then, often only to prepare food and to eat and then he'd be off again. Where he slept was a mystery since as far as Adan could tell he never came back for the night. Maybe he slipped in after he'd fallen asleep, but given how much noise the door made when opened it seemed unlikely. The metal hinges were rusty and the last time they saw oil was probably when they'd been put in place.

When Gan was in the small cabin the two didn't talk much. It made for an uncomfortable atmosphere, but Adan was used to being on his own and not having someone to talk to. The same could be said of the hermit.

It was the morning of the third day, a while after the two had eaten breakfast, that Adan decided it was time to get out of bed. He'd gotten rid of his sleep debt and started to feel itchy all over. He needed something to do or his body would become a prison.

So he clambered out of bed and pulled on his now well dried set of clothes, including the cloak. His knife was there as well so he put it in its usual place. Checking the pockets of the cloak he was pleased to find many of the small items still there – flint to start a fire and other such nicknack's that anyone wandering the wilderness would find useful.

The pain in his leg made him limp a bit as he made his way to the door. It wasn't broken, but the bruise on it would have made even a seasoned healer raise an eyebrow. He was greeted by a thick forest all around when he stepped outside. To the left from the door there was a pile of logs and chopped up wood as well as an axe that had been struck into a large piece of a trunk, used as a work surface

when chopping wood.

To the right he could see a small stream run right past the cabin. It was barely wide enough for Adan to stick his foot in it, but the flow of water was strong so it was plenty for the needs of Gan.

Adan walked around the cabin, getting to know his surroundings. It wasn't a big cabin even from the outside. The old timber used to build it had turned a dull grey and the roof looked like it had been stitched plenty of times. Still, if Gan had built the place all on his own then he was a skilled man.

Behind the cabin he found a clearing that had neat rows ploughed into it. Some still had green bits growing out of them. A garden of some sort. You could get the meat from the forest with traps and hunting, but the woods offered little in terms of vegetables. Growing your own was the best way to get them reliably without having to go into town too often.

A man banished by the Church had as much risk in doings so as Adan did if he walked in openly and let everyone see his eyes.

There was no sign of Gan anywhere.

Probably off trying the traps.

That was the second thought Adan had. His first had been the old man going to town to try and sell him out. But he'd dismissed it. It would have been easier to do that the days he'd spent in bed.

Adan took in a deep breath of the fresh air. It was a cloudy day, but at least it wasn't raining. The wind was barely enough to make the very tips of the trees bend. He spotted a large rock by the small stream that looked perfect for sitting down and reflecting on the world around you. He hobbled over to it and found himself a comfortable position. His leg complained for a while before being satisfied that it wouldn't be receiving any more strain just yet.

It was calming to listen to the voices of nature – the birds, the wind rustling the leaves, the babbling of the creek – but none of that made the world seem any more just to Adan. Why did he have to be hated by everyone just because his eyes were different? He couldn't help it. Saying his eyes determined what he would become seemed so wrong to him.

That's why the Church hates me. I don't belong in any of their predefined

categories. So they made up a new one to keep their system running.

The Church believed the eyes were the window to God's will. Those with blue eyes were the ones who got the most blessings from him and thus ruled the world. Those with brown eyes were mundane, best suited for farm work and other physical labour. The highest one of them could hope to get was advancing through the ranks of the Church, but they would find themselves unable to advance to the position of bishop or higher.

Then there were the green eyes who were rare, but had the opportunity to be nearly anything they wanted to be. They were a special class, but they weren't blue eyes. Despite the opportunities they had, they would never rule lands and while the nobles would treat them with the respect their station afforded them, they were still looked down upon.

Finally, there were the rarest of the rare – the amber eyes. Some said they didn't exist, but the streak in Adan's eyes was proof that they did. There were stories of babies born with amber eyes. They were all the same. The moment the baby lets out its first cry there's a knock on the door. A group of hooded men who demand you give them your child. Those that agree live. Those that do not, die and the baby is taken anyway.

It was said the hooded men had amber eyes as well.

But no one ever saw them. The stories were all that was told of them. Officially, the Church had no position on people with amber eyes. If such a person was born they'd likely be clumped up with the brown eyes, left to live a menial life of labour.

But at least they'd have a life.

I have a life. It's just not a very good one.

Adan smiled to himself.

“You're up and about then, eh, boy?”

Gan had two rabbits in one hand and an axe in the other. It wasn't the sort meant for cutting wood. It was made to chop up people.

“Can't spend the rest of my life in bed,” said Adan, feeling grateful for being pulled away from the world thinking.

“That's for the blue eyes, that is,” said Gan with a grin and stopped by the

rock. He laid out the rabbits next to Adan. There wasn't much meat to them, but with the addition of some vegetables from the garden you could make a stew out of them and it'd be enough to fill both their stomachs.

"I doubt even they're that lucky," said Adan. Even if you were a noble you still had obligations. You couldn't spend all day in bed. Of course, the duties you had weren't as physical as the brown eyes. Maybe you'd need to go on a ride with some noble woman you were trying to impress or go on a hunt with friends.

Gan grunted and look up to the sky. "Rain coming soon. Not long until winter blows in."

Adan didn't say anything. He knew full well the cold months were not far away. He'd survived plenty of them so he wasn't too worried even though this time around he'd run into some bad luck and had less time to prepare.

"How do you figure on surviving?" Gan looked at him curiously.

Adan shrugged. "I'll figure something out. I always do. Find some good place to camp out, with plenty of passers by to rob."

"So you're a thief now?"

"Not much choice for someone like me." It was how he'd gotten the coins he'd used to buy food in the village. It had been a lonely traveller. His body had probably been picked clean by now by the animals. The cloak was his too, as were many other items Adan had on him.

There was a silence and when Adan glanced at Gan he seemed to be thinking of something.

Please don't offer me to stay the winter.

"Well, seeing as we're both outcasts, you're welcome to stay here the winter. Or how ever long you want to."

Shit.

It wasn't that Adan didn't appreciate the offer, but when ever he had settled down somewhere it had always ended up badly for the one offering him shelter. There was no happiness to be had with him around. Things would turn to ashes eventually.

"I'll think about it," said Adan, not wanting to turn down the offer without thinking. Maybe staying just for the winter would work. He didn't have any better

place to go and few people were brave enough to venture in the woods when the snow reached your waist. It was unlikely his presence would cause Gan trouble, save for the amount of supplies they'd need to gather for it to last for two people.

"Don't think too long," said Gan. "There may still be leaves in the trees, but the snow will soon come. Won't have much time to get the extra supplies we'd need if there's two of us."

"I won't," Adan assured him. He wasn't the type to mull on a decision for too long. If anything the opposite was true; he'd rush straight in without thinking things over enough.

"You know how to use that knife of yours?" asked Gan.

"You know how to use that axe of yours?" asked Adan and glanced at the weapon. It had two blades, one meant for attacking and a second, smaller one that reached almost all the way down the handle. It was meant for blocking attacks and making smaller wounds in enemies. It was the sort of weapon you didn't want to face off.

Gan grinned. "Kid, I was a soldier for ten years. I could teach you a few things about fighting." He threw the rabbits on the stone next to Adan. "See if you can skin those. I'll go chop up some more wood. We'll eat some stew today."

Adan nodded and pulled out his knife. Skinning rabbits wasn't an unfamiliar task to him. No one had taught it to him. He'd figured it out all by himself. He'd wasted plenty of good meat before figuring out the best way to do it. Though when you were hungry you weren't too concerned if a few coarse hairs ended up in your mouth.

He started cutting through the skin, pulling and tugging it where needed to reveal the red meat underneath. He did his best to keep the fur intact. While he wasn't an expert on preserving them he'd found a few tricks here and there that would keep them in decent condition for at least one winter. Sew together enough rabbit skins and you'd have a decent base for any piece of clothing. They wouldn't be the warmest, but enough to keep you from freezing out right.

The sound of axe hitting wood told him Gan had done as he said. Given the pile of wood he already had it seemed like he was doing the chopping for nothing, but Adan figured he knew best how much wood they'd need for the

winter.

Adan sneered.

They. So I've made my decision.

He scooped out the innards from the second rabbit and did some more cleaning before going down to the small creek and rinsing the carcasses quickly in it. Maybe it wasn't what seasoned hunters would do, but he'd found it got rid of the stray hairs and grime that still remained on the meat. He rinsed the knife in the water before putting it in its holster. He then walked over to the cabin with the two ready rabbits in hand.

"Where do you want these?" he asked Gan.

"Hang them on those hooks," said Gan and pointed to a row of metal hook hanging from the lip of the roof. Adan tied a piece of rope around each rabbits legs and hang them from the hooks. Red water dripped from them.

Gan chopped up another piece of wood before striking the axe in its place and turning to take a look at their dinner. He nodded in approval. "Not bad. The skins?"

"At the rock. Shouldn't be too badly damaged."

The man nodded again. "You know how to survive in the woods?"

Adan shrugged. "I've learned as I've gone."

"Man's instinct for survival pushes us towards the right things."

"I'm going to accept your offer," said Adan.

Gan raised an eyebrow. "Which one?"

"I'll stay the winter," said Adan, not certain what the other offer had been.

Gan nodded. "Good. We'll get to putting together our supplies tomorrow. Once snow falls we'll have time to see about that other offer."

"What offer?"

Gan grinned. "To teach you how to fight."

Chapter 3

(Memories)

THERE WERE THREE THINGS Adan was good at.

Remembering was one of them.

Most people didn't remembering much from their early childhood, but Adan remembered everything. His first memories were from being in his mothers womb, hearing the mumbled voices from the outside, but most of all the steady heart beat of his mother. It sang him to sleep and was a source of comfort when he was awake. The warmth that surrounded him was so perfect he wished never to let go of it.

It was probably why most people didn't remember any of it. The shock of entering the world was a trauma best forgotten.

It was cold. Gone was the warmth surrounding him, the steady rhythm of his mothers heartbeat. The midwife lifted him up by the lags and swatted his back a couple of times.

Adan cried and kept his eyes shut.

“Good lungs,” said the midwife and took a more gentle hold of him. She set him down on the bed and started working on the umbilical cord. “You have a son.”

“Is he all right?” Adan heard his mothers voice, strained and weakened by the ordeal of giving birth to him. He recognized the voice even though it was different from what he'd hear before. It wasn't muffled.

The midwife finished with the umbilical cord and started to examined Adan more closely. She pried open his eyelid to check his eyes. She jumped back, making the sign to thwart off evil. “God save us,” she muttered and stared at Adan, wide eyed.

“What is it?” his mother asked, panic coming through in her voice.

“His eyes!” the midwife cried out, her voice near panic. “I need to get the priest. The priest.” She scrambled out of the room, leaving Adan and his mother alone.

He stopped crying and opened his eyes to look around the new place. His mothers face appeared over him. He smiled. She looked terrified. He'd never forget that look.

“What have I done?” his mother said to herself. “What have I brought into this world?”

“Is everything all right? The midwife ran out blabbering like..” It was his father. He stepped into the room through the door the escaping woman had left open. He stopped short when he saw the expression on his wife. “What is it?”

“His eyes,” said Adans mother, voice breaking. She looked away.

Another face appeared above him. The look of shock was even more profound than on his mother.

“God help us,” his father muttered and looked away. His shoulders shuddered.

Adan's mind couldn't comprehend it all at the time. It was only later when he dug through the memories that he understood. The parents that had loved him without seeing him had turned their backs on him when they'd seen his eyes. The teaching of the Church were so deeply ingrained that they over rode the parental instincts every living thing had. They didn't even touch him. They didn't dare, out of fear he'd somehow infect them with something.

They huddled together, his father doing his best to reassure his mother she had done nothing wrong. It was not her fault. She feared she had done something to anger the God, to bring the disaster on them. They feared what the other villagers would think of them when word got out. Would they need to move to live a normal life?

The priest rushed in, cheeks red, breathing heavy. His robes were a mess. He'd hurried over. A short moment later the midwife came in as well.

The pudgy face of the priest appeared over Adan. He smiled at him and tried to reach for the pendant than hung around his neck. The gold glittered in the light so enticingly. The priest pulled back, eyes wide.

“Well,” the priest started and glanced at Adan once more. He made the sign to thwart off evil.

“Father, what do we do?” asked Adan's father. “Is my wife going to be all

right?"

"Ah, yes, your wife is going to be fine," said the priest and motioned for the midwife to tend to her. "This..this evil that has befallen you is only in the child."

"Why, father? Why us?" It was Adan's mother who asked the question.

The priest wiped some sweat from his brow. "Why does God allow anything to happen? Only he knows. All we, the faithful, can do, is live according to his teachings the best we can. If I didn't know you I might be inclined to think you have strayed from his teaching in some way and this is your punishment for it, but I know. You are good people. So this must be the work of the evil forces. They want you to abandon the right path and join their ranks by saving your own child."

"We will not stray," Adan's father assured. "The tricks of evil are powerful, but we will stand up to them."

The priest nodded with a smile. "Such faith will keep you strong through all this." He glanced down at Adan, the smile melting away into a frown.

"What do we do with it, father?" Adan always remembered that question from his father. He was no longer a person in his eyes. He was an it, like a diseased dog or a pig to an farmer. He wasn't human. It took him years to realize how quickly his parents had abandoned him and stopped caring what would happen.

"The Church doctrine is clear. We must kill it."

"How?"

"Never mind how, just take that thing away from me," Adan's mother cried out. The midwife did her best to calm her.

Adan's father stepped up to him and grabbed him. His hold was not gentle when he picked him up. It was a hold meant to keep him in place. It made Adan cry again.

"I'll take him to the forest. The animals will take care of him," said his father.

"That is an acceptable way of doing it," the priest agreed. "I will come with you to ensure everything goes as it should."

The priest did not trust Adan's father to be able to carry out the task. It wasn't a big surprise given the pervasive nature of the Church and how it

impacted the lives of people. They would keep an eye on everyone if they had the manpower to do so.

The cold air of the night felt even worse than the relative warmth of his parents cabin. His father had not bothered wrapping him into anything so he felt the full chill of it. The senses of a baby weren't the most accurate so he did not remember much about the walk. His father and the priest did not speak to each other.

In the darkness all he could see were shapes. Trees, bushes that looked like things from nightmares in the lamp light. The priest cursed a few times when his robe got stuck on something. How long they walked was hard to say. The sense of time would come only later.

Finally, they stopped at a clearing. His father walked to the middle of it and placed him on a large stone that stood there. Adan remembered the cold rough surface under his back. It made him cry again.

“This should do it,” said his father. The priest appeared with his lamp.

“There are wolves around,” said the priest and nodded. “A bear was sighted near here not long ago. The cries should attract them. We will come check in a day or two to make certain.”

Adan's father nodded. They said nothing more before turning away and leaving the crying baby alone in the darkness. The footsteps going further away was a sound that would haunt Adan's dreams for the rest of his life.

The sounds of the forest surrounded him. The owl letting out its cry, the sound of something moving in the bushes, low growls and frightened noises made by the prey of predators. It was a cacophony that stilled Adan's cries. Being silent was probably what allowed him to live until dawn without being discovered by anything more dangerous than a curious squirrel.

When the darkness started to withdraw in the face of the rising sun, a new sound appeared. It got closer and the words became distinguishable.

“What? No. No no no. It can't be that. Yes. No. I don't know.”

It was like someone was having a conversation with someone he could not hear. The voice came closer and the discussion continued as disjointed as it had first appeared. The footsteps brought her next to Adan and finally the haggard

face of a woman appeared above him.

She had black hair that had not seen a brush in years. Dark eyes looked down at him, surrounded by a face with patches of dirt on it. The robe she had on had been patched more than a few times in the small area of what was visible.

“What are you? Why are you here?” the woman asked and glanced around.

Adan let out the sort of mishmash of a giggle and laugh that babies did. He tried to reach up and grab hold of a long strand of hair that hung close to him when she leaned down.

“What?” the woman cried out and turned around. “I can't take him. No. No. Fuck you.”

She mulled for a moment before leaning back towards Adan. She stared straight into his eyes. “The eyes. See? The eyes. That's why he's here. He's waiting for the wolves.”

She shot back up again and walked around the stone. She muttered to herself low enough that Adan couldn't hear what was being said. She waved her hands around as if arguing with someone. Finally, she stopped and gave him one more long look before leaning and picking him up. She brushed a dirty finger down his cheek.

“Ssh. Don't cry, Adan. I'm here now. Adele is going to look after you.”

So he had survived the night to end up at the hands of a mad woman.

It could have been worse.

The wolves could have gotten him.

Chapter 4

THE WINTER TURNED out to be a harsh one. The first snowfall put down enough snow for it to be ankle high. The second one brought the layer of white to Adan's knees and the third one put it up to his chest. Venturing out into the woods to hunt for what ever animals remained became difficult and the two of them found themselves practically isolated in the little cabin.

But they had prepared well.

The cellar beneath the cabin was filled with potatoes, carrots and other goods that would last them well into spring and leave them with seed for the garden. The few times Gan went out to hunt and caught himself a deer or some larger animal were bright moments in the otherwise dark days. The benefit of winter was they could keep the meat for a longer time, ration it and not have to prepare it all in one go.

That left them with days and hours with little to do. They were but a few weeks into the winter when Gan proposed teaching him what he knew of fighting. Seeing as there was nothing else to do Adan agreed. The old man made a couple of practice swords out of wood and soon they were fencing each other in the middle of the cabin. As the dark months progressed so did Adan's skills. Gan taught him about fighting with knives, axes, swords – everything they could make up to practice with.

It was relatively light training, but with the combination of being fed properly and having exercise, Adan began to turn from a lanky boy into a young man that had muscle in his arms and tolerance for pain thanks to the many hits from Gan's practice sword.

It was the middle of winter when Gan finally started asking him questions.

“How old are you, boy?”

Adan wiped some sweat from his brow and put down the wooden sword. The fire kept the cabin warm enough and when you'd practised for a few hours you had more than your fair share of sweat coming out of your body.

Adan shrugged. “I don't know. Fourteen maybe?”

He'd never really thought about it. He'd had more important things to worry about. Like surviving and finding his next meal.

"About to be a man then," said Gan. Sweat ran down his forehead. The training was doing him good as well though not as visibly as the younger man.

"I guess," said Adan and walked over to the table. He grabbed a mug and gulped down some of the icy water. One of the benefits of winter. You could just step outside and grab yourself a mug full of snow and a moment later have a refreshing drink.

"What do you plan to do when spring comes?"

Adan gave the old man a glance. He hadn't thought about it yet. The small cabin was starting to feel like home and Gan wasn't bad company. He had plenty to teach him and any advantage he could gain in the world was welcome.

"I don't know," he admitted and took another gulp of water before setting down the mug.

"You could stay here," Gan offered. "I'm not getting any younger and could use the help of someone like you."

Adan shook his head. "Staying put is not safe for me. Eventually, someone will see me and then I need to run. The more time you've spent somewhere the harder it is to leave it behind."

"You're very pessimistic about the world." Gan squinted as he looked at him.

"Can you blame me?" Adan asked.

The bearded man shook his head. "I suppose I can't."

They dropped the conversation there and started practising again.

Days passed. The routine remained the same. The more time passed the more the two shared of themselves with each other. For Adan it was relieving to be finally able to tell someone of the hardships he'd endured in his life. At the same time it was sobering to hear Gan's story. He wasn't the only person in the world the Church had screwed over.

"I served in the forces of Duke Garamond," said Gan and sat down by the fire. He'd constructed a crude chair from pieces of wood. It was held together by nothing more than straps of leather and some wooden pegs, but it held his weight, albeit with a slight creak.

“It wasn't a bad time. A soldier's life is mostly waiting with brief moments of pure terror scattered in. With no war going on the job was easy. Patrol the countryside, round up the occasional group of bandits, that sort of thing. The nights you spent in relatively comfortable barracks, drinking and playing dice with your comrades, your friends. It wasn't a bad life.”

“What changed it?” asked Adan.

Gan sighed and prodded the fire with a piece of wood before tossing it in. “Some cunt of a count decided he knew better than the duke. He proclaimed his lands to be independent of his rule. That's something that would get the attention of even the king so the duke took care of it. He marched his troops there and burned everything to the ground. ”

“Blue eyes political games,” said Adan with disgust.

“They rarely pay for it,” said Gan. “All we slaughtered were brown eyes. They were just doing what their lord told them to, but we killed them anyway. We burned farm houses with women and children still in them. It's the sort of work that puts your faith to the test. What sort of god would allow such things to happen?”

“The god of the Church has no problem killing people,” Adan noted. It was true. There were plenty of instances in the scriptures detailing how a village was wiped off the map by god's wrath or a father was forced to kill his son to prove his faith.

“If there is a god he's a bastard all right,” said Gan and stared into the fire. “The good thing about the duke's forces was they were all voluntary. You signed up for a year and renewed the contract if you wanted to. So after that operation with the count was over I didn't renew my contract. Was getting close to thirty at the time so it was a good time to leave anyway. Didn't raise too many eyebrows. Men at that age usually get the urge to find a woman they can settle down with. That was my plan too.”

Adan looked around. He sat by the table, drinking his cold water. “Didn't work like you planned it?”

Gan chuckled. “No, no it didn't. Even before I joined with the duke's forces I was sceptical of the Church teachings. After the ten years I spent there, I was

certain the Church was full of shit. I didn't hide that too well. In the little town where I went to, it wasn't easy to hide. In the big city I might have gotten away with it. I couldn't keep my mouth shut.”

“It's a good skill to have,” said Adan.

Gan nodded. “I moved to a little town. Not that far from here, actually. Got some work on a farm. Good honest living for a brown eye. The rest of the lot were religious to the core. Hard to find people in a small town that aren't. The local priest was a nice enough man, tolerated my shit for longer than most. But I crossed the line.”

“So they made you an outcast?” asked Adan. The details of the exact words said didn't matter. You didn't need to say much to upset the Church, though often the most devout followers were the ones who ended up demanding your head on a platter and the priests came out as the reasonable ones.

All part of the plan.

“Yeah. I said some words to the priest. Got over heard by the town zealot. It was downhill from there. Bastards dragged me to the centre of town and branded me in front of everybody. Kicked me out after that. Threw stones and rotten food at me.”

“At least they didn't kill you,” said Adan. Had it been him the town folk would have torn him to shreds the moment they saw his eyes. In that sense their situations were different. Gan had caused his own. Adan was blameless in his.

“There's that,” Gan agreed and threw another piece of wood into the fire. The man stood up and grabbed his practice sword. “Come on. Let's work out the frustration remembering this all has brought out.”

Adan nodded and so they practised, like they did the day after that and the day after that.

By the time the first signs of spring started to roll over Adan felt comfortable calling Gan a friend. He trusted him, knowing his past now and how he felt about the Church. He would not turn him in even if it meant he'd be able to return to a normal life.

The snow melted away gradually and the small creek by the cabin unfroze. The birds that had flown away for the winter started to return. The forest began

to come back to life with small animals crawling out from their winter nests and larger animals appearing more frequently.

Gan and Adan moved their training to the outside. Moving in the open sunlight instead of the stuffy air of the cabin was a joy. The cool air also kept the worst of the sweat away.

“So, have you decided what you will do?” asked Gan as the two locked wooden swords and tested their strength. Over the winter Adan had gained muscle, but he was still no match for the bigger man so he jumped back, hoping he'd lose balance.

He didn't.

“What do you mean?” asked Adan as he blocked a swing aimed at his head.

“Where will you go?” Gan swung his wooden sword in a wide arch in front of him, forcing the younger man to jump back again.

Adan stopped for a moment to catch his breath. “The winter hasn't been bad.” He charged after having said that.

Gan nodded and parried off his attack. “Aye. Been one of the better ones for myself as well.”

The two exchanged blows, neither landing a hit on the other. There had been plenty of that when they'd started. Adan had had bruises all over his body during the first month. The old man didn't conserve his strength even against a lesser opponent. It meant Adan had to really work to keep himself from being beaten sore every day. It made him improve faster.

They parted and stared at each other. A small smile lingered on both their lips.

“I'll stay with you, old man,” said Adan. He had pondered the question all winter and the more time he spent with him the more clear the answer had become. Bad experiences from the past were put aside by the trust he'd extended towards the man.

Gan failed to hide his surprise at the announcement, but it soon melted into a smile. “Good. I was starting to get tired of the hermit life.”

“Some hermit you are with your farmer friend,” said Adan with a grin. Gan had revealed how he got most of the supplies he couldn't forage from the forest.

An old military friend of his lived on a nearby farm and in exchange for some furs he'd go to town and buy what Gan needed. So they could get nails and just about anything else they needed, including seed for their small garden should the need arise.

Gan shrugged. "Can't get everything out of the forest."

It was true enough. Though you could get by scavenging there were things you were better off getting from town. Most everything a blacksmith could do fell into that category.

"So what do you do in summers?" asked Adan. His sword tip fell to point towards the ground.

"Get ready for winter," said Gan. It didn't sound like he was joking.

"No rest for those trying to live on their own," said Adan.

"No rest for the living," Gan corrected.

"Rest when you're dead," said Adan.

"With my luck some god will fuck that up too," muttered Gan and made the younger man chuckle.

They continued practising, but the further along spring got the more they had other chores to tend to. When the snow melted off the roof of their cabin there were some repairs to be done to it. When the ground melted it was time to start preparing the field for planting. There was hunting to be done and while Adan knew how to make a snare there were many tricks Gan passed on to him that would make catching prey that much more likely.

"I'm going to visit that friend of mine," Gan said one morning. "We need some tools and we've got plenty of furs to trade in."

Adan nodded. "Can I come with you?"

They had just finished eating breakfast. The windows shutters were open, revealing the start of what would be a beautiful day. It was a good day for the journey. It'd take the old man three to four days for the entire thing and staying alone at the cabin for so long made Adan feel nervous.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," said Gan. "He tolerates me, but if he saw your eyes he'd call the soldiers on you in a heart beat. Best you stay here where it's safe."

Adan felt a slight sting for the remark, but he couldn't blame the man for speaking the truth. No matter how good a friend might be, his eyes would strike fear into them and that fear would drive them to the Church. It was best to stay behind.

An hour later he watched Gan disappear into the forest, furs strapped to his back along with a bag to carry the few days worth of food and water he needed. For a moment he just stared into the woods, not sure what to do. The place was his for the next few days. He had a list of chores that would keep him busy, but there was plenty of free time to be had.

Adan walked over to the large stone by the creek and sat down to enjoy the day. Now that he thought about it, he'd been to a similar place before. It reminded him of the place he'd spent his first years. All the memories he had weren't bad. There had been good times, short as they may have been. The winter he'd just survived could be counted among the good ones.

His experience of good never lasting had him shaking his head.

Don't think about it. Live in the moment. For now.

He spent a moment more resting on the rock before getting up. There was work to be done and it would keep his mind from wandering to the doubts and fears that festered inside him.

Chapter 5

(Memories)

ADAN HATED GOAT MILK. It made his early years cranky as it was all the crazy woman who had turned into his mother had to offer him. Adele had her little hut deep in the forest, hidden away behind thick bushes and hard to travel terrain. She did not want anyone finding her.

For the first years Adan rarely got to see the outside. Adele would come and go, constantly holding the conversation with her invisible tormentor. Sometimes she would shout and throw things, sometimes she'd be blushing and giggling like a girl being courted. Adan's cries over the goat milk never caught much attention from her. Sometimes she'd frown at him and shush him, but other than that she was content to leave him be for long stretches of time.

Things changed only when Adan started to walk and talk. Despite being what she was, she kept a close eye on him, never letting him get into trouble. She named him Adan and taught him how to talk. Given her distractions the lessons were brief which was all good and proper since Adan could focus only for so long before something new caught his attention and he'd run off to explore.

"Who do you talk to?" It was the first real tough question Adan asked. They were sitting inside the little hut, enjoying the freshly caught fish Adele had managed in the morning.

Adele leaned in closer and stared at him. There were twigs in her shaggy hair and it was hard to tell whether it was naturally black or just that dirty. "Don't you see him?"

Adan picked at his fish and looked around the small hut. There was barely room for a third person and all he saw was the fireplace, the dried herbs hanging from the ceiling and the pots and pans that had been used to cook their meal. He shook his head.

Adele sighed. "No one sees him. But I do. I see him. He talks to me. Tells me things. Tells me what to do. He told me to save you. Told me to keep you safe."

She continued to babble on. She sometimes did that when the right thing

was said. Her hands twitched and the words flowed out of her mouth without a filter.

Adan continued eating his fish. His clothes were simple fur and leather, sown together by rough threads Adele made from the young saplings of a certain tree.

“No. No. He asked a question. I answered,” Adele continued mumbling to herself, shaking her head while she ate the fish. Suddenly, she burst out into laughter, scaring Adan.

“You remember this Adan,” said Adele once her laughter died down. She stared at him with eyes that seemed more lucid than usual. “The Church wants you dead. Never trust them. Priests. They're your enemies. Everyone outside this hut. They're your enemies. There are no friends for you.”

Adan frowned. Hearing at his age that the entire world wanted you dead was not something he could wrap his head around. He remembered the way his parents had reacted and what the priest had said, but he couldn't fully comprehend what it all meant.

“You're not my enemy,” said Adan and stared at her with his moist eyes.

The woman burst into laughter. It was only years later than Adan learned to recognize the lack of sanity in it.

“I'm just a crazy woman,” said Adele after the laughter died down once more. “Trusting someone crazy is the worst mistake you can make.”

The words left Adan feeling uneasy.

She started arguing with her invisible friend once more.

Even though he had not interacted with people other than Adele, he knew well she was not normal. He had the memories of his parents and the priest and while it had been brief, it was clear to even him they were different from her. The full extent of it remained a mystery for years to come, but it left him with enough not to be completely drawn in by her madness.

The older Adan grew the more freedom he got. At the age of six Adele let him wander into the woods all by himself. It opened up a whole new world to him and he'd often leave after breakfast and only return once the sun started to set. The forest became like a home to him. He knew the animals, not because someone

told him about them, but because he spent time watching them. He knew where to get water, what places to avoid so the bears and wolves didn't find him. He had close brushes with death while finding it all out, but it also gave him the tools to deal with it all.

By the time he was ten he walked the forest like he owned it. He'd grown into a boy that looked well fed, but like someone who spent most of his days out in the woods or working. His hair was a mess and he had dirt on him most of the time, but other than that you couldn't have told him apart from any normal kid. His hair was long and tangled, much like Adele's. She had told him it would let him cover his eyes if the need ever rose.

But Adan wasn't the only one who changed over the years that passed. He had to see Adele descend further and further into her madness. In the end there were days when she was in her own world, never ceasing to talk to her invisible friend. She'd barely have the wherewithal to eat and drink. She'd get into fits of rage now and then and Adan quickly learned it was best to be away when those came about. She'd throw things, swing wildly with her arms at anything close by.

The first time it had happened Adan had had a black eye for days.

It started to happen more frequently. Finally, her lucid days were the rare occurrence instead of her raving fits. Adan started to spend less and less time in the hut he'd called home, but he had to return at the end of each day. Adele was all he had. She had done her best bringing him up and for that Adan loved her.

It was one such evening, in the middle of summer, when Adan was coming back from his daily trip. He found Adele standing in the doorway. She stared at him.

"Where have you been?" she demanded.

Adan was surprised she was lucid enough to realize he was there. "In the woods."

Adele writhed, almost falling to her knees. It looked like she was fighting off something. She cried out in pain and swung her hand. Adan saw the knife.

"No! I don't want to! Not him! No!"

Adan took a step back. The situation looked more dangerous than any previous one.

Adele struggled some more before calming down. She straightened herself out and started at Adan.

"I'm sorry. I can't resist him. He demands, I must obey."

Adan was acutely aware that she was holding the knife in one hand. He took another step back. "You don't need to do what he says."

Adele chuckled. "I must. He forces my hand. If I don't, I die."

"What is he telling you to do?" asked Adan. There had been times when she had displayed similar behaviour. He'd always been able to talk her back to normal. But those times she had not had a knife.

"He wants you," said Adele and pointed the knife at him. "He was the one who told me to save you. He wanted to study you, see you. He's seen enough. He wants you to die."

A chill ran through Adan. Hearing her say the words hurt more than anything else he'd experienced. He had believed Adele would never do anything to hurt him. She had always ensured he was safe. But now, she wanted him dead and there was little Adan could do to change her mind.

"You don't have to do that," said Adan and took a step backward. "I'll leave if that's what he wants." It hurt to say it, but abandoning your home was better than getting killed.

Adele shook her head. "There's no choice. You die." She raised the knife and lunged forward.

She caught Adan by surprise, but years spent in the woods had made him tougher than your average boy. He ducked the best he could and the wild swing with the knife scraped his shoulder, but didn't do any major damage. His move had Adele stumbling. She was no fighter and even in her lucid moments she was not what you would call nimble or graceful.

Adan hesitated. What should he do? Run away? Try to wrestle the knife from her?

The hesitation cost him as Adele regained her balance and swung the knife at him once more. His reflexes saved him again, but cost him another cut on his arm. It was the reflexes that made the decision for him. He followed Adele's hand and grabbed her by the wrist. He twisted, hoping the knife would fall, but he was

just a boy. Even if Adele was a frail woman, she still had more strength. Her other hand grabbed Adan by the hair and started to pull.

He let out a cry and tried to wrestle down her hand. Maybe he could bite her wrist and make her release the knife. They stumbled around as they struggled. The front of the little hut was beaten ground, but there were tree roots that stuck out of the ground and made it treacherous for those not looking.

Adele stumbled on one root and fell down.

Adan was pulling her knife hand down. When she lost her balance, she stopped fighting back. The hand came down and twisted with the pull of Adan. The knife sunk to her chest. It took him a moment to realize what had happened. His back rested against her. She was still breathing, but there was no struggle left in her.

“Adele?” Adan turned around. He saw the knife sticking out of her chest. His hand came away from it, stained red. He had never wanted to kill her.

“Adele?” he climbed upwards so he could come face to face with her. Blood trickled down the side of her mouth. Her eyes were open.

“Adele. You can't die. You can't die.” There was now a measure of panic in his voice.

Adele coughed. “You will die.”

It was said in a gurgled voice, but there was no mistaking it. She closed her eyes and took a last breath.

For a moment Adan just stared at her. Then the tears came and the knowledge he had just killed the only person to ever have cared for him.

Chapter 6

ADAN HAD TURNED FROM a boy into a man. At seventeen he had the black stubble of a beard covering his chin. He had grown taller and the years of work and training Gan had put into him had given his arms muscle and width to his chest that had not been there before. Being well fed and not scrounging for every bite of food meant he had everything needed to grow strong.

He sat on the river bank, black hair hanging around his face. He'd followed the small creek that ran past his home all the way to where it joined up with the bigger river. It was where Gan had fished him out all those years ago. It didn't have steep banks at that point. There was a stretch of grass that separated the forest from the river and the green field went all the way up to the river. Adan's feet didn't quite touch the water as he sat on the slightly down angled bank.

He had on a pair of ordinary trousers and a shirt that could have been worn by any farmer. Gan had gotten them on his last trip to his friend. Making your own clothes was something neither of them were very good at and even then they had access only to materials that would make for winter clothing. His trusty knife was holstered on his belt.

It was a rare day. Gan had told him to go enjoy himself. No training, no work, just relaxation. Adan didn't mind it. In fact, he welcomed it. He'd been worked hard ever since he'd arrived at the little hut and only in the past year was he starting to get days off from training. It made him feel slightly proud over the fact he'd improved enough to earn that.

He leaned back against the soft grass, put his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. The warm sunlight soon had him feeling lazy and almost dozing off. He felt safe enough. In the years he'd spent there, no one had even come even close to their little cabin.

I wish this could go on forever.

Adan knew it to be wishful thinking. Something would change sooner or later, something would come and drive him back into the world. He hated being so pessimistic, but it had served him well so far. As much as he liked Gan he had

not allowed himself to grow too attached to the man. If need be, he'd be able to walk away without looking back.

Even after years of living in the woods there was still something inherently calming about the noises of the forest. The leaves rubbing against each other in the wind, birds singing, grasshopper rubbing their legs together. It all created a soothing symphony.

What was that?

Adan frowned and opened his eyes. He'd heard something that didn't belong in the usual mix of noises. He heard it again. The whining of a horse. He heard the heavy thumps of its hooves as it galloped closer. He knew the best thing to do was to stay down. The river bank would hide him from anyone going by the even ground above. The tall grass offered additional protection from any passer by.

I can't be seen.

The sound of the running horse came closer and it passed by him, sounding almost like thunder. The horse let out a cry and it was followed by the startled scream of a woman. Adan peeked up from the tall grass in time to see her tumbling down the river bank in a mess of a blonde hair and her riding dress.

Shit.

The horse kept running. Adan waited. More horses were headed that way. He remained hidden as best he could and let out a sigh of relief when the three horses that followed rode past, chasing after the riderless horse, not aware the woman had fallen. He waited a moment after the horses had passed to ensure no one else was coming. He then peeked up from the grass to see where the woman was. Looking hard he spotted a piece of her dress peeking from the thick grass. It was no wonder the riders had missed it. They'd probably had their eyes forward, trying to not lose the one they were chasing, and not down the river bank.

Don't get involved. Just walk away. Go back to Gan and tell him about the riders.

Reluctantly, he pulled himself to a crouching position and looked around. The woman seemed to be out of it, at least she had not moved, but who knew how long that would last. There was no sign of any of the ones who'd ridden past them. Feeling a bit more secure about his surrounding, Adan stood up and

started making his way up the bank.

“Hey, you!”

Shit.

The female voice had him freeze in his tracks. With no small amount of dread he turned to look behind him and towards where the woman had fallen. She had gotten up into a seated position. Her blonde hair looked like it had gone through a hurricane and the blue eyes that stared at him told clearly enough what she was.

A damn blue eyed noble. Great.

Adan quickly shifted his gaze down, hoping she had not yet spotted his eyes. He hoped the long hair would be enough to hide them.

I need to get out of here quick. If her companions return I'm in trouble.

Adan took a step away from her.

“You. Peasant. Come and help me.” Her voice told she was used to people doing as she asked. There was a softness to it that would have had you liking her were it not for the words she used. She already had her arm reaching out, expecting Adan to clamber over and help her up.

“Are you deaf?” the woman demanded when Adan made no move to go help her. She sighed and stood up on her own. She took a moment to brush off any stray blades of grass that had stuck to her dress. You wouldn't have called her beautiful, but she was not ugly either. The slight chubbiness told of the wealth among which she lived and lent her a softness that had you wanting to wrap your arms around her. She was young, maybe a year or two older than Adan.

“No,” Adan found himself replying. He had not intended to, but the words came out his mouth anyway.

The woman cocked her head a little. “Then why didn't you help me?”

Adan turned away from her. “It wouldn't have been appropriate. You are nobility, a blue eyes. I'm just a lowly brown eyes.”

“Well, that is true, but I asked for your help. You are expected to provide it,” said the woman and looked around. “Where's my horse? Poor thing got spooked by a snake and galloped off without any regard for me.”

“Your horse continued without you,” said Adan. “Your companions rode past

as well.”

The woman frowned. “And you were here, ignoring it all?”

“It is best to leave the blue eyes to their own amusements and stay out of the way,” said Adan.

Shit, shit, shit. Leave her, ignore her, walk away. Now.

He took the first step away from her.

“Where do you think you're going?” the woman asked.

“Are you hurt?” asked Adan.

“No, just a little sore.”

“Then you are fine. There is no need for me. I have things to do.” Adan took another step away from her. She followed.

“You can't leave me alone in the middle of the woods,” she protested and took a few hasty steps to follow him.

Adan stopped. He couldn't lead her back to the cabin. “Your companions will turn back soon enough and find you here. Just wait.”

“But I could be attacked. A wolf or a bear..”

“No animal is going to bother you in broad daylight,” said Adan.

“But I command you!” The looks she was giving him told she expected to be obeyed.

Damn blue eyes.

“I'm not one of your palace flunkies to be ordered around,” said Adan in a moment of frustration and glared at her. Only when her eyes widened he realized he'd looked her straight in the eyes and the hair covering his face had failed him.

“What's wrong with your eyes?” the woman asked, sounding more curious than afraid.

Adan quickly looked down. “Nothing. I see just fine.”

Stupid, stupid, stupid.

“I'm sure you do, but the colour! I've never seen anyone with eyes like yours.” She quickly strode to Adan and grabbed his face on either side to peer into his eyes.

He was too surprised to do anything about it.

“They're so unusual,” said the woman with a smile. She did not seem to

share any of the fears others struggled with when they saw them. "But beautiful."

The last comment made Adan feel tingly all over. He realized he was blushing. He grabbed the woman's hands and pried them off from his head. "Haven't you listened to what the Church teaches?"

She gave him a shrug. "I have an old fart of a priest that tries to teach me all about the faith. He's boring so I rarely listen to him. You have no idea how stuffy they can be. I'd much rather be out riding than listen to him read verses off some dusty old book."

She doesn't know.

The realization made Adan wonder if there were more blue eyes like her. Maybe they didn't care about his eyes. The momentary hope quickly died. She was just a young woman. Others would know and they'd just as soon kill him as the brown eyes and others the Church held in its tight grip.

He started to say something, but was interrupted by the distant rumble of horses racing towards them. Her friends were coming back. It would be better if he was gone by then.

"I need to go," he said once more and started towards the woods.

"Don't go," said the woman and grabbed his hand. "My friends will want to thank you." She had heard the horses as well. It wasn't a big delay, but it was enough to allow the rider to come to view. It was too late for Adan to disappear into the woods.

They reached the pair before he could make any request to her to keep his eyes a secret. He hoped she wouldn't mention them so he let his hair cover his face again and kept his eyes looking down.

They had caught her escaped horse. A man dressed in brown leather clothes had it tied to the back of his saddle. Judging by the way he was dressed he was a brown eyes. A guard or a guide. Definitely not someone who lived the luxury life of a blue eyes.

The other two were blue eyes to the core. They had on the silky clothes of colours few could afford and even the swords strapped around their waists were there with the purpose of making them look more wealthy and pretty.

"Mary!" One of the blue eyes jumped from his horse and rushed over to her.

Adan took a few steps back to give them more room. He was tall and you could tell he did more than sit around all day enjoying the benefits of his status. He had a similar blonde hair as the woman and there were similarities in their features.

A brother, then.

“Are you all right?” asked the man.

“I’m fine, Han.” Mary replied and smiled at him as he looked her over with a concerned look.

“What happened?” asked the other blue eyes. He’d dismounted, but kept his distance. His brown hair was as long as Adan’s, but it was neatly tied back to keep it out from his face. Just as Han, you could tell he did things instead of simply living a life of luxury.

Maybe they’re not all lazy.

Adan found the thought distasteful.

“A snake startled the horse,” said Mary. “I could barely hang on, but then I ran out of strength. I fell down here by the river bank.”

“And we rode right past you,” said Han and grabbed a hold of her hands. “I am so sorry, sister.”

She gave him a smile. “It’s all right. This man helped me.” She motioned towards Adan.

Everyone’s eyes turned to regard him. It wasn’t hard to see the disdain on the face of the man still riding. The brown eyed one seemed to notice him only for the first time and he immediately dismounted, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

A man of caution and suspicion.

Han was a more simple man. “I must thank you for looking after my sister.” He did not seem at all concerned about the fact he was not a blue eyes.

Adan simply nodded, not feeling confident enough to speak.

“He has the most curious eyes. You must see!” The excitement in Mary’s voice spoke to the innocence with which the words were said.

You just couldn’t keep your mouth shut, little princess?

“His eyes?” asked Han.

“What about his eyes?” asked the other blue eyed one and dismounted.

“They're special, Lance,” said Mary and smiled at Adan. “Nothing like you've ever seen.”

Adan wanted to stab her in the face. She had just signed his death warrant. They weren't going to let him go now, not without seeing his eyes. And when they did see them someone in the trio would know what he was and the rest would fall in line due to the fear of the Church.

With hand on his knife, Adan looked up at the three and brushed aside his hair. Best not to have anything distracting his view. He wouldn't go down without a fight.

It was the brown eyes that gasped and pulled out his sword before stepping between Adan and the three blue eyes.

“Careful, my lords,” he said and raised the blade in a threatening manner. “This man is dangerous.”

“What are you on about, Greg?” Han asked with a frown. “His eyes are unusual indeed, but surely that does not make him dangerous.”

“This man should not be alive,” said Greg. “You are young and religion has not been any of your favourite subject, but surely you are aware of the teachings. Men with eyes like his should have been killed as newborn. That is the Church edict. That his parents failed to do so means they went against the teaching of the Church and the commands of our God.”

Adan's lips curled into an involuntary smile. “When I was born my father carried me into the woods and left me for the wolves. You can't blame them for not trying to be good sheep and obeying the Church.”

Mary gasped and lifted a hand to cover her shocked expression.

“My lords, we must rid the world of this creature or he will destroy it.”

“Do not be mad, Greg. How can one man destroy the entire world?” Adan was starting to think there might yet be hope. Han seemed like a man who had his senses.

“The Church commands it, my lord,” said the brown eye. “Your father would command it. This man must die by our hand today or we will be punished for letting him go.”

Lance seemed to be more convinced by the man's words than Han. He had

his sword out already and was moving to support Greg. His blade was decorated and laden with gems, but it did look well made enough to stand in a fight.

Han sighed. "Fine. Kill him."

"No," Mary pleaded, but her words fell on deaf ears.

Greg launched forward and made a broad swing with his sword. It wasn't meant to hit Adan, but drive him further away from the woman and to create more space for their fight. It gave him enough time to pull out his knife which did seem like an inadequate weapon against a sword.

Adan was left with dodging and waiting for the right opportunity. Though Lance had moved to help Greg, he stayed away from the fight and looked on.

Typical blue eyes. Let the brown eye face the danger. If he fails you lose nothing important and can still take care of it yourself.

Greg wasn't a bad swordsman, but he had not trained as arduously as Adan had. His swings seemed to lack the will to kill despite his words. This was not a man who had fought outside a practice ring. He had not spilled blood, at least not enough to be fatal.

Adan dodged his swings and when Greg made an over extended lunge with his blade, he ducked under it and grabbed the man's arm. With his other he drove the knife up under his chin and deep into his skull. He shuddered and coughed out blood before going limp. Adan wasted no time confiscating his sword and readying himself to face Lance.

He was pleased to note the sword was well made and balanced. It lacked decorations, but that was not what it had been made for. It was meant to kill, not make the wearer look nice.

There was a moment of shocked silence from the blue eyes.

Probably the first time they're seeing someone die.

"You killed Greg!" Han accused him, his voice shrill. He fumbled to draw out his sword. Mary stood behind him, hand covering mouth, a shocked look in her eyes.

"Yeah, what of it?" asked Adan and smiled. He now had a sword and the boost in confidence was significant. Taking out two blue eyes sounded like a favour to the world. They couldn't have been very skilled fighters by the way they

were conducting themselves.

Lance didn't say anything, he simply rushed Adan. Parrying his attacks put his skills to the test. He was better trained than he'd assumed, but there was one weakness that cried out. He fought with a grace and show suitable for duels among the court. He lacked the gritty practicality Gan had been pounding in Adan for the past few years.

Their blades crossed again, the two locked mere inches from each other.

"I'm going to kill you," Lance muttered to him.

Adan smiled and kicked the man in the groin. He went down, gasping for breath and moaning in pain, but Adan didn't have the opportunity to finish him off as Han joined the fray.

If anything, he was more skilled than Lance and he soon had Adan scampering backwards, away from the fallen blue eye. If the two of them managed to attack together he'd be in trouble.

Blades met each other. Sparks flew. Sweat started to run down Adan's face. He glanced over to ensure his other opponent was still down. Lance was starting to get his breath back and was already reaching for his sword to get back to the fight.

Adan jumped back to avoid a sweeping blow from Han. He wasn't quick enough and the tip of his blade cut an angry red stripe across his stomach. It didn't bleed, but it made him yelp in surprise.

Great. Now I need a new shirt.

The thought made him laugh.

His laugh made Han hesitate and Adan made use of it. He made a strong attack, forcing the man on the defensive, and finally there was an opening. Adan forced Han's blade up and before he could bring it back down, he made a quick jab with his sword. The blade sunk into the man's stomach, but he managed to pull away before being completely skewered.

Not an instant kill, but he's out of the fight.

"Han!" Mary cried out and rushed to the fallen man. He tried to stem the flow of blood with his hand, but that wouldn't save him. Adan ignored the two and focused on Lance, the last remaining threat.

“You freaky eyed bastard,” Lance muttered and raised his blade. You could tell he was still feeling the pain in his groin, but was doing his best to fight through it.

“You have only yourselves to blame,” said Adan. “I did not start this fight.”

I never do.

Lance ignored his words and attacked with recklessness that came with anger and inexperience. The blows were furious and Adan felt every one of them in his hands, but they were easy to see coming so fending them off offered little challenge.

An overhead blow, blocked. Hit from the side, blocked and hand forced wide. Counter attack, blade cutting deep into Lance's side.

Adan blinked. It had happened almost without him realizing it. The fight had taken its rhythm and now his enemy laid on the ground, holding a bleeding wound. Adan walked over to the man and drove his sword through his throat.

Feeling light headed, he turned to regard Mary. She had Han in her lap. The man was still breathing, but there was no fight left in him. His skin was starting to get pale and clammy.

Mary looked up at Adan with her blue eyes. She didn't need to speak. The plea was there, conveyed by something far more powerful.

I can't let them live. I can't trust her. She'll talk and then they'll come and hunt me down.

“Please. I won't talk. Just..let us go,” said Mary, finally finding words to express her desire. Tears streaked down her cheeks.

Adan shook his head and walked towards the pair. “You know that's not true. I've killed your brother. The moment you find someone willing to listen you'll talk. The forest will be swarming with soldiers looking to hunt me down.”

“No, I won't do that. Please, believe me.” Mary looked up at him.

Adan looked down at her and her dying brother. “No.”

The sword came down and cut her throat. Blood spilled over her dying brother. Adan took the sword to him and let him out of his misery.

I wanted none of this. If only she had let me go when I wanted to.

A gentle breeze blew down the river. Adan took a heavy breath and looked

around. The horses were still there, though the fight had made them take some distance to the group. The four bodies laid in the grass.

Adan sighed.

Gan would not be happy. Even if he hid the bodies, someone was bound to come looking for them. Three blue eyes missing was certain to draw attention. They'd find the cabin. They'd find Gan.

"Damn blue eyes," Adan muttered and surveyed the area. There would be no hiding the fight. There was too much blood spilled on the grass. He could hope for rain, but staking your survival on the whims of nature was a losing strategy at best.

He grabbed Han by his legs and started to drag him down the river bank. Going through his pockets he found a coin pouch that felt quite hefty. There were gold coins inside, enough to buy plenty of things. Adan shook his head.

They live in a different world than the rest. This would feed a family for months, but to him it's just pocket money.

He pushed the body in the water and ensured it floated towards the centre of the stream. The current was strong enough to carry the body far away before it would end up on the banks where someone would find it. There were no towns or cities right next to it for miles so it was unlikely anyone would find the bodies even if they did was up on the shore.

It took him a while to do the same for the two remaining bodies. He found more coins from Lance. Greg had a more modest amount on him, a few silver coins and some copper, but he was a brown eyes. He wasn't going to be rich. Adan hesitated searching Mary in the same way and ultimately decided not to do it. He had plenty of coins from the three idiots that had fought him.

Gathering the horses took up some more time. He wasn't sure what to do with them. They were all branded with their owners mark so they'd be easily spotted by someone looking for them. In the end he decided to take off the saddles and reigns and leave them to roam free. He hid the equipment the best he could in the forest.

Hoping he'd done enough he turned to head back to the cabin. Knowing his time was at end there made him feel sad. They had been the best years of his life.

More than himself, he worried what would happen to Gan. If he did not leave a search party would eventually run into him. He was already an outcast and him claiming to know nothing would likely be viewed with suspicion. It was probable he would not be able to continue living as he had until now.

He found the old man chopping wood by the cabin. He stopped when he saw Adan emerge from the woods. There was no missing his torn shirt and the angry red stripe that ran across his stomach nor the splatters of blood dotting his clothes.

“What happened to you?” asked Gan and struck the axe in the log he'd been using as a bench. “Where did you get that sword?”

Adan had kept Greg's weapon. It was well made and not too flashy. “I ran into some blue eyes out for a ride.”

“Looks like they gave you some trouble,” said Gan and eyed the wound.

“They saw my eyes,” said Adan and sat down on the log, next to the axe. “After that, all they wanted to do was kill me.”

“But you're here,” said Gan, leaving out the obvious question.

“They're floating down the river, dead,” said Adan.

“Who were they?”

Adan shrugged. “The blue eyes were Han, Lance and Mary. They had a brown eye named Greg with them.”

It was hard to miss the shocked expression that took over Gan's face.

“What is it?” Adan asked.

“You just killed the dukes children,” said Gan in a grim voice.

Adan closed his eyes.

Figures. Couldn't have ran into some low ranking blue eyes. Had to be the dukes children. There will be no escaping this.

“What were such important people doing in the woods without a proper guard?” asked Adan. Had there been a guard none of it would have happened.

“No idea,” said Gan, offering little consolation. “Why anyone would be this deep into the woods is a question, much less young blue eyes like them.” He stroked his beard for a moment. “What do you plan to do?”

“What can I do?” asked Adan. The answer was obvious. “I'm going to run. I

can't stay here. They'll come looking eventually and they'll find this place. Even if I didn't do it, they would kill me in a heart beat.”

Gan nodded. “I'm sorry to say it, but you're right. You have to go.”

Adan could not hide how much it hurt to hear him say that. It didn't matter that it had been his own conclusion. For the first time it felt like he was being thrown out of his own home.

I guess I wasn't as prepared as I thought.

The expression on Gan softened a bit as he watched the young man struggle with it. “But first, let's get that wound of your patched up. I'll give you what supplies I can to help you on your way.”

“What about you?” asked Adan. “They'll come here. Will you be safe?”

Gan waved his hand dismissively. “Isn't the first time some people come here. I've always managed. No reason I won't this time. All they will see is an old hermit.”

His confidence made Adan feel better. He didn't want his actions to bring harm to his friend. He made no protest when Gan motioned him inside the cabin to have the wound looked at.

An hour later Adan looked back at the cabin for the last time before disappearing into the woods.

Chapter 7

(Memories)

SHE WAS THE MOST beautiful girl Adan had seen. It helped that she was also the first one he'd ever seen so close up. Adele had been a grown woman and not sane of mind so his reference gave the girl a leg up. Her sand brown hair reached her shoulders and the plain peasants dress she wore looked like it had seen its best days, but that did nothing to make her any less of a sight in Adan's eyes.

He watched from his hiding place as she picked more flowers into her little basket. The small clearing was not far into the woods so it offered a variety of plants for her to pick. It was the third time Adan had seen her there. He had not dared to approach her for fear of her seeing his eyes and running away, but now he had come up with a plan.

He looked down at the strip of cloth in his hand before tying it around his head, covering his eyes. He could see enough to avoid bumping into things, but anyone looking at him would not be able to see his eyes. He'd pretend to be blind. No one would suspect anything. He was proud of coming up with such a plan. If it worked he'd be able to go into towns without fear.

It had been a year since Adele was killed. He'd wandered far off from where she used to live. His search for food and safety had been driven by hunters and others starting to come too close to his usual roaming grounds. It had taken a long time, but he had decided that living like a hermit would not be much of a life at all, though he had occasionally dared to enter an isolated farmhouse or village during the night to pilfer what ever he found useful and easy to take.

At the very least he had to try to make contact with others. Maybe his parents had been abnormal.

Taking a deep breath, Adan took the first step forward. He could barely tell what was in front of him on the ground so it wasn't surprise when he made a lot of noise, breaking dry branches and stumbling.

"Who's there?" asked a clear voice. She had heard him.

Adan continued onward and emerged at the edge of the clearing. The warm sunlight hit him like a blanket after the cool shadows of the forest.

"Who's there?" asked Adan.

"I asked first," replied the clear voice. It came from closer than before. It suited her.

"My name is Adan."

There was a silence. "What's wrong with your eyes?"

"I can not see," said Adan. "I was born that way."

"How unusual," said the girl, her voice now coming from right next to him. Adan could see her figure as a darker area against the sunlight.

"And who are you?" asked Adan. He felt uncomfortable not getting anything out of her.

"I'm Kat. Do you live here?" She sounded more curious than afraid which was an encouraging sign for Adan's plan. If she wasn't afraid then it was likely his plan would work.

Don't say too much.

"I live near by," Adan admitted.

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"What happened to your parents?"

"They're dead."

There was a silence as the girl walked around him. "You do look like you've lived in the forest for a long time."

Clothes made mainly of animal skins and stitched together crudely were not something any regular peasant would be found wearing.

"Do you live near here?" asked Adan.

"My parents have a farm a little ways from here," said Kat.

"What are you doing out here all by yourself? The forest can be dangerous."

"You're blind and you live here all alone. You're barely as old as me and you say the forest is dangerous?"

"First hand experience," said Adan with a small smile.

The girl gave him a look. At least that's what Adan assumed it was. "I can

take care of myself.”

“Why are you collecting flowers?” It seemed like a waste of time to him. You couldn't eat them yet picking them up ate up energy.

The girl shrugged. “To make decorations and to please my mother.”

“Wouldn't your parents rather you helped out at the farm?” Adan had little experience with other people, but if you were a farmer it seemed like there would be meaningful work for all the hands you could get. He'd seen them working the fields from a distance and it wasn't the sort of work that was easy.

“I already did my chores for the day,” said Kat, sounding pleased with herself.

“I see.”

The girl glanced up at the sky. “But I should be headed back. Meal time soon.”

Adan felt slightly disappointed at that. “Can we meet again?” He was desperate to see her again. She had not run away nor had she given any indication that she was suspicious about him. It was a contact he had never had before and he did not want to lose it.

“I'll be here again tomorrow,” said Kat and picked up her basket and trotted past Adan towards the edge of the forest.

“I'll be here,” he said after her and she glanced back to give him a smile. He watched her disappear into the woods before heading back to his little camp. The plan had been a success and he couldn't help but feel happy about it. Getting to talk to another person was something he had not realized he longed for so much. Now that it had happened there was no returning to the solitary life he'd led for the past year.

His camp wasn't that far off. It wasn't much, a basic shelter made of tree branches and small logs, but it was better than sleeping out in the open. Adan spent the rest of the day there, enjoying food, resting and finally going to sleep.

He was so anxious about meeting Kat again that he could barely sleep and when the sun started to peek over the horizon he was already up and preparing breakfast. After eating he made his way back to the clearing to wait for her. He hid in the bushes for cover so he didn't need to put on the blindfold.

It was close to mid day when she finally appeared, basket in hand, wearing a similar dress as she had the day before. Adan quickly wrapped the piece of cloth around his head and emerged from his hiding place. She didn't startle at his sudden appearance, though she did stop and look at him with guilt ridden eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

Adan started ask what for, but then the men emerged from the woods. He looked around and found himself surrounded. The men wore armour and their spears pointed at him. They were no peasants gathered up from a farm. They were professional soldiers.

"Grab him!" bellowed a voice from the woods and the soldiers advanced. Adan pulled out the small knife he had, but surrounded and against trained adults he stood no chance. He managed to cut one of the men in the arm as they wrestled him down, but that was the extent of damage he could do. The knife was taken from him and his hands were tied behind his back with rope. When they pulled him up he saw Kat still standing there, looking regretful. When she saw the anger that masked his face, she turned away and walked into the arms of a man standing behind her. The man put an arm around her shoulder and talked to her as they walked away.

"You did the right thing," were the only words Adan heard come from the man.

"Get him up," came the same voice that had given the order to capture him. The soldiers pulled Adan up. His blindfold was still in place despite the struggle so he could barely see the man standing in front of him. He could tell he had a beard and the combination of his facial bones and brows made him seem like a hawk.

The blindfold was ripped from his head. The bright sunlight made him blink furiously to regain his vision. He heard the gasps and a few of the soldiers take distance to him.

"His eyes," one of the soldiers whispered. "He's not blind!"

"He's worse than that," said another.

"Who failed to kill him?" asked a third.

Adan got a look at the hawk faced man. His brown eyes stared at him with a

look of surprise and terror. Then it melted into grim determination. He motioned to one of the soldiers and all Adan felt was something hitting the back of his head before things went dark.

When he started to come to the first thing he noticed was the throbbing at the back of his head. He felt around, but all he found was a big bump that was sore to touch. His hand came back without blood. He was laying on a cold stone floor. Feeling a bit weak, Adan pushed himself up to a seated position and looked around. He came face to face with a solid wooden door that had a barred window on it. Solid stone walls surrounded him on all sides and the only source of light was opposite to the door – a high window that had bars on it.

Trapped.

There was no way out, of that Adan was certain even after a quick look around. All the room had besides him was a wooden bucket and iron loops in the walls, some with chains still attached to them. At least they had not deprived him of his clothes.

Why did she do it? Why did she trick me into thinking she did not care? Does the church have doctrine on blind people as well and that's why she called the soldiers? Had it been her father that had done it?

Adan wished he knew more, but being forced to live in isolation did not give him much opportunity to learn. He recalled the expression on Kat. Maybe she had simply mentioned him to her father and he had followed the teaching of the church. Maybe she had not been aware of them.

He pulled himself into a corner and huddled there. How long he sat there waiting, blaming himself for being too trusting and for even thinking about making contact with someone, he could not remember. He dozed off from time to time. It was eerie how quiet it was. There weren't even footsteps outside his cell door like you would have expected. There had to be guards. No one locked you away only to trust the lock to keep you there.

It might have been a day, maybe two, before the cell door finally opened and ripped Adan away from his self pity. Two guards barged in and before Adan could get up, they had snapped shackles on his hands and fastened him to one of the metal loops on the wall. They then brought in a table and two chairs. They made

him sit on one of the chairs. More chains were put around him to keep him in the seat.

The chains weigh more than me. They must really be afraid of me.

All Adan could do was stare at the guards. His eyes unsettled them. He could tell the nervousness it brought about in them when they saw him watching. It was the only pleasure he could draw out of the situation.

Having secured him to the chair, the guards left the cell. A robed figure entered and took a seat. There was gold and silver in his robe along with other expensive colours and decorations. His white hair was cut short, but still had a thickness to it. Green eyes watched from amongst the wrinkled face and measured him from head to toe.

“I am bishop Cardenas. Do you know what that means?” There was a rhythm to his voice that told he was accustomed to holding sermons meant to appeal to peoples emotions.

Adan shrugged. The chains clanked around him.

“Of course you don't. No one has taught you about the Church and the blessing of our God. It is understandable. You shouldn't be alive.”

“People keep saying that to me,” said Adan. He tried to be defiant, but it was hard when deep inside he was scared. His words came out weak. You could not expect miracles from a young boy.

“And they are right,” said Cardenas. For a moment they stared at each other. It was odd, but the bishop was the first person Adan had run into who didn't look away from his eyes nor seem too bothered by them. “Do you know where you are?”

Adan shook his head.

How could I. I've been unconscious most of the time.

“You're in the dungeons of West Rodale.”

Adan knew the place. He'd spent time spying on various villages without gathering the courage to make an appearance. But he'd heard people talk. He'd picked up things. West Rodale was the largest city for hundreds of miles and the seat of the local duke who oversaw the region. There was an East Rodale, but it was a smaller city located further away. Why they were sister cities was

something Adan had not been able to find out during his time listening in.

“And why are you here?” asked Adan.

A brief smile passed the bishop's lips. “I'm here to find out who let you live. It is a grave violation of the Church rules.”

Adan didn't need to ask what would happen to him. They'd kill him. Of that he had no doubt. Even though his parents had abandoned him, he didn't want to give the bishop the satisfaction of spilling everything voluntarily.

“I don't know who did that,” said Adan. “I was raised by a crazy woman in the middle of the woods. How she got me I don't know.”

“You're lying,” said Cardenas.

“I'm not.”

“Yes, you are. But we will soon fix that.” The bishop motioned and a black hooded man walked into the cell. He had a roll in his hand that he unfolded on the table. It was filled with all sorts of tools – from pliers to sharp knives and all sorts of exotic looking things Adan did not want to know the use of.

“Ham here is very skilled with these tools,” said Cardenas. “He has no problem using them even on a young boy like you. He'll probably enjoy it even more than usual. He'll give you pain like which you've never felt before and he'll make it last as long as I order him to. You will want to die, but that is a relief you will not be granted here in this cell.”

Adan felt himself shrinking in the chair. His determination wavered. “Why do you do this? Why do you want me dead so badly?” His voice felt weak, barely strong enough for the two men to be heard.

“I suppose I should tell you,” said Cardenas. “Everyone deserves to know their sins.” He leaned back in his chair. “We, the Church and its followers, believe the eyes to be a blessing from our God. It is his way of telling us our place in the world. If you have blue eyes you are to rule and lead, if you have brown eyes you are to work and keep everything running that society needs.”

“But sometimes we have people like you, with muddled eyes or blind, being born into the world. According to scripture – which is the word of God recorded by holy men – they are the result of Desolation injecting itself into the new born. They are born with the seed of evil within them. They are the World Destroyers. If

left be and allowed to become adults, they will destroy this world and everything God has blessed us with.”

Cardenas leaned forward and stared at Adan intently. “So you see why you must die.”

To Adan it all seemed preposterous. He didn't feel like there was some great evil brewing inside him. The only evil he had ever seen was the Church and its crusade against him and anyone else born with eyes that did not conform to their expectations.

“I have no desire to destroy the world,” said Adan.

Cardenas chuckled. “Maybe not now, but you would when you became an adult. Fortunately, we're not going to allow that.”

It seemed there was no point talking with him any further so Adan just glared at him. It was the best he could do.

“You are not like a normal child your age,” said Cardenas and examined Adan with a serious expression. “You act older.”

When you remember everything that has happened to you, you tend to act different.

Adan shrugged the best he could in his restraints. “I haven't lived like a normal child.”

Cardenas nodded, thoughtful. “Well then, shall we begin?” He gave the hooded man a nod and he reached for a pair of pliers from the table.

“So, Adan, tell us who let you live.” The bishop stared at him intently.

“I already told you,” Adan replied, though his eyes were focused on the pair of pliers. The hooded man came next to him and grabbed hold of his hand. He used the pliers to get a good hold on the nail of his middle finger. He gave the bishop a look and received a nod in return.

The pain when the nail was ripped from his finger made Adan scream. He had never felt such pain. Tears rolled down his cheeks and there was no controlling the sobs that rocked his body. He dared not open his eyes and see what had been done to him.

“Who let you live?” asked Cardenas again once Adan's sobs settled down a bit. “There are nine more fingers left.”

Adan couldn't speak.

Another nail was pulled off.

Everyone had a limit before they broke. Adan was a young boy so that limit was not high. He talked after the second nail had been ripped from his body. He told the bishop everything he knew; about his parents, about the priest that had ordered him abandoned in the woods, he told where the village was as best he could.

It wasn't enough.

The two men tormented him for hours more, breaking bones in his fingers, cutting wounds in his body and then rubbing in salt. It wasn't that they wanted more information from him. They just wanted him to suffer.

"Enough," said Cardenas, ending the torture that felt like it had gone on for days. The hooded man nodded and started to gather his instruments. Guards came in after him and escorted the bishop out. Then they came back and undid the chains keeping Adan in the chair. They didn't need to toss him off the chair. His limp body did it all on its own. They left him laying on the cell floor as a broken mess that barely had the strength to sob. The cell door banged shut, the lock turned.

After a while Adan pulled himself into the corner and curled up, nursing the hand they had done the worst to. His body throbbed. Despite that, he drifted off to unconsciousness.

He awoke to screaming. It came from the corridor, followed by guards grumbling and finally a cell door banging shut. Adan's hand hurt. All of his body hurt. Simply moving to a seated position brought tears to his eyes. He looked at his mangled hand. Where there had been nails there was exposed tissue and flesh. The broken fingers on his left hand didn't look too bad, though even trying to move one of them had him feeling dizzy and nauseous.

I'll need to break them again, if I survive this. Then properly set them.

He'd spied on a town healer once. He'd set bones and bandaged wounds. It had seemed like an useful skill and since his hut was apart from the rest of the town it had been easy to keep an eye on what he did. Adan felt confident he could treat most wounds that he'd get. If he couldn't, he'd be dead anyway.

He examined the wounds from the torture session. The hooded man had known what he was doing. It had hurt worse than anything Adan had felt before, but the wounds themselves seemed small and innocent when he looked them over.

It could have gone on for weeks.

The realization made Adan feel thankful it had not gone on longer. There had not been much for him to tell them anyway. They'd demanded he reveal the true evil inside him, but how could he do that? He didn't even feel like something like that resided within him.

It was a day more before his cell door opened again. The guards marched in and chained him to the wall once more. The familiar figure of the bishop strode in. He regarded Adan from above with a smug smile. It made him wish he still had his knife and the chains that held him to the wall were gone.

Slitting that throat would feel good.

Cardenas motioned and a woman was pushed into the room by the guards. Her hands were chained as were her feet. A large bruise covered the left side of her face and there was dried blood here and there on her simple dress. Adan recognized her despite all that. It was his mother.

"Look at the spawn of evil you have brought into the world, woman," said Cardenas and the woman did as told.

Adan had to look away. The hatred with which she stared at him was like a knife struck into his chest. She had never shown any affection towards him, but there had always been a hope burning inside him. Maybe she had not really meant it. Maybe she had done it all because she feared for her own life.

"Curse you," she said and spat a bloody wad at Adan. "I wish you had never been born. Why God chose to punish us, I do not know, but we should have slit your throat instead of dropping you in the woods. We should have seen your dead body and burned it to erase any trace of it."

Cardenas nodded next to her. "I am glad you have come to see your mistake. Upon your death your sins will be forgiven. It is unfortunate your husband did not survive the interrogation. His sins will drag him down to Desolation."

Her head snapped to stare at the bishop for a moment before she broke

down. No one cared when she slumped to her knees and started wailing. Not even Adan.

Good. You deserve to know pain for what you've done to me.

"Tomorrow you will both be transported outside the city where you will be publicly executed. We will not soil the land we live on with your remains," said Cardenas and glared at the crying woman. Her sobs made it hard to hear what he was saying. He motioned for the guards and they dragged the woman away from the cell. Adan could hear her sobs and cries up until she was thrown into her own cell.

"Why drag them into this?" asked Adan. He didn't care that his parents were going to die. They had never cared about him and the words of his mother had been enough to kill any last remnants of hope he had. But why would the Church go so far? They'd denounced him on birth so there was little blame to be laid on their laps.

Cardenas snorted. "They let you live. True, they abandoned you in the woods with the blessings of the local priest, but he was a fool. He should have known better. Your parents, as devout members of the congregation, should have known better. They neglected to rid the world of evil as demanded by scripture and they must pay for that sin."

"So you're killing the priest as well?"

At least some consolation.

"He will come to understand the mistake he made," said Cardenas. Despite not admitting it directly, there was no question whether the priest would live or not. "And tomorrow, you will be purged from this world for all to see."

With those last words, the bishop left the cell. The guards didn't bother taking the chains off Adan this time.

Tomorrow I die.

Instead of feeling fear over it the feeling of relief overwhelmed him. The life he had lived had not been a pleasant one and the world around him was not the kind of place that would make it any easier in the future. The constant hunt for him would never stop. He would always be running and hiding. What sort of a life was that? Being relieved from it seemed like a liberation of the biggest kind.

It's my life.

With that though the despair replaced the relief. He didn't want to die no matter how shit covered his life was. It was still his life. The only one he had. No one should have been able to take that away from him.

In the morning when the guards opened the cell door, Adan had come to a resolution. He'd face what ever came head held high. If his life was to end then he'd rob those taking it from tears and despair. If he'd live, he'd run and live a life that meant something to him instead of letting others decide for him and dictate what he did.

The guards undid his chains and shoved him into the corridor. More guards waited there. He could see his mother being pulled out of her cell and marched in front of him. The guards soon pushed him after her. They walked up to a staircase and climbed up.

The bright sunlight made him squint when they exited the building and entered a large courtyard. He didn't have time to look around his surrounding. The guards soon had him hoisted into a wagon. The back of the wagon was a wooden cage re-enforced with iron here and there. The door slammed shut behind him and the lock clicked.

"You stay away from me," said Adan's mother and huddled in a corner.

"Don't worry. I want nothing to do with you either," he replied and went to one side of the wagon to look outside. The wooden bars left plenty of room to stick your head out, but not enough for anyone to wiggle out. Not that it would have mattered. There were guards on all sides of it.

The wagon nudged forward, pulled by a pair of horses. The guards walked along with it to ensure no one would escape, though as soon as they left the courtyard, Adan realized they weren't there to keep him from running. They were there to keep the crowd from rushing the wagon and ripping him apart.

The streets were lined with people on either side. They yelled death to him and his mother. They threw rotten vegetables at the wagon, hitting by virtue of the sheer volume of things thrown. The guards did their job and kept the crowd from reaching the wagon.

Safer in the wagon than trying to escape.

Adan kept to one side of the wagon and looked out despite the barrage of vegetables. He saw the large stone buildings go by with their red tile roofs. The people that got closer he stared down with confidence, not giving them the pleasure of seeing fear. From time to time he glanced at his mother. That was where you could see fear. She was on her knees, praying for salvation from the very God that had damned her.

Adan shook his head.

The wagon rolled through the streets and past another gate. Looking forward Adan could see there were no more walls, but also that the crowd had gotten bigger. They were blocking the road. The wagon had to stop so the guards could clear a path.

The crowd chanted for Adan's blood.

“Kill the child!”

“Rip apart his whore mother!”

“Death to the World Destroyer!”

The mass of people surged forward. The guards were powerless to stop them. Adan stepped back as hands started to reach inside the wagon. His mother cried out in pain. Hands had gotten hold of her. Fingers were digging into her flesh, hair was getting pulled out.

The wagon shook and swayed. The crowd pushed and pulled on it, swaying it, slowly rocking it off balance. When it started to tip the crowd dispersed from underneath it. Adan grabbed hold of the cage and hoped he wouldn't be crushed. Wood cracked, metal groaned as the cage crashed against the ground. Adan's handhold broke and he fell to the ground. He hit his head, dazing him.

In the blur of things the next clear image was himself being pulled out of the cage by numerous hands. A hit landed on his side. Another on his thigh. A third on his head. Then he was dropped onto the dirt covered ground. A kick landed on his side.

He did his best to get away. He crawled, clawed, bit and kicked. He couldn't make out what the crowd around him was shouting. It didn't matter. His eyes were fixed on the small holes that would let him escape.

It was the guards that saved him. They broke through the crowd, driving the

off. Despite the kicks and punches. Adan was ready to act. The moment of reprieve the guards gave him was enough. He rushed forward through a hole in the crowd. Hands tried to grab him. Angry shouts followed him.

He ran.

And somehow he managed to escape it all.

Chapter 8

“Have a safe journey.”

“Thanks.” Adan grabbed the package and stashed it under his cloak. Keeping his eyes down, hidden under his hood, he left the shop and started down the road through the town. It had been a long time since he'd visited any habited place, but he had deemed the risk worth it. He'd needed to change some of the gold into lesser coin to avoid suspicion. There had been a money lender and having some fresh goods to eat was always a temptation.

He had also wanted to see what action the duke had taken over his lost children. So far it looked like it wasn't much. There were rumours of the children going missing and search parties being after them, but nothing to indicate bodies had been found. It would be big news when they were deemed dead. Adan hoped to be far away by then.

He hurried out of town. The less time spent there the better. People were happy to ignore him and go about their own business. It was a town that was accustomed to travellers going through. Being along one of the busiest roads in the realm had that effect. Adan walked past inn signs, stables and everything a traveller might need. The temptation to get a room and sleep in a comfortable bed was not small, but his instincts told him to move on.

Get used to sleeping in the woods again. That's what I'll be doing in the future. Give up on the idea of a comfortable life. What I had with Gan was an anomaly. Treasure the memories and toughen up.

The road was well travelled and there were plenty of others making use of it. Wagons passed Adan along with the occasional group of riders and others who had to walk. It forced him to keep his hood up and even after stepping onto a less travelled road he couldn't risk suddenly running into a traveller. They'd report him in no time. Or he'd have to kill them.

Neither option appealed to him much.

At least the weather had been favourable to him since leaving the cabin. There had been a few days with sporadic rain, but those had not lasted long and

the rest of the days had been sunny so his clothes had plenty of time to dry. It was a sunny day and Adan was in no great hurry now that the town was behind him so he spent a good time enjoying lunch under the shadows the nearby trees offered.

He continued on after a bit of rest. He didn't have a specific place in mind where to go. No inhabited place was safe for him so going some place with few people seemed the best choice. The distant mountains he could see from time to time held a certain temptation. Few people travelled those, but there was wildlife to feed on. He could live there without being seen for years.

The road led him into a forest that blocked the mountains from view. The shadows cast by the trees made him feel comfortable enough to pull back his hood. Even if someone came down the road they wouldn't see his eyes and he'd have plenty of time to life the hood to cover up.

He was not ready when two men appeared from the bushes with swords in hand. Looking back he could see one more appearing behind him with weapon in hand. He pulled his hood up and his hand went for his own sword.

“Easy there, traveller,” said one of the two men in front of him. He had a bald head and clothes made of patched up leather and cloth. In the shadows it was hard to make out any details about his face. “Give us your money and no harm will come to you.”

Adan pulled out his blade. Maybe they would think twice if they saw he was ready to defend himself.

The bald man shook his head. “You don't want to do that, friend. There's five of us and one of you. Are the coins in your pouch really worth dying for?”

“You should ask that same question for yourselves,” Adan grunted and glanced back. The one behind him was advancing slowly but surely.

The bald man chuckled and stepped forward. “If you want to die then we'll be happy to oblige.”

Adan heard the footsteps coming from behind him and he started to turn, but it was too late. Something heavy hit the back of his head and he fell to the ground, barely able to keep his eyes open. Before he could try and recoup his sword was kicked from his hand. Strong hands rolled him on his back, feet

stepped on his hands, his hood was pulled back.

He found himself staring into eyes that were not normal. The iris was brown, but the black of the pupil on the left eye was smudged, like a painter had been lazy with lifting his stroke, leaving behind a trail.

“Hey, Kal, you might want to take a look at this,” said the man and stared down at Adan in disbelief.

“What is it?” asked the bald man and Adan saw him come into view. He looked down at him. His left eye was brown, the right one was blue. He frowned and leaned in closer to examine Adan's eyes.

“You..are you all World Destroyers?” asked Adan. It was unfathomable for there to be so many of them, all together. Surely the Church would have hunted them down long ago. There couldn't be so many parents willing to defy Church teachings for them to survive into adulthood.

“What do we do with him?” asked the man with the smudged pupil.

Kal grunted. “We take him to the boss.”

“Wait..”

Adan didn't get to say anything more before everything went black.

When he woke he could not miss the throbbing in his head. Who ever had knocked him out had not done so gently. With a grunt he pushed himself up to a seated position. He found himself inside a tent, on a cot that was surprisingly comfortable. There wasn't much room inside, barely for him to get out of the cot and walk out. His sword and other valuables were not on him. He'd been left with his clothes, save for the cloak.

Kal peeked in through the tent flap. “Good. You're awake. Come on out. The boss wants to meet you.”

Adan rubbed his neck and glanced at the man. He did not seem hostile. If they wanted him dead they could have done it already. Though maybe they were just waiting for their boss to say it. Even if he wanted to, there was nothing he could do about it. With no weapons at hand escape was not going to be easy, if at all plausible.

He had to take a moment to stabilize himself as he stood up. The world suddenly decided to tilt itself and almost make him fall. He scrambled out of the

tent to find Kal waiting for him along with a man he had not seen before. Both had swords in hand.

It was late in the day. The sun was starting to set and the camp fire was becoming the biggest source of light. There were tents set up around it and men were sitting around the fire, preparing food while others Adan could see on the edge of the camp tending to horses and keeping an eye out. In total he counted four people in addition to Kal and his other guard.

He didn't have time to get a good look at anyone as his two captors guided him to the largest of the tents. They didn't come in, but instead motioned for him to go in alone. Adan did as told and stepped inside.

The tent was well lit and far more spacious than his had been. There was a lush carpet covering the ground and a table sat in the middle of it. There were large cushions on which to sit around the table. Beyond it there was an actual bed to the far left. Not a big one, but a real bed none the less. Adan saw the white haired figure standing in front of what could only be described as a dresser.

“Please, have a seat.”

Adan had expected the voice of an old man so he was surprised to be commanded with the gentle voice of a woman. He took a seat on one of the cushions, crossing his legs. He kept his eyes on the robed figure. It was hard to tell anything of her body build. Finally, she turned around. She had gentle and delicate features, though most of all her eyes drew any watchers attention. They were completely white.

She walked over to the table and took a seat.

She has to be blind.

Yet when she moved you could have sworn she saw everything in front of her. She gave Adan a small smile.

“My name is Nora and I'm the leader of this little band of outcasts.”

How is she the leader? She's blind and a woman on top of that. Why would these men follow someone like her?

“I'm Adan.” It felt the only right thing to say. She had given her name, after all.

“Kal tells me you have the most unique eyes he has ever seen, Adan.”

“Plenty of unique ones among your men from what I saw,” Adan replied, not denying the obvious truth.

The wry smile that passed her lips was one of the most charming ones Adan had seen. “Perhaps it is best I explain what it is my little band is.”

“Please do.” There was no denying Adan was curious about it.

“Despite the best efforts of the Church, there are still parents who put the love for their child before the teachings of the priests. There are people like you and me who survive long enough to be able to fend for ourselves. This little group of ours tries to gather those survivors.”

“Why?” asked Adan. It seemed like it would put them all in greater danger. The more of them there were in one place the greater the risk of losing everyone.

“To teach them how to survive,” said Nora. “Point them to places where they can hide. To build up our strength.”

“So you were here looking for me?” asked Adan. It seemed like too much of a coincidence that the group had just been travelling through the area.

“We heard of a sighting, even though that had taken place years ago. We often get such tips years after the fact, but still come searching,” said Nora and tilted her head. “Are you that young boy who killed two boys in a village not that far from here?”

Adan knew the river had not washed him *that* far off. Still, he had expected it to be further away. “Yes.”

Nora smiled. “Then we have succeeded.”

“How much do you know about me?” asked Adan. He expected it to not be much, but they deserved to know he was a chased man not only because of his eyes.

“Only what the rumour said. A young boy, a World Destroyer killing a few local youngsters.”

“Have you heard of the duke's children going missing?”

“Yes,” said Nora. She reached for a cup on the table and drank from it.

“I killed them,” said Adan and kept his eyes on her. Her reaction would tell how much they were willing to look past.

“Why?” asked Nora. Her eyes fixed on him frightfully well. Adan found

himself turning away from those white eyes.

"They saw my eyes," said Adan. "Couldn't let them go and tell about it. The forest would have been crawling with soldiers. I wouldn't have gotten away."

"You've been living alone in the woods all this time?" asked Nora. You could tell she was surprised.

"Most of the time alone. Sometimes someone has seen fit to help me."

"Ah," said Nora. "It is true. There are outcasts and others who do not share the views of the Church. Men who do things for money, though you should never trust such types too much."

Adan nodded, before remembering she could not see it. "Trust is a hard thing for people like us."

"That it is."

"So why should I trust you?"

"Who said you should?"

Adan sat silent for a while, confused. "What do you want with me?"

Nora shifted in her seat. "Do you want to destroy this world?"

"Not particularly."

Nora nodded. "Is there something you would want to change in it?"

"Plenty."

Burn down every church. Get people to realize your eye colour was as meaningful as the length of your beard.

"That's what we want," said Nora. "To change the world, not to destroy it."

"And you want me to be a part of your group?" That seemed to be where the discussion was headed so Adan asked the question straight out. He wasn't the kind who liked to dance around before getting to the dinner table.

That wry smile passed her lips again. "Yes."

"What can a group of under ten do, besides rob an occasional passer by?" Adan had not seen anything that gave him much confidence in the groups ability to change anything. The only benefit he saw was that there was enough of them to rob more than a single travellers. They could maybe target some remote monasteries or even a merchant wagon here and there. But eventually, the soldiers of nobility would be on their trail and they would get caught.

“We are more than ten,” said Nora. “We're spread out around the known world in safe places. The group you see here is one that goes around finding new ones like you. There is no need for everyone to take the risk we take.”

“Why would they send someone like you to take the risk?” asked Adan. She seemed the least capable person for such a task, though he had to admit there was strength in the woman, but not the sort of strength that would let her be useful in a fight. She was well accustomed to her own tent, but in a strange place she'd be stumbling around and an easy target for anyone.

“I am less vulnerable than you think,” said Nora and gave him that wry smile once more. “The men follow my orders. That should tell you enough.”

He had to admit that told him something. Either the men had their wits stolen or she was more than she seemed. Either way, staying with the group was not something he could decide then and there.

“I can't say whether I'll join you or not,” said Adan. “But I do know I need to get further away from here before the dukes children are discovered. Given the reaction that will cause, you should probably do the same. Maybe we can travel together for a bit and I can get to know you all better and make my decision when the time to part ways comes.”

Nora sipped some more of the liquid from the cup. The fact she had offered none to Adan had him feeling a bit annoyed. His throat was parched from all the talking. “Very well. We will do as you say.”

“Good.”

“But there are some rules you must agree to.”

“What rules?”

“First, you must follow my orders at all times. No matter how much you might disagree, you do as I say. This is the same rule that applies to everyone in this camp.” The firm stare she gave him made him feel uneasy.

“And if I don't?” asked Adan.

“You will likely die.”

It was not a threat so much as statement of fact.

“All right,” Adan agreed. “What else?”

“You do not leave without seeing me first.”

Not much of a demand that.

“Done.”

“That is all,” said Nora and stood up. For a moment Adan wished her robe wasn't quite so loose. Her thin shoulders made it apparent she would be a sight to behold if she wore something more flattering. “Kal will show you around camp and return your belongings to you.”

Obviously the meeting was over so Adan stood up and left the tent. Kal was standing by the tent, looking bored. The man by the fire looked like he was almost done with cooking the last meal of the day.

“So, you're staying with us?” asked Kal and looked Adan over from head to toe.

“For now,” he replied. “She told me you'd show me around and return my belongings to me.”

Kal ran his hand over his head. It was a move that looked like it was engrained in his muscles from the time he still had hair. “Of course she did.” It sounded like it wasn't the first time he got saddled with taking care of the new guy. “Come on. You're probably hungry just like the rest of us. Besides, no better time to get to know someone than while sharing a meal.”

“So, what's your name?” asked Kal after they'd walked for a bit.

“Adan.”

“Well, Adan, my name is Kal. You've put your lot in with a group that's quite special. I hope you're up to it.”

Adan nodded and followed the man to the camp fire. The smell of food had his stomach growling as they got closer. Three men sat around the fire, one on his knees by it, stirring a black metal pot.

“We've got ourselves a new member,” said Kal and all three men looked up at the pair. Adan recognized the man who had knocked him out. “His name is Adan and, as you can see, he's one of us.”

“My name is Jonas,” said the man with the smudged pupil. “No hard feeling for knocking you out, right? I was just doing what I'd been told.”

Now that Adan got a better look at him, he was the sort that looked like he'd worked for a blacksmith his entire life. There was more muscle in his arms than

should have been possible. No wonder he couldn't get away from his grip. "As long as you don't do it again," said Adan with a brief smile.

Jonas laughed. "You're one of us now. No need to worry about that."

"The man by the pot is Bigs," said Kal and pointed at the man. Adan was surprised to see he had regular brown eyes when he looked up. He wasn't a World Destroyer. His brown moustache covered his upper lip and had some of the stew dripping from it before being wiped on his sleeve. He nodded to Adan.

"Stew's about ready," said Bigs and turned back towards the fire. His voice had a rasp to it, almost as if something was stuck in his throat.

"He's not much of a talker," said Kal in a quiet voice before pointing at the last man by the fire. "That there's Carnes."

Carnes was an older man. His black beard had grey hairs in it and his hair was fast gaining a similar colour. His eyes were brown as well. Even though Nora had said they were all World Destroyers there had already been two men who could have led normal lives. There was nothing about Carnes that made him stand out. Average height, not fat, not skinny. Just someone you could have passed by in any village.

"He's a young one, ain't he?" noted Carnes, his voice smooth as butter.

"They tend to be," replied Kal.

"True enough," replied Carnes and looked at Adan from under his brows.

"Well, that's the lot of them," said Kal and turned to Adan. "Lars and Tess are out keeping watch so you'll have to meet them later on."

Adan nodded.

"Well, are you two going to stand there or sit down and eat?" asked Bigs and glared at both of them. He started to hand out wooden bowls and spoons. Jonas was first in line to get his filled and he smiled all the way back to his seat as he smelled the steaming stew from his bowl.

Adan found himself next in line and he had to admit the food gave off a scent that had his mouth watering. He found himself a seat by the fire and started enjoying the meal. His head still hurt, but at least it looked like he'd live yet again. He observed the men around the fire, still not entirely certain they could be trusted. The deep rooted mistrust was not something you got rid off in one

night even if you were with others in the same situation.

“How do you guys keep from getting discovered?” asked Adan after finishing his food. There seemed to be plenty left in the cauldron, but he decided a little break would serve him best. Getting answers to a few questions in the mean time was an added bonus.

All eyes turned to Kal.

Still uncertain how much to tell me.

A brief smile passed Adan's lips. They were as careful as he was about trusting people. You didn't just reveal your biggest secrets without thinking about it.

“Why don't you show him, Jonas?” Kal gave the man a glance before focusing on his food again.

“Sure thing,” said Jonas and put down his bowl. He dug around his pockets before pulling out a small wooden box. He opened it and pulled out a pair of spectacles, though they were not the normal kind. He put them on and Adan saw the lenses were made of such a dark material that it was impossible to tell what kind of eyes were looking at you from behind them. There were pieces of the same material around the frames so that no matter what angle you tried to peek in from, you could not see the wearers eyes.

“Can't see much with these in this light, but in daylight they work perfect,” said Jonas and took of the contraption and handed it to Adan for examination. It was surprisingly well made and light. Small hinges allowed you to fold away the bits that went behind your ears to hold them in place. Such craftsmanship seemed beyond what the group could do.

“We've got all kinds of such glasses,” said Kal. “Smoky quartz, tinted glass, ones that only leave a small slit to look through while covering the rest of your eyes. We make them and we sell them. They're becoming quite popular with sailors. Helps with the glare in open seas.”

“So you can see through these during the day?” asked Adan and tried them on. He could barely see the camp fire when he looked straight at it. He was confident no one could have seen his eyes through them even if the sun shone directly at them. The only worry would be someone asking you to remove them,

but that seemed unlikely on the road, especially if you had two brown eyes to present a more normal appearance.

“The black ones are the darkest,” said Jonas. “But outside the slit ones, they're the best for hiding the more noticeable eyes. The other colours let in more light, but they can't hide things as well. All of them let you see well enough during the day.”

“And you're just allowed to keep them on? Soldiers don't ask you to remove them?” It seemed too easy to Adan.

“Sometimes we're asked to remove them,” said Kal. “Thankfully our normal eyes have tongues of silver and can talk us out from having to do it most of the time.”

“But it happens?” asked Adan. He did not want to be fooled into thinking they were perfect. That could end up costing when the truth came out.

“A few times,” said Kal. He looked down. “We've lost some good people over the years.”

Adan watched as the rest of them grew the same sort of aura of gloominess.

It's no wonder. The Church has eyes everywhere. It's a miracle there's anyone besides me alive.

“I'm sorry to hear that,” said Adan and passed the glasses back to Jonas.

“It's a part of who we are,” said Kal and looked up at Adan. “People like us are living on a short leash.”

Adan nodded. There was no arguing against that.

“Don't be so gloomy around the new boy,” said Bigs and stood up to go to the pot hanging over the fire. He took the ladle and piled himself a second portion. “We've got a new one today. It's celebration time. So get yourselves another serving. There's plenty to go around.”

“Wow. That's the most I've heard him talk in days,” said Jonas and laughed.

Kal and Carnes joined in on the laughter. Even Adan found himself smiling and going for a second serving of the stew.

They stayed around the fire well until the night, celebrating their newest member.

Chapter 9

Memories

As good as his memory was, the escape was still a blur in his mind. How he got past the crowd and managed to lose them was something Adan couldn't remember clearly no matter how hard he tried. His first clear memory of it was a dark cellar he had ducked into. There were heavy sacks of potatoes among which he hid. Soldiers came in at one point and poked around, but they missed him, somehow.

Even after they were gone he remained hidden, listening. He could hear shouts and running footsteps and angry voices through the hatch leading outside. The sunlight that came through the cracks in the wooden door was not enough to illuminate the cellar, but it was enough to tell Adan when the sun set. He waited well into the night before emerging from his hiding place and taking the careful steps towards the way out. He stopped to listen, but heard nothing. More steps towards freedom.

His arms screamed in pain when he pushed on the hatch and took a look outside. The dark alley was empty and the main street that had some light to it looked just as empty. Carefully, Adan climbed out and proceeded to move from dark alley to another. The further he got the scarcer the buildings became. He saw a patrol go past in the main streets from time to time, but they didn't bother checking the alleys. They had searched everything during the day. They must have thought he'd gotten away into the nearby woods.

The thought gave him pause. If they were out looking for him in the surrounding countryside would it be better to stay in the city? He shook his head. No. The city wasn't going to be safe for him. He needed empty countryside around him. In the woods he'd be able to hide and let his wounds heal.

Having reached a decision he braved on. The sky was clear and the moon was full so the darkness wasn't too much. The city slowly turned from tightly packed buildings into a more loose gathering of houses and finally the next house was so far away he could barely see the light leaking through the closed window

shutters.

Adan had no idea what the terrain would be like, where there would be a forest and where just open farmland. The only thing he had to go on was getting away from the city and he did just that. Soon there were no buildings to be seen and he could run as best he could with his sore body. Any patrol out at night was easy to spot since they all seemed to be carrying torches.

He ran through fields that had tall crops growing on them. It made it hard to see what was ahead, but he was careful and stopped from time to time to listen. People discounted hearing in favour of their eyes, but in the darkness your ears were your best friend. He heard nothing alarming so he continued onward.

It was after many similar fields that he saw the familiar shapes of trees. He headed for them and breathed a sigh of relief when he found it to be a real forest instead of just a small group of trees. He had no idea how far he had run, but the urge to continue on was greater than the desire to rest. His body complained, but he pressed on through sheer force of will.

Tripping on roots and bumping into trees made for slow progress, but the same would be true for anyone else. It did not seem anyone was out during the night, so far from the city, so Adan started to feel slight relief.

Maybe I've actually gotten away. Maybe I will live.

The mere thought of that gave him pause. He stopped running and leaned against a large tree. He couldn't see much in the darkness. Moonlight barely got through the branches above. He shouldn't have stopped. His legs froze up and refused to take another step, the muscles throbbing with pain as he slumped to the ground and took deep breaths.

It didn't take long for him to fall asleep.

Snapping awake to a sudden sound had his body screaming. It wasn't just the beating he had taken at the hands of his captors, it was the running and the poor choice of sleeping place that had every muscle and joint locked up. Looking around he couldn't see anything dangerous. The sun was up and casting its light down to the forest floor.

Adan settled down and took count of his injuries. There were new scrapes from running in the darkness, but those were minor compared to his fingers and

other bruises. He needed water to clean the wounds and himself. Hiding amongst the potato sacks had not been the best for his injuries. There were a few plants he knew that would help stave off any possible infections. Setting the broken fingers would have to be done as well.

With a deep breath he set out to see to everything he needed.

The herbs were easily found and along the way he found some berries to kill the worst of his hunger. He collected promising looking pieces of wood that would allow him to splint his fingers and hopefully make them heal properly so they'd be of use again.

Finding water was a more tricky proposition. He spent a good portion of the day wandering around. In the end he found a small creek. The rock filled bottom ensured the water was clear and after tasting it, Adan deemed it suitable for cleaning his wounds. With a grimaces and gasps of pain he removed all his clothes and cleaned himself the best he could. Having done that he pounded the herbs into a paste and lathered it over his wounds before ripping strips from his shirt and bandaging the herb covered wounds.

Then came the broken fingers and splinting them. They had not had time to set themselves that much so even though it hurt, Adan managed to put them all in their place the best he could. He hoped it would be enough. Maybe they would look like they'd been broken previously, but hopefully he'd have full use of them.

With his tattered clothes, the bandaged fingers and wounds, he looked like someone who had climbed out of their grave. The dirt was missing, but everything else was there.

Adan sighed as he sat down and leaned against a tree right by the creek. He felt better. He felt tired.

What do I do now? I can't stay this close to the city. The search parties will eventually get here. With the bishop there they won't give up the search. He'll push everyone to remember me.

While the urge to continue on was strong, there was no denying he needed rest. His body had been subjected to things it had never experienced before and he hadn't had much to eat in the past days. Good sleep had been missing from his days.

Of one thing he was certain. Never trust anyone. It was a lesson that had been expensive to take. He would treasure it, no matter how painful it had been.

I can't stay here for too long. I need to get further away. I need better clothes and supplies.

The same thoughts kept swirling around in his head. Before realizing it he had dozed off and when he woke up the sun had moved across the sky and was starting to set. Adan cursed and tried to stand up, but his muscles had truly given up. So he remained in place. It wasn't a bad spot. Not too much in the open, the tree offered its protection. So he stayed there for the night.

In the morning he scrounged up some more berries and looked for a stone he could use to make a knife of some sort. He needed something with which to kill. There was bound to be some of that in his future. Having secured a crude weapon he started walking deeper into the forest.

He wandered for days. Looking for signs of chase kept his nerves on edge and the constant need to hunt for food and looking after his wounds made for slow progress. He got lucky with his snares and caught some hares along the way. Skinning them was something he didn't have much experience with so he ended up with a lot of wasted meat and some annoying hairs in the bits he managed to salvage. But he was too hungry to care.

It was five days since he'd started walking that he ran into a road that looked well travelled. It cut through the forest like a white snake.

Stay away from it.

The thought of running into someone had him feeling panic. They'd call the soldiers on him and he'd be dragged back to that cell. He could be certain that this time there would be no escape. Or if he was lucky they'd just get together a mob and kill him outright.

But I need clothes. I need things to survive. I can't get all of that from the forest. Not like I am.

The logical conclusion to that thought had him hesitating.

I need to rob a lone traveller.

Robbing someone would also mean killing them. They'd see his eyes and if left alive would tell his pursuers where he had been. The less they knew of his

movements the better off he was. A dead traveller might draw them anyway, but they might also blame it on any regular highway robber. Adan grabbed his make shift stone knife. It wasn't much of a weapon with its wooden handle and the strings of bark keeping the blade in place. It was enough for skinning and dicing a rabbit, but actually fighting someone with it wasn't going to work. Especially if they had proper steel on their side. He'd need to surprise the person.

Determined to do what was needed to survive, Adan followed the road in the safety of the forest. He'd be able to hide and anyone he came across would be unlikely to spot him. He passed groups that were travelling the road, farmers with their sons, pulling wagons filled with goods. Merchants that had guards with them. Those were targets he could not hope to touch.

It was late afternoon when he finally spotted a possible target. An old man, using a cane to support himself, slowly made his way along the road. Adan had caught up to him, so slow was his movement. He had a bag swung over his shoulder and looked ready to keel over. He stopped often to wipe sweat from his forehead. He barely had any hair left on his head. He would be an easy target, Adan decided.

He shadowed the man until it started to get dark. The old timer looked around as if contemplating whether to continue on, but in the end he stepped off the road and set himself up under the shadow of a large tree. He dug some food from his bag and took his time enjoying it before taking out a bed roll and finding a good spot for it.

Adan kept an eye on him from a near by bush.

Wait until he falls asleep. Sneak up on him, slit his throat. Quick and easy, no fighting.

As he watched, the man relaxed against the trunk of the tree and killed time before darkness took over. Before wrapping himself in the bedroll, he went to relieve himself in a near by bush. Adan waited impatiently as he wrapped himself in the bedroll. Waiting for him to fall asleep felt like a longer time than anything else Adan had gone through.

The road had been empty ever since he'd found the old man. It didn't look like there were any late movers on it either. He waited a good while to ensure the

man had fallen asleep. His fingers fondled his knife. The rough surface of the handle, the sharp edge of the stone.

It'll be enough.

Adan crawled out of the bush and stopped to listen. Insects, birds, the gentle wind, those were all the sounds he could hear. Cautiously, he started towards the sleeping man. One step at a time, careful not to make much noise. His hand started to sweat. One step at a time, he made his way to the bed roll. He could hear the man's steady breathing. He stood over him before kneeling down. Even in the dark it wasn't hard to tell where his neck was.

Adan lifted the knife and struck.

It wasn't what he had expected, though he wasn't sure what he had hoped for. Maybe no struggle? He was an old man after all and with a gaping wound in his neck he shouldn't have been able to do much besides struggle for breath while trying to stem the flow of blood. But the grip with which he grabbed Adan's hand was strong, frightfully so.

The knife was still in Adan's hand. He still had a good grip on it and even though the man held his arm he could still use it to cut the wound deeper.

"Die. Please. Just die." Adan pleaded and cut through the man's throat. There was a gurgled cough and he could feel something moist spread over his face. Then the grip on his arm loosened. His own deep breaths and the thump of his heart was all he could hear. Trembling, he sat down next to the dead man. He tried to hold back the tears, but it wasn't to be. For a good while he sat there, sobbing.

It was the first time he had intentionally killed someone. He fought against the nausea that ran through his body in waves. He had not wanted to do it, but couldn't find any other solution to his situation. The Church had put him in this situation. They were the ones driving him to do the very things they feared his kind would do.

That's right. I'm only doing what I have to do to survive and it's the Church that's driving it all. If they'd left me alone this man would be alive. I wouldn't have needed to rob and kill him.

The thought eased his guilt. His sobs started to settle and the throb in his

broken fingers grew less frequent. Gathering his strength, he started to look through the old man's belongings. The clothes were too big for him, but rolling up sleeves would at least let him wear them. A rope could fasten trouser around his narrower waist.

He found a flint as well as some torches wrapped in cloth. Lighting one up allowed him to go through the belongings quicker. He did his best not to look at the death mask he had brought into the world. But he couldn't ignore the blood on his hands and face. The last cough had spewed the red dots all around him.

He used a piece of clothing to scrub away all he could.

He didn't touch the bed roll. It was soaked in blood so sleeping in it seemed wrong. Having secured all the items he wanted – which included some food, a knife made of proper metal, clothes and other items he had desperately needed. Before leaving the camp Adan wrapped the man in the bed roll. Someone would find him eventually, but at least he'd be somewhat safe in the mean time.

He disappeared in the woods, feeling a bit better about his chances of surviving, but more guilty over the killing than he had expected.

Chapter 10

“So you're the new guy.”

Adan jumped awake and reached for his sword. It had been returned to him, as promised, and it rested on the ground next to his cot. He was half way pulling out the blade before the voice stopped him.

“Oh, put that away. Breakfast is ready.” The voice was female, but it wasn't Nora.

“Tess?” Adan muttered and tried to shake the last bits of sleep from his eyes. He made out the figure standing at the tent flap. Her copper red hair reached her shoulders and the freckles covering much of her nose gave her an appealing look, at least in Adan's mind. She was clearly older than Nora, but nowhere near what Kal or Bigs was. The shirt and trousers she wore were meant to blend in the forest.

“Yes. And you're Adan.”

He nodded and sat up. He was glad he'd slept in his clothes. He could feel her green eyes on him.

Green? What is someone like her doing with these people.

Though it certainly helped to get people off the groups backs. No one would expect someone like her to have anything to do with World Destroyers.

“I didn't see you last night.” They'd spent a good while around the fire, the others telling Adan stories and bringing him up to speed on things, but the two keeping watch had never appeared.

“Kept watch with Lars. Was late at night when we switched shifts.”

“But you're still up so early,” said Adan and sat down to pull on his boots. Having done that he stood up again and started towards the tent flap. Tess gave him way. He had to squint at the bright daylight and there was a moment of total blindness because of it. He had slept longer than he'd thought.

“It's not that early,” said Tess with a small smile.

“You always let people sleep this late?” Adan stretched and heard a pop from his shoulder. He rolled his arm a few times to ensure nothing had broken.

“Only when a new guy joins us,” said Tess and started towards the camp fire. “New guys tend to be in need of good sleep.”

“I was pretty good on sleep,” said Adan and followed her. He saw that Nora was sitting by the fire. From what he had gathered it was rare for her to leave the tent or the safety of their wagon when travelling. The rest of the group was there as well.

“Well, we need to decide where to go next now that we've found you,” said Tess.

“Good morning lad. There's some beans and bacon by the fire. Help yourself,” said Bigs as the two got close. Adan nodded a thank you and helped himself to a wooden plate and a portion of the breakfast. Even with Gan it had been rare to get such a breakfast. It felt like a good start for a day.

He took a seat opposite to Nora. Kal and Jonas sat on either side of her with the bald man talking with her in hushed tones. Bigs sat next to Jonas and Tess took a seat next to him. Next to Kal sat the man called Lars.

Adan eyed the blond haired man. His well tanned skin struck a contrast with it. His eyes had black spots all through the iris with streaks of green running between them. It was as if he had multiple small pupils. Out of everyone in the camp he looked the most like someone who knew how to fight. How to kill.

Lars met his eyes and nodded silently.

Adan did the same.

“Is everyone here?” asked Nora in a loud enough voice for everyone to hear.

“Seems so,” said Kal and looked around. “Now that Tess managed to drag the new guy from bed.” He grinned at Adan.

There was a chuckle from all the old timers and a whistle from Jonas. Adan didn't know what to make of it. An inside joke he didn't yet understand. The mysterious smile Tess gave him didn't help any.

Nora did not seem to take part in it other than a brief smile that passed her lips. “We've done what we came here to do. We investigated the rumour and by pure luck we found Adan and have welcomed him to our group. Now we must decide what to do next.”

“There was that rumour about one of us being spotted near the city of

Jerdan.” Jonas was the one who pointed that out.

“Jerdan isn't exactly a welcoming place,” said Kal. “They're sharp over there, follow the faith more fervently than others. I wouldn't go there unless we were certain we'd find someone.”

“That rumour is a few months old,” admitted Jonas. He seemed to be ready to abandon the idea.

“Maybe we should go visit home base?” The suggestion came from Bigs. “We've been gone a long time and the new lad should see what he has gotten himself into.”

“We could use a bit of proper rest,” Tess chimed in, though as far as Adan could tell none of them looked particularly worn by the travels. They had two wagons and tents so, outside of a proper inn with proper beds, travelling wasn't going to get any more comfortable. There was the tension of being constantly on guard so maybe that was what the home base offered; relaxation without having to worry about someone coming and killing you.

“Can we trust him?” The question came from Lars. His voice was rougher than you'd have expected. It sounded like he'd been shouting for two days straight and was finally running out of endurance.

Everyone's eyes turned to Adan and then to Nora.

“Well, I'm not going to run off to some soldiers and sell you out, am I now?” Adan gave Lars a look. Both of their eyes would ensure death if either one did something as stupid as that.

“We can trust him,” said Nora. Her word was enough to put to rest what ever doubts the others had. “And I agree, he could use a visit to the home base to see what we're all about. So unless anyone has a better idea, that's what we'll do.”

“It's a months travel anyway. Might as well spend the winter there,” said Kal and ran his hand across his bald head.

“He just wants more time with his wife,” said Jonas.

“Don't we all want some time with our families?” asked Tess.

“I don't,” muttered Bigs.

“That's because your wife is even grumpier than you,” said Lars and grinned.

“Yeah, well, why else would I be out here?” Bigs grinned and got a chuckle

out of the rest of the group.

The friendly banter continued on for a while. Adan was surprised to hear that so many of the group had families waiting for them. He'd have expected them all to be lonely wolves like he had been for most of his life. Just finding someone who'd tolerate your different eyes would be hard enough, but the act of putting them in danger by simply being with them would have been a constant weight on your shoulders.

The fact they had found a way to do that made him curious to see what they called home.

"It's decided then," said Nora and stood up. The banter stopped right then and there. "Let's break up camp and move out."

Adan hurried to finish his breakfast as the others got up and started packing up the camp. Kal and Lars went to take down the big tent Nora had used while the others took care of the smaller ones. Jonas went for the horses and started putting them in front of the two wagons the group used to travel in.

"Come on lad, hurry up. I've still got to wash them," said Bigs as he passed by with his hands full of tent canvas. Adan quickly wolfed down the rest of his meal and put the plate down where the rest of them were. He hurried after the older man and helped him put the canvas in the back of one of the wagons.

Small drawers lined both sides of the inside of it. At the back, right behind the drivers perch, there was a small table with all sorts of tools laid out on it and a half finished pair of glasses. There was room for four people to sit there comfortably while the wagon rolled onward.

Both wagons were made of solid wood, no canvas covered backs, but real sturdy workmanship that would give cover and protection from anything from rain to arrows. The back could be closed off with doors that could be locked from the inside so they offered safety in that regard as well.

"So who makes all the glasses?" asked Adan as he jumped down from the wagon. Bigs was close behind him. They'd stashed the tent in a large travelling trunk that also served as a bench for any passengers.

Bigs patted some sweat off his forehead. The day was getting to be hot. "That's Kal, though you wouldn't believe. Jonas helps him. Apprentice of sorts."

Adan nodded, though it was hard to believe the bald man could manage such intricate work.

“Why don't you go help them with Nora's tent?” Bigs walked towards the fire, no doubt to take care of the dishes as he had said. He'd talked plenty enough so it was time for some silence it seemed.

“All right.” Most of Nora's belongings had already been carried from the tent when he got there and the woman herself had climbed inside the other wagon to prepare for the journey. Adan helped Kal and Lars fold up the tent and stash the canvas and the supporting rods inside the first wagon. It was a good thing there was plenty of clever and hidden storage in there, otherwise there wouldn't have been room for that many people.

The only tent remaining was the one Adan had been sleeping in and he went to help tear it down. He gathered his belongings as well and transferred them to the wagon with the small drawers. It seemed Nora and Tess pretty much had the one wagon to themselves, save for some equipment that had been stashed there.

“Here,” said Jonas and offered a small box to Adan as the tent was being folded up. It had a pair of glasses inside, the black kind. He tried them on and the world turned darker, but he could see well enough for it not to matter. The most important thing was no one would be seeing his eyes.

“Thanks. They fit perfect,” said Adan and smiled.

“They should. While you were asleep I took the time to adjust them for you.” Jonas grinned and looked around. The camp had mostly disappeared now. The wagons each had two horses pulling them, a fifth one was still free for someone to ride on. “Come on. We're about ready to go.”

Adan followed him to the wagon with the workshop. Kal poked his head out the back. He had a hat on as well as a pair of glasses.

“Here. Put this on and ride in the front.” he tossed a similar hat to Adan who barely caught it.

It had a large rim to it that shadowed your entire face. Combined with the glasses it offered plenty of protection from prying eyes. Adan tried it on and found it a perfect fit. “Thanks.”

Kal nodded and disappeared back inside the wagon.

Adan walked to the front of the wagon and climbed onto the drivers seat. Jonas climbed up next to him. He'd gotten himself a pair of dark glasses as well as a hat. Tess rode with the horse next to them.

"Ready to go?" She wore a pair of green glasses as well as hat. Her sword was at her hip and the clothes she wore clearly made her the leader of the group.

"All set," replied Jonas and grabbed the reigns.

"Let's go then," said Tess and pushed her horses sides, sending the beast into a gallop. Adan noted Bigs was driving the second carriage, wearing a hat and glasses. It made sense. If anyone asked them to remove the glasses they'd be happy to see nothing but normal eyes. Maybe it would discourage them from asking anyone else to do so. Certainly the green eyes of Tess were the best protection the group had against that. Few brown eyes would dare to go against her word.

"Nora is the real leader, but in the eyes of the world Tess is a better choice when travelling," said Jonas as the wagon rolled out of the woods and onto the road. It had not been a long way off.

Adan nodded. "I bet her green eyes come in handy." He adjusted his sword so it would be easier to pull out. It wasn't unusual for a travelling group to be well armed. There were bandits about and during the winter a pack of hungry wolves could end up harassing you for the horses.

Jonas chuckled. "People see those and the questions stop right there."

"Why is someone like her with a group like this?" asked Adan. The wagon rolled down the road with surprising comfort. Talking was easy.

Jonas grew more serious. "She has a son. Cursed eyes like ours. She couldn't do it, let the Church kill him. So she ran with him. Cost her a lot."

"How did she do it?" asked Adan. If there had been a midwife then certainly the reaction would have been the same as it had been with him. Once the priests were informed that would have sealed the child's fate.

Jonas glanced at him. "It's a story you best hear from herself. When she's ready to tell it to you. Some things you should hear from the person themselves instead of a third party."

Adan nodded. He could respect that. He wouldn't have wanted others telling

his story either since they'd likely get details wrong and that might turn everything on its head. But it looked like they'd be on the road for a while and talking would make the time pass by faster. "How about you? How did you manage to steer clear of the Church until you were found by this bunch?"

"I was lucky with my parents," said Jonas. He lazily held on to the reins. The horses seemed mild mannered and were content to trot along the road, following the first wagon. "They loved me more than the teachings of the Church. When I was born they didn't have a midwife, being the isolated farmers that they were. They managed and kept me safe for most of my life."

Adan could tell by his stance that the story did not have a happy ending.

"But you can't hide from the world forever," said Jonas and shook his head. "It was a stupid mistake. That's all it took to make my world crumble. A single mistake." He let out a sigh. "I was ten years old by then. My parents had taught me much and always stressed I should hide when ever a stranger came by. Even an isolated farm gets the occasional passing by merchant trying to sell their goods or pay for a nights lodging. I still don't know how we missed him, but this merchant appeared out of nowhere. I was in the yard then. I was busy teasing our cat with a piece of hay so I saw him only when he was standing right next to me. He saw my eyes when I looked up at him. I still remember the look of shock and fear."

"He called the soldiers after you?" asked Adan.

Jonas nodded. "He ran from the yard when he saw what I was. I went and told my parents and my father told my mother and I to leave the farm. We did. We ran to the near by forest with what we could carry. The next day we watched the soldiers come along with a priest. There was a tree in the yard that I liked to climb in. They used it to hang my father."

Some might have been shocked to hear that, but for Adan the only surprise was they had only hanged the man. Usually they did much worse to those who were found to harbour someone like Jonas.

"The fool confessed to me being there when he should have denied it," said Jonas. "Said he was proud of me."

"I'm sorry," said Adan. It was all he could think of to say. At the same time

he felt a sting of jealousy. It was clear Jonas had had a father that was proud of him and loved him. It was something he would have given all to to feel even once.

"It's all right. Of course, at the time, my mother and I were quite upset about it, but we had to run and hide because the soldiers started searching the area. We had to leave my father strung up in the tree. We hid under a large rock. The ground gave way and left a little hole underneath it. We blocked the entrance with some old branches. The soldiers walked right by us."

"You're lucky they didn't have dogs," said Adan. He added, "I hate dogs."

Jonas nodded. "Damn things find you no matter what you do. And that barking. No worse sound than that when you're running away. But they didn't have them, you're right, we were lucky. We stayed under the rock until they were gone and then we left. It wasn't easy getting by and we didn't dare return to the farm to get any more things. If someone was watching the place that would have been the end of us. So we wandered the wilderness and my mother occasionally visited towns to get some supplies. We had a bit of money, but we knew that wouldn't last long so my mother was trying to find a way to make some. In the end she ended up selling herself. There are always men willing to pay for sex even in small towns."

He didn't sound bitter about it like most would have. He spoke with the voice of someone who had come to accept the fact the world sometimes forced you to make choices you rather wouldn't. There was no shame in doing what was necessary to survive and keeping your child fed.

"It was two years later that we ran into Tess and this group. They'd heard rumours about us and come searching. I can't tell you what a relief it was for my mother that she could go back to living a normal life in safety."

"So they really have a safe place for people to stay?" asked Adan. He couldn't shake the feeling it was too good to be true. The Church and its faithful were everywhere.

"There are several safe places," said Jonas and glanced at Adan. "Too dangerous to keep everyone in one place. They're not easy to find. Most are deep in the mountains in hidden valleys that few know of. It's a harsh life at times, but beats being here in the lowlands, constantly chased and having to worry about

other people.”

Adan shook his head. “It still sounds too good to be true.”

Jonas laughed. “I know, but you'll see.”

The wagons rolled down the road, Tess rode in the lead. They passed by several other travellers who paid little attention to their group. A patrol of soldiers passed without even stopping. The disguises were working, that much Adan had to admit.

The day went by with Jonas sharing stories of what he'd seen in the time he'd been travelling with the group. It was surprising how many places they'd been, from the coast of the Jagged Sea to the outskirts of the Sand Dunes, to the southern marshes and the jungles. The only place they had not been to was the far north. Jonas said that was the territory of another group like them, though sometimes they crossed ways if there were enough rumours.

The group stopped for a mid day meal by the road. Bigs enlisted Jonas to help, leaving Adan to feed and water the horses. Kal grumbled about the road being in poor condition when he climbed out the back of the wagon. He had not managed to get much work done with the glasses because of it. For Adan the ride had been comfortable enough, but intricate work probably needed an even more stable environment to work in. He gave the horses their grain and drew water from a large barrel that stood in the back of the wagon.

It had turned out to be a hot day with nary a cloud in the sky. As he wiped some sweat from his forehead he saw Tess climb into Nora's wagon. The blonde woman had not stepped out despite the stop. Even when Bigs declared food to be ready it was Tess that took her a plate while the rest got their own servings and ate the meal in the open.

“Is it always like this?” asked Adan and leaned against the wagon, plate in hand. There was a piece of bread along with some beans and left over bacon and a thick gravy to cover the potatoes. Jonas dipped his piece of bread in the gravy and took a bite. He glanced over at Nora's wagon and then back at Adan.

“Nora is best kept safe,” said Jonas and dipped his bread again. “She may be extraordinary in many ways, but she's still blind. She's an easy target and she's more valuable than anyone else in this group.”

“What makes her so special?” Adan had spent only a moment with her, but there had been a certain insight to her that would serve well any group trying to remain undetected.

Jonas looked away. “You’ll find out in time.”

Adan was not pleased that he was being shut out in such a way. “Why won’t you tell me?”

“Some things you need to see with your own eyes to believe,” said Jonas and finished his meal. He left to wash the plate in a bucket of water that had been set aside for it. When it came to mid day meals, everyone cleaned their own utensils.

Adan looked after him for a moment, biting down not to say anything more. Secrecy was understandable, but he was supposed to be a part of the group.

Am I? I didn’t exactly say I would be with them, just that I’d give it a try. Maybe that’s why they’re keeping things from me.

He spooned some beans into his mouth and thought about it.

I need to commit and prove myself to them. Then they’ll trust me and tell me everything.

He had to admit the group seemed to have credibility. He was starting to like Jonas and the rest of the people didn’t seem that bad either. He finished his meal and cleaned his plate. The others had finished their meals as well and Tess came out from the wagon with an empty plate. She walked around, talking to each member of the group. It wasn’t long before they were back on the road.

“Adan, why don’t you come back here?” asked Kal from the back of the wagon after a little while. Jonas nodded to his questioning look so he climbed back into the wagon through a small door that connected the drivers seat to the back of it.

The two windows on each side were open, giving plenty of light inside. Kal sat by the desk and was tinkering with a pair of glasses, fitting in the lenses.

“Why don’t you help me a bit?” said Kal without looking up. He pointed towards slender metal frames that needed to be put together.

“I’m not sure I know how,” said Adan and took a seat by the table. He took the frames and examined them. It didn’t look that hard, just a few tiny pegs to put in place so the tiny hinges kept the thing together, but with the wagon

shaking with every bump in the road it wasn't going to be easy. How Kal managed to do the intricate work was a testament to his skill, though it made his earlier grumbling more understandable.

"Do your best," said Kal as he fitted the first lens in place. It was a green one. "If you can't do it then you can't do it. We let everyone try since making these is what allows us to travel around. The more people know how to make them the more secure we are."

Adan grabbed the frame and did his best, but after a while he had to admit the small parts were beyond what his fingers could do. Frustrated, he put down the pieces. "I can't do this. My fingers are too clumsy. They'll wrap around the hilt of a sword, but not these tiny parts. I can't put them in place."

Kal put down the piece he was working on. He looked at Adan, examining him from hand to head. "Don't worry about it. We let everyone we find have a go at it. Most don't have the dexterity and precision it takes."

"Some of my fingers were broken once," said Adan. "Maybe that's why."

Kal nodded. "Could be."

His words didn't stem the feeling of frustration that was running over Adan.

"Why don't you head back out with Jonas. I'll handle things here," said Kal and went back to work. His voice was softer and more compassionate than what Adan had heard from him before. He did as told and climbed back out to the drivers seat.

"How did it go?" asked Jonas, lazily holding the reigns. They'd left behind the forest road and were now making their way across open farmland.

"I'm not up to it," said Adan and looked down at his hands. If you looked hard you could tell some of his fingers had been broken at some point. He'd thought there had been no permanent damage, but it seemed he had been wrong.

Jonas slapped his shoulder. "Don't worry about it. Most we find have broken bodies that can't do everything. Just the way life treats people like us."

"I can still hold a sword at least," said Adan.

"All a man needs," said Jonas and grinned.

The wagon rolled on down the road. Adan felt slightly better about failing the task given to him. There were other things he could do for the group. And he'd do

his best with those duties.

Chapter 11

The season was turning from hot summer days to the chill of autumn and the rains it brought with it. The group had left the kingdom of Haskel and entered the kingdom of Baneholm, but in practice that did not mean much for them. The occasional patrols still stopped them from time to time to ask questions. Tess handled them without issue and never did they ask any of them to remove their glasses. Not after seeing her green eyes.

The first few times Adan was nervous, hand resting on the hilt of his sword, ready to jump into action, but after the third time he started to relax a bit. But he didn't fully drop his guard. No one else in the group did either. Sitting next to Jonas he could see he was relaxed, but still had a weapon on hand. On the second time Kal popped out from the back of the wagon with a sturdy crossbow in hand, cocked and ready to fire. They were all ready to fight should things go wrong, but they managed to hide it well.

The group passed villages, never staying at them more than a night and even they they stuck to the outskirts and kept to themselves, save for the few whose eyes allowed them to mingle. It was how they got information and sold their goods while restocking on supplies. Those stays were the most dangerous times. You never knew when some villager would wander into the camp and see something they weren't supposed to.

But they were worth the risk because of everything they could gain.

It was those stays that gave them information about the dukes missing children and how the search was going. Just before crossing the border to the other kingdom they heard the bodies had been found. News like that travelled fast, but it was still a week or two old bit of information. The fact they seemed to have no clue about the culprit had Adan sighing in relief. It meant he was safe and Gan had not gotten involved in the matter in any undesirable way.

He hoped the old man would continue to be safe.

They also heard rumours of a World Destroyer, but it was quickly deduced that they were in fact the same rumours that had brought the group to Adan.

More worrying than that there was some talk about deteriorating relations between the kingdoms of Seven Frost and Baneholm, that, if true, could hinder their way to the secret base. If worst came to pass they might find themselves going through a war zone and that posed its own problems and dangers.

Adan sat on the drivers bench, cloak wrapped tightly around himself to keep the wind at bay, reigns loosely in his hands. Driving a wagon had not been that hard to learn and the horses they had were the calm sort that didn't need much guiding. Looking up at the sky he could see the dark clouds they were headed for.

"We're going to get drenched," said Jonas from next to him. Looking at the horizon you could see the grey curtain of rain the fell ahead of them.

"Looks like it," said Adan. It wasn't so bad. They had wagons for cover. No more sleeping under a bush and hoping it would keep at least some of the rain away.

Nora's wagon rolled on in front of them. Tess rode next to it. Since departing, Adan could count with one hand how many times he'd seen the blind woman. How she could bear staying inside the confines of the wagon for so long was beyond Adan. He'd grown up wandering under the open sky so staying inside such a small space had him feeling anxious after a few hours.

Why didn't I feel like that with Gan? Maybe it will change with time.

"Heads up," said Jonas and pointed forward. Tess was riding off and as Adan looked past her he could see three wagons coming their way with several people riding along them for protection.

"I see them," said Adan. Jonas peeked inside the wagon and gave Kal the warning. He'd have the crossbow ready for trouble. The glasses he was wearing today weren't the black kind. It wasn't a sunny day so instead he had ones with yellow lenses. Not as good as the black ones at hiding his eyes, but as long as there wasn't direct sunlight coming at them they were good enough and let him see the world more clearly.

The wagon in front came to a halt and Adan pulled the reigns to stop their wagon as well. He watched Tess meet up with another rider from the oncoming troupe. It looked like the conversation was friendly enough. He could hear her laughter echo down the road. When she finally returned her expression was far

from someone who was having a good time. The three wagons passed by with the riders keeping a close eye on them. It was a merchant group and the guards they had looked professional with chain mails and well kept weapons. Their stance on the horses made it clear they knew what they were doing.

"They've passed," Jonas said to Kal in the back of the wagon. The bald man peeked out, crossbow still in hand.

"We need to talk," said Tess. She had rode up. Lars and Bigs had already climbed off the wagon in front and were walking towards the back of it.

Kal nodded and went back inside the wagon to get himself glasses just in case. Adan and Jonas hopped off the wagon and walked up to meet Lars and Bigs.

"What's going on?" asked Jonas.

"She'll tell us all," said Lars and nodded towards Tess. She was dismounting and securing her horse to one of the wagons. Having done that she walked over to Nora's wagon and opened the back door.

"You'll need to hear this too, Nora," she said and the blonde woman appeared at the door. She didn't step out into the rain that had made its way to them now. She looked tired and made Adan wonder what she was doing inside the thing all day for that to happen.

"What's going on Tess?" demanded Kal as he huffed over.

"I got some news from the merchants that just passed by," said Tess and removed her riding gloves and smacked them against her thigh. She gave everyone a look. "They say a war has broken out in the north."

A moment of silence passed as everyone tried to come to terms with the news.

"So the rumours were true," said Kal in a grim tone.

Tess nodded. "They say troops from Baneholm crossed the border and sacked some of the northern most villages before the mountains. The troops from Seven Frost are moving to intercept. By the time we get there it'll be an all out war zone."

"Right in our path," muttered Kal and cursed.

"Going through a war zone isn't going to be easy," said Lars. "They'll check

everything that much more thoroughly.”

“I don't think we should risk it,” said Tess. “We go around, it'll take some more time, but at least it will be safer.”

“Why did they start the war now?” asked Adan. Politics wasn't something he was well aware of.

“Baneholm and Seven Frost have been arguing over the north for a long time. This isn't the first time they're warring over it and probably not the last time either,” said Kal.

“Ever since they carved up the old kingdom of Vealn between the two of them they've been fighting where the border should be,” said Bigs in a rare moment of talking.

“Can we even get around the conflict zone?” asked Jonas. “The two pretty much make up the entire border with the mountains.”

“They're not going to be fighting all along the border, just the disputed area,” said Lars.

“That'll still add weeks to our travel,” said Kal. None of them looked too happy about it.

“Are we in any particular hurry?” asked Adan, drawing looks. He looked away. “As far as I can tell there's nothing urgent waiting for us where we're going. What matters is that we get there safely. If I've understood things correctly.”

“He's right,” said Nora in her soft voice. “There is no big hurry. As long as we make it before first snow, we will be fine. A few weeks isn't going to put that in jeopardy.”

“Around we go then,” said Tess and gave everyone a look. There were nods of agreement. No one argued against it.

“We'll need to change directions then,” said Kal and frowned. “I think the western route will be the safest bet.”

Tess nodded. “My thought exactly.”

“The road splits that way from the next village. We'll make our change there,” said Kal. He seemed to know the geography better than most and when ever there was a need to choose a route his opinion and knowledge carried weight that few argued against.

"It's decided then. Now let's get out of this rain," said Kal and headed back for his wagon. Nora closed off her door and Lars and Bigs headed for the drivers seat.

Adan followed Jonas to his seat and harried the horses onward, after Nora's wagon. Tess rode on forward to keep an eye on anything suspicious coming their way. Adan didn't envy the fact she had to be out in the open. At least those driving the wagons had the lip of the roof to give them some protection.

"I wonder what war is like," said Jonas after a while. The rain had gotten worse and a rumble rolled across the sky now and then, preceded by a flash of light. It looked like there would be a proper storm.

Adan had heard stories from Gan. He knew the answer, if not by first hand experience. "It's bloody, it's messy, and the only one to win is a blue eye. All the rest lose."

"Sounds like we've been at war since birth," said Jonas.

Adan glanced at him. "Sort of," he finally admitted. He knew they'd seen death on a personal level, but it had not been war as it could be at its worst. It had been too one sided. The other side had not taken significant hits and because of that the other side was not prepared for what it would take to deal that damage.

"It'll turn into a real war at some point," said Jonas. "We'll carve a piece of land for ourselves and kick out the Church."

Adan shook his head. "Everywhere you go, the Church is there. It has the power to band the kingdoms together to fight us. What can we do against all that?"

"We will do it," said Jonas with a surprising amount of passion and confidence.

Adan just shook his head and let the conversation drop. The wagons rolled through the rain and into the village Kal had spoken of. They parked by the western road with a good view of the eastern road as well as the north and south roads. The village was a hub and at the centre of it rose the tall bell tower of the Church. While the rest prepared for the night, Tess and Carnes went to gather up some information while the rest stayed on the outskirts of town.

“Riders,” said Jonas and pulled Adan's sleeve. He pointed towards the southern road. A group of ten men rode on towards the village. Their purple capes fluttered around them.

They heard Kal curse behind them. “Shit. We can't stay here for the night.” The bald man stood in the back of the wagon and used a spyglass to get a closer look at the riders.

“Why not?” asked Adan and watched the riders disappear amidst the first building of the village. Kal hopped off the wagon and started putting stuff back inside it, though they had not taken much out because of the rain.

“Those are men of the Church,” said Kal. “The worst kind. Inquisitors.”

“For real?” asked Jonas with a hint of fear in his voice. “I've never ran into any, but I've heard stories.”

“Be glad you haven't,” said Kal and continued getting the wagon ready. Bigs was doing the same with Nora's wagon with help from Lars. They hadn't even needed to talk about it and the fact both men had the same idea made Adan feel nervous.

“Will Tess and Carnes be all right?” asked Adan. They'd be completely surprised if they ran into the men. “They won't say we're staying here the night and then they'll wonder why we left in a hurry?”

“They'll know we'll be ready to go if they see those men,” said Kal. “Now stop asking questions and help me pack everything up.”

Adan did as told and with help from Jonas it didn't take long for everyone to be ready to leave. Kal grabbed his crossbow and stood guard inside the wagon, looking out from the windows. Adan and Jonas sat on the drivers seat, ready to put the horses into a gallop if they needed to get away. Bigs came out from Nora's wagon, no doubt having informed her of the situation.

Waiting for their two friends to return felt agonizingly long. The rain died down into a misty trickle and the horses whinnied nervously. They could sense the tension of their owners.

Kal cursed behind Adan and Jonas before peeking out from the back. “What's taking them so long?”

Both men shrugged. It wasn't a question they had an answer to.

"This isn't a group we want to tangle with," said Kal. He sounded like he needed to talk. "A group of ten usually has a priest of moderate rank in the lead and nine warriors to back him up. Their devotion to the Church is complete and the purple cloaks put them in the same business as us. Finding the people with strange eyes and other things the Church deems a deadly sin."

"Purple cloaks," muttered Jonas and shook his head.

"They're worse than any king's soldiers," said Kal. "They act under the Church, with the blessings of all the kings. They're good at what they do and rarely fail when they've found their target. Every time we've ran into them people have died. We've lost good friends to them."

"They came from the south," said Adan. "Could they already be after us?"

The thought silenced Kal for a moment and made Jonas shift nervously.

"Unlikely," said Kal in a dismissive voice. "We haven't attracted any attention through our journey."

"But there's that rumour about me," said Adan. "Maybe they've figured I've left the area."

"No point worrying about that now," said Kal. He did not sound so sure about it himself. "If they do come after us there's not much we can do about it besides fighting. These wagons can't outrun horses."

Seven against ten. Trained soldiers. Not a good fight for us.

Adan's hand went for his sword. If they did come, he hoped Gan had taught him well enough and that the rest had the experience to stay alive.

"There they are!" Jonas pointed at the two figures heading out from the village. They strolled agonizingly slowly and by the time they were at the wagons Kal would have pulled out all his hair if he'd had any.

"Are we ready to go?" asked Tess. Her cheeks were a healthy red. She tossed a bag of goods to Jonas who barely caught it. Carnes was stashing a few more bags in Nora's wagon.

"We've been ready for a while," said Kal. "You saw the purple cloaks?"

Tess nodded. "Didn't have to talk to them. They were in a hurry to get to the church."

"They came from the south," said Kal.

Tess frowned. She had the same thought as Adan had had. “We better get going. We didn't tell anyone we'd be staying for the night so we should be all right.”

“Not much left of the day, but we'll put as much distance between us and the village as we can,” said Kal.

Tess nodded and went for her horse. A few minutes later the wagons were rolling down the road to the west. Instead of working on the glasses like he usually did, Kal sat at the back of the wagon, looking out the cracked door, his crossbow at the ready to fire on anyone chasing after them. The tension had Adan's shoulders bunched up and he soon had a headache to accompany that. No matter how many times you feared for your life the fear always came to keep you company.

But the worry turned out to be for nothing. There was no sign of anyone coming after them and by the time it was starting to get dark and they'd pulled by the side of the road to set up camp everyone was starting to feel like they'd gotten away.

Kal still demanded they sleep in the wagons instead of pitching the usual tents. He also insisted on extra guards just in case the riders came during the night. No one objected.

Adan stared up into the darkness and listened to Jonas snore. He wished he could see the stars. There was something calming about the small lights and his heart was still racing and doubts haunted his mind. Something to relax would have been welcome even if it was something as commonplace as watching stars.

His guard shift came and went by without incident. The wagons were back on the road before the sun was even fully past the horizon. Everyone was feeling visibly relieved nothing had happened during the night and the further they got from the town the more relaxed everyone became.

“Riders!”

The shout from Kal had Adan and Jonas exchanging frightened looks. They had their glasses on, as did everyone else, but they would not do much if it was the men of the Church coming. They'd command a green eyed woman just as well as a blue eyed king.

Tess rode past their wagon to get a better look. She passed back a moment later with a grim look.

"It's the inquisitors," she said as she passed. She went to pass the information to the front wagon, including Nora

Adan adjusted his sword so it would be easier to get out. Jonas did the same with his and the two young men drew strength from each other.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to fighting," said Jonas and tried to smile.

Adan nodded.

The sound of hooves thumping the ground grew stronger and it wasn't long before the first purple caped man passed them, followed by several more. Five surrounded the first wagon while another five took the back one. Adan glanced at the men. All brown eyes. All with a stiff expression that made you think they hadn't laughed a day in their lives. These men meant business and would not be distracted.

"Why have you stopped us?" Adan heard Tess demand from what looked to be the commander of the unit. He had on a fancier helmet and his armour had more decorations on it.

"I am vicar general Polan. By the authority of the Church and the all mighty god, I command you to stop and subject yourselves to a search."

Adan moved his hand to the hilt of his sword as casually as he could. There would be a fight, of that he had no doubt. The man demanding their co-operation was someone who would not leave without getting what he wanted. He heard Tess plead with the man, argue against having to do what he demanded, but it all fell on deaf ears and made the vicar general even more insistent.

"I respect that you are a woman of good standing," said Polan, referring to Tess' eye colour. "But we have reports that there is a world destroyer travelling amongst a group of merchants. We're obliged to search all convoys we come across. Now step aside or my men will move you by force."

Adan could see her shoulder slump. She had realized there was no talking themselves out of the situation. Then came the hand signal.

The first man fell off his horse next to Adan, a quivering crossbow bolt sticking out from his side. His armour had done nothing to make it any less

lethal despite how well made it was. Adan paid little attention to what was going on around him. He heard the horses frightened whinnies and shouting, but he focused on what he was doing. Since his closest enemy had fallen, he jumped back towards the man by the side of the wagon. He caught him by the leg and dragged him down with him. They hit the ground hard, but it was a bump Adan had prepared for. He was the first one with sword in hand and a resemblance of balance. The only thing that saved the soldier was his armour. It deflected the first attack from Adan and allowed the soldier to get his own weapon out. Having no armour left Adan at a distinct disadvantage.

But Gan had taught him well.

He parried the first attack and examined the armour with a calmer mind than he'd expected to have. It was an odd mixture of leather, chain and plate, but allowed for free movement while protecting the important areas of the body. The only weak spots seemed to be under the arms and around the neck along with the joints. He'd have to aim carefully to deal damage and against a skilled opponent that could prove difficult.

The blows they exchanged only further calmed him down. Here he was, fighting a trained soldier from an elite unit on even ground. No longer was he relying on instinct and luck to survive. He had skill to add to the pot and that, combined with his natural knack for surviving, made him a force to be reckoned with.

Adan crouched under a wide swing and made one his own. It landed on the man's knee, cutting into flesh and the joint behind it. The man lost his balance and fell down, still swinging his sword. It was easy enough to disarm him and sink the blade in his throat.

He didn't have time to survey the situation when a soldier rode towards him. He ducked under the overhead blow and sliced the horse's leg. It went down, sending its rider flying through the air. Adan rushed over and found him gasping for breath. A quick slice of his throat relieved him from the struggle. Then Adan went to put the horse out of its misery. Its leg was cut too badly for it to be any use besides making use of its meat.

Three down.

Adan looked around. He couldn't see what was happening on the other side of the wagons, but judging by the sounds the fight was still in full gear. On his side he saw Tess exchanging blows with the leader of the group while Carnes and Lars were fending off two soldiers. That left four soldier unaccounted for.

Fearing Jonas might be in trouble, he climbed to the drivers seat to get a look. He saw the young man laying on the ground, blood covering a sizeable portion of his stomach. Kal was standing over him, fending off two soldiers.

In the other direction, Bigs was exchanging blows with the last soldier, one laid dead near by. The grumpy man had a wound on his arm, but it didn't look to be serious as he was still swinging his blade with force and accuracy.

The choice as to who to help was an easy one to make. Adan rushed to Kal's side and took on one of the soldiers. All he had time for was a quick glance at Jonas, but what he saw did not look promising. The wound was to the stomach and it looked to be deep. Those were the sort of wounds that killed you over a long period of time instead of quickly.

For a moment he wondered why Kal had not kept hidden and used the crossbow, but then he remembered the huge thing almost needed two people to ready it. Alone, you needed to use some tools to pull the string taut and that took far more time. An extra sword, especially after Jonas had fallen, was much more useful and probably the only reason the young man might still be alive.

The two swords sent sparks flying when they met. Adan stared into the eyes of his enemy. He wasn't much older than him. He met his gaze and Adan could see him look slightly shocked at seeing his eyes. He grinned at the soldier and pushed him away. He wasn't sure when he'd lost the glasses. It didn't matter. All the soldiers would die or the group would end up dead.

There was no middle ground to be had.

The fight ended quick when Kal came in from the side and sunk his blade underneath the soldiers armpit. The man slumped to the ground and Kal pulled out his blade. He'd taken care of the one facing him.

"You all right?" he asked Adan and gave him a look over.

Adan nodded. "I killed two on the other side of the wagons."

He saw horses prancing around nervously near by. The soldier had

dismounted for some reason. Maybe they had feared the same thing would happen to them as to the one Adan had put down. Horses could be expensive and in a fight like this they just got in the way. It looked like the fight would be theirs. Bigs had wounded his opponent and was in the process of slowly cutting him down. Tess had cut down the leader of the group. The man hung to his saddle by one foot, the rest of him dragged along the ground as the horse moved.

Adan decided tending to Jonas was the best he could do. He rushed over to the man's side and inspected his wounds. Kal knelt next to him.

The bald man shook his head. "Not good."

You could see his insides peek through the wound. Jonas was still breathing, but the loss of blood combined with the gaping wound made it unlikely he'd live to see the next day, if even the next hour. Thankfully, he did not seem to be conscious.

"What can we do?" asked Adan.

Kal looked around. He let out a sigh. "Nora is our only hope."

"What can she do?" demanded Adan. A blind woman wouldn't even be able to bandage the wound. She'd be useless.

"You'll see," said Kal. He gave Adan a look. "You go get her. I'll help Bigs take that soldier alive. We'll need him."

"But.."

"Do as I say kid!"

Adan shut up. He stared at the bald man for a moment before standing up and heading for Nora's wagon. He saw Kal stand up and rush to help Bigs. Why they needed the soldier alive made little sense to him.

He knocked on the wagon doors. "Nora. It's me, Adan. Kal sent me to get you. Jonas is hurt. Bad."

He waited for a moment. There were some shuffling sounds from within and then the doors opened. Nora had a crossbow in hand, a smaller one than what Kal used, but still deadly. "How bad?"

"Bad enough that he'll die. Kal seems to think you can do something. He went to get one of the soldiers alive."

Nora nodded. Her white hair looked like she'd spent hours brushing it. The

robe she wore was the same simple one as she always wore. "Can you help me?" she put down the crossbow and extended a hand.

"Of course." Adan holstered his sword and took her hand and helped her down from the wagon. Her hand felt small compared to his.

"Show me where," said Nora and didn't let go of his hand. Adan didn't mind and guided the woman to where Jonas was laying. His situation had not improved though it had not gotten worse either. Nora knelt down next to him and felt around, examining the wound. Adan stood and watched, not expecting her to be able to do much for the young man.

"Where's Kal?" asked Nora. Her hands were bloody. Some had gotten onto her robe.

Adan looked around and saw the bald man and Big dragging an unconscious soldier towards them. "They're bringing the soldier now."

"Good. We'll need him."

"What can you do for him? That wound is fatal," said Adan.

"You'll see," said Nora and remained on her knees.

Kal and Bigs huffed as they slammed the soldier down next to Jonas. "He has a few minor wounds, but he's alive."

Nora nodded. "That should do. Are all the other soldiers dead?"

"They're all dead," grunted Bigs and examined his own wounds. He had several cuts, some that wouldn't need anything more than cleaning, but there were a few that would need to be bandaged, maybe even stitched.

Adan noticed it was true. Tess was climbing down from her horse and was walking towards them. Carnes and Lars were in tow. There were nothing but dead soldiers on the ground.

"Can you help him?" asked Kal and looked at Nora. She was examining the soldier and continued to do so before finally nodding.

"How is he?" asked Tess when she joined the group and saw Jonas laying on the ground.

"Dying," said Adan.

Kal glared at him. "Nora can help him."

"How?" Adan demanded. Even the king's healer would have shook his head

and moved on to the next patient, even if it was the king laying there.

“Just watch,” said Tess.

“Hold him down,” said Nora. Bigs and Kal did as told, the bald man taking the soldiers arms while the cook sat down on the man's legs. Nora stood up and closed her eyes. A deep breath left her.

Adan didn't know what to expect. When the soldier started screaming and thrashing he jumped a bit at the suddenness of it. Nora had her hands spread, one over Jonas the other over the soldier. The soldier cried and cursed, but Jonas barely flinched.

Before his eyes, the soldier started to wither away.

Wrinkles appeared on his skin. His hair turned white. The pinkness of his skin slowly turned into a pasty grey and the bones in his body started to shine through. His eyes sunk into his head. Soon he was too weak to even cry out. A moment later there was a cracking sound and Bigs stood up. His weight had broken the bones in his legs. By the time he was standing there was nothing but dust left inside the armour the soldier had been wearing.

Jonas took in a deep breath and sat up. He looked surprised and felt his stomach. You could see that under his shirt was nothing but dried blood and healthy skin. His guts were back inside him, where they belonged.

Nora stood in place and opened her eyes.

Adan stared straight into the whiteness of them and a shiver ran down his spine.

What are you?

A small smile passed her lips before she turned to return to her wagon.

Chapter 12

Memories

“They say he vanished in a puff of black smoke, right there, from the wagon and that his mother spat fire at the crowd trying to kill her.”

“You're full of shit, Garb.”

“Just telling what I heard!” the man grabbed his tankard and took a long gulp. He glared at his friend. “You know how people are. One World Destroyer and they see the end of the world.”

“It is what the Church teaches,” said the other man and stared into the fire. “Bad business people like them. Thank the god we have pious men and women who hunt them down. They'll catch this runaway and burn him at the stake like he deserves.”

A moment of silence passed between the men.

“I still can't believe they let him escape, Val.” Garb took another sip from his tankard. They had a piece of meat rolling on the fire and their horses were tied to the back of the wagon. They weren't far from the near by town where they'd gotten some supplies and heard the rumour they were now chewing through.

“Them city folk don't know how to deal with people that need to be killed,” said Val. “They think they need to be paraded through the streets. What they should do is just kill them on sight like they do in smaller towns.”

“You know that's not true, Val,” said Garb. “Town folk are so bored that a World Destroyer is something everyone wants to see. The whole town gathers around to see their deaths. They're just as bad as city folk, if not worse.”

Val grunted something and shut up.

Adan wiggled his way into the back of their wagon and started to rummage for things he could use. There was a loaf of bread that his hands found immediately followed by a thick quarter of cheese. He was careful to keep an ear out for the two men. If they found him he'd be dead.

“Do you think they really have powers?” asked Garb. Having gotten into the wagon their voices came a bit more muffled but still clear enough to be made out.

“What? That they can disappear in a puff of smoke and breath fire?” Adan couldn't see the men any more, but he could imagine the look of ridicule on the man. His hands found some dried meat that he packed in his little sack of things.

“It's what the Church teaches. 'Beware for their abilities come from Desolation.’” A direct quote from scripture by the sound of Garb, which was a bit of surprise for a travelling goods hauler like him.

“You'd think that they'd be able to do something special,” said Val. “There's so few of them that it would be hard for one to do anything if they didn't have some trick up their sleeve. Since they come from Desolation it must be something horrible. But I've been to one of those executions and if the weird eye had any power and he needed a reason to use it, then it was then and there, but all he did was burn up screaming.”

I wish I had some power. Maybe things wouldn't be so hard. Maybe I wouldn't need to sneak around in the dark and steal from passers by. Maybe I wouldn't need to hide in the woods from every other human.

Wishful thinking wasn't something Adan did often, but sometimes he allowed himself that luxury. His fingers were still wrapped up, but they had had time to heal and there were days when he thought maybe it was time to free them. But the time had not been right yet. Barely three weeks had gone by since he'd killed the old man and stolen his belongings. He continued to search the wagon for useful things.

“Maybe he didn't want to reveal them. Wants to keep people thinking none of them have any powers,” said Garb.

Val laughed. “If you were going to be burned alive, would you not escape no matter what it took? No reason to keep hiding things at that point.”

“Maybe it's not a power that would let you escape,” said Garb.

“Then what good would it be?” Val laughed again. “I'd be pissed if I had some magical power that was useless. I'd rather not have it and just live a normal life.”

“If you were born of Desolation you wouldn't think like that,” said Garb. “All you'd think about is destroying.”

“And how much death and destruction have the World Destroyers done so far?” Val did not sound too impressed with their achievements.

“There's Cievman,” said Garb. “He started it all and killed tens of thousands in his mad war. He's the reason the Church stood up from the ashes and declared those weird eyes to be from Desolation.”

“That was two thousand years ago. What have the World Destroyers done since then besides maybe survive long enough to become no worse than ordinary bandits?” Adan could hear someone poking the fire and some grease from their piece of meat sizzling as it fell in the hot coals. He started crawling towards the back of the wagon. He'd gotten food and some other useful things. It was time to go. But he didn't want to get out of range of hearing the two men. They were talking about some interesting things so he hid under the wagon, behind a wheel to listen in some more. The horses gave him a curious look as he crawled past them, but didn't make a sound.

“It's because the Church hunts them down,” said Garb. “They don't have time to make anything big.”

“Maybe so, but if they're from Desolation as the Church says then they should be able to do something more dramatic,” said Val.

“Are you questioning the Church?” Adan could hear the agitation in Garb's voice. It was clear Val wasn't as fervent about his beliefs, which was interesting in its own right, and that was starting to rub his friend the wrong way.

“No. That's not what I'm doing,” said Val. He had realized how close to the line he was getting and now wanted to sooth his friend to avoid a fight. “I just haven't seen much harm in them for myself. You know me. I'm the type who questions his own mother if she tells me there's a dark skin in town. I have to see it with my own eyes.”

Garb grunted. “You're a suspicious bastard, I'll grant you that.”

“Keeps me from being hustled,” said Val with a small amount of pride in his voice.

“The meat done yet?”

“Just about,” replied Val.

“I'll go grab us more beer,” said Garb. Adan took that as his cue to leave the two behind. He made his way from behind the wagon wheel into the nearby bushes. He stopped to let Garb get their drinks. No point in alerting him by

moving. Adan watched the big man climb into the back of the wagon. He hoped the theft would go unnoticed until morning. He'd be far away by then.

He saw the figure of him come back out without any sign he'd noticed food missing. Adan watched him go back to the fire before starting heading away from them.

Who's Cievman? Sounds like he's the one to blame for all of this. He started the trouble. He ruined my life. With the Church.

Branches scraped his face. It didn't bother him. He'd run through enough forests to expect them. There had been search parties after him, but he'd managed to keep ahead of them. Killing the old man had brought them closer, but he'd managed to keep hidden from them. The dogs hadn't been able to keep up with him, though that was mostly pure luck. It had rained on several days. Even though that made him miserable it also washed away any trace the dogs could follow.

The darkness made it hard to see. Even though the moon was full very little of its light made it past the tree tops. Adan stumbled more than a few times. He didn't dare set up a fire for fear it would attract the two men he had just stolen from. Though they were just a pair of wagon drivers, if they saw him, at the very least they would beat him to within an inch of death for stealing from them. Most likely his eyes would convince them to kill him.

He stopped under a large tree. It was where he had planned to stay the night. There were two large stones right by the tree between which he could squeeze. Beyond them there was enough space for him to curl up and sleep in relative safety and comfort. The stone scraped his skin as he crawled into the hideout, but he figured it would be worth it. He curled up and fell asleep after a while, leaving going through his haul for when there was light.

It wasn't often that he had dreams. Even with his memory few were the kind he could remember after waking up.

He stood on the edge of a cliff, looking down on a battlefield. The men looked like ants as they rode across the open plain and crashed into the line of infantry men. A man with brown hair stood next to him, dressed in armour that was decorated with enough gold to buy a small village. A beard covered much of his

jaw and upper lip. He frowned as he watched the battle unfold below him. The sound of a horn had both of them look up to the horizon. More men were coming to support the infantry.

The man in the armour frowned. "There is no avoiding it then." His voice had a heft to it. Almost like his entire life had been slowly marching towards the point in time and now that it was here, he wished it wasn't.

Adan watched the man put on his helmet and draw out his sword. It was a beautiful thing of shiny steel and embedded jewels. The helmet covered much of his face and brought Adan's attention to his eyes. They were like his. Multicoloured that should have seen him dead as an infant. But there he stood, a man well into his thirties, in armour, wielding a weapon befitting a king.

The man muttered something Adan could not make out. He pointed the sword at the advancing army. The next thing Adan saw was a blue ball of flame burst into being in the middle of the advancing army. It expanded, engulfing the entire force. A barely visible wave washed away from it, ripping the clouds in the sky, before finally reaching where Adan stood. The sound was deafening and made the ground shake. It forced him to put his hands over his ears. After a moment he put his hands down. It sounded like there was a tiny whistle being blown in his ears.

It was difficult to see what had happened to the attacking army. Too much smoke and dust drifted in the air. The bloom of fire was still burned into Adan's eyes and he could see the shape of it when he closed his eyes. When he opened them again the wind had blown much of the dust away. There was no sign of the advancing new enemy.

The man next to him sheathed his sword and took off the helmet. You could tell from his expression he had not enjoyed doing what he had done. He turned to look at Adan. "The past is the future."

"What?" It was all Adan could think of to say.

The man leaned in. A strong arm grabbed Adan by the shoulder. "What was will be again. You are important. Never forget that."

Adan snapped awake in his little hiding place.

A dream?

He shook his head and tried to shake the feeling of dread that had come over him. The memories of the dream started to vanish. A ray of sunlight hit the edge of the crack that he'd crawled in through. Adan yawned and grabbed his belongings before crawling out. He stretched and put the bag down and sat down to examine his haul from the previous nights robbery.

The loaf of bread and cheese made for a quick breakfast. Adan ate more than he should have, but he still had an uneasy feeling over the dream and the bread was too tasty to leave it at one slice. It was his second slice that he looked through the other stuff he'd taken. There was a flint, some dry kindling that would make starting a fire easier. A new knife that had a wooden handle and a blade that looked like it had never been used. It cut a small wound in his thumb when he tested it for sharpness.

He wrapped the thing in cloth and hid it on himself. Then he frowned. He couldn't shake the dream.

Who was that man?

It was all he could really remember well from the dream. That face. The eyes. They weren't something he'd forget easily.

The past is the future? What sort of nonsense was that? What did it even mean?

He shook his head.

Just forget it. It was a dream. I've got bigger things to worry about. Like staying alive.

He finished the slice of bread and packed everything in his sack. He headed deeper into the woods, away from the road. The two wagon wranglers would notice they'd been robbed. They might search the nearby areas or inform a patrol going by. It was better to lay low for a while and let the thing blow past. Then there'd be an opportunity to rob someone else.

Chapter 13

“Why don't you travel with Nora.”

Adan gave Kal a surprised look. “Why?”

The bald man wiped some sweat from his forehead and leaned on his shovel. They'd dragged the bodies further away from the road and buried them. “I'm sure you have questions. She can answer them the best.”

Adan hoisted the chain mail on his shoulder. It fit him well enough that it'd be of use if another fight came their way. There were no insignias on it to mark it as inquisitor equipment so it was safe in that regard as well. They'd taken plenty of other things from the dead men as well. “If you think that's for the best.”

Kal nodded. “I think it would be.”

“All right.” They were done with the bodies so Adan started to head for the wagons.

“Adan!”

He turned around.

“You did well today,” said Kal and pulled the shovel out of the ground before resting it on his shoulder.

Adan nodded and headed for the wagons. He put the chain mail inside the wagon Jonas drove and walked past the young man on the drivers seat. He looked pale. He had not been his usual talkative self after what Nora had done to him.

He nearly died. It'll have an effect on anyone. Give him time.

Bigs and Carnes emerged from the near by woods, having completed their share of burying corpses. Carnes had been tasked with sending the horses off. They were branded as Church property so there was no safe way to keep them.

Tess emerged from Nora's wagon. She shook her head and took a deep breath.

“Everything all right?” asked Adan and stopped.

Tess rubbed her eyes. “Yeah, everything is fine. It's just.. never mind.”

“Kal told me I should travel in the back with Nora.”

She sighed. "You must have questions. Kal's right. You should talk with her."

"We've buried the bodies. Seems everyone is about ready to head on," said Adan.

"We're lucky no one died," Tess muttered. She seemed to be taking the thing hard.

"We nearly did lose one," Adan reminded and glanced back at Jonas. He was staring at his hands like they were there for the first time. The confused expression he had made it clear he was not all there just yet.

"I wish we'd had Nora with us the previous times we've ran into the inquisitors. Maybe we'd have more friends alive today." There was a bitterness to her voice.

"Nora hasn't been with you for long then?" Since she seemed to be the leader, Adan had assumed she had been there for some time. Though given her age she can't have been the senior member in the group.

"A few years," said Tess and looked around. Everyone had gathered from their disposal duties. It was time to move on. "Climb inside. We're moving out."

Adan nodded and watched her go talk to the others before hoisting herself up on her horse. He didn't feel comfortable just climbing in so he knocked on the closed doors of the wagon.

"Come in, Adan," came the voice of Nora. He did as told and opened the door to climb in. It was a far cleaner wagon than the one Kal resided in. There was a table and some soft pillows to sit on around it. The clutter of items was hidden by trunks and barrels where everything was neatly hidden away.

"Kal told me I should travel with you," said Adan.

Nora nodded and motioned for him to sit down. She was already sitting down with a cup of some steaming liquid in front of her. She looked tired and Adan could have sworn her facial bones were showing more than usual, like something had drained the life out of her. What ever she had done it looked like it did not come without a price.

They sat in silence for a moment. The wagon nudged forward and they were back on the road again, leaving behind the mess the inquisitors had caused. Nora

took a sip from her cup.

“You must have questions.”

Adan nodded. “Wouldn't you, after seeing what you did?”

“I would,” she admitted and put down the cup. Her white eyes turned to regard Adan even though there was nothing they could see. “How much do you know about us? People with strange eyes. How it came to be that the Church hunts us down?”

Adan shrugged even though the motion was wasted on her. “Not much. I've heard the name Cievman mentioned in passing, but not much more than that.”

“It's not surprising. Few of us have the fortune of having someone talk to us, let alone reveal our history.” Nora took a sip from the cup. It smelled like a mix of potent herbs.

“Cievman was a ruler with eyes like ours,” Nora started. “His kingdom – or empire – spanned much of the lands the current kingdoms occupy. He was a strict man and showed little mercy to his enemies. It was that lack of compassion that ultimately led to his downfall at the hands of rebel lords and outside kingdoms. It was a costly war, not least because he had something no one else had. He had powers. At least, that is what the Church tells of him. We don't know how true that is since they've spent centuries erasing anything that contradicts their view of the world.”

“Powers?” Adan couldn't keep the question from leaving his lips.

“He could wipe out entire armies,” said Nora. “He could create flames that would burn away anything in their way. He could do many things, but the Church has done its best to distort or destroy the accurate accounts so we're left guessing all he could do. I can say that what I can do is but a shadow of his powers.”

Adan fell silent to ponder what he'd heard. A dream from the past was rustling in the back of his mind.

“But none the less, he was defeated, his once mighty kingdom divided amongst many. Out of those ashes rose the Church and started its persecutions of people with eyes like ours. Given what Cievman did it is not surprising those he oppressed came up with a faith that sought to prevent anyone like him from

emerging again.”

“Yet here we are,” said Adan.

Nora nodded. “We survive, but few of us have even a hint of his powers. In fact, I am the only one we know of.”

The wagon jolted over a larger bump in the road. The soft cushion under Adan dampened much of it. “Why is that?”

Nora shifted in her seat. The sleeves of her robe hung over her hands, but Adan could see them twitch nervously. “It is difficult to say with any certainty. So much time has gone by, so much has been distorted by the Church. The best theory we have is that those with actual power are Cievman's descendants who had children with people who have some disposition towards the same in their heritage.”

“If he was so hated how did anyone with his blood live?” To Adan it seemed the first thing any newly risen Church would have done was to hunt down them all and kill them.

“The Church teaches that he was a man who got around, despite being a king. Maybe he had many bastards and legitimate heirs. Some survived despite the hunt. The eyes, they can skip generations before manifesting,” said Nora.

“So you're one of his descendants?”

Nora shrugged. “All I know is I have this power.”

“What, exactly, can you do?” She could heal people, that much Adan had witnessed himself, but it had demanded the life of another.

“Every one of us has a life force. I can affect that. It allows me to heal like I did with Jonas or I can take that force away, like I did with the soldier I used to save our friend.” Nora shifted in her seat again. “I can rob that force from several people and do things that should not be possible. Horrible things. Deadly things.” Her voice tapered off. Her usually calm and determined outside had cracked. The power she wielded frightened her.

For a moment they sat in silence. “How did you discover you had the power?” Adan was keen to know the answer.

“I had a dream,” said Nora. The wagon shifted slightly to one side, but soon straightened itself. The road could have deep grooves in it at places. “I believe it

was Cievman in it. He used the power to save someone. It was years after that when my power woke. It just happened when I needed it.”

“What did Cievman look like in the dream?” The memory of a dream had creaked open the door to its small corner. Adan could feel slightly light headed as Nora described him exactly as he had been in his own dream.

“I have seen him in a dream as well,” said Adan after going through the dream in his mind and comparing the man to Nora's description.

“When? What did he do?” It was the first time she showed genuine excitement. She leaned over the table, white eyes fixed on Adan.

He told her the story. What Cievman had done, when it had happened and what he'd done before and after that. It wasn't a short story so by the time he was done an hour had passed.

Nora sat back and unfolded her legs from underneath herself. Adan saw the skin of a white shin and thigh when she sat cross legged, though her robe quickly covered it all up again. “But you've never been able to use any sort of power?”

Adan shook his head, forgetting for a moment she could not see it. Finally, he realized and said, “No.”

Nora pursed her lips. It made her look much younger and had the corners of Adan's lips nudging towards a smile. “Perhaps you have not yet encountered the triggering situation,” said Nora.

“There have been plenty of times where I could have used a power,” said Adan and thought back. If he'd had some sort of ability then his life might have turned out less painful. On the other hand he could see it having made his life shorter.

“There is another theory some have passed around,” said Nora and grabbed the cup. The liquid had become cold, but she sipped it none the less with a small cringe. “It's that there needs to be others like you around you for the power to awaken. You need to use it to save another one like you.”

Adan chuckled. “That's not very convenient now is it?”

Nora shrugged. “It's a theory. Fact is, we know very little. Too little. And what little we know is tainted by the Church's view.”

“You'd think there would have been others before you if that were the case,”

said Adan.

“There may well have been, but they got caught by the Church and were killed,” said Nora. “You’ve heard the stories among the people about how we can create fire and all that other stuff. Those have to have come from somewhere.”

“They could just be from the original Cievman story,” said Adan. “And the Church uses it to remind us how dangerous we are.”

“It’s possible,” Nora admitted. She let out a sigh. “The Church has destroyed so much of our past that it’s nearly impossible to say anything for certain.”

“From the sound of it they weren’t completely wrong,” said Adan. “Cievman does not sound like a pleasant man.”

“We are not him,” reminded Nora. “The Church does not hang the family of a murderer. They don’t kill his sons and daughters because of his crime.”

“I’m not defending the Church,” said Adan. “Give me a priest and I’ll spend the rest of the day making him cry out to his god in vain while his church burns. They deserve everything that’s coming to them. I’m just saying they had a reason to do what they did. Not a good one, but a reason other than someone writing a bunch of stories into a book and calling it the holy word from god.”

“It has been a long time since we burned a church or a monastery,” said Nora. There was a slight hint of regret in the way she said it. Adan was not sure what to attribute it to: the past burnings or the fact they had not done so lately.

“Why?” To Adan it seemed like a good way to strike against the Church. There were plenty of isolated monasteries that would have been an easy target for a group even their size.

“That tends to attract attention,” said Nora. “You saw what a chance encounter with inquisitors was like. We nearly lost Jonas. If they focus their efforts on us it would be even worse. Our best tactic is to remain unseen and not draw attention. At least for now.”

“It sounds like you plan to step into the public at some point,” said Adan.

Nora nodded. “When we’re ready.”

Adan wanted to ask for specifics, but the way Nora shifted her body made him think it would be useless. He was not yet deserving of that knowledge. They still did not fully trust him.

Given what was at stake he couldn't blame them.

"So, what now?" Adan leaned back and supported himself with his hands.

"We go home like we planned," said Nora. "We wait to see if you wake up."

"You think I will develop a power?"

Nora nodded. "So far you're the only other one to have seen a dream similar to mine. You just need the right thing to trigger it."

Adan wasn't as optimistic, but he said nothing more. The silence grew longer. The wagon swayed as it ran over bumps in the road. It gave Adan time to examine the woman opposite to him. The whiteness of her hair and eyes gave her a certain charm, though most would have found it off-putting. Adan didn't mind. He had not had the chance to be close to women his age so it was a rare opportunity in his mind.

"How did you survive?" asked Adan to break the silence. She was someone who'd stand out not just because of her eyes. If she was alone then she was even more tenacious than Adan.

"I was born inside the safe place to parents who were both World Destroyers," said Nora. "I never had to contend with the outside world trying to kill me every day. I had a childhood that was safe."

"Then why are you here, outside?" Adan was uncertain he would have left the safe place. It sounded like a good place to be and when you'd found a good place, why leave?

"Because I have seen what the Church does," Nora replied and sighed. She closed her eyes. "The way they oppress our sort is not right. Anyone with a working sense of moral knows it. So I joined the parties that go to the outside world to help find people like you. It wasn't easy because of my blindness, but once my power woke up, there was soon no shortage of groups wanting me to go with them. But then there were others who wanted me to stay in safety."

"With your power, isn't that what you should be doing?" asked Adan. It seemed short sighted to risk her life on the outside when she could be of great use in a safer place.

"If I did that then we would have lost Jonas today," said Nora and opened her eyes. "I've saved a dozen lives by being out here, just from attacks by the

Church. That doesn't even take into account people like you that we have found and guided to safety. What would I have done otherwise? Nothing of worth.”

“I can see the sense in that,” said Adan. Her words had revealed what sort of a woman she was. She did not lead the group for no reason. She genuinely cared about the cause.

The wagons came to a halt. It wasn't long before Tess knocked on the wagon doors and entered after permission from Nora.

“Lunch break,” she said and dug up some rations from a barrel behind her. She took a seat between Adan and Nora.

“How are things looking?” asked Nora and wrapped her hand around a piece of dried meat Tess put in her hand.

“At least no one is following us,” said Tess and took a bite out of the meat. “The road has been empty so I doubt anyone has even had a chance to pass by the mess we left behind. We've had a bit of rain so hopefully that has washed away most of what we couldn't clean up.”

“The Church will eventually miss those men,” said Adan and reached for a piece of meat himself. Chewing the dry piece had saliva filling his mouth. He hadn't realized how much the fight had taken out of him.

Tess nodded. “Let's hope they were on a long mission.”

“If the Church comes after us we won't be able to get to safety. We can't lead them there.” Nora nibbled another bite out of the meat.

“Less Church officials in the north,” said Tess. “They like the warmer south, fat bastards.”

“We need to be careful,” said Nora, not giving an inch on her concerns.

“We will be,” said Tess. “But there's nothing we can do about chance encounters like we just had.” The smell of her wet clothes was starting to overpower the herb smell that had lingered about from Nora's teapot.

“How's Jonas doing?” asked Nora. She shifted in her seat. It seemed the thought of not being in control of a situation was unnerving to her.

“You know how they are,” said Tess and grabbed another piece of meat to chew on. “He doesn't understand what happened to him. What he experienced. You should talk to him just as you've talked to Adan here.”

"He needs time to come to terms with it himself," said Nora. "I will talk with him once he's ready."

"Just don't leave it for too long," said Tess. "We don't want him ending up like Sam did."

"Who's Sam?" asked Adan. The fact they were talking like something bad had happened to him made him worry about Jonas.

"I healed him like I did Jonas," said Nora. She looked down at her hands. "He couldn't come to terms with it. He lost his mind."

"Poor man," said Tess. "One moment he was fine the next he was shouting gibberish and swinging a knife at anyone coming close to him. The only blessing was it happened in the sanctuary so we had people to subdue him and look after him."

"Why did he do that?" asked Adan.

"We're not exactly certain," said Nora. "The others I have saved have said they experienced something when they were at the door leaving out of this world. That something haunts them, but they're unable to describe it accurately."

"Sam went on about seeing things from the past. Horrible things. People getting tortured, all the horrors of war and then he started saying there were people coming for him, to drag him into their torture chambers. That's why he started swinging that knife." Tess bit into a new piece of meat.

"I hadn't heard that." Nora frowned.

"I'm sure I told you," said Tess.

"You didn't."

"Well, I'm sorry. It must have slipped my mind."

Adan didn't believe her. Tess did not seem like the sort of person who forgot things. But why would she keep something like that from Nora? Especially when she was the one who needed to know. No one else was going to find much use in it.

Nora did not seem pleased with it either, but she said nothing more on it. Instead, she glanced up at Adan. "Why don't you go ride with Jonas the rest of the day. See what he's going through. Maybe he'll be able to talk to you."

"Good idea," said Tess and leaned back. There was still some of her ration

left, but she seemed to be satisfied with the amount she'd eaten.

Adan grabbed a final piece of meat and quickly chewed it down. "I'll do that." He had to admit to being worried about the young man after hearing Nora talk. He stood up and turned towards the door.

"Come see me this evening when we stop," said Nora. "I want to hear what you've learned from him."

Adan nodded, but then remembered. "I'll do that." He jumped down from the wagon and closed the door, leaving the two women to discuss what ever they still had on their mind. He got the feeling Tess was going to get an ear full from the young woman for forgetting to mention such important information to her.

The clouds in the sky had grown darker. Rain wasn't the only thing that was going to come down later in the day. You could tell there was going to be some thunder and lightning. The wind was starting to pick up which was a tell tale sign the show wasn't far off.

He found Jonas sitting in the wagon, ready go back on the road. Kal and the rest were huddled up a short distance away where they'd found some rocks to sit on. They still had food going in so it looked like they wouldn't be moving for a while yet.

"How are you holding on?" asked Adan as he climbed to take a seat next to Jonas.

The look he got from Jonas was one of confusion. For a moment it looked like he didn't even see him. "It's strange."

Adan took a comfortable seat, not that the bench offered much in that. "What is?"

"I'm supposed to be dead, but I'm not. Here I am feeling wet, cold and miserable. I should be beyond things like that now."

"Who knows, maybe those things don't go away when we die."

"They're supposed to," said Jonas. There was a note in his voice that sent shivers down Adan's spine. "If they didn't then what would be the point?"

"The point is to live," said Adan.

The edge of Jonas's mouth twitched. "I've had my brushes with death before. They've always left me feeling more alive when I made it through. It's not like that

this time. I know I should be dead. I went away and got a glimpse of.. something. But then I was ripped back here and I'm feeling like I've been robbed of something precious.”

“What did you see?” asked Adan. He noticed Kal and the rest were done with their food and heading back to the wagons. He gave the bald man a nod and received one back. No words needed to be exchanged for him to give the two young men their own space. Tess climbed out of the back of the wagon and jumped on her horse. Her expression was frozen so it was hard to tell her mood, but Adan could tell by the way she moved that she was upset. Nora had not spared her words it seemed.

Jonas didn't reply until the wagons were back on the move. The rumble of distant thunder greeted them in the direction they were headed.

“I can't describe it. I know it was something important, but the details elude me. All I have is the feeling that I've lost something precious.”

Adan wanted to prod further, but he could tell the answers weren't there. The look of confusion and frustration that took over Jonas every time he tried to remember was enough to convince anyone he couldn't answer even though he wanted to.

“I talked with Nora,” said Adan. “She mentioned others she has saved, like you. Has she talked with you about them?”

Jonas shrugged. “I've heard stories.”

“Do they worry you?”

For a moment Jonas simply stared at the backs of the horses and the reigns in his hands. “I've heard enough to have some worries.”

“Nora was concerned about you too,” said Adan. “She's here. We're all here. If anything comes up we will help you through it. You know that, don't you?” Though he had spent only a small amount of time with the group he knew them well enough that it wasn't in their blood to abandon one of their own in a time of need.

“I know,” said Jonas. For a moment they listened to the thunder and watched the bright flashes that preceded it in the horizon. The mountains loomed ahead of them like an impassable barrier. The rain started again. It was a

miserable day to be on the road.

“The road's going to be nothing but mud soon,” said Adan to break the silence.

Jonas just nodded.

Adan didn't try and pry any further. Jonas needed time to arrange his own thoughts before he'd be able to give anyone an explanation of what he had gone through.

The wagon rolled along the road. The rain waxed and waned, sometimes beating them so hard it hurt when a large raindrop hit your face, other times turning into nothing more than a gentle mist.

Adan tried to start up the conversation again, but Jonas had retreated into a shell of silence. He gave up by the time it was time to set up camp for the night. Nora called the young man to her before the food was ready and Tess took their portions to them. Jonas didn't come out before it was time for Adan to sleep.

The next morning there was a noticeable change in Jonas and he was back to his usual self, though you could tell he had been through something transformative.

The group continued its journey towards the sanctuary.

Chapter 14

The foot of the mountain was home to a small village, though calling it an outpost might have been more accurate. There was a shop selling all sorts of supplies that miners coming down from their claims were likely to buy. There was an inn to accommodate any new arrivals, miners looking to spend the winter in more comfort, and to offer drinks to those looking to get drunk. There were a few more buildings for residents who made their living seeing to what ever craft was needed to keep a town like it running. Blacksmith, carpenter, at least those two signs were visible as the group rolled through the muddy street that cut through the huddle of buildings.

The decision had been made not to stop there and when Adan saw some of the figures lounging by the tavern he had to agree it had been a wise choice. He couldn't help but fear some of the types were the kind that would follow them and cut their throat in the night to steal what ever valuable they could find.

His expression grew grimmer when he saw the symbol of the Church peeking behind the buildings. Even a remote outpost could not escape their influence. Adan would have wagered a good sum of gold that the temple had been built right after the first building had had its foundations laid.

Looking at the mountain it was hard to believe there was a path there that could allow wagons to go through, but Kal had assured there was one and that they had travelled through it plenty of times. He admitted it could be tricky at times and once you got past the tree line there were parts where they'd need to push to help the horses drag all the weight up the slope.

In any case, it was the only path left open to them.

"This'll be rough," said Jonas from next to him and peered up at the mountains. You could see snow capping the peaks. It wouldn't be long before the white blanket spread down and covered everything.

"Yeah," said Adan. He had spent his life in the lowlands; the open fields, the thick forests, the gentle hills. The sheer hostility of the mountain before him had him wanting to turn back and find an easier route.

"If the Church finds us up there, there's nowhere to run," said Jonas.

"Good thing we haven't seen any sign of a chase," said Adan.

They had been careful to keep an eye out. Someone would find the dead inquisitors eventually. The horses would wander into some village or be found by travellers. That would get the investigation going since no one would dare to do anything with Church branded animals besides returning them to the nearest temple.

"At least it's not raining. We'd never get up that road," said Jonas.

Adan had to agree as the road started to climb up the slope and the small town was left behind. The hard stone would be slippery when wet and the horses would easily lose their footing on it. Now, it was dry and there was plenty of grip so the horses wouldn't slip. What was most surprising was just how wide the path leading up was. There was room enough to walk around the wagons on either side and there were hardly any big holes in which a wheel could get stuck or worse yet, break.

Tess led the way, walking her horse, not taking any risk of falling. Lars and Bigs walked on either side of the wagons to ensure the wheels didn't go over the edge in the sometimes tight turns. The higher they got the harsher the drop became and it wasn't long before it became one that could kill.

Adan was amazed the road stayed as good as it did. It was like it had been purpose built instead of forming naturally. He knew there were old roads going across the country so it was entirely possible some old empire had carved the face of the mountain in an effort to reach something valuable to them.

Looking past Jonas he could see the few buildings of the town. More worryingly, he saw the column of riders arriving. Even from the distance he could tell it wasn't a small group. Perhaps fifty men in all.

"We might have a problem!" his yell was loud enough to be heard by all, but not loud enough to echo all the way down the mountain. Jonas pulled the wagon to a halt as did Carnes with Nora's wagon. Tess walked up to their wagon and peered down at the town when Adan pointed out what he'd seen. Kal climbed out from the back of the wagon with a spyglass to get a better view.

"Well?" Tess asked, sounding nervous.

Kal put down the spyglass. "Inquisitors."

So many of them left little doubt what they were after. How the Church had gotten so many together and after them on such short notice was alarming as well as baffling.

"How did they get so many together so quickly?" asked Tess. "There aren't any big cities that close and the small towns aren't supposed to have so many of them."

"We ran into that patrol by pure chance," said Kal. "Maybe we got unlucky again and that column was riding through the area."

"We don't even know if they're after us," said Jonas. Adan saw his hand was shaking. His eyes had that wild look in them that took over when the animal in you told you to run. If there was going to be fighting then Jonas would not be of much use.

"Why else would such a large group come to a place like this?" asked Tess.

Kal brought the spyglass up again and peered down at the village with a frown. It didn't take enhanced vision to see the soldiers ride on towards the path snaking up the mountain side.

"They're coming," said Kal and put down the spyglass.

"We aren't going to outrun them with our wagons," said Bigs. He and Carnes had walked up to them a bit later. Lars was looming behind them.

"We aren't going to fight off fifty men either," said Kal and shook his head.

"How about blocking the path with something?" asked Adan and looked back up the mountain. There weren't any loose rocks that jumped out immediately. No easy way to block the path then.

The rest followed his gaze and came to the same conclusion. It was a good idea, but there simply wasn't anything to accomplish it with. The road was well built and maintained and that kept any dangerous looking rocks away.

"Not much we can do then but move on ahead," said Tess. "Maybe we'll find a narrow piece of path that will allow us to make a stand without getting overrun."

"Slim chance of that," said Kal. "You know how this road was built."

"Nothing else we can do. Let's get moving." Tess gave Kal a stern look before

turning and heading for her horse. Bigs, Carnes and Lars followed her.

Kal shook his head. "This time it might be our time."

Adan watched the bald man climb back inside the wagon as he and Jonas walked back to drive the thing. He had a feeling it might be the last time he saw him do that. The situation was dire and made him think it might have been better to just remain the lone wolf he had been so long. At least then he wouldn't have ran into the Inquisitors.

You might have ran into the duke's men instead.

The outcome would have been the same. Death.

"We're dead," said Jonas as he sat down on the drivers perch. Adan thought it best to grab the reigns himself. His friend seemed to be out for the count as far as doing anything useful was concerned. He whipped the horses into motion.

"We'll make it. Somehow," said Adan, hoping to reassure not only his friend, but himself. The words rang hollow.

"How? We're trapped," said Jonas. The panic in his voice was starting to grow to alarming levels.

"Nora will think of something," said Adan. "Or Tess."

Jonas said nothing more, but continued to fidget about and look like the world was coming to an end, which it very well might have been for the group. Adan kept his eye on the road and kept the wagon as far away from the ledge as possible. The road wound up the mountain and sometimes turned back on itself to lead them back the way they came, but only slightly higher.

There was no grand escape for them.

Kal shot the first bolt from his crossbow and fell the first soldier that rounded the bend they'd passed only a short moment before.

"They're here!" yelled the bald man and furiously cranked to reload his bow.

Adan glanced at Jonas. He didn't look ready to do any fighting.

"Look after Nora."

Jonas turned to look at him, but didn't argue against it. He climbed off the wagon and headed for the one in front of them. Lars, Bigs and Tess walked past him with swords in hand to fend off the coming soldier.

Adan turned the horses so that they and the wagon created a barrier and

blocked the entire path. It wouldn't hold the soldiers for long, but it would slow them down and allow for more time to kill off any that got through.

"I hope they don't have bows," said Adan as he jumped down from the drivers perch and drew out his sword.

Lars grinned at him. "With our luck they will."

"Adan, go to Nora and look after her," said Tess in a firm voice.

"But.."

"Just do it!"

There was no arguing against the voice she used. Reluctantly, Adan started towards the other wagon. Jonas was already there along with Carnes. As he looked back he saw the first soldier make it past the horses. He was quickly struck down by Lars. He could see several more soldiers beyond. He knew the situation. They'd kill a few of them, but eventually they would be over run.

"What's going on?" Nora peeked out from the back of the wagon.

"The Inquisitors caught up with us," said Carnes.

"How bad is it?"

"We're all dead kind of bad," said Adan and readied himself. Jonas had his sword out, but the way his hands were shaking he could just as well have dropped the blade and ran away. He wouldn't be able to fend off anyone in that condition.

"Shit," Adan muttered when he saw Tess go down and a soldier loom over her. She had her blade up to block the coming strike, but there was no need for it. Kal appeared out of nowhere and struck down the soldier. He helped Tess on her feet before the next soldier came their way.

It felt surreal watching it. Adan wanted to run in and take part, help, but protecting Nora had been made his duty and he understood well why that was.

There has to be something I can do. This can't end like this.

More soldier came through. It was a miracle any of the defenders was still alive. Bigs had one arm hanging useless to his side. Blood stained his sleeve.

"Why don't you do something about it?"

"What.."

Adan started to say before realizing it wasn't any of his friends that had spoken. Next to him was standing the man from his dreams, the one who

had lit up an entire army in flames. He had his armour and helmet on so there was no mistaking him.

“You think you are powerless?”

“I don't.. ,” Adan started. He missed the looks he got from Jonas and Carnes. Jonas started to say something, but Nora put her hand on his shoulder and shut him up, leaving Adan to confront what ever he was seeing in peace.

“You have my blood in your veins,” said the man. “You're not powerless. I will show you what you can do.”

Before Adan could say anything, the man merged in with him. It drove his breath away and sent him to his knees, gasping for air. He was barely aware of his surroundings. His body tingled all over. The first breath he drew in felt like a mouthful of the tastiest stew he'd ever eaten, but it did not fix his blurred vision. Without even realizing it, he raised his arm and pointed towards the inquisitors trying to break through. He felt the ground shudder and then give way like spring ice. The screams of his friends echoed in his mind.

He fell.

That's it. I'm dead.

Everything went dark.

“Drag him here, quick!”

It was the first thing Adan heard. His mind registered it even before the pain that seemed to have taken over his entire body. It was hard to tell what was an arm and what was an leg because of it. It all felt the same throbbing pain.

“He's messed up bad.” Jonas. His voice wavered.

“I can fix him.” Nora. Calm as ever. “But I need someone for it.”

“Use me.” Kal. He struggled with the words.

Adan tried to open his eyes but to no avail. Either he was blind or his body didn't listen to his mind any more. He heard mumbled voices. His ears were failing him as well.

He felt himself slipping away.

Thorn covered gates made of black stone loomed over him. Surprised, Adan looked around and saw nothing but dull grey. Iron bars made up the gate doors and they flung open with a screech. Adan took an instinctive step back. With

horror he watched the creatures start to stream through the gate. Skeletons with rotting clothes on them, corpses that still had bits of skin and rotting flesh on them. Black creatures with wings hovered over them, their horns curling around their heads. Their tails whipped around in the air, occasionally striking one of the dead creatures below with the bone sharp end of it.

“What is this?” Adan asked and took another step back. The smell of rotting flesh hit him. He recognized one of the living dead. Despite the flesh that tried to fall off her face, he knew who it was. His mother.

He felt something grab his shoulder. He spun around and came face to face with Nora. Her white hair seemed to have a glow to it.

“Come with me,” she said and extended her hand.

Adan looked back at the army of dead and demons that was pouring out of the gate, looking to draw him in.

“Don't be drawn in by them,” said Nora.

Adan turned towards her again. He grabbed her hand. The pull between the gate and Nora hit him. It felt like he'd be ripped apart between the two forces, but in the end the gate had to yield before Nora.

A gasp for breath.

Adan opened his eyes and saw Nora hovering above him. There was dirt all over her and the smudges on her pale skin stood out like blood on a white dress. Jonas appeared in his field of vision.

“You're alive,” said the man.

“I suppose,” said Adan, his throat feeling dry. He remembered there had been pain, but all of that was gone now. He felt weak, but other than that everything seemed fine. He wiggled his toes and clenched his hands into fists. “What happened?”

Looking around and sitting up he saw they were in a small cave. Light shone in from the outside. He saw the pile of clothes next to him. The blood covering them made it hard to tell the original colour, but he knew who they belonged to. Kal. Nothing but dust remained of him.

Use me.

The words echoed in his mind.

“Why did you save me?” Adan asked. It made no sense. Kal had been the more valuable man.

“Because you blew up half the mountain,” said Jonas.

“What? No.. ”

“It's true,” said Nora. “I didn't see it, but I know what happened. I felt the heat, smelled the burning flesh. The flames must have been enormous.”

“Enough so that it caused the rock slide that made the road collapse,” said Jonas, his voice shaking at remembering the event. “It's a miracle we survived. We went all the way down the mountain. The wagons somehow protected us when we grabbed onto it. It slid down instead of tumbling. That's what did it, I think.”

“But Kal.. ”

Jonas nodded. “After the dust settled we found him half buried under some rocks. His legs were a mush, no hope. We found you pretty close by. You'd been banged up badly by stones as well. Not sure there was a solid bone left in your body. With help from Nora we dragged both of you in this cave we found and then..” He fell silent.

“Then you used Kal to save me,” said Adan, filling in the blank.

“He wanted us to,” said Nora. She had found a relatively flat rock to sit on. The dust and blood covering her looked out of place on her. She should have been in clean clothes, going to a dance, instead of being stuck in a cave where she had just ended the life of a long time friend.

Adan shook his head. “What about the others? Tess?”

“We don't know,” said Jonas. “There's rubble everywhere. They might have made it out like we did or they could be buried under half a mountain. The town we went through has been buried too.”

Adan tried to comprehend the scale of it. The town had been a fair way away from the foot of the mountain. If the rock slide had reached it then saying half the mountain fell wasn't that far off. It was the sort of even that wouldn't go unnoticed and would soon have search parties scavenging what was left.

“We should get moving,” said Adan and stood up. His feet felt weak, but there was enough strength to keep him upright. Whether he'd be able to walk any

sort of distance was another question.

“Where do we go?” asked Jonas.

“Anywhere but here,” said Adan. “If a mountain collapses people tend to notice it. They’ll come looking and we’ve got nothing to hide ourselves with. They’ll kill us. Heck, they’ll probably say we caused it, which would for once be true.” He couldn’t hide the bitterness in his voice.

All my life they’ve told me I’m a monster. Now it seems I’ve actually become what they’ve always said I was.

“You can’t walk far,” said Nora. “None of the people I bring back can. They need a day of rest.”

“Listen to her,” said Jonas. “She knows what she’s talking about. I know. You feel weak, I can tell. You need to rest. We all do.”

For a moment Adan stood there, ready to argue against it, but when he saw the expression on their faces, he could not deny they looked ready to keel over. He probably looked worse himself. “All right, but at least we need to hide the entrance to the cave.”

He started towards the light and shaded his eyes. The clouds hid the sun, but it was still brighter than inside the cave and his eyes felt more sensitive because of what he had gone through. When he finally started to see properly there was nothing but rubble and stones to be seen. Broken trees stuck out here and there and way down the slope the forest started again, though some large boulders had smashed into the tree line, felling several trees like they were nothing but a poorly made fence.

The landscape had changed so much that it was hard to tell where everything had been before. Adan looked up and saw what had happened to the mountain. A large chunk of it had simply slid down, leaving behind a dent that made it seem like a giant had reached down and took a mighty swing at it.

Did I do that?

He dug through the memories. They were vague, but when the man had merged with him he’d come to realize something. The road they were on had been built by him or at least he knew who had built it and why and how. He knew everything about it, including the traps that had been laid out in case the thing

needed to be collapsed. Without even thinking about it, he had sprang one of those traps. It had not been his power that had made the mountain collapse, but an ancient mechanism that had been carefully constructed to do just that. His flames had only been the catalyst. They'd burned away a few inquisitors and the trigger for the mechanism.

Remembering that made him remember the feeling that had rushed through him when the ghost figure had merged with him. The sense of vast knowledge beyond that of any single human that had briefly touched his mind. He was no ordinary man and that was not only because of his eyes or the power he had.

And now a part of him is in me.

Shaking his head he turned to look where the town should have been. There was nothing but rubble there, though it was far enough away that any debris from the buildings would have been impossible to see. The trunk of a broken tree stood not far from where Adan was standing. He looked at it for a long time. The temptation to test his new powers was strong.

Hahaha. I don't even know how to use it. I could blow up the mountain again. At the very least a flaming tree would draw attention.

Adan looked around. The scenery was void of any life. He couldn't even hear any animals. Everything living was either buried under rocks or had ran away and was reluctant to take the risk of returning to face another land slide. It was later in the day than he had thought. Another reason to stay where they were for the night.

The cave they were in was fairly well sheltered. There was a large boulder right by it that blocked it from view from one side. A little more camouflage by a fallen tree or something like that and they'd have a good enough hideout for the night. There'd be no room for a fire, but that was a small price to pay for staying out of sight.

Adan headed back to the cave. There wasn't any more he could do outside alone. He needed Jonas to help with the camouflage. He found Nora sitting on the same stone and Jonas crouching next to her.

"We need to camouflage the entrance to the cave if we're going to spend the night here," said Adan.

“With what?” asked Jonas. “We can't move that many rocks.”

“We'll have to hope we find some tree branches and stuff like that,” said Adan.

“We don't have any food or water,” said Nora.

“We'll make it until morning without any,” said Adan. He knew how long it would take to starve. He'd been close to that limit plenty of times. “We'll get water in the morning. We passed that river a while before the town. If nothing else, we'll head there first.”

“And then what?” asked Jonas. “We can't cross the mountain now.”

“I don't know,” Adan admitted. He didn't know where they'd been going to exactly in the first place. “But we need to leave here tomorrow. Get away to some better hiding place.”

“Shouldn't we look for the others?” asked Nora. You could tell she worried about them and held hope some might still be alive. Adan and Jonas exchanged looks, both thinking the same thing. There wasn't going to be any additional survivors. She couldn't see the destruction and had to rely on others describing it to her. It wasn't going to give her the full picture no matter how hard you tried. The human mind couldn't fully comprehend it without seeing it first hand.

“We're in no shape to look for others,” said Jonas.

“Best we get through the night,” said Adan.

Nora's hands twitched as she grabbed hold of one arm. “All right.”

Getting ready for the night was a task on its own. Finding suitable things to hide the cave entrance took longer than thought and moving them was hard work. Adan realized they wouldn't have gotten far with the strength in his body. He'd have keeled over after a mile or two.

Having gotten the entrance suitably hidden, they huddled together for some warmth against the cold night and tried to get some sleep.

Chapter 15

Adan squinted and shaded his eyes from the bright sunlight. Gone were the clouds of yesterday and a clear blue sky greeted him. He stumbled over some rocks and went to relieve himself after a night of uneasy sleep. He stretched and tried to unlock the muscles from their jammed up state. A joint popped here and there.

He took a moment to survey the surrounding. It was still early in the day and he was pleased that there weren't any signs of others in the area.

Maybe we won't need to run for our lives.

He wasn't feeling much better than the previous day. No food meant his body had little to nothing to work with to regain its strength. There had never been an opportunity to gather fat on his body like some of the blue eyes did. They'd survive a month on their reserves without eating. But there was no alternative to moving out. Eventually, someone would come investigate what had happened.

Jonas led Nora out the cave. Adan walked over to see if they were ready to move out. There was no breakfast to be had after all.

"To the river then?" he asked.

Jonas looked around. The destruction was not any less depressing in bright sunlight. "I don't think there's much we can do here."

"What about searching for the others?" Nora tried to sound confident when saying it, but the night had given her time to digest the descriptions Jonas had given her of their surroundings. In the face of that it was hard to keep optimistic.

"Let's worry about ourselves," said Adan. "Come on. Let's get to the river so we can have something to drink. We'll hunt for some food in the forest. We can hide there for a while if need be to regain strength. Maybe come back here to look through things if it doesn't look like the area is crawling with Church soldiers."

"We don't have our disguises any more," said Jonas. "If we're found, that's it."

Nora nodded. "Let's do that then."

Getting down the collapsed mountain side was a taxing endeavour. There

was no path to follow and the loose rock made slipping and starting another landslide a real possibility. It was especially hard with Nora since she couldn't see where she was going and had to rely on Jonas holding her hand. It made for slow progress.

By the time they reached the forest and the river that ran through it, Adan felt like he couldn't go on any further. The bank was gravel laden with few plants. Tree roots were about the only life you could find there. It made the area open and hard to hide in, but made it easy to get to the water. He rushed to the streaming water.

A few gulps of the cold, clear water made him feel a bit better, but his stomach started to growl to remind him he needed more than liquid to keep going. Nora was kneeling by the stream while Jonas had his head soundly underwater. He pulled up gasping for breath, but looking like it had done him good.

Adan listened to their surroundings. There were birds chirping. The pine trees didn't rustle in the wind like the leaf filled cousins of the south, but there was still a hum that made the forests song. There was bound to be something to hunt in there.

Looking through the bank he spotted several stones that could be used to make a weapon. He'd lost his sword somewhere when tumbling down the mountain side. Jonas and Nora weren't much better off and all of their clothes were tattered and torn to some extent. If the weather got colder they'd be in trouble.

“Jonas, you know how to make a stone knife?”

“Sure.”

“Then why don't we make some. There are good stones here. Maybe we can make some arrows and a bow too to make hunting easier.” Adan looked around. There weren't any young trees in sight that would have made for a good bow. But there was bound to be some nearby.

Nora sat quietly by the river as the two men worked to arm themselves. She heard the stones hitting each other, the occasional grunts they made. Above all else she heard the river. It was times like these that she felt the most useless.

"All right, these should do," said Adan and nodded as he tugged at the strands of bark that held the stone blade in place. It was securely attached and would do for its intended purpose. The stone had been easy to splinter to make the jagged edge that was sharp enough to cut through skin.

"No bow, but at least we have a spear," said Jonas and leaned on the long piece of wood. It held under his weight fine, though it might have been a bit heavy built for throwing.

"What do we do now?" asked Nora.

"I go hunting," said Adan. "Why don't you and Jonas find us some shelter for the night, gather up some firewood?"

"And after that? We can't stay here forever."

"I don't know," Adan admitted. He hadn't thought past the immediate needs.

"We should try and get to the sanctuary," said Nora. "It's the only place we'll be safe. If the others survived they will try to make it there as well."

"How are we going to get there?" asked Adan. "I don't know the way and the route we were going to use is no more."

"I don't know another way," said Jonas. "I'm not the best with remembering routes and we've always left through a different one. They're hard to remember even for someone with a good memory." He shifted his weight from one leg to another.

"I know several routes," said Nora.

"But.."

"I know, I can't lead you," she admitted. "But I can guide you. Give you landmarks to find."

"So what's the fastest route we can take?" asked Adan. "We can't waste much time. Winter is coming. Those mountains will be covered in snow in a short while and we aren't getting through once that happens. Not in the state we are now. We'll freeze to death if nothing else."

Nora looked thoughtful for a moment. "We'd need to go back the way we came and take the route we originally planned."

"Right into the arms of the Church that's looking for us," said Adan and shook his head. If the Inquisitors had honed in on their two wagon caravan they

would be looking. Though now they were no longer what the Church was looking for. There was no group. “We don't have our disguises so we would need to travel through the forests instead of on the road. That and we don't have horses and it'll take us a long time to get to where we changed direction. Long enough that winter might hit us.”

“So you're saying we shouldn't try to get to the sanctuary?” Had Nora been able to tell where Adan was she would have been giving him a death stare. As it stood all she could do was try and control her angry expression.

“No. I'm saying we have to consider the possibility we won't be able to do that even if we try.” Adan stepped closer to her and put a hand on her shoulder. “You've lost a lot more than me in this and I understand your desire to get to a safe place. But it just might not be possible.”

“Toughing it out in the wilderness during winter won't be easy,” said Jonas. He spoke with a voice filled with experience and Adan knew he likely had just as much of it as he did. There were always things you could do when alone, but with two others it would be more challenging to gather up enough food.

“If it comes to that we'll make do,” said Adan. “There's two of us that can use our weapons. Enough to rob more than a lone traveller.”

“And with your power..” Jonas started, but the look Adan gave him killed the rest of the words before they could part his lips.

“I don't know if I can even use the power,” said Adan. “When it happened I wasn't really..me.”

“What did happen back there?” asked Nora. “You were talking to someone we couldn't see.”

Should I tell them?

He could still feel a portion of Cievman in himself, lurking in a corner of his mind. He'd realized that after being brought back by Nora. How the others would react to him being there he couldn't say for certain. They might not trust him after hearing it.

“I saw Cievman,” he finally admitted. “He guided me. Showed me what to do.”

Best not tell them everything. They don't need to know.

Nora simply nodded where as Jonas looked like his eyes were about to pop out of his head.

“But enough of that, we need to get to work,” said Adan hoping the conversation would be dropped. He had no such luck as Jonas started after him to pester him with questions. He dodged some while answering others before finally reminding what Jonas was supposed to be doing. With a grumpy look the young man returned to his duties.

Adan managed to hunt some meat for them in the form of a scrawny hare. They enjoyed it along with some roots Jonas had had time to dig up. In the morning, after having spent an uncomfortable night under the open sky, they started back the way they had come with their wagons.

For several weeks they made slow progress through the woods. They gathered supplies along the way the best they could and robbed a few travellers for clothes and proper food and weapons. They had winter clothes now, though some were a bit big for Nora and drowned her if she wore them all, but at least she wouldn't be freezing to death come first snow.

The first signs of winter were quickly building and they'd had a bit of snow during one night, though it had melted away as soon as the sun started to shine. Sometimes they had to move during the night to cross clearings and fields that separated one forest from another. But they made it to the town they had decided to change direction at.

They stopped a fair way from it and hid in a small patch of woods. Along the way they'd seen one patrol of inquisitors ride by. It had forced them to be even more careful though there was no evidence they were looking for them in particular.

“So we head north?” asked Jonas as he tried to start a fire with the damp wood they'd gathered. The weather had been rainy and the temperature was starting to approach freezing point from time to time. It made for some uncomfortable nights even with their better clothing and a tent big enough to hold all three of them. Nora had protested it, but after the first really cold night she had come to accept that sleeping together was the only way to keep warm and stay alive once the temperature dropped enough. There was no stove to

generate heat like she had had in her wagon.

Adan hesitated. "I don't know. It's a war zone from what I heard last and the weather is getting chilly. How long would it take us to reach the mountains that way?" He knew they could be seen in the distance, but estimating the distance with such massive things was difficult at best.

"By wagon it was five days," said Nora. "Then two days up the mountain and a day to get to the sanctuary." She sat on a log, wrapped in a cloak laden with furs.

"If there's fighting going on then we have no idea how long it will take us," said Jonas and gently blew on the few embers he'd managed to create. Smoke rose and soon there were tiny flames licking at the wood.

"We have to try," said Adan. "Otherwise we'll be stuck here for the winter and it won't be enjoyable for any of us." He put his hands on his temples and rubbed them. It was the headache again. He'd been suffering them ever since being brought back by Nora. They came and went so he hadn't thought much of them, but it had been getting worse every time. Now, when it hit him, it was enough to blur his vision for a moment and make him stumble if he was walking.

"You all right?" asked Jonas as he looked up from the fledgling fire he had going.

"What is it?" asked Nora.

"Just a headache," said Adan and shook his head. It almost made him feel nauseous.

"Have you had them before?" The concern in Nora's voice told of a deeper fear she had over it.

"Now and then," Adan replied and took a seat on the log next to her. "I've also had nightmares. Of the things I saw when I was..dead." He couldn't help but shudder. The dead faces of people he hated, people he had killed, all reaching to drag him through that gate. They were angry they had been robbed of him. He was starting to understand why others had gone mad after being brought back. No one would be able to tolerate it for long.

"You see them too, don't you?" asked Jonas and stood up, satisfied that the fire would not go out. He tossed an extra branch into it. "The people we've killed,

those who hated us.”

Damn him for talking.

“Yes,” Adan admitted, unable to hide his anger at having to reveal it. He knew there would now be an endless probing by Nora into the matter and the feelings those images brought out in him were not something he wanted to share.

There was a moment of silence as his two companions digested the news.

“It's the side effect of my power, of what it does to you,” said Nora.

“I can see how it would drive people mad,” said Jonas and stared at the growing flames. “I'm not sure how much more I can take myself.”

That drew the attention of both Adan and Nora.

“Every night they come. Their rotting faces and wailing voices. I can smell them even though I know they're not real.” Jonas stared at the fire and talked in a feverish voice. “There's no escaping them. I know they'll return when I fall asleep.” He let out a nervous laugh. “I fear going to sleep.”

It wasn't as bad as that for Adan. Not yet at least. Jonas had been living with it longer so time might have made it worse. Either way his confession did nothing to make him feel better about it.

There was a long silence only broken by the crackling of the wood as the flames consumed them.

“I can't imagine what it is like and I am sorry that you must live with it,” said Nora. The guilt in her voice was evident. “But we're here. Me and Adan. Adan is going through the same as you. Lean on us when you need to. We will be here, we won't leave you to struggle alone. Together we can survive.”

“I'm not going to let a bunch of dead people harass me into becoming one of them,” said Adan with more confidence than he really had. “I've killed who I've killed and they're dead. Nothing I can do about that besides live on.”

Jonas drew in a wavering breath. “You're right. Together we'll make it.”

Adan stood up and walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Promise me you will talk to us if anything comes up.”

“I promise,” said Jonas and looked up at him. His eyes were moist from held back tears. Adan nodded. He understood.

They spent the night in the shelter of the small forest, Adan and Jonas

taking turns to watch. They were close to a town and someone might be curious why someone had camped out instead of going for the warmth of a tavern. The Church men especially. In the morning they continued towards the north.

It was three days later that they came across what looked to be the scene of a battle. There were bodies strewn all around the treeless landscape. Dead horses, broken spears and lances, severed limbs and blood splattered all over. The smell of iron filled the air.

It took Jonas a while to explain what they were seeing to Nora while Adan went around ensuring there were no more soldiers around. Which side had won didn't really matter to them. Both sides would be equally eager to chop off their heads if they were found.

Moving from body to body he rummaged through pockets and took any piece of useful things he could find. Taking a chain mail for armour was tempting, but when travelling the extra weight was more a hindrance than the benefits of the protection it would offer in any fight. He did find some clean clothes from the occasional pack and there were plenty of military rations to take. They wouldn't be the best tasting food around, but they lasted a long time and gave you the needed energy. He grabbed himself a sturdy sword and stashed another one to give to Jonas. They'd robbed some travellers, but hadn't gotten any better weapons than long knives and shoddy swords from them.

Looking back he could see Jonas leading Nora through the field of slaughter. There wasn't anywhere to hide so if someone did come the only thing they could do was lay low and hope to be mistaken for casualties of the battle. It was mid day and the sun lit the field, leaving few shadows in which to hide. The nearest bit of forest was far behind them and the scene ahead offered nothing but a few low hills and the mountains in the distance. The closest road was far enough that any passing patrol might miss them completely. How the battle had taken place so far from the road was a bit of a mystery. The terrain was full of rocks that stuck out making a treacherous ground for horses to tread on.

"What a mess," said Jonas as he and Nora reached where Adan was crouching behind the carcass of a horse. A spear had been driven through its side and it looked like some of its companions had trampled over its head. The rider

had been crushed under the falling beast.

“Looks like it was a tough battle,” said Adan. Though he had killed people and been a part of minor fights, this was the first time he was seeing so many dead in one place. He'd heard Gan tell stories of battles, but they had not done justice to the horrors that must have taken place.

“At least there doesn't seem to be any patrols around,” said Jonas and crouched behind the horse. He dragged Nora down to the same hiding position.

“So far,” said Adan and handed the sword he'd taken to Jonas. “A big fight like this they're bound to patrol the area to keep it secure. We should keep moving and try to find some place to spend the night. This open plain is not going to give us any shelter.”

A flock of crows shot up to the sky, startled by something. It sent all three of them hunkering to the ground. Jonas half way pulled the sword out of its scabbard and looked around nervously. Adan found his own hand at the hilt of his sword and his eyes moving around, looking for anything amiss. The birds circled above, cawing in protests like a flock of hungry children, before finally settling back down to feast. Adan peeked around the dead horse and saw nothing out of place. What ever had startled the birds wasn't going to be a threat to them.

“Come on, let's go,” he said and stood up. “This isn't a place to stay at.”

They made their way through the field of corpses. Nora looked grateful she didn't have to see it, though the smell seemed to bother her more than it did Adan and Jonas. The open field continued after the bloody display and they made good time moving towards the mountains. They started seeing the fields of grass give way to bare rocks and small trees with trunks so twisted you'd have thought someone had bent them on purpose.

“Where are we going to stay the night?” asked Jonas and looked around. There was no forest in sight to offer them protection. The rocks around them would barely hide a man laying flat on the ground, but they'd be no use in sheltering a camp.

Adan shrugged. “I don't know. We have to hope we find something before dark.”

But they didn't. The barren landscape only got worse as the day grew older

and by the time it started to get dark there was no place in sight that would allow them to set up a camp fire for warmth without having it be a beacon for miles around. The best they could do was find a rock that allowed them to stretch a piece of canvas from the top of it, creating a small shelter, but not enough to risk getting a fire going.

It was a cold night, but they had warm clothes and blankets to sleep under. During the night, while keeping watch, Adan saw a column of light move in the horizon. It made him thankful they had not set a fire or they'd be looking at the pointy ends of spears of the passing patrol. Soon after that those spears would have been rammed through their bodies and the creatures haunting his dreams would have dragged him down with them.

The thought sent a shiver down his spine and made him wrap his cloak tighter around himself.

In the morning they started off again and by the next day they were at the foot of the mountains. They were slowed down by the need to move carefully and the terrain that had gotten rockier by every step. Not being able to use the road made things even worse, though they would have to enter it to get up the mountain. The road was the only way up.

Ensuring no one was in sight, they moved from rock to rock and started the climb up. Their only hope was that there would be no one up the mountain. It seemed unlikely as the road was barely big enough for a wagon to get on and even that would require people pushing it most of the time to help the horses. Not something you'd want to march any significant force through.

Nora had explained where they would need to go. A fork in the path here, another there by a rock shaped like a hat. Keeping an eye out for such marks, they made their way up the mountain. She had assured them they wouldn't need to go near the peaks and Adan hoped that would be true. There was snow on them already and it wouldn't be long before there would be a white blanket covering all the slopes.

The heavy packs Adan and Jonas carried slowed them down and made their feet cry in protest at the climb and their lungs burn, but they pushed on knowing that below them was a war zone that wouldn't welcome them back. They had

been lucky to avoid the patrol and get as far as they had without being seen. And there was still the possibility they'd be spotted and have men coming after them for fear of them being spies of the enemy.

They found the hat like rock with relative ease and took the path Nora had told them to. It led them up the mountain in the opposite direction they had been going to. A bridge led them to the slopes of another mountain and to a log cabin that served as their resting place for the night. Nora assured them it was safe and that few people travelled the path they'd taken. Still, they kept a guard during the night and kept the fire in the fireplace small.

In the morning they continued on and Nora said they would arrive at their destination if they kept a good pace. The path made several more crosses and Nora's directions led them to the right ones. Without knowing the path it would take an extraordinary stroke of luck for someone to discover the way. The fact there was no snow yet meant there weren't any traces left of their passing.

The most difficult part was finding the hidden cave. It was stashed away behind hard to pass rocks and bushes and even though Nora assured Adan it was there, he didn't believe her until the cave was in front of him.

"I better lead the way," said Nora as she and Jonas joined Adan. Jonas ensured the bushes and everything else looked like it had before so the cave would remain hidden. "We don't have any light and the tunnels branch out. I know the way by feel."

"How long is it?" asked Adan and peered inside the cave. He could see there was a large chamber just at the mouth of it, large enough to fit several wagons and horses out of sight, and that the tunnel continued on, shrinking in size.

"Long," said Nora. "It'll take us a few hours to get through."

"And what's on the other side?" asked Adan.

"The sanctuary," said Nora and smiled.

"No one guarding the place?" asked Adan and followed Nora into the darkness. They held hands and she warned them of any obstacles. Jonas kept the rear.

"They don't have people on the outside," said Jonas. "They'll have guards at the other end. The tunnels are a maze so it's unlikely anyone would just stumble

in the right path. I've been through here a few times and I still have no idea where to turn and when.”

Their steps echoed from the hard stone surrounding them. The air was moist, but the further they got the warmer it turned. After a few bumps and turns in the darkness Adan could understand why there were no guards. They'd have drawn more attention to something that was near impossible to see as a path to a hiding place. If anyone dared to venture to look they'd be lost in no time in the maze. How Nora made her way through it with such confidence was baffling.

The tunnel never grew so small that horses couldn't go through. Finally, there was a spot of light that grew bigger and bigger. Adan had to shade his eyes when they exited the cave. It took a moment for his vision to come back, but as it did he found himself standing on a large ledge. Below him was a valley, surrounded by high mountains.

“Oh, we're lucky. It's a clear day,” said Jonas with a grin as he looked down.

There was a lake in the middle of the green valley. Adan could see houses and roads, fields with crops on them. There was no sign of a coming winter as the trees still had green leaves on them and the fields looked to have crops growing.

“Welcome to the sanctuary,” said Nora with a smile.

Chapter 16

The rotten faces surrounded him. Empty eye-sockets stared at him. Bone fingers grabbed at him.

“Join us.” The chorus of eerie voices chanted in unison.

“No,” said Adan and shrugged off the arms and started to run. The creatures followed him. Their bony hands grabbed at him again, bringing him to a stop.

“Join us.”

“No!”

Panic started to set in when he couldn't get away.

“Don't fight it. Welcome it. You will be stronger for it.” The familiar voice of Cievman came above the wailing and growling of the rotten corpses.

“No!” Adan struggled even harder. As he looked down he saw one rotten face open its mouth and bite down on his hand. He screamed.

He was still screaming when he bounced up on the bed. It took a moment before it died down and he realized there were no dead people around him. The first rays of sunlight came in through the window, lighting up his small room. The soft mattress had him feeling out of place. He slumped back down on his back and wiped some sweat from his forehead. The nightmares had been getting worse. The headaches came more frequently and sometimes they were bad enough to send him on his knees when they hit. He sighed and sat up again. There'd be no going back to sleep after a dream like that. Experience had taught him that.

Why does Cievman want me to embrace it?

He stood up and grabbed his clothes from the chair next to the bed. They were brand new and the best he'd ever owned. The shirt didn't make his skin itch and the trousers didn't squash his manhood nor were they too loose. The shoes he put on by the door were new as well and fit perfectly. The people at the sanctuary had been more welcoming and understanding than anywhere he had been before. They'd given him a single room in a building set aside for new arrivals and guests, but that was more than he'd ever had.

A warm morning greeted him when he opened the door and stepped outside. The mist was thicker in the morning after a cold night, but the sunlight usually made it go away. He'd been told it was because of the hot spring that laid at the centre of the valley. It kept the valley temperate even during winter and the warm water was a pleasure to bathe in. He'd learned that the very first night at the sanctuary and it had taken Jonas to drag him out from the warm water.

It was hard to believe the valley was there even though he was standing in it. There were buildings scattered through out the place, smoke rose from chimneys as people were preparing breakfast, the sounds of livestock in the barns and the fields of crops that surrounded it all made it not that different from any other village.

Adan took to the path that led to the largest building in town. The hall was big enough to hold every inhabitant there and it was the place where he got his breakfast. It was also where Nora lived. He'd been told there were a hundred World Destroyers living in the sanctuary and a similar amount of people with normal eyes. Mostly parents of young children. All in all it was a good place to live, at least that's what Adan gathered.

Walking down the road there wasn't much he could see wrong with the place. He'd learned there were three entrances like the one they'd come through, on different sides of the mountains surrounding them. There were guards at all of them. It hadn't taken long for armed men to come to the ledge and surround them, though the moment they recognized Nora they became friendly. They started asking where the rest of the group was and the grim expression they got when Nora simply shook her head told it wasn't the first time they'd heard such news. Nora was sad to hear none of the group had made it to the sanctuary, though she still refused to give up hope. There was always a possibility they had simply been quicker or the others had chosen to go some place else.

Adan didn't have much hope for that to be the case.

They'd been led down to the valley using a path that looked more man made than natural. The temperature rose enough for them to shed the winter clothing they'd worn. It was odd to walk on green grass when just a day before there had been nothing but rocks surrounding them and before that an autumn scenery.

Even more odd was seeing crops growing near to harvest time. Adan was told the hot spring made it possible to grow all year round and get three harvests per field. The soil was rich and made a perfect place to grow food.

He was told meat was a bit harder to come by, though there were some deer and rabbits in the woods that took up a lot of the eastern side of the valley. But they couldn't hunt too much for fear of killing the entire population. What livestock they had was not enough to make butchering a viable option beyond a few times a year.

Adan waved a hand to a farmer that greeted him from his yard. Judging by the bucket he was carrying he was going to feed his animals. It might not have been a life of luxury, but it was not one of starvation either. It was a comfortable life compared to being out in the woods by yourself, running from the soldiers hunting you.

The large hall loomed in front of him. It wasn't tall so much as it was wide. You could fit everyone in the valley inside. It was made of logs and there were plenty of windows to let in light. Adan opened one of the twin doors and stepped inside. A large fireplace took up the centre of the room. There were still red glowing ambers in the stone circle. A black cauldron sat on top and by the smell of it there was porridge bubbling inside it.

“Good morning,” came a cheerful voice. Adan watched the woman appear from one of the side rooms. She had a stack of plates in her hands and a scarf tied around her head to keep the blonde hair out of the way. An apron covered the simple dress she wore underneath. Her eyes had large patches of green and brown dotted with black and gold. She was the person responsible for keeping the great hall in order and for making meals for those who did not have families or were living in the guest lodge.

“Morning, Nadil,” said Adan and navigated through the sea of tables that took up most of the large hall. At the very back there was a slightly raised portion that had a single, long table running the entire width of the building. It was where the leaders and elders sat during large gatherings.

“You look like you didn't have a good night,” said Nadil and started putting plates on a table near the fireplace.

Adan walked to the cauldron to peek inside. As he had guessed a greyish porridge was bubbling away inside. With a bit of bread it would make a fine breakfast. "I've had better," he admitted and took a seat on the table she was laying the plates on.

"I hope it's not the room," said Nadil and set down the last plate. She'd gotten out six even though Adan had never seen anyone else besides himself, Nora and her to take a meal in the morning. Maybe it was habit from the times when more of the groups venturing to the outside world were home. Jonas was lucky enough to have his family to share meals with.

"No, the room is amazing. More than I'm used to," said Adan. Even with Gan he had not had such luxury or privacy. Remembering the old man made him wonder how he was doing. He hoped the dukes men had not given him trouble.

"People like us have to make do with little," said Nadil and disappeared back into the little room she'd come from. A moment later she returned with spoons and mugs to match all the plates. "If it's not the room then what is it?"

Adan hesitated. She was not a young woman like Nora. She could have been his mother. She had the aura of someone who was accustomed to listening to peoples worries, something Adan had never encountered before. Talking to her came naturally even with his usually cautious mind.

"It's just bad dreams," he ended up saying, fighting the urge to go into more detail.

Nadil nodded and went to stir the porridge. "We all have our demons. With the life most of us have led before coming here it's no wonder we have bad dreams."

"It's a wonder any of us are alive," said Adan and stared down at the wooden plate. It was deep enough to get a sizeable portion on it. It was only his third day at the sanctuary but already he knew Nadil's cooking was good enough to warrant seconds most of the time. He was startled when she placed a hand on his shoulder.

"No need to be so gloomy," she said and gave an encouraging squeeze. "This valley is a safe place. You can live a normal life here."

"I don't think a normal life is an option for me," he replied. No one else had

the powers he had. It wouldn't do for him to simply pick up a sickle and become a farmer. That option had been taken from him when the power awakened.

“Why is that?” asked Nadil and let go of his shoulder.

Right. Not everyone knows about my powers. Nora told me to keep it a secret from anyone but the elders.

Adan shrugged. “I don't think I can go to a normal life. Not after what I've lived through. Not while I know there might be others like me out in the world, needing help.”

“Not everyone is meant for a quiet life,” said Nadil and disappeared back into the small room. She returned a moment later with a platter that had bread on it along with a small pot of honey and a pitcher full of water. She set it down in front of Adan. “Go on. Dig in. The porridge is ready.” She gave him a warm smile. Adan imagined it was the sort his mother might have given him had he been a normal child.

He did as told and grabbed himself a slice of bread and drizzled some honey over it. He put it on his plate and got up to get some porridge. He had just sat down and eaten the first spoonful of the gooey goodness when Nora walked in from a room on the opposite side. Nadil rushed to her side to guide her to the table even though Adan doubted she had any need for help in a familiar place.

“Good morning, Adan,” said Nora as she took a seat opposite to him. She wore a simple robe that dragged along the floor when she walked. It was clearly not made for her as the sleeves went over her hands as well. Nadil took the plate from in front of her and went to fill it so the blind woman didn't need to stumble around with hot food to worry about.

“Morning,” Adan replied and took another spoonful of porridge. He bit into a slice of the dark crusted bread and frowned. He'd put on too much honey.

Nadil returned with a steaming plate and set it down in front of Nora. She gave her a smile and the blonde haired woman went off to see to something and left the two alone to enjoy the meal. Adan doubted anyone else would be joining in on the breakfast. They ate in silence. Since arriving there had not been much opportunity for them to talk and now that there was, Adan found he had little to say. He knew she had been busy explaining the events that had led to the loss of

the wagons and the comrades as well as what had happened with Jonas. She looked like she needed a good nights rest.

“So, what are we going to do now?” Adan finally broke the silence as he scraped the last bits of porridge from his plate and started pondering about getting a second helping.

“We wait for spring and hope,” Nora replied and spooned some porridge in her mouth. There was a sadness to her voice and entire being.

Is she starting to doubt whether anyone else would be making it back?

“I’m not very good at staying in one place doing nothing,” said Adan and stood up to get some more filling for his plate.

Nora frowned. “So you want something to do?”

“It’ll be a boring winter if I do nothing,” said Adan.

“Normally people who go out in caravans don’t have to work during winters. It’s our reward for taking the risks the outside world puts on us. Most welcome the rest after months on the road.”

“A few days more and I’ll start feeling uneasy,” said Adan and sat back down with a full plate. He grabbed another slice of bread, but applied less honey this time.

“What would you like to do? Help out at a farm? Hunt?”

Adan shrugged before remembering she couldn’t see him. “I don’t know. I’ve never been a farmer. Hunting I can do, but is there much of it to do?”

“I can ask what is needed,” said Nora and nibbled on a piece of bread. “Guards are often in short supply, though I’m not sure..” she stopped talking.

Adan smiled. “You’re not sure if they’ll trust me with such duties just yet?”

She nodded. “I know you’re worth the trust, but the others haven’t spent as much time with you. And even though you have the eyes, we need to be careful who guards. Someone falling asleep could mean the difference between life and death.”

“I could give everything a try,” said Adan. “All I’ve ever done is run for my life. Makes sense that I’d need to try different things.”

“I will talk to the elders,” said Nora.

Three weeks later Adan found himself in a garden, wielding a hatchet,

digging up ground for a new row of crops. The guards outside had told everyone winter had come and the snow was high enough that no one would be coming up the mountain before spring. In the valley there was no sign of it. The mountains were too high for clouds to come over them and even if they did the hot spring kept the air temperate enough that any snow would have turned into rain before hitting the ground.

He'd spent a week looking after farm animals after Nora got the elders to agree to let him take part in the normal workings of the town. They'd resisted because they wanted him to practice using his powers, but Adan wasn't keen on that idea. He didn't want to delve deeper into that swamp. He knew the elders had agreed only to keep him happy. They hoped he'd change his mind.

He wasn't going to give them that. They had not even sought to talk with him directly. Nora was his only connection to them.

Tending to animals had not been a task he enjoyed so he'd moved to preparing fields for crops. Helping people expand their gardens. It was work more to his liking. Just him, a tool, and the muscles in his arms doing work.

Why haven't they wanted to talk to me in person?

Ground flew up as he hit it with the hatchet and raised it above his head for another swing. He'd tossed his shirt off to avoid getting it dirty. He couldn't help but feel suspicious of the elders. If he was them he'd have wanted to talk in person to the new guy, especially if they had something special to offer.

Maybe they think Nora is best suited to handle me.

What ever the case, they were creating mistrust by not showing themselves and talking directly with him. Not that he had anything against Nora. She was still the closes of the people in the valley. There were several people he knew by name and Nadil was always easy to talk to, but besides Jonas no one had the same history with him as Nora did.

Rankin, the farmer he was currently working for, was an older man with eyes of green and brown. A pleasant enough man who liked to tell stories over meals, though living alone he had few to share them with so he had welcomed Adan. Still, the connection between the two was void of the closeness a fight and survival together had forged between Adan and Nora.

Adan stopped and wiped some sweat from his brow to take a look around. The farm wasn't that far from the hall. He could see the large building in the distance. The hot spring was in the other direction, but his view of it was blocked by growing crops and lines of stone fences that separated fields from each other.

He frowned when he saw a figure jogging down the road. It looked like Rankin, but why would the old farmer be in such a hurry? He'd gone to the meeting hall to arrange some deals with others in the village. A sack of potatoes for a hunk of meat and so on. Barter was the way of commerce instead of coins. For a small community it worked well and if they needed something from the outside they'd get it from travellers like the ones Nora and her crew had been.

Adan continued to work and waited for the old man to reach him. When he did it took him a moment to catch his breath. His grey beard and balding head told of his advanced age and jogging all the way from the hall was not something he should have been doing.

"What's wrong?" asked Adan and stopped swinging his hatchet.

Rankin wheezed in a breath. "It's Jonas. He's gone mad. They need you at the hall."

Adan didn't even bother grabbing his shirt before starting to run. He'd been worried about Jonas. He'd seen him in passing here and there and he had not looked like he was doing well. Nora had assured him that she saw him regularly and talked about things and the he had his mother to share the burden so he was going to be all right, but the doubt had always remained.

His own nightmares had been getting worse and worse so he had reason to worry, but then he'd been given the jobs to do and that had drawn his attention. Now he beat himself over for that.

Never again ignore a friend. You have so few of them. Promise yourself that now.

He could tell something was going on by the number of people gathered at the hall. Even from a distance he could hear shouts. The scene started to become more clear the closer he got. There was a gathering of people surrounding Jonas. He was holding a long knife that he swung at anyone looking to get closer.

"Stay away! You're not dragging me with you!" Jonas shouted.

Adan pushed through the crowd and finally got a good look at his friend. He looked like he hadn't slept for a week. His hair was a mess, black pouches made his eyes look like they'd sunken in and the shrillness of his voice told enough of his mental state.

“Jonas.”

He turned to face Adan, knife at the ready. A flicker of recognition went through his eyes. “Adan. They're here for me. They're going to drag me down with them. I can smell their rotting flesh. They're coming.”

“They're just in your dreams,” said Adan and glanced around. The crowd had gathered in front of the hall. Nora was standing at the doorway with an anxious expression on her. A woman was sobbing next to her. Adan figured it to be Jonas' mother. The crowd was made up of villagers who were trying their best to disarm the deranged young man without hurting him or themselves in the process.

Jonas shook his head. “They're real. They're coming and I'm not going to let them take me. Not to that hell.”

A gentle breeze blew across the scene. It kicked up some dust from the dry ground. “No one is going to let them take you,” said Adan. “I'm here. So is Nora. So is your mother. We'll all make sure you're safe.”

“No one can stop them,” said Jonas and waved his knife around. He glanced around at the people surrounding him. The looks of concern went unnoticed by him. “They're already dead. Nothing can hurt them. You can't kill them. They will come and take me.”

Shit. Nothing I say gets through to him.

Adan hesitated. What more could he say? The mindset he was facing wasn't one that would listen to reason. Jonas was convinced there was nothing anyone could do. How could you convince someone that wasn't true?

“I'm not going to let them do it,” said Jonas and put the knife to his throat. Before Adan could react the blade sunk through his neck and came out the other side. With a swift motion Jonas pushed the knife forward, cutting flesh and veins. The sharp blade cut through his throat and splattered blood all over the ground.

Adan rushed forward, but he was too late. All he could do was get on his knees and lift up the fallen body and watch the life disappear from Jonas' eyes.

He didn't hear the screams from the crowd, above all of them the cries of his mother.

"You stupid bastard," Adan muttered to the dead man in his arms. Tears rolled down his cheeks. He hadn't actually expected him to take his own life. It was such a drastic move from a man who seemed adverse to such things.

A hand squeezed his shoulder, forcing him to look up. Nora stood next to him. "Can't you save him?" asked Adan. "Bring him back again?"

She shook her head. "I can't save someone twice. Even if I could, would it be any different? His mind would not be healed."

"But.."

She shook her head again.

Adan's shoulders slumped. Accepting the fact felt like a punch in the gut. Another one came when a man led the sobbing mother to the scene and she crumbled next to her dead son. Adan had to let go of the body and let her cradle it. He stood up all too aware that the blood of his friend covered much of his upper body and had ruined his trousers.

"Are you all right?" asked Nora.

"No," said Adan and shook his head. "I just watched one of my few friends kill himself. Because of the same things I see, he took his own life. No. I'm not all right."

"Come inside the hall. We'll get you cleaned up. And we'll talk," said Nora. Adan wasn't in a mood to argue so he let her guide him inside the large building. Having her holding him by the arm put her uncomfortably close to him. She felt small and frail, but the strength with which she pulled him along told there was strength in her that you wouldn't have expected. The irony of being led by a blind person did not go unnoticed by Adan, but there was no fight left in him. So he followed her without resisting.

"What about his body?" Adan asked just as they reached the door. He turned to look behind him. Jonas was still being cradled by his mother, but the crowd was starting to disperse. Some were kneeling next to the body, offering support for the heart broken woman.

"They will take care of it," said Nora and tugged at his arm. They entered the

hall and it took Nadil only one look to jump into action.

“Let's get you some hot water so you can clean up.” She grabbed a large pot and went to fill it before putting it on the fire to warm up. Meanwhile Adan found himself put into a seat and Nora standing in front of him, looking down with her unseeing eyes.

“I imagine you're covered in blood,” she said.

Adan looked at himself. There was no denying the need of a good scrubbing. “Yes.”

To his surprise, she rolled up her sleeves and grabbed herself a piece of cloth Nadil offered before dipping it into the warm water she had brought with her. She then knelt down and started to wash the blood off his body. Adan was confused how he should feel about it. On the one hand she was blind so it seemed unlikely she'd be able to get good result, but on the other hand she was the first woman to ever touch his body in such a way and it wasn't all together unpleasant. He decided it was best not to say anything and clean up any spots she missed himself. Nadil gave him a wink before disappearing into one of the small room. It made his cheeks turn red.

“How are your dreams?” Nora dipped the cloth in the hot water and squeezed it to get rid of the excess water. The blood stained it red.

“They're getting worse,” Adan admitted. “My headaches too. They haven't let up at all.”

Nora nodded and wiped his body with the wet cloth.

“What if that's me in a few weeks time?” Adan asked. Jonas had been brought back earlier than he had been. His condition had been more advanced. How long would it take for the dreams to get so bad he'd be as convinced as Jonas had been that he'd be taken and no one could stop it?

“It won't be,” said Nora.

“How can you be certain?” The frustration in Adan's voice was enough to draw her eyes to look up at him. He could see she was fighting back tears.

“Because you're strong. You're different from Jonas.”

“Jonas wasn't weak,” said Adan. “None of us that survive in the outside world as long as he did is. We're stronger than most people.”

“Yet you are stronger still,” said Nora and lowered her head.

“I'm not sure I agree,” said Adan and took a deep breath. “Every time I have a nightmare I feel a tiny bit more uncertain. I question whether the beings I see are only in my dreams and not hiding under my bed. It gets harder and harder to fall asleep again. You could tell Jonas had not slept in days. I can't say how I would feel if I had to go a week without sleeping. I just might kill myself too.”

The confession made Nora stop. “If you ever feel like that you need to come talk to me before you grab a knife. Promise me that.” She gripped his thigh with her hand and squeezed so hard it started to hurt.

Adan had to reach and pry her hand off just so he could have some time to respond before she broke something. Where she got such strength was beyond him. Maybe it was the combined grief and fear. “I promise,” he finally said. He wasn't certain he'd be able to keep the promise if he lost his mind like Jonas had, but he'd do his best.

She seemed to sense that as she glanced up at him. The white eyes saw more than any seeing eyes and Adan had turn from them knowing he had likely lied. “Remember you promise,” she said and continued washing off the blood.

Adan said nothing.

Chapter 17

The heart of winter had passed. The valley had remained temperate through out even though the guards who sometimes ventured through the caves said they had never seen so much snow piled on the mountains. It meant they were safe from anyone outside, but also meant it would take spring a long time to melt it all away. It would be a while before any group would venture back to the outside world.

For Adan things had gotten worse each day. The dreams had grown stronger at an increasing pace since Jonas had killed himself. The night after his burial he'd seen a nightmare that had sent him scrambling from bed and huddled into a corner of the room. He'd remained there until morning. He had not seen a dream as bad since then, but it was only a matter of time before his nightly ones got as bad.

He'd talked with Nora about them and she was as understanding as one could be, but it did nothing to help with reigning them in. Cievman continued to make appearances among the nightmarish creatures. He continued to encourage Adan to embrace them and go with them. He said it was the only way to survive, but it seemed such a horrendous idea that doing so would mean a fate worse than death.

"I don't think I can go on like this." Adan grabbed the mug with steaming broth in it. It was a light last meal before going to sleep.

"What do you mean?" asked Nora. She sat opposite to him with a mug filled with tea in front of her. The large hall was empty. Even Nadil had already gone to sleep and the only light came from the single piece of wood Adan had thrown into the fireplace.

"I can't sleep any more," said Adan. "I can't fall asleep. Even if I do the nightmares wake me up."

Had she seen him she would have understood. The dark bags under his eyes were starting to look like the ones Jonas had had. "Cievman is still haunting you to embrace it?"

“He won't leave me alone.” Adan took a sip from the mug. “And I'm starting to wonder if he's right. Maybe I should just embrace the dead beings and let them drag me to where ever they're trying to take me.”

For a moment she was silent. “Cievman is our forefather. He knows things we do not. He gave you a power. I do not believe he would lead you astray.”

Adan raised an eyebrow and gave her a look. It was the first time she had given such direct advice to him. A yawn escaped his lips. “It's not a decision I'd make lightly. If he is deceiving me then I'm likely dead and that's a condition I want to avoid.”

“Have you tried talking with him? In your dreams.” She took a sip of tea from the mug. It smelled of herbs and made Adan wonder how she could stomach it.

“He just repeats the same things no matter what. I don't think he's really there to respond to questions. One more reason why I don't feel comfortable following his advice,” said Adan and gulped down the last of his broth. Another yawn stretched his jaw. He wanted to sleep, but he didn't have high hopes of actually being able to do that.

“I still think he is the key to ridding yourself of the nightmares,” said Nora and emptied her mug. She let out a satisfied sigh. “Maybe you should try this herbal tea. Helps me to sleep.”

Adan shuddered. “Judging by the smell I'd be puking my guts out for the entire night.”

Nora smiled. “It smells worse than it tastes. I suppose it's an acquired taste.”

“I think I'll go and see if I can get some sleep,” said Adan and stood up. He hesitated. “Can you find your own way?”

Nora nodded. “This hall is etched into my memory. I can get around just fine. I hope you get some sleep.”

“Good night.” Adan walked out the hall and towards his lodging. It was dark and there were no lights from any of the houses either. Everyone was sound asleep. The moon peeked from behind the clouds from time to time giving Adan enough light to find his way. The air was as moist and warm as it was during most days. He imagined it would be uncomfortable during the summers when the sun added its warmth to the hot spring.

He kept a brisk pace. He knew there was no danger in the valley, no wolves or large predators that might attack you in the night, but the years spent in forests had instilled a respect for the night in him. He followed the beaten path and soon enough he was back in his room, stripping off his clothes and climbing in bed. He closed his eyes and hoped for the best.

It didn't take long for the rotting corpses to come marching into his dreams.

"Join them. Don't resist." The voice of Cievman echoed in the background of the empty grey that surrounded Adan. He ran from the dead hands reaching for him.

"Why? What will happen if I let them take me?" Adan cried to the voice of his ancestor.

There was no answer. The dead hands continued to reach for him, the rotting corpses slowly dragging themselves along to follow him where ever he ran. A cold hand managed to brush against his arm. The cold slippery flesh made Adan recoil in disgust and run even faster.

How the hell am I supposed to let them drag me where ever they want to?

"Give in and you will be free," came the voice of Cievman from right next to Adan's ear. It made him jump and run just a little bit faster. He closed his eyes and begged to wake up, but it didn't work. It rarely did. It could feel like an eternity in the dream, but in reality it might just barely be an hour.

"Listen to him." The familiar voice made Adan stop. She appeared just off to the side.

"Nora?" Adan started towards her. She had on the same robe she'd worn during their late night snack. Her hair seemed to have a glow to it, but other than that she was herself.

She smiled and spread her arms.

Looking around Adan saw no other place to run to. Her embrace was the only safe place. Maybe he would wake up from that. He ran towards her without looking back. Her hands wrapped around him and he embraced her with as much intensity.

"Let them take you," said Nora in a soft voice.

Adan felt the first clammy hand grab him. He wanted to pull away, but he

couldn't. Nora was holding him in place. She was preventing him from running away. Panic took over and he struggled with all the strength he had, but her hold was not to be broken.

"Ssh. It will be easier if you just accept it," she said and pulled him down to eye level with her. She pressed her lips against his, her hot breath pushed inside him. It took his strength away. The rotting hands grabbed him all over and started to envelope him.

"Listen and believe," whispered Nora to his ear before letting go. The hands covered Adan from head to toe, finally covering his eyes so he could not see Nora. The last image of her was an encouraging smile. He didn't know what to make of it, but it was clear struggling would get him nowhere. The hands holding in place were too numerous, too strong. So he went with it and embraced the darkness he was being dragged into.

"You are the lock," came Cievman's voice from the darkness. "She is the key. Together you will set the world right once more. Together you will kill them all."

"Kill who?" Adan asked. "Who's she?"

"I have given you the initial push. Now, I will give you the rest."

Adan cried out in pain as the images started to flash through his mind. They went past so quickly he couldn't make sense of any of it. Here and there an image stayed with him; a field of dead soldiers, a woman sitting by a window looking out, an army marching, a child laughing. What it all meant he couldn't say as it was a mess that seemed to have no order to it.

Then he woke up and started to sit up, but found he couldn't. Something pressed against his mouth and upper body. A moment of panic passed before he realized what was going on. Nora had straddled him, her mouth was pressed against his as she leaned down, her hot breath with a hint of her herbal tea pushing into his mouth as she continued the kiss.

It was hard to see in the darkness, but when she broke the kiss and sat up, Adan could have sworn her eyes were not fully white any more. She had red irises with black pupils. She smiled at Adan.

"I told you you should listen to Cievman."

"What? How did you get here?" asked Adan, still stunned by what was going

on. His mind was in jumbles because of the images. His head hurt because of the strain of trying to sort through so much new information.

"I followed you," said Nora and leaned down a bit. Adan could tell he had seen right. She was not blind at all.

"You're not blind," he said only to make certain he was not seeing things because of the confusion.

She grinned. "I never have been. It was easier to let people believe that. It let me observe without being suspicious. Hiding my eyes was a simple thing once Cievman gave me my powers."

"But why?"

"All to find you," she said. Adan could feel her hips pressing against his. "I understand now where I went wrong. I understood it the moment I used Kal to bring you back. I understood why the others had gone mad. Why Jonas went mad."

"What?"

"See, I used normal people to save the others. You were the first one I used another one like us. That was the key to it. All the other World Destroyers carry fragments of Cievman in them. It was them I needed to use my power on so you could awaken. It is why we must use them all so we can be complete and fix this world."

"Use them?" Adan looked around. It was the same, now familiar room he had been sleeping in since arriving in the valley. Somehow it didn't make him feel any better, but increased the anxiety that was gripping him.

"They are pieces of a whole and we're the ones who will bring them all together. With my power. The people in this valley should be enough to make you more powerful than you can imagine. Together we will right this world." She leaned in and gave his cheek a gentle kiss. "You know it's the right thing to do." Her hot breath tickled his ear.

Adan found himself agreeing with her. Somewhere from the mess of memories a certainty bubbled to the surface. There was no other way even though it was a cruel thing to do and the body count would be massive. The world was too far gone wrong to be righted without killing people. Some would die

for the cause while others would be cut down in opposition of it, but in the end the world would be set right and the arbitrary class division by eyes would be made history.

"I know," Adan admitted. "Doesn't mean I have to like it." It was a small portion of his mind that rebelled at the idea that made him say it.

"Of course you don't," said Nora and smiled gently. She put a hand on his cheek and gently stroked it. "The burden is often the heaviest on the ones who have to bring change. They carry the darkest of sins so the rest don't have to."

"We can't act until spring," said Adan. "The snow blocks us in and we can't go anywhere."

"Mm..true. We will have to wait for the paths to open," said Nora. She sat up straight once more. "It is better to have people around until then. But once the snow melts.. we take action."

"What.."

She pressed a finger against his lips. "You need time to get your bearings. We need time to plan. For now..let's take it easy." She leaned down and Adan felt her body press against his own. She grinned. "I feel you want more, but not tonight. Not yet. You need the sleep."

Adan couldn't deny that. Maybe now he'd be able to sleep.

"Sleep," she whispered in his ear and nestled against his side.

Adan closed his eyes and it didn't take long before he drifted off to sleep. It was the first good nights rest Adan had gotten that he could remember. No nightmares bothered him and in the morning he woke up and found Nora gone. The smell of the herbal tea still lingered in the room telling him it had not been a dream. His head still hurt and the images milling in his memory were just as much a jumble as they had been during the night. Shaking his head he got out of bed and put on some clothes. Walking out, he looked up to the sky and saw that it was already mid-day. His stomach growled having been without proper food for so long. The broth had not been that filling.

Walking towards the hall several people passed him and Adan found himself looking at them differently. Knowing he'd be killing them all with Nora once spring came changed things. No longer did he see comrades, people who had

suffered the same fate or possible friends. All he saw was future prey. It made him shake his head. He'd grown accustomed to killing, but he'd never really planned it ahead. It had always been a necessity to survive. Now it was something else. It was a tool to change the world for the better, to rid it of the Church and the arbitrary division it had imposed on it. It would allow them to overthrow the blue eyes. It would allow them to build a world where everyone could live without fear of persecution for something they had no control over.

Many people will die, but it will be worth it. I will ensure that.

He didn't have doubts whether it was the right thing to do. He felt there was a solid foundation to the logic that would become apparent once he had time to sort through the memories that were filling his mind. Every now and then a new fragment found its place, slowly building a picture that would tell the story and validate his logic.

The hall was empty. Even Nadil was out. Adan found himself a piece of bread to chew on to keep the worst of his hunger at bay. He thought about going to Nora's room, but decided against it. He needed some time to himself, away from her.

People greeted him as usual when he walked out of the hall and headed towards the farm he'd been working at. There wasn't anything on the list to do today, but the old man would always be up to talking and sharing stories. A distraction might let his mind work things out more rapidly. If nothing else he'd have something else to think about. The responsibility was starting to weigh in on him.

He found Rankin sitting on the porch of his house. He sat in a rocking chair with a pipe in his mouth, occasionally blowing out a puff of smoke. The smell was strong from what ever he was smoking. Adan waved a greeting and the man nodded.

"What are you doing here? No work to be done today," said Rankin and pulled the pipe from his mouth.

Adan stopped and leaned against a wooden support beam that kept the roof over the porch. "Got nothing else to do. Figured I'd keep an old man company."

Rankin pushed his chair into a gentle rock. "A young man like you should

have better things to do.”

Adan shrugged. “What else is there to do?”

“You could be chasing some of the young women we have here.”

A grimace passed Adan's face before melting away. There were young women in the valley though not that many, but given they'd be dead by spring it didn't seem like a good idea to try to get closer to any of them. Then there was Nora who had gotten awful close the previous night. Maybe there was something there.

Rankin burst out laughing. “No need to look so confused, boy. Chasing women is what young men do.”

Adan looked down at his feet. “Now isn't the time. Not for me.”

Rankin blew out another cloud of smoke. “Perhaps not. I remember times in my youth when I needed some time for myself. I can tell you, there weren't that many women here when I was brought in. The few that we had were quickly picked up by the better looking men than me.”

Adan glanced at him. There was no denying he wasn't the best pick of any lot. “Is that why you're alone now?”

The older man shook his head. “I had me a wife. She wasn't the prettiest, but she could cook like no one else and her wit made anyone laugh.”

“What happened?” Though he had often told stories he had never mentioned having a wife before. Maybe it was a sore spot or he had not felt comfortable sharing it with Adan until now.

“The Church got her,” said Rankin and took the pipe from his mouth. His expression grew more solemn with a hint of anger. “She was one of those who ventured outside the valley. She always thought it her duty to help others like her. Did I mention her eyes? They had the most beautiful mixture of brown and green in them. I could stare into them for hours without getting bored, though she'd always smack me if I did it for too long.” A smile passed his lips. “I never got to bury her. The wagons she was with never returned. We only heard about it from rumours the other groups brought with them.”

“I'm sorry,” said Adan.

Rankin waved a hand. “It's in the past. It's what our lives are. I've lost plenty of friends since then to similar circumstances.”

"It won't be like that forever," said Adan. "The world will change by our actions."

Rankin gave him an appraising look. "They've been saying that for two decades, certainly even longer, but nothing has changed. I imagine it won't happen in my life time. Maybe you will be luckier."

"I hope so," said Adan. "The Church has twisted this world to be something it shouldn't. It doesn't deserve to live on."

"Dangerous thoughts," said Rankin. "When you start to decide what deserves to live on and what doesn't, you're entering a territory that never leads to the outcome you want. It's what got us here in the first place."

"What do you mean?" The memories rumbled through Adan's mind, showing him flashbacks of Cievman and other people, but there was no context to them so it made little sense.

"Well, the Church had that mentality. Kill all the people with strange eyes, they'll destroy the world!" Rankin chuckled. "Their unbending stance is what got us here. It's what made the division between the brown eyes, the blue eyes and the green eyes. If we go down the same path, what sort of a world will it create?"

"A better one than this," said Adan.

"For us, certainly," Rankin agreed. "But what about the rest?"

"Why should we care about the rest when they don't care about us?" asked Adan.

"Because we should be better than them," said Rankin and put the pipe back in his mouth and puffed out some smoke.

The words gave Adan something to think about. Not that he had any shortage of things to ponder. But this was something that related to everything he was about to do with Nora. Whether what they did would change the world for the better or simply bring about another round of different kind of tyranny.

"I think I'll go walk a bit," said Adan and nodded to the old man. He waved a hand.

Adan walked away, his mind racing to make sense of everything that jumbled around it.

Chapter 18

(Memories)

“There you are!”

Cievman looked up and saw Adel walking towards him. The bulge of her stomach told of the life growing inside her and forced her to wear something other than the tight around the waist dresses that were so popular among the ladies. Her loose dress was simple, but made of fine cloths that left no doubt that she was well off.

“I needed some time alone,” said Cievman and smiled as she took a seat next to him on the bench. The garden around them was a soothing place to be. Trees were cut into animals shapes, flowerbeds lined the gravel paths and if you looked at them from one of the many balconies of the palace you'd see them form similar animals shapes as the trees. It was a true testament to the abilities of the gardeners.

“The senate still can not agree?” asked Adel and put a hand on his.

“They are as likely to agree as they are to disagree,” said Cievman with a faint smile.

“You need to put them in their place,” said Adel.

Cievman chuckled. “I wish I could, but they were chosen by the people just as I was. Just because I was elected the senate leader does not make me a dictator who can decide things on his own.”

“Well, you will turn their heads. You always do,” said Adel and smiled. It was enough to make him forget all about the bickering he had listened to for the previous three hours.

“Enough about my troubles. What have you been up to?” asked Cievman and gave her his full attention. He admired the brown hair that reached her shoulders in slight curls.

“I visited the market. Had to buy some new fabrics since this belly isn't going to get any smaller any time soon.” she put her hands on the bulge and smiled again. Cievman reached out to caress her belly through the soft fabric. “I'll go get

a few more things on the way back home.”

“So you just stopped here to see me?”

She nodded. “Should I not have?”

Cievman smiled. “You've saved my day.”

She smiled back at him. Then she grew more serious. “There was one of those preachers at the market, declaring the one true god.”

Cievman shook his head. “You should stay away from them.” He looked into her eyes. They were evenly split between blue and green.

“I know,” said Adel. “I walked past him as quickly as I could, but he still pointed at me, condemning me, saying I would destroy the world.”

“They've been becoming more frequent as of late. Their preachers.”

Adel nodded. “I don't understand how people can believe in one god that never shows himself. At least when you look up at a stormy sky you can see Elmage throwing his bolts, or if you look at the sea you can see Umys guiding the waters. But their god, there's no sign of him.”

“Their preachers have a passion that resonates with people,” said Cievman. “Like everyone else in the Republic, they are free to worship what god they wish.”

“If only they let it end there,” said Adel. She glanced at him and looked ready to ask a question, but decided not to. He knew what she wanted to ask, but knew he couldn't give her an answer. The senate had not come to an agreement yet.

Cievman sighed when he saw a familiar figure emerge from behind a tree. The young man was there to find him and inform the senate was ready to continue the talks. Everyone had had time to eat and drink. No doubt some of the representatives had drunk more wine than they should and that always brought out the worst in them. There'd be no end to the arguing.

He stood up and gave her an apologetic smile. “It seems I must go. Be careful on your way home.”

“We'll be waiting for you, my love,” said Adele with a smile and stood up herself. The two went their separate ways.

Two hours later Cievman was ready to storm out of the senate hall. They were no closer to reaching a decision and the speeches were starting to repeat themselves.

“We have all heard the reports,” said Arkin. He stood in front of the half circle of seats the senators used. The floor was his alone, the pillars behind him framing the hillside view offered of the city below. The clever ones timed their speeches so the summer sun shone bright behind them, but that time had long passed. “They have attacked people based on their beliefs that those of us with the gifts of gods are going to destroy this world. An absurd claim as most of us here will agree.”

“The republic charter guarantees everyone the right to worship the god of their choosing,” a voice protested from within the half circle of men and women. Cievman recognized the voice for he had heard it many times that day. Veradar, a young senator from a wealthy family, the only one in the Senata to follow the new faith. He had defended it all day with the same arguments.

“That same charter guarantees everyone the right to remain unharmed by others!” Arkin bellowed out. He was a barrel of a man and could pull off amazing things with his deep voice. He stared down everyone looking at him. “No other faith within the republic openly preaches for harming other people. There have been numerous incident of people with eyes like mine being attacked. There are reports from further away provinces that local governors have converted to the faith and there have been mass hunts for people the so called Church has declared World Destroyer. Just yesterday there was a report of twenty men, women, and children being burned alive in Seazi province! Actions like those can not be allowed to spread and gain root. It will be the end of the Republic if we do nothing.”

Cievman looked around. There were some nods here and there, others looked concerned while some were busy whispering to each other to exchange opinions. The majority were still undecided and he couldn't blame them. What was on the table was something fundamental to the values that had kept the Republic going for centuries. Changing it just might be its downfall. But so would letting a violent faith run rampant.

“We must protect all our citizens. We can not allow one group take advantage of our laws to harm another. Thus I support the motion to declare the faith referred to as the Church illegal as long as they continue to promote

violence.” Arkin made a slight nod and walked to his seat. A loud buzz soon took over as a hundred men and women started openly talking. Cievman let it go on for a while. You needed to give them time to exchange thoughts. It was his duty to stop it and give the next speaker their turn. He looked at the list in front of him and noted there were no more names there. It would be time to vote.

He stood up and took the centre stage. He banged his gold laden staff against the marble floor to get silence. It took a while for the representative to quiet down. “Representative Arkin was the last speaker. If everyone has had their say it is time to vote.” He surveyed the people in front of him, hoping no one would stick their hand up. He noticed the dressing was very similar today. Often it was a cacophony of colours, but it seemed today many had preferred white in the form of simple shirts and dresses. To his relief no one raised their hand to indicate they still had something to say.

“Very well,” said Cievman. “We will beg..”

There was a ruckus at the doors leading to the chamber. Cievman frowned and waited for the guards to get things under control. Some of the senators were eyeing the doors nervously. It wouldn't be the first time one of them would have a disgruntled voter from their district barge in and let them have it on what they were doing wrong. Cievman even remembered one incident where a group of local farmer had barged in and thrown rotten vegetables at their representative for failing to secure reparations for their failed crops so they'd survive the winter.

The commotion died down and the door opened. The captain of the guard appeared, looking as apprehensive as one could. None the less, he walked inside and in front of the senators who were giving the man some curious looks.

“What is it, captain?” asked Cievman.

“Senator Cievman, it is a rather personal matter for you, perhaps we should talk in private.”

“You've interrupted the senate right as we were about to take a vote. The senators deserve to hear the reason for it,” said Cievman in a stern voice. There were approving murmurs from the seated men and women.

The man looked even more uncomfortable, but did as told. “Senator, a messenger arrived bringing news. I apologize for having to tell it to you in this

manner and in this place, but your wife has been killed.”

Cievman felt like someone had punched the air out of him. He couldn't believe it. He had seen her only a few hours ago. To think she was dead made no sense to him.

The senators were silent, stunned by the news. Then one voice rang out. “Motion to postpone the vote for two days so senators Cievman can have time to see to things!”

“Motion seconded.”

“All in favour of the motion, stand up.”

Who had called for the vote or supported it went past Cievman, but he saw every single one of them stand up. He couldn't help but smile briefly. Sometimes they could act in unison and now they had been offered the perfect excuse to postpone a controversial vote. Many wanted the extra time to get their own thoughts in order, some to try and change the minds of others, but no matter the reason they all welcomed more time.

“Motion carried,” said Cievman and banged the floor three times with his staff. The senators started to gather into their little groups and talk. Cievman walked to the small rack on one of the walls and set his staff into it. He then turned to the captain of the guard.

“Where?” Cievman continued to walk. They were out of the senate room before the captain could bring himself to answer.

“At the market.”

“What happened?” She was healthy and young. It had to have been something unexpected; an accident or someone attacking her.

“The messenger said she was attacked. By one of the preachers of that new faith.”

Cievman's hands clenched into fists. He rushed out of the building without talking to anyone else. He walked the streets of the city and found his way to the market. People gave him way when they saw him. He was a recognized figure within the city. Some whispered behind him. The news was already circulating.

The city streets were filled with people. The capital was a busy place, but compared to the amount of people it was a clean place to live. The city guard

ensured peoples safety for the most part though you could never root out all the violence and crime. Losing your coin pouch was something everyone had to worry about and there were certain areas you didn't want to go in alone at night, but the day to day life of an average person was as safe as it could be in the Republic.

The closer he got to the market the more people there were. Shops started appearing in the buildings surrounding the street instead of being homes and government offices. The market itself was a large plaza with wooden stalls and wagons serving as places of business. Come night they'd all be gone and erected again the next morning. It was a constant churn of new shops and old ones going away. Farmer brought in their goods as did many artisans and sometimes a travelling merchant would drop by for a few days to find something new to sell in the provinces.

The market was buzzing save for the calm ring the city guard formed in one place. Heart pounding, Cievman walked over. The men recognized him and let him through. Curious onlookers were quickly told to move on to keep the area from clogging up. No matter what, business had to continue or there'd be too many angry merchants for the guards to handle.

There was a scorched body that drew attention to itself by still smoking. Cievman knew it was her doing. She had killed her attacker even though the pregnancy had made her powers unreliable at best. It gave him some measure of satisfaction knowing they had burned alive. It was one of the most horrific ways to go.

His gaze finally wandered over to her. She laid on the ground, blood puddled under her. The blades were still stuck in her, one through the chest, the other through her belly. Two attackers? What ever the case, they had wanted to ensure the life growing inside her would die as well. Her expression was frozen in one of mixed agony and anger. Her eyes stared up at the sky unseeing.

Cievman took a deep breath and fought back the tears.

"I am sorry for your loss, senator."

He turned to regard the speaker. It was a sergeant of the city guard. A sword was fastened to his hip and the chain-mail he wore looked like it had been polished just that morning. Even his leather boots looked immaculate. There was

a man who took his duty seriously.

“Thank you,” said Cievman with a nod. “What happened here?”

“From all accounts she was just walking when they attacked her,” said the sergeant and picked at his moustache with one hand. “There were two of them. A preacher of that new faith and a follower. She managed to burn the follower to death after he'd struck her in the chest, but the wound was too grave for her to fend off the preacher. He drove the blade in her stomach.”

Cievman couldn't hold back the tears, but he fought not to completely break down. With tears rolling down his cheeks he gathered himself. “The preacher. Did he get away?”

The sergeant grinned. “No, sir. We were close by and he ran straight into our arms trying to make the escape. Where he ran the crowd pointed and gave him up. Someone must have recognized her.” The man looked around before leaning in a bit to confide. “The people here respect you and I doubt there's a face in this crowd who'd want to see your wife get hurt. Apart from that out of his mind preacher.”

“You have him?” asked Cievman. The things he wanted to do to that man. The pain he wanted to inflict on him. But he knew the guards wouldn't allow it. He would have to face justice as deemed by the laws. He would die for what he did, but it felt like an easy way out now.

“Yes,” said the sergeant. “He's being watched by several of my men.”

“I want to speak with him.”

“I'm not sure that's..”

“What's your name, sergeant?”

“Radald, sir.”

“Sergeant Radald, if it was your wife laying on the ground there, would you not wish to exchange words with the man who did it?”

“Senator, with all due respect, that is exactly why I would not let you talk to the man. I know I wouldn't hesitate to kill the bastard.”

“Would it put you at ease if I give you my word as a senator that I will do no such thing? The prisoner will be safe and unharmed. I only wish to speak with him.”

Radald hesitated, but finally nodded and motioned for him to follow. He took him to where four guards were standing, in between them was a man in chains. His grey robe was torn and you could tell the man had gotten more than one punch in his face. He looked up when the two stopped in front of him.

“Senator Cievman,” said the man and grinned.

Cievman frowned. He had expected someone older, not someone who wasn't even into their twenties. “Why did you kill her?”

The man chuckled. “It's what god commands us to do. People like her, like you, you will destroy this world. You must be hunted down and killed with no mercy or there won't be a future for my children.”

Cievman felt a shiver run down his spine. The hatred with which the man spoke was frightening. It was the sort that led to blind obedience and would not let anything stand in the way.

“Your time will come. Soon,” the man continued. “It doesn't matter at this point. I might as well reveal your future to you. The provinces will soon fall into our hands. They will form kingdoms, ruled by the faithful and will serve as the base of the new world, a world where the likes of you have no place. We will spread our influence and the Republic will fall and we will cut down anyone standing in our way. What I have done was only a first step. A message to the likes of you.”

Cievman shook his head. He'd known the new faith was gaining ground in the provinces, but for them to openly rise against the Republic and the senate? It was inconceivable. They would not have the trained soldiers to stand up to the regular forces that kept the lands safe. Though if those forces had been converted to follow their faith..

The man chuckled again. “I see it's finally dawning on you. You're starting to understand how deep the touch of our god reaches. Do not worry. In a few days you will no doubt have confirmation for my words. Then you can start counting the days to your end.”

Cievman glanced at the sergeant and then around them. He could tell. The words had unsettled them. There was uncertainty and fear in their eyes. He couldn't blame them. Depending on how many provinces were in upheaval it

could mean large scale war. The death toll would be high and if the Republic lost the people would be treated to tyranny and persecution.

"I've heard enough," he said and walked away.

The preacher laughed. "That's right. Run. Run away. As far as you can and maybe you will live to see the Republic fall!"

One of the guards had had enough and smacked the man on the head with the blunt end of his spear. The preacher crumbled to the ground. Cievman couldn't keep the brief smile from his lips.

"I told you he was crazy," said Radald.

"That's an understatement," said Cievman. His gaze wandered over to his wife. While the preacher's words still echoed in his mind there were more important things to consider for now. "Can you get me a blanket? Something to cover her with. And a cart so I can take her home."

"Of course." The sergeant barked some orders and grabbed a few passers by. It wasn't long before there was a blanket covering her. The two guards who covered her also pulled out the blades at his request. It wasn't long before a man came with a small cart he could pull all by himself. The guards help load her up and soon Cievman was walking beside the cart, heading home to wash her body and give the last goodbyes before an official burial.

The next day she was buried as was customary. A simple ceremony at the temple and then a procession to lay her in the family tomb. Her parents attended along with her brother and sister. They were as devastated as Cievman for the loss. The priest's words of comfort did little to ease that pain though the promise of meeting her in the afterlife was a consoling thought.

The day after that the reports started to come in. The preacher had been telling the truth. There was upheaval in the provinces. Several governors had declared themselves king and the province an independent state from the Republic. There were reports of mass killings conducted by the believers of the new faith. To the dismay of the senate a large portion of the regular troops in those provinces were following the lead of the governors and joining them. That meant the rebellious had a force that could fight.

Cievman rubbed his eyes and tried to listen to the senators speeches. None

of them remembered the vote that had been postponed. The entire state was falling apart and that made for a more pressing matter to attend to. With their actions the new faith had essentially solved the question anyway. What they were now discussing was how to respond to the uprisings. Some wanted to talk, others wanted to raise the armies and go crush the rebels. Cievman knew talking would get them nowhere. You couldn't talk someone out of believing in a god any more than you could turn them from a man into a woman with just words.

"It is therefore that I motion that we enact the emergency powers laid out in our laws. The armies would fall under the command of senator Cievman as he is the senate leader. We will give him a year to root out these rebels and convene after the time has run out to see what the situation is." Arkin gave Cievman a nod to indicate he was done with his speech.

"Any seconds?" asked Cievman as he stood up and walked in front of the senate. He wasn't keen on getting the responsibility, but he had sworn to serve the Republic and if leading it to war was what was asked then he'd do it.

"I second the motion," came a female voice and she stood up so everyone could see who it was.

Cievman nodded. "Then we will vote."

It wasn't an unanimous vote, but the vast majority voted in favour of granting the powers.

"I thank you for the trust," said Cievman and gave all the senators a look as they had retaken their seats. "This is not a responsibility I take with a light heart, but I will do my utmost to protect the Republic."

The weight of a nation on his shoulders, he went to work on planning and assembling his council of advisers.

Chapter 19

“Who could it be at this time of night?” brother Orel complained. He pulled the hood of his robe over his head to protect from the rain. The banging at the gate sounded again. He hurried his steps. The monastery was so out of the way for regular travellers that it was rare to get any visitors. Only the Inquisitors and others associated with the Church dropped by, but rarely during the night. The rain hissed as it fell on the lamp he was holding. He crossed the courtyard with quick steps and arrived at the gate.

Orel opened the small hatch in the gate door and looked outside. He raised the lantern to get some light. There were two figures standing in the rain, huddled deep under their thick capes. “Who are you and what is your business here?” He had learned to be suspicious of any visitor coming in late and these did not seem like men of the Church.

“Forgive the late hour, brother. We are just two weary travellers looking for shelter from the rain.”

“Show me your faces,” Orel demanded. They did as told. He was surprised by the fact the other one was a woman and her hair was a pure white. Most unusual. He did his best to get a look at their eyes in the poor light. Green the both of them. People to be respected then, unlikely to be bandits.

“Very well.” Orel shut the small hatch and opened the gate door to let the two in. Both carried heavy looking backpacks, but there were no horses for either of them. “Follow me.” He led them across the courtyard and under the protection of one of the many covered walkways that connected the various buildings of the monastery.

Both travellers let out a sigh of relief as they wrangled down their heavy looking packs. The man rubbed his shoulders. Orel noticed the sword at his hip. It wasn't unusual for a traveller. The roads could be dangerous.

“We can't thank you enough,” said the man. “A few more hours in this rain and we would both be coughing our lungs out the next day while fighting a fever.” He smiled pleasantly.

"We don't get many travellers around these parts," said Orel and examined the woman. Underneath her cape was a simple dress. Nothing fancy, but not the most expensive either. Well suited for a journey. The pack she carried looked like it would have been too heavy for her slender shoulders, but she had carried it none the less.

"Ah, yes," said the man. "I imagine not. We ourselves were stuck in the mountains for the entire winter. Rough times."

"You're miners then?" asked Orel. Few others would stay in the mountains. Even most miners came down to spend the harsh months in a more hospitable environment.

"You could say that," said the man and glanced at the woman. When he looked back at Orel his eyes had turned from green to a spoke wheel like mix of colours. The young brother gasped, but before he could shout the cold steel of a sword sank into his gut.

"We're mining for something all right," said Adan and pulled the blade out. The monk sunk to the ground, hand holding the bleeding wound. He'd die soon enough and the way he was gasping for breath ensured he wasn't going to alarm any others.

"You still need practice with your eyes," said Nora. Her green eyes had turned into red ones as was natural for her.

"I managed it long enough for us to get in," said Adan and wiped the bloody blade on the now unconscious monks robe.

"If we are to walk in public you will have to manage it longer than that," said Nora and rummaged through her pack. She pulled out a piece of cloth that wasn't completely soaked and began to dry off her hair.

"I wonder how many of them are here," said Adan and looked around. From the outside all you could see were the walls surrounding the place. Now that he was inside he saw enough of the buildings to know there could be dozens of monks in there.

"Does it really matter?" asked Nora.

"No, I suppose not," Adan admitted. He gave her a look over. She had changed. Part of it was that she no longer pretended to be blind. Where she had

in the past seemed helpless because of it there was now a confidence about her that made her seem stronger than her small frame would have led you to believe. Adan suspected part of that was because she siphoned off a tiny portion from every one she had killed and transferred over to him.

With the memories of Cievman getting together in his head, any doubt had disappeared from his mind. They were doing the right thing. So when spring had come there had been no objection to her plan. She had summoned everyone in the valley to meet at the hall. It had been a feast to welcome the new season.

She had poisoned the food.

By the end of the night everyone but Adan and her had been laying unconscious. Then she had gone to work and sucked out their life and given it to him. It had taken several days, but she finally figured out she could steal a portion for herself to keep the transfer from taking such a toll on her. For Adan, he was discovering new powers with each new life added to his. That's where the ability to hide his eyes had come from.

After everyone had been assimilated they'd gotten some things together and left the valley. They had lost their horses to a landslide that had nearly gotten them too. That had been two days ago and the monastery they were at now had been the closest place they might find new ones, as unlikely as it was.

But they'd get to kill some followers of the Church so it wouldn't be a complete waste of time.

"I think the sleeping area is this way," said Adan and nodded towards a door on the other end of the covered walkway. The building on the other end looked more like a chapel and dining hall with its steep angled roof and tall tower.

"All right," said Nora and put down the piece of cloth. She had managed to dry her hair, but there was nothing to be done about the wet clothes. Not until they secured the place. She dug around in her backpack and pulled out her sword. It was a bit shorter than blades usually were, but it would kill just the same. Together they headed for the sleeping monks.

It wasn't much of a job. The door led them to a corridor lined with doors. Each door led to a small chamber with a monk sleeping in a uncomfortable looking bed. Quick stabs didn't give any of them time to raise on alarm. All in all

they sent thirty monks into everlasting sleep.

“Let's keep the abbot alive,” said Adan when they approached the final door. It was at the end of the corridor so it made sense for it to be the abbots. He'd have a slightly bigger room than the lesser brothers.

“Why?” asked Nora. Blood dripped from her sword. She was surprisingly proficient with it for someone who had faked blindness for much of their life.

“I have some things I would like to discuss with him,” said Adan. “I haven't had a chance to talk with a man of the Church. Not since learning the truth of their birth and how they made this world theirs.”

Nora shrugged. “If you think it'll do some good.”

“Good? No. Maybe a bit of fun,” said Adan with a grim expression and pushed open the door. They had been right. The room was larger and even though a big desk took up a lot of space there was still enough left for a large bed that looked like it had a more comfortable mattress than what the lesser brothers got to enjoy. The smell of incense greeted them along with the flickering light from a few candles that were still burning by the small praying alcove in one corner. The abbot was snoring in the bed, his large belly doing its best to shove the blanket onto the floor.

Adan took a couple of careful steps towards the bed and knocked the man in the head with the hilt of his sword. The snoring stopped and his body went visibly limp.

“That should do it,” said Adan and pulled off the blanket. He grabbed a robe from the travellers trunk at the end of the bed and started tearing strips from it. He soon had the abbot tied up and gagged.

“The only problem is you now have to carry him,” said Nora and holstered her blade. Unless there was more than one person guarding the place at night, there wouldn't be any more trouble. It wasn't a large monastery so a single person could keep the fire going through the night. The nights could still be chilly, especially in stone buildings like the ones that made up the Church's monasteries.

Adan looked at the bound man. He was built heavy. Lugging him along even for the short way to the main building would be a struggle. “Didn't think of that,”

he finally admitted, but then remembered the chair that had been in one of the smaller rooms. He fetched it and while Nora watched with impatience he plopped the limp man into the chair and tied him down by his arms and legs. He'd be going nowhere, but dragging the chair would be easier than carrying him. It turned out not to be as easy as he'd thought, but soon enough he had the man outside and the wet cobblestone made the chair legs slide even easier.

Nora grabbed their bags and went ahead. She pushed open the door leading inside the cathedral like building and took a look around before entering. It never hurt to be careful. Adan dragged his prisoner with him and entered after her.

They entered a large hall with a podium slightly to the side. Behind it there was a pair of tinted windows that would let in light during the day. Now, there were lamps and candles lining the walls that lit the place up. Rows of benches filled much of the space. You could have fit a lot more people in there than they had killed in their beds.

"Over here," said Nora and motioned towards a door that was ajar. Adan dragged the chair. There was a small corridor that led to another room. Judging by the tables and benches it was the dining hall. A large fireplace was crackling away, giving heat and light. There was a bowl and cup on one of the tables. No doubt a late snack for the brother that had been keeping watch.

Adan dragged the unconscious abbot near the fireplace and then took a breather. It had been rough, but better than carrying him on his shoulders.

"Come on, let's get into some dry clothes before we both get sick," said Nora. She had already gotten rid of her cape and started to pull off the shirt she wore, though the moisture made it cling to her skin.

"Good idea," said Adan. The wet clothes made his skin itch and that in turn made him feel jumpy, like there was a dozen eyes on him. He turned his back to give Nora some privacy. She'd dragged their packs by the fire and Adan rummaged through his own after getting off his shirt and cape. The first layers had gotten a bit damp so he dug deeper to get some dry clothes. A few moments later he had on a pair of dry pants and a dry shirt. The wet clothes were laid out in front of the fireplace to let them dry.

Nora was drying her hair again and raking her fingers through it to untangle

bits of it. She'd gotten on a dry shirt and trousers as well. She had given up wearing her robes. Too much trouble when not travelling in a wagon, or so she said.

Adan looked around. There was an open doorway leading into the kitchen and a door at the other end of the dining hall. He guessed it led outside. "I'm going to get some water so we can wake up this bastard."

"All right. I'll watch him," said Nora and continued grooming herself.

It wasn't a long search. The kitchen had a barrel full of water that was suitably cold. He took a bucket and filled it with water. There was a piece of bread and some left overs from the monks last meal that he loaded onto a platter and took with him. He set the platter down on a table close to the fireplace.

"Found some food."

Nora turned to look at the platter. It wasn't much. Some pieces of meat, cold potatoes that may have once been steaming hot after being roasted and the light crusted bread. "Better than nothing I suppose."

Adan nodded and dumped the bucket of water on the abbot. The man jolted and gasped for breath. He tried to move, but the binding were tight enough that he couldn't do much. Adan took the gag from him so he wouldn't choke to death.

"What's going on?" the abbot stuttered and looked around, wild eyed. His expression froze when he saw Adan and the eyes that were staring at him. It looked like he was ready to soil himself when his eyes landed on Nora. She was nibbling on a piece of bread and gave the man a cheerful wave of her hand.

"Merciful god save me," the man breathed out and started mumbling a prayer. Adan slapped him to draw his attention back to himself.

"Praying isn't going to save you, abbot," said Adan. "I must admit that being what I am I have rarely had a chance to talk with a priest or even a monk like yourself. Someone who has truly studied the faith and its history. I've recently found myself with some information I would like to compare to what the Church tells its followers. Maybe you can help me with it. And maybe you will live afterwards."

The man swallowed hard. "What do you want?" With less panic in his voice it was a velvet soft tone that would have been a pleasure to listen to.

Adan pulled a bench closer so he could sit down and still stare at the man straight in the eyes. "Well, let's start with your name."

"I am abbot Emschy. What have you done with the brothers?"

"They're all dead," said Adan. The way it deflated the man had him grin briefly. "One was kind enough to let us in from the rain. The rest we killed in their sleep."

"Oh merciful god," said Emschy and started muttering another prayer. Adan let him finish for the sake of not completely losing him before getting what he wanted out of him. "Your sins are insurmountable. Once this atrocity comes to light there will be no place for you to hide."

Adan chuckled at that. "With my eyes that means nothing changes."

But it silenced the abbot nicely.

"Now, on to my questions. What does the Church teach about its early times? The times when Cievman was alive."

"Every child knows that," said the abbot.

"Amuse me. I haven't had the benefit of the Church wanting to teach me anything but how to die."

The abbot furrowed his brows for a moment. "Cievman was the first obstacle the Church saw. Before him we were peacefully spreading our message. Sometimes the message was heard, other times it wasn't, but the preachers kept at it. These peaceful converts drew the ire of Cievman, who ruled the lands at the time. He started to persecute the members of the Church. Where ever he found one he killed them to prevent others from learning the truth. It was a long and bloody war that finally saw his tyranny come to and end. That is what history and the Church teaches about the vile man."

Adan shook his head. "You see? They've completely re-written history."

"They don't even know of the lies they've built their faith on," said Nora and grabbed a piece of meat and started chewing on it.

"See, I have Cievman's memories in my head," said Adan and stared at the abbot. "He remembers things very differently. He was a senator in a republic where everyone was on more equal footing. No nonsense of keeping people with brown eyes down or elevating those with blue eyes to be nobles. Then your

Church came along and killed his wife. You rebelled and over threw the republic to install your tyranny on everyone.”

“Lies! Lies from the Desolation!” Emsby cried out and shook his head.

“There's no point talking with someone like him,” said Nora. She grabbed another piece of bread. “Just kill him so we don't have to listen to his wailing any more.”

“God will welcome me with open arms,” muttered the abbot and bowed his head. “If it is his will that I die today then so be it. I will serve his plans as intended.”

Adan shook his head and reached for his sword. “You know, if your Church had not hunted me from the day I was born none of this would be happening. I'd be living happily with my parents, bowing down to your god.”

The abbot looked up. “We can not go against the word of our god. People like you will destroy this world and must be gotten rid of.”

Adan grinned and pulled out his sword. “I was hesitant about that for a good while. Destroying the world. It seemed inconceivable that I'd want to do that. But now that I know the truth I will glad burn down everything to bring back the world *you* destroyed.”

“In time you will be judged. Then you will understand,” said the abbot.

“I doubt it.” With one swoop Adan drove his blade through the abbot's throat and sidestepped the splatters of blood. Some of it landed in the fire, hissing.

“Was it worth it?” asked Nora and stood up.

“Not really,” Adan replied and cleaned his sword. He went to the platter and grabbed himself some meat and bread. Nora had not eaten all of it so there was some left over for him. He watched Nora kick the chair down so it wasn't in the way so much. The abbot's head hit the floor with a crack.

“We'll spend the night here and move on in the morning,” said Nora and made sure no blood had gotten on the clothes she had put in front of the fireplace to dry.

“Where to?” asked Adan and munched down the last of his bread and meat before grabbing another piece from the platter. As he watched Nora he couldn't help but remember how she had gone from limp body to limp body, turning them

into dust and infusing their knowledge and power into him. He was uncertain about everything he could do now, but one thing he was certain of, few would be able to oppose him. They'd need an army for it.

"We're going to get the mercenaries," said Nora in a determined voice. "Then we're going to fix this world."

"So we're going south?" asked Adan. They hadn't discussed the plan that much before leaving the mountains. Neither had wanted to stay in the empty valley that long. Despite knowing they had done the right thing there was no denying the amount of blood on their hands and everything in the valley was a reminder of what they had removed from the world.

Nora nodded. "We won't need to cross the sea. There's a contact in one of the coastal cities that will arrange everything."

"What about the other sanctuaries? Shouldn't we visit them as well?" Adan left out the obvious implication of killing everyone in them.

"They will come to us when the fighting begins. Or we will go to them then. Either way, we will need to collect the payment money from the stashes along the way. Otherwise we'll be stuck with nothing." Nora glanced at Adan before turning back to the fire. "Though you alone would make a formidable impact."

"We can't win this with just an army," said Adan. "The people are used to the way things are. They'll never accept someone like us ruling."

"We can mask our eyes," said Nora. She gave him a mischievous smile. "You need some more practice though."

"But still," said Adan. "We can't change things in one night. We can't just bring back the republic and give the power of voting to the people. Not when they're still following the Church teachings. They would just return everything back to the way they were."

"Bringing back the Republic is a fine idea, but we will need to do it gradually," said Nora. "The brown eyes might be easy to convince. They wouldn't be beholden to others simply because of the way they were born. They'd get a lot more freedoms. But we will need a religion of our own to combat the teaching of the Church. Otherwise its teachings will interfere with what we want to do."

"So we need preachers. People who would bring back the gods of old," said

Adan. "Are there any left in the world who know anything about them?"

"Not in these parts," said Nora. "Maybe beyond the sea where our mercenaries will come. They don't follow the Church, though their faith isn't that different from them. A single god, but at least they're not commanded to hunt people like us, though with bounties from the church they have no trouble claiming the coin."

"Sounds like a long road," said Adan and munched down the last of his bread and meat. It had left him feeling full enough that his stomach wouldn't keep him awake at night.

"We have time," said Nora and turned to face him. The fire behind her cast an aura of yellow around her. "We won't fail."

Adan nodded. "I'll have a look around, make sure we didn't miss any of the monks. Then we can get some rest." He grabbed his sword and ventured to explore the rest of the monastery. He was disappointed with the stable he found. There were no horses, but there was a flock of sheep out in a pen. No doubt the source for the meat he'd just enjoyed. He didn't find any monks lurking around in the rest of the buildings. There was one building full of books and desks where the monks dutifully copied down texts, word for word, picture for picture.

Returning back to the dining hall he stopped at the door. Two tables had been dragged together by the fireplace and both their bedrolls had been laid out on them. The dead abbot had been moved out of the way and covered with a blanket. Nora stood by the fireplace, her bare back turned to Adan. She was changing out of her travel clothes into something she usually slept in.

He couldn't help but stop and look. The way her spine made a small indent along her back. She turned around to reach for something in her backpack, but froze in place when she saw Adan looking at her. It was the first time he had seen her without clothes. Guided by instinct his eyes wandered down to her breasts. Her small nipples stood out from the apple sized breasts. He felt blood rush to his cheeks among other places. He turned his gaze away, ashamed.

"I'm sorry," he muttered and began to turn around.

How can I face her after that?

"Don't go," said Nora. Adan could hear some shuffling. "I'm dressed again."

He turned around. She'd put on a shirt. It didn't seem to bother her that he'd seen her without it.

Still feeling uneasy about it, Adan walked further into the room and sat by one of the tables.

"Did you find anyone?" asked Nora and adjusted her bedroll on the table.

"Just some sheep," he replied.

"Good. Maybe we can get a good nights rest then."

Maybe you can. I certainly can't. Not now.

"What's the matter?"

Adan glanced at her. She was standing with hands on her hips, looking at him with a curious expression. "I just..I'm sorry. I shouldn't have walked in like that. Not while you were.."

"I don't mind," said Nora in a soft voice. She walked over to Adan and put a hand on his shoulder. "I told you that night. You wanted more then and you want more now, but it's not yet the time. But soon." She reached out and grabbed his hand. She guided it up to her breast and placed it there firmly. Adan could feel the soft flesh underneath. He couldn't resist giving it a squeeze. She smiled. "When the time is right we will enjoy each other."

"When?" asked Adan.

I haven't known many women, but I can tell when I'm being manipulated and led.

She let go of his hand, but didn't push it away so it remained where it was. "There is so much we need to do. We don't need distractions."

"This isn't a distraction?" asked Adan and pulled his hand away.

She straightened herself out and looked down at him. She went from head to toe with a wry smile. "I suppose it is."

"Just stop teasing me," said Adan and stood up. "I'm not your play thing." Having said that he marched out of the room. Nora stared at his back with a look of disbelief.

He didn't return until morning. He found a warm enough corner to huddle in and used a tapestry to wrap himself in. The true believer would have called it blasphemy when he tore it away from the altar, but it wasn't something that even

crossed his mind. After a while he started feeling silly for storming out like that. With the memories of Cievman he could recognize the weakness living alone had given him. How to deal with other people was not something he could do well. Especially women. Especially someone like Nora who would have given anyone a hard time. It was thoughts like those that sent him off to sleep.

He woke to the rays of sun coming in through the tall windows. His neck hurt along with a number of other places because he'd slept sitting up against a wall. It took plenty of stretching to get rid of most of it. He hesitated going back to where Nora was, but finally he'd gathered enough courage for it.

He found her already awake. There was a new fire going in the fireplace and she'd scrounged up some more stuff from the kitchen to make some breakfast.

"Good morning," she said and smiled while stirring the black cauldron hanging over the fire.

Adan nodded and found himself a seat by the table closest to the fire. "I'm sorry about last night." The words came out forced by the increasing uneasiness he was feeling.

"I am too," said Nora and straightened herself out. She had her travel clothes on once more.

"It's just..with the memories of Cievman I know all about men and women and what they do together," said Adan. He couldn't help but blush a bit as the memories ran past his mind. "But I haven't actually lived that life. I'm bad with people. I haven't lived with them for much of my time. You're the first woman I've really talked to or touched in such a way."

Nora walked over and sat opposite to him. "I'm sorry. I didn't think of that. I've grown up in the valley so I've had more experience with it than you.."

"But just because of that I'm not blind. I can see you're doing it to try and control me. To get me to do what you want. I want you to stop it. You don't need to trick me with promises like that. I have the memories and I'm doing this because of them. Not because of you." He stared right into her eyes. "If you want me in that way then I wish it was because of who I am, not because of what you want me to do."

"All right," she agreed. "And I'm sorry. I just thought.."

She mumbled the rest of the sentence so that Adan couldn't quite hear her. He wanted to ask, but before he could she had stood up and went back to stirring what ever she had cooking in the cauldron. He didn't want to push the issue any more. They'd hashed out the most important bit.

They enjoyed a brief breakfast before getting their belongings together and heading out. Walking out the monastery gates they found a sunny day and a gentle breeze blowing from the south. After walking for a bit Adan turned to look back at the stone walls that surrounded the monastery.

“Should we destroy it?” Adan asked.

Nora shrugged and adjusted her backpack. “No harm in it.”

Adan gave the structure an appraising look. “We'd better get further away. I have no idea how well I can control my powers. I might over do it and that would be bad if we're too close.”

They walked to a hilltop that was a safe distance away. If it looked like things would be out of control they'd be able to hide behind it for some extra cover.

“You ready?” asked Adan and focused his gaze on the monastery. It was maybe half a mile away.

“Go for it,” said Nora, sounding excited.

And why wouldn't she? I am too. First time using my powers like this. In a controlled manner.

It wasn't hard. The memories of Cievman told how to do it and following those instructions was simple enough. The ball of blue flames exploded right at the centre of the monastery. It expanded and engulfed the entire structure. For a moment Adan felt sorry for the sheep, but the flames would have turned them to ash almost instantly. The ball continued to expand and reached a third of the way to where Adan and Nora were. They could feel the hot air rush at them. The flames didn't disappear instantly, but stayed in place for a good time.

Then they disappeared as suddenly as they'd appeared. Small grass fires continued to burn here and there. The stones that had made up the monastery had melted down. A puddle of red glowing molten rock was all that remained in the crater left behind by the flames.

For a moment they stood in silence and watched the carnage.

“Was a bit bigger than I intended,” said Adan.

I barely tapped into my power. A spoon full out of a bucket. The destruction I can do with this..

“I'd like to see the expression on the first person to come here expecting to find the monastery,” said Nora and chuckled.

Dark smoke rose from the still glowing stone.

“Let's go before that happens,” said Adan and turned from the destruction. He knew full well it would not be the last time he'd be using his power. And it wouldn't always be already dead bodies he'd be incinerating.

But it didn't bother him.

He had his mission.

He had his conviction.

Chapter 20

Memories

Cievman surveyed the field beneath him. The hill offered a good view of everything going on. The enemy was in retreat. The sounds of battle still filled the air, screams of pain from those getting wounded sounded out, but the rebel forces were being driven back. The losses they had suffered were heavy. Despite facing the flames, the hail of arrows, and large boulders from the catapults, they'd marched to face the forces of the Republic. And they'd dished out damage. Almost equal to their own.

"The battle is ours," said Dewun. The general had his helmet off under one arm. His armour looked like it had been polished the very same day.

"At a great cost," said Cievman. The amount of dead bodies on the field was horrifying. He suspected they'd lost at least a legion and against the growing power of the rebelling provinces that was not good. There were rumours of them looking to hire mercenaries from beyond the sea and if they did that the war would be over. Even against the people with power a big enough mass of bodies would bring you victory.

"They are putting up more of a fight than I anticipated," Dewun admitted and stroked his greying moustache, the only hair on his bald head. He turned to one of the messengers standing at the ready. "Go to the left flank. Tell them to tighten up with the centre of our formation. We don't want the enemy isolating them even if they seem to be on the run." The messenger saluted him and jumped on his horse to deliver the order.

"We can't afford many more of these battles," said Cievman. "Too many of the provinces have sided with the rebels. They outnumber our men and even if I can wipe out half a legion with my flames that still leaves them with more men on the field than we have."

Dewun nodded. "Even if there are others to help you the blessing of the gods are not enough to turn the tide."

"So what do we do?" asked Cievman and turned around and walked to the

chair that was there for him. He took a seat and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "How do we protect the people of the Republic from this lunacy?"

Dewun turned to him with a sympathetic look. "We'll give it our best on the battlefield, but we should prepare for the inevitable. We will lose this war. We'll win some battles still, but in the end their superior numbers will get us."

"And then they will hunt down the people they call World Destroyers," said Cievman. "They will burn thousands at the stake just to appease their misguided belief in a single god."

"It's not going to be pretty," Dewun agreed. He had brown eyes. He'd read what the opposition thought of his place in society. Why people supported them with such ideas was a mystery to him. The majority was only going to hurt themselves when they came to power. He shook his head. "Fear makes people do strange things."

Cievman glanced around. It wasn't a safe place to air out such grievances. There were messengers in the vicinity who could hear everything. There were servants in the tent behind him readying a meal. There was the lesser command staff gathered around a table with maps laid out and wooden fixtures that represented various units of the army as well as the enemy. None of them should be hearing the two leaders admit they were going to lose.

"We'll talk about it later," said Cievman. "Let's just see this battle to the end for now."

It took several more hours before the fighting died down. Pushing back the fanatic army was never easy. Plenty more people died in the process. It was starting to get dark by the time Cievman and Dewun had time to sit down and enjoy a meal in private to discuss how to proceed.

"What does the senate think?" asked Dewun and grabbed a chicken leg from the large platter.

"They're afraid," said Cievman and nibbled on his own piece of chicken. They sat by a table inside his tent. There were trustworthy guards around the outside to keep any nosy people out. The servants had been ordered out after they'd brought in all the food and drink.

"I would be too if I had eyes like yours," said Dewun. "Though I suppose I'm

not going to be any safer than you because I've been leading the armies. They'll burn me alive just the same for that."

"The senate still thinks we can win this," said Cievman. "They refuse to consider options in case we do lose."

"What could we do?" asked Dewun. He sipped some wine from his cup. "When the Republic falls those fanatics will rule everything south of the mountains and north of the sea. There's nowhere to hide."

"We could try and get some refugees across the sea," said Cievman.

Dewun shook his head. "Those southerners aren't very welcoming. Unless you're paying them to fight or selling goods they'll be just as happy to sell you as a slave. That's not a good life, I can tell you that."

"Makes me wish the Republic had crossed the sea with more determination," said Cievman.

Dewun chuckled. "It's not for a lack of trying. Those southern bastards are tough as nails. Their ships far better than ours. They sunk most armies we sent there before we even saw land. But even if we had conquered them, they'd just be fighting against us like most of the provinces are now. At least now those fanatics have to pay them."

"And we can't because they control the coasts," said Cievman. The core of the Republic was all inland. Getting anyone out to sea with enough gold to convince the southerners to fight a war wasn't going to happen.

"There's still a path to the mountains," said Dewun. "There are valleys there that are hard to get to. You could hide people there for centuries."

Cievman tore off the last piece of meat from his chicken leg and chewed it down. "That's something to consider. We've built roads there so the miners can haul their finding down more easily. Wouldn't be hard to get at least some people there."

"We'd need a distraction," said Dewun. "Something to get the attention of the fanatics. If they find out we've sent people to the mountains they'll surely try and prevent it."

"Leave that to me," said Cievman. "The final battle isn't far off. If we can meet them at the plains of Venera I can make it a show that will have all their

attention.”

Dewun gave him a grim glance. “Sounds like a suicide mission.”

Cievman grinned. “It is, but what do I have to live for besides seeing the people who have trusted me, safe? I will trust you with this. Gather as many of those with blessed eyes and see to it that they find safety in the mountains. Do it quietly and carefully. They are the most vulnerable people under the new rule.”

Dewun leaned back in his chair and frowned. “Are you sure about this?”

“We can't just let them come in and kill who they want to,” said Cievman. “We can't save everyone, but we can try to save as many as we can.”

Dewun nodded. “I'll see to it.”

A month later Cievman found himself standing on top of a steep hill with a ledge. Down on the plains he could see the army of the fanatics approaching. What remained of the Republic's forces was gathered below him. They were outnumbered twenty to one. Recent nights had been plagued by assassins targeting those who had powers like him. They were playing a smart tactic and limiting the destruction those who had been blessed by the true gods were able to dish out. In the army there were only a handful left and none of them were as powerful as Cievman was.

Today the Republic would fall.

His only consolation was that Dewun had managed to save some. They'd even found a valley to hide in that was hard to find and easy to defend. At least some would survive. Perhaps they would be able to reclaim the Republic some day.

“Come on then, you bastards,” Cievman muttered and put on his helmet. He was no warrior, but in the face of death there was no reason not to fight to the last. He pulled out his sword and pointed it at the sea of approaching enemies. A ball of flames burst out in the middle of their ranks, engulfing with it thousands. The brief screams of pain echoed across the plains.

But the army continued approaching.

More bursts of flames erupted among them, but they barely slowed down their march. Finally Cievman had to stop. He was at the limits of his abilities. Heavy breaths accompanied the sweat running down his forehead. He'd killed

thousands, but tens of thousands still flowed towards his forces. Gritting his teeth he made his way to his horse. There was nothing more to do but to fight to the end. His guards followed him as he rode towards the battle.

The clash between the armies happened before he could reach the front line, but in the open plains there was plenty of room to get around. He rode into battle with his guards. A swing of his sword cut down one man, two, three, but there was always someone to replace the fallen body. In the chaos it wasn't easy being aware of everything going around you so when Cievman felt something hit his side it was a complete surprise. It hit with enough force to make him fall from the saddle. His head hit the ground hard. The helmet didn't soften the blow at all. The world went dark. The shouts and cries around him seemed to come from a distance before finally vanishing completely.

A splash of cold water brought him back. Gasping for breath he tried to move, but found himself tied down.

“Wake up, World Destroyer,” came a voice.

Cievman opened his eyes. He was standing up, tied to a pole. There was all sorts of scrap wood piled under his feet. Looking around all he saw were hateful faces. The enemy had him surrounded. He knew what they were going to do. They had waited just to hear him scream. Looking around some more he could see three others in a similar situation as himself. All had the blessed eyes of the gods.

“Brothers and sisters,” the voice bellowed. Cievman sought out the source and landed on a man who, judging by his robes, was a priest of the insurgent faith. “We have captured Cievman, the leader of the evil forces that have gripped this land for so long!”

The mass of people surrounding them erupted into cheers. Cievman surveyed the crowd. There were plenty of people who looked like they were nothing but farmers who had been dragged into battle. Here and there he could see some who looked like professional soldiers by the way they carried themselves. There were some women in the crowd as well, some dressed to fight, others with aprons covered with blood from treating the wounded.

Cievman couldn't help but grin. They were cheering now, but once their new faith started laying down its teachings the women would not be allowed to fight.

All their freedoms would be restricted. Many of them would lose their station simply because their eyes were the wrong colour.

“But there is much more to do!” the priest bellowed out once the crowd silenced. “The fight against the evils of the world will continue, but today we have achieved a thunderous victory. Today we rid the world of the most evil creature walking on it!”

The crowd cheered again. Cievman shook his head. They didn't know evil when it was preaching to them, telling it was the saviour of all. He wished there was something he could still do. His head hurt too much to concentrate on his powers for any meaningful effect. Best he could do was set the pyre he was standing on on fire, but that wasn't going to accomplish much.

“The fire will cleanse the world of their taint!” the priest declared and motioned to a few people holding torches. They stepped forward and set fire to the first pyre. The woman tied to the pole begged and cried as the flames started to grow. Then came the screams of pain when her skin and flesh started to feel the heat and burn.

It went on for far too long.

Cievman tried to keep the tears away, but he couldn't. The heavy responsibility of knowing he had failed her and everyone else was too much. When they set fire to the second pyre he closed his eyes and openly cried. The sobs rocked his body while the crowd around him mocked the victims and cheered at their suffering.

The third pyre was started.

He knew he'd be next.

Where it came from, he didn't know, but the laughter bubbled out of him. Maybe his mind had finally snapped. It silenced the crowd and had them all staring at him, some in terror, others with disgust and contempt.

“Silence!” the priest shrieked, but made no move to get closer to Cievman.

“Why should I obey you?” asked Cievman, the laughter having finally died down. “I will burn anyway. Might as well burn on my own terms. But know this, this does not end here. My ashes will spread through out the world and spread my powers to those who need them. Some day in the future it will be your faith

that burns!”

Having said what he wanted to, he closed his eyes and mustered what power he had left. A column of white fire shot up from where he was. The priest stumbled backwards and fell down and raised his arms to protect himself from the heat. The crowd rushed back. Panicked screams were drowned by the roaring flames.

When the flames died down there was nothing left of the pyre. No sign of a corpse left behind. The priest swallowed hard and scrambled back on his feet. Something black landed on the back of his hand. He looked down and tried to brush away the smudge. The black ash only spread to a larger area. Looking up he could see more flakes floating down from the sky.

Chapter 21

They had the funds. Their contact to the south eyed the pouches and licked his lips. His long beard was a shiny black and his brown eyes matched the colour of his skin. He wore the customary white turban of his people which would have drawn a lot of attention had they been anywhere but the harbour of the largest trading city within hundreds of miles.

“This is the initial payment in full?” the man asked and grabbed one of the pouches. The coins inside let out the melody any merchant enjoyed hearing.

“In full,” said Nora. She took a sip from the cup of water she had ordered. The tavern was quiet and they'd found a secluded corner in which to conduct their business. There was a lot of money involved so keeping prying eyes away from their dealings was a good idea, though their contact had marched in with four heavily armed mercenary guards so anyone looking to rob him would have to think a few times whether it was worth their life.

The man gave both of them an inquisitive look. He lingered on Adan a bit longer than on Nora on the account it was the first time he was seeing the young man. “This is not an easy thing you are asking of me.”

“We know, Yusef,” said Nora. “But it is the arrangement we have made with your people. This has been in the works for decades and you know it. Now that time is finally upon us it is not the time to start having second thoughts.”

Yusef nodded. A customer entered the tavern letting in a fresh breeze of salty air from the harbour. “We have the place and time. We have the payment. I believe this will be enough for now. I trust you will have someone out to meet the forward party?”

“We will be there,” said Nora. “We will give further instructions at that time.”

Yusef nodded again. “Then I will start sending the needed messages. Two weeks and you should meet the force in the agreed upon spot.”

“Very well,” said Nora and stood up. Adan did the same and gave the man a slight nod before following her out of the tavern. He felt oddly light not having to carry so much cash on him and it wasn't just the weight of the missing coins that

did it. They had taken the important step in furthering their plans. The plank covered street they got on was busy with carts rolling every which way filled with goods. The piers started to extend straight from the street and there were several ships unloading their cargo while others took theirs in.

“That went well,” said Adan and followed Nora. He glanced around nervously. It was still an odd feeling walking out in the open with nothing to cover his eyes. He'd had a lot more practice during their walk to the coastal city and could now keep his eyes looking normal for long stretches of time without much effort.

“Let's hope everything keeps going as well as it did now,” said Nora and dodged a cart. They left the plank road and entered the part of the city that was built on solid ground instead of stone stilts over water. The traffic died down considerably as soon as they left the harbour.

They hadn't had any trouble getting the funds together. They had been dispersed just as Nora remembered, though it had taken them time to visit each stash. The biggest concern had been ordinary bandits once they'd had enough coins to fill a backpack, but they had kept to well travelled roads and faced no troubles.

“We have two weeks. What will we do?” asked Adan. Nora stopped and looked around before grabbing his hand and pulling him to a silent alley between two stone buildings.

“It will take us a week to get where we need to be,” said Nora. She continued looking around to ensure no one was looking or listening in.

“That still leaves us a week,” said Adan and kept an eye out as well. They may not have had the World Destroyer eyes to give away who they were, but when you had just hired an army of twenty thousand to take over the kingdom you were in you didn't need to be one to get in trouble with those in power.

“Is there something you've always wanted to do?” asked Nora. “We can be normal for a week if we want to. Do what the people who don't need to hide do. Live life.”

Adan shrugged. “I don't know.”

“There must be something,” said Nora.

"I've dreamt of a normal life, of course. But it has always been on a grand level of being a farmer or a blacksmith or something like that. I haven't really given much thought to just everyday things people like that do."

"Then we can simply explore what the city has to offer," said Nora. "We can sleep late and get some rest. I don't think we'll be getting much of that once things start rolling. We can walk around the city and see what there is to do and enjoy."

"That is something I've never done," said Adan in agreement. "Just walking out in the open is such a new experience. Still makes me question whether I should be doing it."

A small smile passed her lips. "You'll get used to it. Come on. Let's go see what the inn has to offer in terms of food."

It turned out to be the best week of Adan's life. Just the simple act of walking through the marketplace opened his eyes to a world of goods and items he'd never seen. He got to try exotic fruits and spices brought in from the south. Being a harbour city made it a trade hub and you got to see things that would never make it to the small villages he'd been to before.

He got to see artisans work, painters make quick sketches of people and sell them, street entertainers please a crowd so they burst out in laughter and applauds. All the joy and happiness was a stark contrast to the life of persecution he had lived. It made him more angry at the Church for robbing him of all of that, but at the same time it gave him a glimmer of hope that things could be changed without as much blood shed as he'd feared.

Nora seemed to enjoy it as much as he did. They had enough coins to buy almost anything they wanted so they spent evenings enjoying meals at well regarded taverns. She bought clothes that were suited for anything but travel. She said they would be needed once things started to settle down. They bought Adan a new sword that was made by a well regarded sword smith. It cost more than felt right, but it was well made and fit perfectly in his hand. It wasn't overly decorated, but there were carvings in the blade and handle that gave it an air of prestige.

By the time the week had passed Adan felt almost sorry to ride out the city

gates. A pack horse was tied to his own horse. Nora rode next to him in a dress she had bought. The leather skirt was made for riding and the deep brown leather corset that made up the top hugged her thin body and made it look even more frail. A cape covered her shoulders. The breeze from the sea pressed it against her back. A cloud blocked the sun here and there, sometimes making the day feel chilly until the sun emerged and hit you with its rays once more.

“So, where do we go?” asked Adan. They’d ridden down the road, away from the city, for a good while. The walls had disappeared behind the landscape and the smell of the sea had grown weaker.

“East,” said Nora and pulled on the reigns of her horse. The white steed came to a halt with a whinny. “There’s a beach a few days ride up the coast. It’s a perfect place for our army to land and assemble.”

“You seem to know the area well,” said Adan. It was not the first time she declared their destination with a confident voice. During their search for gold she had guided them without fail to the right locations.

“I’ve been around the various kingdom several times,” said Nora and brushed aside a lock of her white hair. “I’ve been preparing for this moment for most of my life. The elders have entrusted me with the decades of preparation they had done. This is not my plan, but one that dozens of people have honed over a century, perhaps even longer.”

“Then let’s make certain it works,” said Adan and dug his heel to the side of his horse. Nora soon caught up to him and led the way. They left the road that ran through crop fields and isolated farms and entered the grass plains. There were herds of sheep and the occasional shepherd that they passed, but the further they got along the coast the less people there were. It soon became apparent the fields of grass had not been touched by domesticated animals and the forests they ran through had not seen many hunters rummage through them.

The weather remained pleasant during the journey. Some occasional clouds and a gentle breeze were all that disturbed the sky. The temperature remained pleasantly warm and the nights had clear skies that allowed the stars to shine.

It was mid-day when the beach finally stretched out in front of them. It wasn’t a white sand beach, but one with small, round stones and mud making up

most of it. High cliffs surrounded it on both side, making the beach itself a small dip in the otherwise steep shore. Trees and grass started soon after the stone covered beach.

They set up camp by the forest edge and gathered enough wood to start the fire for the agreed upon mark. Now all they had to do was wait. Adan listened to the waves crashing ashore and watched the dark waters span from horizon to horizon. In the city he had not really appreciated just how vast the sea was. The salty air made his skin tingle.

“Makes you feel humble,” he said when Nora walked up next to him. She was wrapped in her cloak to protect from the wind that was picking up. The waves were growing bigger and some already had a white head to them.

“Let's hope the wind doesn't pick up much more. They won't be able to land if the waves get much rougher.”

“A delay would not make for a good start,” Adan agreed. “But they're not supposed to be here until tomorrow.”

“More time for the wind to grow stronger,” said Nora.

“More time for it to pass,” Adan countered. Though she was often optimistic there were times when she turned to negativity and doubted what they were doing and whether it would work.

She embraced herself. “It won't be an easy road from here.”

Adan nodded. “A lot of people are going to die.”

“Hopefully we'll be the ones doing the killing instead of the dying,” said Nora.

“We will,” Adan assured her. “We will carve out a kingdom for ourselves. Then we can begin reforming. It will take time, but some day we will be able to let the people return to the ways of the Republic, to decide for themselves who leads them and what gods to follow.”

Nora shook her head. “That will not happen in our life time. The Church is too ingrained.”

“We have to try,” said Adan. “We can't just kill everyone.”

“We could,” said Nora.

“Then what would we be left with? Blood soaked lands with no one to enjoy them.”

“There are still the other hideouts,” said Nora. “The people from those could move in.”

“Aren't we supposed to kill them too to gain more power?” Adan glanced at her. She looked torn on the issue. It was the first time he saw any hesitation in her about the road they were on.

“Do we really need to?” she asked. “You only used a tiny fraction of your power to destroy that monastery. Do we really need more power?”

Adan shrugged. “You're the one who told me we need to do it. The memories from Cievman support the idea. If we can avoid it then that's great, but we shouldn't decide it based on momentary emotions.”

“When did you turn into the calculating one?” asked Nora.

“When the memories came to me,” said Adan. It wasn't lie. Having the memories of a much older man in you gave you perspective. Knowing what he had been through, what he had faced, what the Church had done, what had been lost and destroyed, it all gave him determination not to fail. Nothing would stop him from correcting the world.

“I like you that way,” said Nora before turning around and heading back to camp. Ada wanted to look after her, but fought the urge. They had agreed not to tease each other, but she had done so just now. It had been minor so he wanted to leave it at that. Making more fuss about it would only make things worse. For a while he continued watching the waves crash onto the beach. The sound of constant rushing water was unfamiliar to him, but held a soothing embrace over him.

They had a good meal that evening. Not needing to go anywhere gave time to prepare a meal that would have been impossible on a day when they needed to travel. Having a full stomach quickly lead to yawns and to Nora climbing on her bedroll and pulling a blanket over herself while Adan took the first watch of the night.

In the morning they lit the signal fire. They kept adding wood to keep it going until mid day when the first mast peaked over the horizon. The black ships sailed as close to shore as they dared before lowering rowing boats and filling them with men to get to shore.

The lead boat landed ashore and a man in a red cape jumped into the water and strode towards Adan and Nora. His bald head, dark skin and armour covered body all gave him an air of danger. The determined look and the confidence in his steps made it clear he was a leader.

“You are our employers?” he asked. The accent made some of the words hard to understand, but at least he spoke the language.

“Yes,” said Nora and stared at the man with her blue eyes. Adan did the same. There was no need for the mercenaries to know who they were really serving. It was best they thought it was two nobles looking to even a score. That was what they would be presenting themselves to the world as, after all.

“I am general Baga,” said the man and raised a clenched fist to his chest and made a small bow.

“I am Nora and this is Adan. You may call us by these names for now. Our true identities need to remain hidden until we gain a foothold in these lands.”

“How long to get your men to shore?” asked Adan.

“It will take the better part of the day for the infantry,” said Baga and glanced back at the beach. More boats had hit the shore and there were men carrying equipment ashore while others were setting up a perimeter to ensure the safety of the operation. The leather armour they wore and the spears they carried along with the curved swords was enough to make you take them seriously as opponent in a fight.

“What about the cavalry?” asked Nora. “We did hire several thousand of them.”

Baga shook his head. “Landing them here will take time. The horses alone, trying to get them ashore on boats. It's slow and dangerous.”

“Would it be faster if we took over a harbour city?” asked Adan.

“Taking a city is a slow thing,” said Baga.

“Not if they're not expecting us,” said Nora. “The cavalry can sail along the coast and hit them from the sea. We can march with the infantry on land and strike from the land.”

“These lands do not expect an attack from the south,” said Adan. “And if you sailed as told no one will expect an army landing here much less marching on a

major hub of commerce.”

“We were in the city just a week ago,” said Nora and watched a large wave of boats head back to the ships. “The gates were wide open for anyone to enter. The city guard holding it can't amount to more than a few thousand men, if that.”

Baga nodded. “Very well. We will plan an assault on the city. Do you have any maps we can use?”

“In our camp,” said Nora.

“Let's get to planning then,” said Baga.

They led him to the camp to plan while the rest of the army continued to fill the beach.

Chapter 22

The city spread out below Adan. The tallest tower of the castle offered a great view of the surrounding countryside as well as the dark sea that surrounded it on the other side. He hadn't had much time to enjoy the view, but now things had settled down some what so there was space for taking a breather now and then.

He was pleased that the city had not suffered in the attack in any significant manner. The gates had been wide open. They'd sailed one of the mercenary ships into the harbour the day before and the men on it had secured the gates so the main army could flow in. Once the main force appeared and was inside the walls the city guard had not put up much of a fight. They'd seen the hopelessness of it and none of them had much to gain by getting killed. The duke that governed the area had not been in the city which had been an unfortunate surprise.

But it was now firmly under the control of Nora and Adan.

The mercenary army had continued to expand the area they controlled after that and the cavalry forces patrolled the lands they'd claimed so far. Word had been sent south that more troops would be needed and now that they controlled a harbour city it would be easy for additional forces to arrive. It helped that while there had been no duke to capture there had been a sizeable treasury in the castle and those funds would allow them to increase the size of their forces and keep them happy for quite a while.

They'd taken over villages in every direction from the city. You had to ride for two days straight to reach the edge of the lands under their control. The army was now pressing against several large cities whose own armies were the only reason they did not yet control them.

Adan took in a deep breath of the salty air. Looking down he could see people on the streets, walking about as if nothing had happened. The harbour was still filled with merchant vessels, goods were being transported as usual and taxes and tolls collected just as before. It had helped that Adan and Nora had ridden into the city very visibly, dressed as nobles would be. Everyone had seen their blue eyes and heard the declaration issued later. Adan was from a long lost

bloodline that was now reclaiming the lands that belonged to him by birth right. A high ranking priest of the Church had been dragged out of the temple and made to verify the papers Nora had acquired – or rather the elders of the sanctuary had. They had prepared for everything. Who knew when the papers of a noble could come in handy even if you didn't have blue eyes.

“There you are.”

Adan turned to look at her. The clothes of a noble suited her. The fine fabrics and designs along with the blue eyes made her look like a real noble. “I needed some fresh air.”

Nora walked up next to him and leaned against the stone battlement. The top of the tower was open and had plenty of space for the catapult to hurl deadly things at any army looking to assault the walls. “We should be hearing from our messenger today.”

Adan nodded. “I doubt any of them will surrender.”

“No, I don't think they will either,” said Nora. A gust of wind from the sea ruffled her hair.

“It'll take them a while to gather up their armies. Their regular forces aren't enough to face us.”

“Good thing the war in the north still continues and ties up forces,” said Nora. “If the Church steps in it won't get an army together too soon.”

“The priest seemed to buy the papers you had,” said Adan. “He verified them to the people of the city. By those we have a claim on the next five major cities from here.”

Nora nodded. “It's enough to make a kingdom and field an army that doesn't rely on mercenaries.”

“We just need those cities to surrender.”

“Baga assures me that we can take the cities with the re-enforcement coming from the south.” Nora brushed aside some of her hair that had been thrown in her face by the wind.

“That'll leave them in ruins,” said Adan. “A lot of people will die and that will make them resentful of us.”

Nora shrugged. “The brown eyes are used to it. They die at the whim of blue

eyes. That has been true for centuries.”

“Rebuilding takes time,” said Adan.

“This was never a plan that would be seen through in months or even years. We're talking about decades of work. And we've taken some very firm first steps already. Once we have our kingdom we can take land here and there and work on undermining the Church.”

Adan sighed. Looking up he saw a single cloud passing the blue sky. “If we could use my powers everything would be over much quicker and with lesser casualties.”

“Not yet,” said Nora. “If we do it will rouse the Church. It will make people question things. Our hold is not strong enough to face that yet.”

“Solidify our rule it is then,” said Adan and tugged at his collar. While he liked the fabric his shirt and small jacket were made of he wasn't a fan of the way it seemed to want to strangle him.

“Still not used to the shirts?” Nora had a smile on her when he glanced at her.

“No. I feel like I have a rope around my neck and given what we're doing, that's not a feeling I enjoy.”

“Don't worry. Soon we'll be the ones setting the style. You can have shirts with a more open collar.”

“Can't happen soon enough,” said Adan and frowned. A group of men was riding towards the city. They bore the banners of the mercenaries, but there was clearly someone not from the south among the group. He pointed it out to Nora. “Might be one of our messengers.”

“Let's go find out,” said Nora and led the way to the spiralling stairs that led them down from the tower. The castle walls surrounded a large courtyard. There were mercenaries walking around the cobblestone covered yard. Horses whinnied at the stable on one side while men who were off duty were playing dice and drinking in front of their barracks. The southerners weren't big on strict discipline when off duty.

Nora and Adan walked over to the closed gate and waited. As they passed the mercenaries made salutes here and there. Some recognized them as their

employers, others did it simply because of their eyes.

Finally the guards atop the wall yelled down and the gates were opened. The group they had seen rode in and Adan was pleased to see it was indeed one of their messengers. The young man recognized them immediately and dismounted to salute them.

“What did the city of Verden decide?” asked Nora.

“I delivered your demand as instructed,” said the man. There was dirt on his face and his clothes were covered in dust. “Duke Barbley happened to be there as well. Your demand of surrender was summarily rejected by him.”

Adan and Nora exchanged looks. It wasn't surprising their demand had been refused. That the duke was in the city made it a tempting target for the first attack.

“Did he have any message for us?” asked Adan.

The messenger shook his head. “No, sir. When I left I over heard some of the servants talking about the duke gathering men and preparing to retake the lost land. There was a rumour he had even pleaded with the king for additional forces and that the request had been accepted.”

“So we are viewed as invaders instead of nobles reclaiming their rightful place,” said Nora. The king rarely got involved between disputes his dukes had.

“That is the impression I got, my lady,” said the messenger.

Adan looked at the man's brown eyes. “You did well. Get some rest. You've earned it.”

“Thank you, sir.” He saluted and headed for the barracks. There was always something to eat to be found there.

“How many troops do we have surrounding that city?” asked Nora.

“Five thousand, I believe,” said Adan. “About the same that we have around every other city.”

“Where's Baga? We should talk with him about assaulting that place before the duke can bring in additional forces.”

“Probably in the citadel with his maps,” said Adan and started towards the structure looming behind them. The stone building rose several stories tall. A double door led them inside the entrance hall that also served as a reception hall.

Now, it served as Baga's war room. A long table stood in the middle with maps spread out on it along with wooden figures of men and horses to indicate where units of the army were. The man himself was leaning over the table with a concentrated expression as he examined reports and troop positions.

"General," Adan greeted the man and took position across the table.

"Lord Adan." He had taken up calling him that after they'd pulled out the nobility papers. "Lady Nora." He looked up from the papers.

"A messenger just arrived. Verden has refused to surrender."

Baga sighed. "Then it is a fight. As we feared, Lord Adan."

"We need to strike quickly," said Nora. She leaned on the table next to Adan. "The king will soon get involved and they are gathering forces to counter us. We need our troops behind walls to hold them off."

Baga shook his head. "With the troops we have we can't assault those walls. We can't bombard them down fast enough with our catapults. Our reinforcements will be here any day now, but it will take time to get them there. By then the enemy might have their own re-enforcements. I have to admit I am surprised there has been so little resistance to us. In my homeland the army would have been harassed to no end And we'd have had several a large battles by now."

"All the more reason to end it now," said Adan and glanced at the map. The cities were surrounded, he knew that, but the troops were spread thin. Assaulting the walls would end up in failure and heavy casualties.

"I don't see how we can do that. We'd have to give up the siege on the other cities and that causes problems of its own," said Baga.

A moment of silence passed as everyone around the table looked at the maps and troop positioning. They all knew even if they pulled the troops from the other cities it would take time for them to arrive where they were needed.

"What if we could take down the walls in an instant?" asked Adan. The look he got from Nora warned not to do it, but a slight shake of the head was enough to keep her quiet.

"If the walls could be taken down in one spot then we'd be able to rush in. There are only a thousand or so troops inside. We'd outnumber them five to one

and those are odds I'd bet on."

Adan glanced at Nora. "We have some special ammunition we had hoped to keep from being exposed just yet, but the situation seem to warrant bringing them out."

She caught on quick with a small smile.

"Can they tear down the wall?" asked Baga.

Adan nodded. "Shouldn't take many shots."

"Where are they? What are they made of?" asked Baga. He was a warrior of many battles so it was unlikely he didn't know most of what the military world had to offer.

"I haven't made them yet. I need some clay pots that can be tightly sealed and lamp oil. I'll procure the rest of the ingredients. A dozen should do for now. I'll have them ready by tomorrow. Then we can move out and take care of this." Adan gave the general a look. He hoped there wouldn't be further questions. There was no secret formula to reveal.

"Very well. I will see to it," said Baga and bowed before turning to look for someone to gather what was needed.

"It's risky," said Nora from next to him after the general had left the room.

"What choice do we have?" asked Adan and sighed. "We need to get a handle on things quickly or this will all fall apart."

"Do you want me to come with you or stay here?"

"Stay here and look after the re-enforcement coming our way," said Adan. "I can handle this."

Nora nodded. She gave him a worried look. "Don't over do it."

Adan grinned. "I'll try my best."

The next day a wagon filled with sealed clay pots rolled down the road with Adan and general Baga riding alongside with an attachment of guards. The wagon had to move slowly so it took three days to reach the besieged city. There was relief when they learned they'd arrived before any re-enforcements for the enemy.

Taking in the walls Adan looked at the city. He had his doubts whether the plan would work. He knew he could level the entire city if he wanted to, but that

was not the goal. The goal was to take it with minimal damage done. That meant carefully timing his power with a clay pot hitting the wall. And he had to use just the right amount of it or else the damage would be too great. It might also raise suspicions.

The mercenary army had the city surrounded. The camp stretched around, circling the entire walled off cluster of buildings. Many of the soldiers were lounging by their tents and camp fires while others kept guard. There wasn't much danger of the defenders trying to break out. They were heavily outnumbered and out in the open they would have been quickly defeated. The walls were what allowed them to keep their position.

He could see soldiers keeping watch on top of the walls. They were high enough that he had to tilt his head upwards to see them. Most he could see from behind the ramparts were the shining helmets and the tips of their spears. There were signs of the siege engines doing their work. Large boulders laid at the foot of the wall, the wall itself had cracks and indents here and there, telling of the force with which the missiles had hit. Still, it looked like little had been accomplished.

“You really think your weapon will take that down?” Baga asked as he came up next to him. He wore his armour and sword at his side, ready to battle.

Adan shrugged, though the chain mail he wore made the motion less pronounced. “We'll see. Get the men ready for an assault in the morning. I'll talk with the catapult crews about handling the ammunition.”

“Very well,” said Baga and turned to bark orders. Adan headed for the catapults to talk with them.

It helped that the crews were professionals. They'd launched clay pots filled with oil before and knew what it took. They taught Adan a thing or two about it. He had no experience waging a siege after all. The blue eyes he wore as a mask was enough to get them to talk enthusiastically about their profession. Few ever had the chance to impress a noble so they took full advantage of the situation. And in the end Adan did leave them to sleep the night, impressed by their skill and dedication. It gave his own confidence a much needed boost that everything would go as planned come morning.

The morning came with a clear sky and a gentle breeze. Perfect day for an

assault. Adan watched the troops ready themselves. Shields were strapped to arms, banners hoisted and prayers given to what ever gods the southerners worshipped. It was something he had meant to bring up with the general. If the people of the south worshipped a god different from the Church then there was hope of getting some of their priests over to preach and convert people. That would pave the road to tearing down the institutions the Church had built up during the centuries of its oppression.

The quick breakfast Adan had eaten felt like it wanted back out. It was the first big battle he'd be involved in. Everything so far had fallen before them easily and with little bloodshed. Today would be different. The ground would be stained red by the end of the day. All he could hope for was that not much of it would be from innocent people who were just trying to stay alive in the midst of the power struggle.

“Are we ready?” Adan asked as general Baga walked up to him. They were near the catapults, well away from the range of enemy archers. There were messengers and other command staff near by, ready to jump at command.

“Waiting for your command, sir,” replied the general. “If we get that wall down the city will be ours before nightfall.”

Adan nodded. “Let's get started then.” He raised his arm and the catapult crews loaded up his special ammunition. He had ordered them to load up only three of them and that they would be shot one at a time. He had his doubts about being able to handle even one of them and timing it right. The report came in that the ammunition was ready.

“Fire!” Adan shouted and watched the first clay pot arch into the sky accompanied by the loud thump of the catapult. He focused on the clay pot and unleashed his power at the exact moment it hit the wall. The oil was quickly consumed by the blue flames that burst out. The flames expanded, licking up the wall. He could hear screams from the men defending the position. They died down quickly as the stone began to glow red and become liquid. A portion of the wall crumbled down with much of its support having weakened to the point where it couldn't support the weight. Adan let the flames die down. The hole that had been formed was large enough that the army could push through ten men

abreast.

Baga let out a low whistle next to him. "Impressive. How does it work?"

Adan shrugged. "A mixture of ingredients, sealed air tight with bee wax. With everything mixed together and exposed to air it bursts into flames like that. Very dangerous. That's why I don't want them used without me present. Poor handling and you could find half the people here burned to death."

"I will have to stress that to the men," said Baga as he eyed the breached wall. The defenders were buzzing around on the still standing portions of the wall. The stones were still glowing red hot and kept away any attempts to form a defensive line there. The pile of rubble would be slow to climb over, but it was no wall.

"What do you think, do we need another one?" asked Adan. "We don't want to tear down too much of the wall or it won't be much use for us once we take the city."

Baga nodded. "Maybe try to make the path a bit wider and throw a third one behind the wall to keep the defenders from forming a defensive position around the breach."

"Two more shots it is," said Adan and relayed the order to the catapult crew. Their aim was spot on as was Adan's timing. The hole in the wall grew wide enough that you could march twenty men abreast through it. Plenty of room to rush in with an assault. The third clay pot hit just behind the opening in the wall and forced the defenders away from the rubble. The mercenary army marched onward and the flames died down shortly before the troops started to flow inside the city. Soon the air was filled with the sounds of metal meeting metal and men crying out in pain as flesh and bone was cut.

Adan remained near the catapults as did general Baga. He issued orders to the advancing troops to make the best use of them. Reports came in of many defenders surrendering without much of a fight. It wasn't surprising. Most of them weren't professionals and few held high allegiance to their current duke and the force they were facing was far superior. They had heard the stories how peaceful it had been in their initial attack, how few had died. The army surrounding them had been proclaiming safety if the city surrendered so they

hoped the same mercy would be shown to them. Adan had driven that point home for the general and his troops and it was paying off.

By the time the sun started to set the city was safely in their hands. The casualty reports started to come in. The flames had confused the defenders enough that their archers hadn't been able to get off that many shots when the attackers crossed the open field. That mean only a few hundred had died assaulting the city. Among the defenders the casualties were not much higher due to their quick surrender when faced with their enemies.

Adan and the general got on their horses and rode into the city through the gates. There was a heavy guard around them in case any archer was left to take a cheap shot at the commanders, but that fear proved to be unfounded. All they saw were frightened people that couldn't resist the urge to see the man who had conquered their city. Adan could tell some where relieved to see his blue eyes brush over them. They could understand that. Nobles fighting over land. It explained the strange mercenaries that had been surrounding their city. The fact they had not gone around looting and killing civilians gave credibility to the claim Adan was there to rule over them.

He still felt uncomfortable being out in the open under so many watchful eyes. Seeing a man in a priests robe had him reaching for his sword just in case. A lifetime of lessons were not easily forgotten.

They rode through the streets towards the citadel in the middle. It had surrendered without much of a fight. The men inside had opened the gate despite the duke ordering otherwise. They had seen what the missiles from the catapults could do. They valued their life more than their allegiance to the blue eye lording over them.

Arriving in the courtyard of the citadel they were met with prisoners guarded by the mercenary troops. Adan could tell by the clothing most of the people were not soldiers, but staff that worked for the duke. People of the court and high ranking officials. It didn't take long before he spotted the duke himself, standing amidst a group of colourfully dressed people. He stood out with his fine clothing and the way which he looked down on everyone around him. He was complaining loudly about his treatment, of being forced to stand among the rest of the court

instead of being allowed to meet his captor inside in a private setting.

Adan walked over to the group, followed by the general and the guards.

“Are you the duke?” he asked and eyed the man. He was in his fifties. The hair on his head was growing grey and his skin was starting to sag in places. He examined Adan for a moment before nodding.

“You must be the fool trying to usurp my place,” he said.

“Not trying. I just did it. Guards, throw him in the dungeon. He *might* be of use once we get the king to talk with us.” General Baga started barking out orders and several men grabbed hold of the duke and started to drag him away.

“You can't do this!” the duke protested. “I have stature! I deserve to be treated well!”

“You had stature. I just knocked you off the pedestal,” said Adan.

“But I have blue eyes! I deserve to be treated with respect!” the duke continued to shout and resist the guards.

“So do I!” Adan snapped, his voice silencing the duke. “But here I am, having to fight for what is rightfully mine. Blue eyes or brown eyes, in the end what matters is what you can claim as yours and defend it. You did not manage to defend what you had and now it's mine.” He motioned for the guards and they dragged the struggling man away. He ignored any further shouting from him and turned his attention towards the rest of the court. There were several blue eyes there, some men, some women, a few green eyes and finally a bunch of brown eyes who were dressed as servants.

“Now then, which of you would like to follow your duke and which would like to give their support to me?” Adan asked and surveyed the crowd. “Those who want to join the duke step forward.”

There was a moment where nothing happened, but finally four men stepped forward from the crowd. Adan eyed them. They were older folk. The younger crowd seemed more open to changing their allegiance on a whim. “Guards, see these four to comfortable rooms. Make sure they have everything they need. They are free to roam the citadel as long as they have guard with them at all times.”

“What about the rest?” asked Baga.

“Throw them in the dungeon with the duke,” said Adan. “And let him know

these are the people who were willing to abandon him.”

“But we want to join you!” one of the younger blue eyes protested. He stepped forward only to be stopped by the guards.

Adan eyed him from head to toe. “I don't want people who shift their allegiance when ever it fits them. You should look to your elders for example on what it means to be a noble.” He nodded towards the four men who had stepped forward earlier. They looked impressed while the younger ones who had hoped to gain advantage by changing sides looked shocked and devastated that they had been tricked.

“That's..that's not fair!” one of the women cried out as the guards started to push them after their duke.

“Life rarely is,” said Adan and turned to walk away. General Baga followed him.

“That was well done,” he said when they'd gotten far away enough from the rusttled nobles that their protests could no longer be heard.

“You think so?” asked Adan. He wasn't as certain about it. He had many many enemies just then, though the looks on the older nobles had been encouraging that he might have garnered some respect as well.

“You made enemies, that is certain, but you also showed what sort of a man you are. That will take you far,” said Baga.

“We'll see,” said Adan and sighed. He looked up at the citadel walls that surrounded him. They started to feel like a prison and had him feeling eager to ride out. “For now, let's secure the city and then move on to the others. There's much to be done.”

“As you say, sir,” said Baga and followed him inside the large building that made up the heart of the citadel.

Chapter 23

“I here by crown you king and queen of Iselor!”

Adan felt the heavy weight of the crown press down on his head as the bishop lowered it. The fur lining the rim meant it didn't dig in to his skin as badly as it might have, but that did nothing to reduce the weight brought on by the gold frame and the various gems embedded in it. He glanced to the side where Nora was sitting right next to him. He felt a slight pang of envy at the more delicate and refined crown being lowered onto her head. It wasn't any less impressive looking, but it weighed significantly less and that was something he waded he'd soon be longing for. The celebrations for the coronation would carry on long into the night and by the end he feared the heavy crown would have his neck all jammed up and hurting.

“All hail the king and queen!” the bishop declared and the people in the hall stood up and greeted their new rulers. Adan and Nora stood up and both offered affectionate smiles on the crowd of people. Both of them hated every single one of them, but they were needed to play their part in fixing the world they had helped break. Adan reached out and grabbed Nora's hand. A cold sweat covered it much as it did his own. They exchanged glances telling of their emotions. It was a mix of disbelief, terror, and excitement.

General Baga banged the blunt of his spear against the floor several times to silence the crowd. Adan was thankful he was there. Though they now had a regular army under their command it couldn't be fully trusted just yet. While some of the mercenaries had been sent home, Adan and Nora had managed to talk Baga into staying with a big enough force that he could guarantee their safety and the continuity of their rule.

As the crowd went silent, Adan stepped forward. The bishop had told him a speech of some sort was expected.

“The past months have been bloody,” he started, his voice echoing through out the great hall. “Many have paid with their lives for me to claim what is my birth right. I am happy to say that today is the end of that. My rightful place has

been confirmed and we can all focus on rebuilding this great kingdom.”

There were isolated cheers and claps here and there. Adan waited for them to die down.

“A kingdom that stretched from the coast far inland. We control much of the trade that the inner kingdoms desire and they will no doubt try and shake this new kingdom and its supporting beams – all of you. Do not be persuaded by them or cover in fear if they threaten you. Your king and queen will stand by you and ensure the safety of everyone in this kingdom.”

There were isolated cheers here and there.

“But today we are here to celebrate. I will not bore you with further talk. Let the banquet begin!”

That got some more cheers out of the crowd. If there was one thing nobles seemed to like, it was a banquet. Twin doors opened on the side of the hall that led to a large room. Tables and benches had been set up there so guests could sit down and eat while the reception hall they were in now would turn into an area for dance and music. There were already musicians rushing in to set up. People were starting to form into groups and talk.

“How was it?” asked Adan as he turned to Nora.

“Your hands still give away how nervous you are,” said Nora with an encouraging smile.

Adan smiled back. “You can't expect miracles from someone who grew up all alone in the woods and hadn't spoken in public until a month ago.”

Nora moved in closer to him and slipped her arm under his. “You'll get there. Plenty of speeches to be given.”

Adan couldn't help but notice how nice she smelled. It was like stepping into a meadow filled with blooming flowers. She had spent all morning getting ready for the event so it shouldn't have been a surprise she looked the part of a queen. She had been introduced as his wife to the nobles of his kingdom. Of course, there had been no such ceremony. They hadn't even kissed since that night in the valley. It brought back the promise she had made.

“Is it time now?” asked Adan.

“For what?” asked Nora and nodded gracefully to one of the old men Adan

had ordered arrested, but to be treated well. It was amazing what sort of loyalty acting with honour could bring you.

“For us,” said Adan and looked at her. She met his eyes. He didn't like the blueness of them. As unsettling as her white eyes could be, they were not lies fabricated to please the masses. They were her true self. To his surprise she leaned forward and planted a gentle kiss on his cheek.

“It might be,” she said with a smile as she pulled back.

Adan could feel blood rushing to his cheeks.

“But we can talk about that after the celebrations,” said Nora and tugged at his arm. He followed her as she led him amongst the crowd. People came to them in small groups, introducing themselves, many congratulating them, some bringing up issues they were having that the new king could address while others simply wanted to be seen talking to the new centre of power for the kingdom.

It was all very tiresome and almost made Adan feel sorry for all the blue eyes who were born to endure the banality of it.

Things got better when the food was on the table and Adan and Nora could take a seat that isolated them from much of the crowd. There were toasts and various speeches nobles of worth wanted to hold, but the wine made it easier to endure it all. There was more food on the table than Adan had seen in his entire life. It still had him feeling surreal that he could eat like that every day for the rest of his life he so chose. There was fresh bread, entire roasted pigs, platters filled with roasted potatoes and meat pies. There was fresh fruit from the south and all the wine, beer and mead the guests could stomach.

After the more strict dining the guests started to flow between the rooms. Nothing like a bit of dancing to help the food go down and then come back for more.

The wine was starting to give Adan a warm feeling throughout and everything around him started to feel less real.

“Don't drink too much,” said Nora from next to him. “You might lose focus.”

The mere thought of the people celebrating seeing his real eyes was enough to sober him up a bit. He could burn them all to death, but that would also end his reign as king. Word would get out about what he truly was and the Church

would bring all its might against him. The people would abandon him. Both the Church and the people were already sceptical of him despite the show of support they were giving. He knew full well that if general Baga and his troops left there would be nobles staging an uprising sooner rather than later.

“We should offer Baga a title,” said Adan and leaned in towards Nora. She was picking on a chicken leg. Only a moment earlier she had managed to wear down a countess who had talked with her non stop for what felt like an hour. She had finally given up after a younger man had come ask her for a dance.

“A title?”

“Make him a baron or something. Tie him down with us more than he is now. He is the guarantee that keeps us in power. We can't afford to let him go.”

“It might be hard to convince him,” said Nora. “He was already reluctant to stay as were many of his men.”

“In the south he is a mercenary. Here he could be a lord. He could bring his family here and make a more secure life for himself.” The more he thought about it, the more Adan started to like the idea. Baga had been nothing but helpful. Even though it had been for the money, he was a man who could be trusted. He was useful to have around.

“Nothing to lose by trying,” said Nora and sighed as yet another noble woman seemed to head her way. “These women really live by gossip. I've been bombarded with invitation to parties and all sorts of events that serve no purpose other than for these hags to dress up and pretend they like each other.”

“You're the queen,” said Adan. “You will have plenty of excuses to turn down their offers. We need to work together for all of this to work.”

“I know,” said Nora and then turned to deal with the woman who sat down next to her. By the way her speech was overly articulated it was obvious she had seen the bottom of her wine cup far too many times. Perhaps it was what was needed to gain the courage to come and speak with a new ruler.

Adan had his own troubles with nobles coming to him. They were the male ones, the counts, barons and everything above and below them. They assumed he was the one pulling the strings and that Nora was queen only in name. They came with pleas to solve some dispute, court for favour or to offer ideas what

should be done next. Surprisingly few of them cared about the damage done to city walls or the peasants ability to feed themselves in the wake of destroyed crops due to battles. Adan did his best to look like he listened even though much went in one ear and straight out the other. He mumbled something in response if that was needed and sometimes he even managed to promise something, though those times he had actually listened and the promise was something he was going to do anyway.

When the evening advanced to the point where it was appropriate to withdraw and let the ones who still had energy to party continue in peace, Adan let out a sigh of relief. He spotted Nora on the dance floor, surrounded by a ring of ladies. He gathered himself and inserted himself into the space.

“Forgive me, ladies, but I believe it is time for the queen and I to retire for the night.”

“Already?” asked Nora, feigning surprise. The ladies around him didn't know her well enough to read her body language. She was relieved.

“I'm afraid so,” said Adan with a forced smile. “There is plenty we need to do tomorrow and I've been assured that sleeping late will only mean staying up late.”

“It is as you hear, ladies,” said Nora and gave them all sparkling smile. “I look forward to talking with all of you again.” She made her way next to Adan and slipped her arm under his. The ladies curtsied as they turned and walked away. Many of the guests bowed and wished them a good night.

The cool air that hit them in the corridor was refreshing compared to the hot and stale air in the halls filled with people.

“I'm glad that is over,” said Nora as they walked onward towards their quarters. Four guards surrounded them to ensure no assassin could strike at the new rulers.

“That makes two of us,” said Adan. He wiped some sweat from his forehead. He hadn't even realized how hot it had been in the crowd. They came to a stairway that led them to the second floor where their rooms were. It was a private section of the citadel with access only through that one stairway. There were guards at the foot of the stairs that saluted them as they passed. The four guards following them stopped at the foot of the stairs. There would be normal

guards further up to ensure no one had sneaked in.

The corridor that opened up at the top of the stairway had four doors on it. To the left was Adan's quarters and to the right were Nora's.

"Well, here we are," said Adan. He couldn't help but feel nervous. Nora's words from earlier were too clearly in his mind.

"Here we are," said Nora and glanced at him. The guards standing by the doors were tactful enough to pretend they didn't see or hear anything. Baga had chosen them well. None of them knew the language so even if they wanted to, they could not spy on the pair.

"Is it time?" asked Adan. "We have accomplished so much."

"Yet so much remains to be done," said Nora.

"It will take time," said Adan.

"But the time is now," said Nora and leaned in closer to plant a kiss on his lips. She smiled as they parted. "It is time."

She grabbed Adan's hand and pulled him into her room. He didn't resist. He knew there was much to do to right the world. It would be years of work. Having an evening to themselves wasn't going to change it one way or the other.