
The City of Pyr

“It is the will of the Gods for man to live as such, to be humbled by his misgivings and sins, to be laid low. For if it was man’s destiny to live free as he desired, he would sooner rather than later turn upon his own, his desires becoming a fatal trap, a wretched condition any man worth living strives to keep in check daily, with prayer and the Law as his guide. For without the Law, what is man but a cunning animal?”

- Arch-minister Feinglot XXIV, *Porfyria Voluntas*, Vol. II

Dangers of the trade



THE first thing that assaulted Hilderich’s senses were the smells. Lost in a smelting crowd of city people, the smells were overpowering: the acrid sweat of unkempt horses mingled with rosewood and cinder scraps from the carpenters’ workshops. Heavy spices like cinnamon and uwe flared his nostrils while an essence of oils and meats wandered

through the air. The smell of filthy beggars waxing and waning around every corner, its temporary absence filled in with incense from close by temples and intoxicating perfumes from passing, illustrious carriages.

The mix of sounds though felt familiar. It reminded him of bees buzzing through the meadows back home, whole swarms feeding on the nectar of roleva flowers over a golden carpet swaying gently under the evening gale. Now and then some voices stood taller than the rest, hints of tradesmen selling their wares and the ever present and watchful Ministers announcing laws, edicts, verdicts, punishments, and religious texts, all for the ears and minds of the good people of Pyr. The cacophony was further accented by the clacking sounds of hooves, the cries of pigs and the pleas of beggars.

Tall arches overhead cast angled shadows everywhere, the walls of the buildings like sheer cliffs towering over the palpitating mass of people and animals. Blue-gray rock and lime mortar dominated the market's landscape, the wear-torn cobblestones of the streets a hazy washed white wherever the grit and the mass of people allowed a small glimpse. Street after street, wall after wall, bronze engraved plaques embellished with holy texts and iconography hung on arches, balconies and posts, in favor of the Gods, in memory and glory of the Castigator and the Pantheon.

If the market was the heart of the city as its inhabitants claimed, then the popular piece of wisdom Hilderich had heard about Pyr being a heartless bitch seemed at once both right and wrong. Every single cast, class and type of man was to be found here: they were buying, selling, begging, stealing, killing, blackmailing and dying, all in one place. He had also heard there were parts of the market where the suns had never shown upon them since the city was built. There were dark corners where those who entered usually did not reappear, and when they did, blood that was not their own had soiled them. From what he was seeing before his eyes, no story could do the place justice. Everything could happen in the market of Pyr, that much he could imagine.

The beggars had become part of the landscape: blinds, invalids, all sorts of castaways and society's detritus were tugging away at embroidered hems, pleading with sore voices and grotesque faces. Those

of them who bothered the wrong people time and again were soon beaten or stabbed to death by lackeys and guardsmen, left for dead on the same spot. As if that was not enough, they also seemed to attract the ire of the some merchants and artisans for not having the decency to crawl away from near their workshops and stalls and die someplace else where they would not put off potential customers.

But this was at the same time the place where everything of import came to be; this was where produce from the surrounding fields and indeed neighboring territories was gathered and sold to those who could afford it. This was where artisans created common everyday wares, materials and tools as well as delicate, commissioned works of art. This was the place were deals and partnerships were entered and broken, contracts signed and carried out. This was the place where everyone, whether a layman or a noble, had some kind of business.

This was the place were the Ministers' chants were heard every day, preaching, teaching, and enforcing the religion that is Law. The market in that sense, was a living representation, a miniature of where and how the people of Pyr lived their lives, and even how some of them lost them.

Hilderich was drifting along the current of people flowing incessantly through the market, occasionally bumping onto variably indifferent or protesting men, trying to take caution of the treads of carts, running heralds and practicing pickpockets. He could hear the Minister from the next street calling out a long list of names, while his eye caught two men in an unlit alley cracking another man's skull, their shadowy outline briskly contrasted with the lit background of the large street that ran behind the small alley. It seemed dishearteningly clear that this was business as usual in the market, that some code of practice had been followed and the formalities obeyed, killing a faceless man hidden away from the light of the suns.

His almost random course took him closer to the Minister's spot, an elaborate fountain made of granite, engraved with scenes of an historic battle from the Heathen times he could remember learning about as a child but could not immediately recognize. The Minister held a distaff on one hand, heavy-looking and oblique, and was still reading names off a long unwinding scroll fitted in some kind of extensible hook on the distaff that seemed purposefully designed. He wore a

long robe made of violet velvet with a gold embroidered hem and a silver-lined crest of the Outer Territories woven on his chest. On his head lay a small black cap with a single emerald denoting his office, and both of the robe's arms were filled with holy texts written in *Lingua Helica*, the Territories' formal language, stitched in purple silk.

The ministers Hilderich had known made offerings to the Gods, upheld the Law and taught it to the people that looked to them for guidance in their daily lives. These holy men seemed somewhat distasteful, one might even call them pompous. He wondered what Master Olom's remark would have been and he was reminded of the duty he had yet to fulfill. He ignored the small mass of people gathered around the Minister as well as the rest of the still unfolding list of names, and lost himself once more in the throng of people. His senses had become acutely attuned by now, searching for a sign that would bring him a step closer to finding the one man he was searching for ever since that fateful night.

He conjured in his mind a brief glimpse of that night, an almost morbid recollection of what had happened. He had barely had time to stop and ponder the minutiae, while trying to get to Pyr as fast as possible, the place where he had to start his quite possibly fruitless search. The more he thought about what had exactly happened, the more he failed to grasp how everything had come crashing down like an avalanche: the perfect stillness in his life had been washed away by sheer and utter terror, an unavoidable terrible fate. Such was the end of Master Olom.

Even though he would not admit to it, he felt he somehow cheated death on that night, that it should have been him rather than his Master or at least he should have had the same luck, at least as a matter of principle. Thankfully wise master Olom, he thought, had believed otherwise and bought him time enough to live and make the most of his life. He would complete his master's lifetime work. He would not be doing it for his master's sake alone. If Olom had been right.. Hilderich could not imagine the consequences that that would imply.

Never pausing in his stride, Hilderich closed his eyes and clutched the keystone his master had entrusted him with ever so tightly. He had taken extra precautions ever since he had to carry the strange artifact with him. He always kept it on his person, and had fashioned a small

metal holder with a small but sturdy chain fastened to his thick leather belt. The holder resembled the small cage of a sparrow. It was made of thin sheets of metal he had scrounged off the stables of an inn, the second day since he ran away from that explosion.

He remembered that vividly. An inexplicable explosion of light and heat, the sound of hundreds of steam engines going off at the same time. It must have been something ancient, there was no other logical explanation. But his knowledge of the Old People and their ways and artifacts was little compared to his master's and as far as he knew, no such examples were in master Olom's care. Hilderich had never seen or heard any hint of such awesomely destructive or powerful items since his apprenticeship began. Hilderich was starting to warm to the idea that it had perhaps been the Gods themselves that were responsible after all.

He let out a sigh without noticing. He looked crestfallen, his expression sour like unripe neranges. He had been so deeply engrossed in thought, that when he ventured a look around him he saw he was utterly lost, without a sense of direction in a part of the market conspicuously calm, lacking the overwhelming mass of people that at least offered him a false sense of safety that was nevertheless more welcome than none at all.

The far away din of the market proper could still be heard, but he had walked quite a distance and the crowd of people looked a little more than a milling sea of garments and bustling feet. With the corner of his eye he glimpsed a pair of shady figures that seemed to be stalking him, probably had been for a while, and from their earliest motions felt they were just about to gang up on him.

Hilderich was not a stoutly built fellow, and did not consider himself a man of action or someone capable of putting up a serious fight. But he had faith in his master's work, and his quest had to take precedence over everything else. He had to preserve his life in order to preserve the keystone, so he chose the most viable and logical course of action under the circumstances: he ran like hell.

He suddenly darted off towards the direction of what seemed to be a large bell tower, and ventured a slight look over his left shoulder to get the bearings of the figures behind him. They were just beyond hand's reach when he started running, his heavy cloak waving wildly,

feet scurrying on the cobbled street.

One of them cursed profoundly and the other one shouted at him to stop, then both of them went on a chase after him. Hilderich went right and left crossing through alleys and larger streets, sometimes under the cover of shadow and others under the sunlight, trying to keep the tower that somehow seemed a public, safe place in sight, as well as give his pursuers the slip. He thought that surely, they wouldn't dare have a go at him in a public place in daylight. At least, that was what he was counting on. They seemed to prefer shadowy, lonely spots. He reminded himself to avoid the shadows.

The sound of boots on stone was still unmistakably behind him. Sweat had started to pour out of his body. He went past small houses, inns, and squares, while fleeing for what would certainly be his life. Curiously enough his mind registered that not a housewife or elder man ventured more than an indifferent look at the chase taking place in front of their eyes. Only the children paused in their play to look startled and amazed, point and giggle excitedly.

His feet started to ache and his breathing became short, almost painful. Fire welled up in his lungs and then he knew he could not keep this up for long. The tower he had set out to reach did not seem much closer than earlier. He ventured a slight look over his right shoulder, and couldn't see either of the figures chasing him. He listened intently for a few moments and could not make out the distinct noise of chasing boots, only rather his own two feet galloping achingly. He allowed himself a drop in pace and eased his breathing. He came to a slow stop near a shadowy wall, and bent over resting his hands on his knees. He threw scared looks around him, hoping that the chase had been over, that his assailants had somehow given up.

"Don't ever run off like that again."

The man's gruff voice seemed to come through the wall of stone, but he was only hiding deeper into the shadow of an adjoining alley. Hilderich instinctively turned around and saw a flash of light hinting at an unsheathed knife or sword, its wholeness under the cover of dark.

Hilderich drew enough of a breath to dart off again in another random direction, slipping away at the last minute like before, but then he noticed the other man: a red-haired bearded brute, pieces of armor showing underneath his shabby clothes with a jagged knife in

hand. The big man stood a few paces to his right, steadfastly covering the only way out of his predicament.

With no real options left, Hilderich suddenly leaped on the man that had appeared from within the shadows, blade or no blade, in what could only really be a selfless last act of defiance. His mind flashed with the thought that he was soon about to die and fail his master for the last time. While he leaped he gathered his fist aiming for the man's head, trying to deliver as much pain as possible. His punch never connected.

The man still standing inside the shadows, expertly and calmly took a step back bending his back slightly, Hilderich's wild effort going awry. He hit nothing but air, lost his balance and made a counter-step trying to compensate. Just as he could feel his face freeze in astonishment, he brought his other hand backwards in order to try and have another go at punching his assailant. He did not manage that in any event though, because he winced and doubled-up at the paralyzing pain from the knee that had firmly and powerfully connected with his belly. He felt his stomach empty itself of its contents and his sight go blurry. A hint of red clogged his sight and his feet went limp and heavy, his breathing shallow. The last thing he saw before he passed out, was a grinning mouth and the icy clear flash of a steel blade.

She woke up with cold sweat on her forehead. Her temples damp, a few locks of hair glued against her face. She drew the bedsheets against her body, and curled up onto the empty side of her bed. She felt the unborn child inside her stir uncomfortably, as if awoken with terror by the same dream as her. She laid her hands on her belly and gently caressed it, feeling the child inside calm down and freely flow in a warm inner sea of love and protection.

The unborn child fell silent, its tiny heart barely stating it was alive and well inside its mother's womb. The mother, on the other hand, was still visibly shaken from her vision. She had seen rivers of blood engulfing her and her child, and fires bright as the suns all around her. She saw Amonas' head on a pike along with hundreds of other men's heads, hellishly put on display in a gory show. In front of them seething masses of animals, rather than men, were cheering with voices that echoed like broken glass brushing up against uncut stone.

The hair on her back was raised and she felt as helpless as a thaw-

ing flake of snow, unable to comfort herself and lay back to sleep. The shocking images in her nightmare had burned through her waking heart and mind. She stood up with some effort and with a slow attentive pace, went to the balcony. The night was invitingly chilly, offering a crystal clear sky. The few clouds overhead were like thin gossamer webs the Gods might have woven to catch a falling star.

She peered out over the never-sleeping city, its market always alight with torches and large common pyres. Strange shadows flickered on walls, while fleetingly illuminated faces with blank expressions as if in a haze of ecstasy whirled in the rhythmic dance of the city like strands of cloth spun in the air.

The Ministry Tower and the Disciplinary were lit as bright as day, their proud banners flung high and wide. A procession of ministers was underway, and another festivity in the Disciplinary's garden that sported tricks of fire and light was taking place, washing the rest of the city with golden red hues and splashes of green and blue light as if there was not a care in the whole world.

The rugged brown stonework of the balcony felt rough under her smooth touch. She moved her hand unconsciously across the stone while gazing at the city, vainly searching for her loved one among the sands of men. Her hand seemed to dance, ebbing and flowing to a melody even she herself couldn't hear, like conducting an invisible chorus of spirits of old that seemed to inhabit this very stone.

She closed her eyes momentarily and the image of Amonas' head haunted her, blood still pouring hot out of him. She held her breath and moved her lips in a silent prayer, wishing her dream was nothing more than simple fear and worry of whatever lay ahead. She thought to herself that her faith should not waver, that she must be strong enough for Amonas' sake and above all for sake of their unborn child. She wished for the good winds of fortune to carry them forward and hoped that all would be as it should be.

Her child stirred once more, soothing her soul and bringing a faint smile to her face. She went back inside and laid herself on her bed, her hands resting on the still empty side. Sleep overtook her in peace, her face a statue of serenity. She saw no more dreams or nightmares on that night.

Inescapable Reality

ILDERICH knew he was still alive since the men's voices echoed faintly inside his throbbing head. Pain was stabbing him in the back of his neck and his muscles were stiff from a prolonged unconsciousness. He opened his eyes and blinked furiously, his eyesight adjusting to a brightly lit chamber with sunlight pouring from tall arched glass windows and a radiant glass dome above.

A small table occupied the middle of the room and a flimsy looking cupboard adorned the opposite wall. The two men that had attacked him were looking at him with what looked like cautious curiosity and apprehension. The bearded brute was standing up with his hands in his pockets and the man with the gruff voice was sitting down at the table. A beam of light partly obscured his face, while dust motes whirled silently in the air.

Hilderich lay in a small stone cot carved into a recess of a far wall. The cot felt uncomfortable and his body protested slightly to his efforts at moving. He flexed his arms and legs momentarily, and realized he was not bound or restrained in any way. Puzzlement showed on his face, and then the man who had bested him in the alleyway addressed him:

"You were out for almost a day. I am sorry we had to take somewhat extreme measures, but we had to make sure you disappeared properly. Giving us the run did not help, so we had to make it look like you were being mugged. Hence the terrible headache you must be having. I apologize for being rather rough," the man's voice gruff but genuinely polite, almost friendly. His words were followed by a faint smile and what seemed like a condescending nod.

"Dunno if that put any sense innim though," the bearded man grumbled under his breath audibly enough, regarding Hilderich with a look akin to contempt.

"Philo.. Please," said the man in the friendly voice who appeared to be the better of the brutish red-haired man, someone in authority of some sort.

Hilderich noted the brute's name was Philo and watched him for

moment, as he made a snorting sound and then crossed his hands across his chest. He then leaned against a wall and quieted down, as the other man had requested. The polite man with the coarse voice continued:

“My friend here thinks you are somewhat dim and unforgivably naive for a place like Pyr. That remains to be seen. I think you will prove to be very useful indeed, no matter what the initial appearances suggest,” said the man, eyes level with Hilderich’s who was now sitting upright on the small cot.

“Who are you people? I thought you wanted to kill me, and be done for. You said you wanted it make it look like I was mugged? Why would you want to make me disappear? Why am I here?”, the look on Hilderich’s face was contorted with eyebrows that almost touched each other. His puzzlement was now even more evident than before.

“Again, I apologize. My name is Amonas and this, as you must know already, is Philo. Let’s leave it at that for now. There are things I can and things I cannot explain to you, at least for the time being. You had to disappear because you were at risk of being found by people with an agenda quite different than ours, one that you’d certainly have found to be at least disagreeable. Once I make myself clear you will understand our course of action was necessary for more significant reasons, as well as for your protection. Soon enough, you will need to reach a decision.”

“What kind of decision? Am I being threatened? You did not bind my hands. Am I a being held as a prisoner? What exactly do you want with me?”

“You are in no way a prisoner. We just needed to talk to you in safety. Please, hear what I have to say first before you jump to any wrong conclusions and make up your mind in haste. It is a matter of grave importance, and it involves the keystone in your possession.”

Amonas’ tone carried a hint of pleading and urgency, his words almost becoming jarred against each other. At the mention of the keystone, Hilderich was left wide-eyed.

“Aye, we knew,” Philo added, casting a severe look upon Hilderich.

They knew? Since when? The thoughts kept rushing through his

mind. What should he ask and what he might reveal that he should not troubled him. Was there indeed real danger here? Were they telling him the truth? Was he being safeguarded? He instinctively reached for the chain on his belt but it was not there. They had taken it. They had taken the keystone. Had he failed already? Was there a point to all this? His face took on an expression of silent horror, mouth frantically opening and closing without a sound coming out, like a fish out of the water, the spasms of death upon it.

Hilderich shouted in a trembling voice that could have been mistaken for a shriek:

“Give it back! Thieves! You are nothing but common thieves!”

He was standing upright now, his head frantically turning from Amonas to Philo and back, casting looks of urgent accusation, wide-eyed and tense. He regained a measure of self-control, and clasped his hands together as if pleading for mercy. He closed his eyes and said in a clear, level voice:

“Please. Give it back. It is not of any significant worth as a gem. I can pay you in good time, I can make arrangements. But please, give me back the stone.”

Hilderich had lied flat out to them for being able to arrange some sort of payment. Everything he owned he carried on his person and that much was the extend of his fortune. He hoped his bluff might work.

Amonas and Philo were exchanging dumbstruck looks with Hilderich’s outburst having caught them by complete surprise. When they both seemed to be trying to answer, all they could do was break into a hearty fit of laughter. Philo while still laughing, managed to speak:

“Thieves! And the.. ‘Please’? Listen to how that sounds, lad.”

Amonas cut in with a motion of his hand and took a beleaguered Hilderich by the arm. A calming, reassuring voice issued from his mouth:

“Fear not. We mean you no harm. We consider you a friend, and if you’d choose so, a brother as well. The keystone is safely with me, I have it on my person. Here,” and Amonas unclasped his cloak to reveal the keystone and chain safely tucked away in a pocket on his leather bodice, the chain firmly attached to a ringed metal belt.

The sight of the keystone calmed Hilderich somewhat, but he still seemed uneasy, willing to protest. His eyes darted around, a look of hurt feelings and pride in his eyes:

“What kind of friend hunts you down, knocks you out, and then robs you of your most valuable possessions?”

“Your new ones do, at least the first time around. Please, listen to me Hilderich. We know about what happened to your master. It pains me as well, I knew Olom personally.”

Amonas let that sink in a bit, recalling a few memories of his own, and then carried on:

“There is trouble brewing ahead in the Outer Territories. What happened that night at your curatorium was neither singular nor a chance event. The keystones from curatoriums around the Territories are being stolen, and sometimes curators try to put up a fight. In some cases, like yours and your master’s, there are deaths involved. The timing is too perfect to be a mere coincidence. We cannot yet ascertain exactly who is orchestrating this, but we have a pretty good idea.”

Amonas glanced sideways at Philo, who nodded knowingly.

“You knew my master? Do you have any proof of that? Who is ‘we’? Are you some sort of group? An organization? A cult? What is the Curatoria doing about this? I wouldn’t like to attract your ire, but I can’t exactly think a man who kidnaps people to ‘have a talk’ as trustworthy.”

Hilderich showed his distrust even by the creases in his forehead. The people in front of him indeed seemed to him to make little sense and what he had heard so far felt very thin indeed.

“I knew him and loved him dearly. I’ll show you proof if that’s what will gain us your trust, soon enough. We are not a cult, Hilderich. We might be many things, but a cult we’re not. You could call us a group, perhaps. We call ourselves Kin. Or Brotherhood of Old. Or Old-folk. We come by many names. Some help us stay hidden, some help us raise support. Your support, for instance.”

Hilderich’s face looked incredulous at best, right on the edge of laughing in disbelief:

“You want my support? And this is how you go about asking people for your support? Ganging up on them in the middle of the

street? Support for what? Clubbing more people in the head?!”, Hilderich’s tone emphasised how incredulous this all seemed to him. Philo seemed especially displeased with his tone and remarks, while Amonas stayed calm and resolute, determined to make his point.

“We want your support in order to claim back our lands, overthrow the tyranny of the Castigator and expose the hateful lie that is Pantheon.”

Amonas words came out like the rush of an unstoppable river, ready to wash away everything that might dare to stand in its path. He sounded earthly solid and unyielding, utterly determined and deadly serious. Hilderich was too impressed to actually register what the man had just said.

“Well, that is.. Did you just.. But, that’s heresy! And high treason!”

Hilderich almost stammered the words aloud, unable to contain his shock, while Amonas replied in kind:

“Heresy is nothing but the leash that binds our blind brethren. Treason is the act of paying tribute to false gods, letting our Kin of Old fade like ghosts with nothing left for them to haunt..”

Amonas was in an instant transformed in Hilderich’s eyes. What seemed like a calm, reasonable person, yet mysterious, shady and quite incredulous, had given its place to a fiery zealot of some sorely misguided cult of heretics. Hot embers seemed to have replaced instead his eyes, burning with the mindless passion of a fanatic with an untenable goal.

Hilderich wasn’t sure of what to say to such a man, but he settled for what felt like the truth of things:

“You must be out of your mind then. Deranged. Or just very misguided. But no.. You would have to be crazy for all that to run through your head without it bursting at the seams.”

Amonas was grinning with a faint smile now:

“Am I Hilderich? Or is it you that has been played like a fool? Like I had been before I saw the truth, and felt the righteousness of our cause? Like Philo was when he was still a killer for hire? It is shocking, I admit it. But by the end of the day, I promise you you’ll see the truth of things as well. If you place any value in it, you will be given sight and hearing anew, and you’ll be ready to decide

for yourself. We can become brothers, or remain simply friends on separate paths.”

“You seem too confident in what you say, and maybe you are a special breed of crazy. But I cannot even begin to imagine how you can prove that these aren’t the rumblings of a madman, that Gods forbid, our religion is a lie. I must confess, I find some of the Castigator’s and the ministers decisions and punishments harsh and unfitting, but I dare not judge their wisdom, or the Law as we have been taught it. It is one thing to doubt the people that uphold the Law, and quite another to judge what is Holy Law, inviolate and heaven-sent.”

Hilderich was now exuding an air of authenticity and oratory skill, dressed with a rarely exhibited confidence, expressing an almost staunch belief. He looked like he knew he was right, and Amonas wrong.

Amonas grin would not go away when he nodded to Hilderich with a motion of his head and then looked up to meet a well-nigh defiant gaze. He told him in his hoarse, steady voice:

“The seed of doubt is already sown in your soul, Hilderich. Tonight it shall spring to bear fruit at last. It is a good sign, for I believed you would be too unwilling to see the truth, but this may yet prove not to be the case.”

“I still think you are madmen. Suppose it is true, that the Law and the Gods are a lie? What then? If everything we’ve ever believed in is a lie, what will the people do? Where will they turn to? If you, for the case of argument, succeed in your purpose, with what will you replace everything that gives sense and purpose to our lives every day? Do you plan to overthrow the Castigator, and the army and all the nobles who will stand against you by mere force of conviction? Or perhaps you cherish a fantasy where all but a few will join your cause, and no blood will be spilled in the inescapable day of triumph?”

“You are more of a thinker than I had believed, Hilderich. Above all, you seem a man of logic. Your questions will be answered in due time. A bit of patience will go a long way. And in any case, we can’t allow you to leave just yet, not before you witness what will invariably change your opinion, for better or for worse. You will come around to see that we are not crazy, and that we know that chaos and mayhem will erupt once we decide the time has come to act. I have no fantasies

and will bear no misgivings: blood will be spilled inevitably, but not in vain. These are not the endeavors of bloodthirsty warmongers or power-hungry dissidents, Hilderich. We are hope incarnate, nothing more and nothing less.”

“Hope incarnate? Doesn’t that sound a bit presumptuous? You certainly seem to lack modesty as well as sanity.”

Hilderich’s mocking tone was destined for an insult. His remark made Philo move and fidget with suppressed anger, shooting pleading looks at Amonas, clearly intent at putting the audacious little man in his place through the use of some non-crippling violence. Amonas would have none of that though and dismissed Philo’s silent protests with an outstretched hand, replying in a serious and honest tone of voice to Hilderich:

“I can only force you to remain until my promise to you is kept, until I make you see. I need your help Hilderich, I need to know things that have been kept in the dark for too long. Olom was getting close, too close perhaps. I need you to make sense of what I cannot, Hilderich. If what I show you does not seem worthy of your time, then you can freely go your own way if you like. But the keystone has to remain with us.”

“So this is not so much of an offer, as it is a blackmail. I can go, but the keystone stays with you? And you ask me to trust in you under these conditions? Tell me in earnest, would you think any differently if you were in my spot?”

“I have been in a similar spot like you and no, I did not think differently. That is why I believe you’ll be our brother by the first light of dawn tomorrow.”

Amonas smiled heartily for Hilderich to see, but the young curator’s expression remained distant and withdrawn.

“You place too much on mere belief and court with arrogance, Amonas. I don’t like all of this one bit. But it seems that I am at your mercy, for better or worse. Would you have me trying to wrestle my freedom and the keystone out of your hands? Whatever I may think of you, I’m no fighter and you seem to know that as well. I have no real choice in the matter, do I?”

“You will prove more valuable and insightful than I had imagined, Hilderich. It is exactly that false belief and that vaunted arrogance that

we seek to expose, and since you place no value in those, I consider you a brother already, a man free of those poisons.”

“We shall see, but don’t bet on it.”

Hilderich sat down on the cot once again, hands on his knees, seemingly resigned to his fate. He had tried to make a stand, send out a message that he would not succumb to such underhanded tactics. If not in essence, at least as a matter of principle.

“I am not a gambling man Hilderich, you need not worry. There is still some time ahead of us. You must be famished. Would you like to have something to eat? I know we have been less than welcoming so far, but the circumstances got the better of us. Please, indulge us.”

Hilderich pondered this for a while and in his mind dismissed the idea that the food might be poisoned. If they had wanted him dead, they wouldn’t have bothered with all these theatrics. It seemed somewhat of a concession to the man effectively holding him captive, but the inescapable reality of not having eaten for more than a whole day struck home in the end. He nodded in acknowledgement and then added verbally:

“That would be sort of nice.”

Amonas smiled politely and told Philo to get some food and water for the three of them. Promptly the brutishly large man vanished behind a rather small wooden door, his steps faintly audible as he climbed down a wooden staircase.

“I’m told our most hospitable friends here have prepared a delicacy today: lamb stew with uwe and knop leaves. Should be rather tasty.”

“I still think you are crazy, Amonas. Just a very strange and mysterious kind of crazy person, apparently with a culinary taste to match.”

“Hilderich, I confess, I have a soft spot for uwe. It’s an acquired taste, I know.”

Hilderich just shook his head in disbelief, a small sigh escaping his lips. Amonas smiled ever more broadly at that particular reaction, and pretty soon the strong smell of boiled uwe wafted through, hinting at Philo’s return. Amonas seemed rather expectant, and could not help asking Hilderich:

“If you don’t like uwe I believe a different arrangement can be

made. Perhaps some ham or bread-pie.”

“Uwe lamb stew will be fine. I can manage.”

Hilderich caught himself being actually irritated at Amonas’ inexplicable insistence on food, which he found rather childish, further enhancing his opinion that the man was indeed deranged, if not outright mad.

“Oh well, I had to try and steal that extra serving.”

Philo returned and entered through the door with some difficulty due to the fact he was trying to balance two plates of stew on his left hand and arm and a large bowl held with his right hand. He precariously managed to reach the safety of a nearby table putting the bowl down first, and then unloading the plate off his left arm. Seeing that no one cared to assist him he threw around a few looks of mixed hurt and mild anger, before pulling a chair and sitting at the table and then proclaiming:

“If you gonna join the table be quick about it.”

Amonas sat excitedly in front of the bowl of stew, and Hilderich guessed the other plate was laid out for him and sat accordingly, but couldn’t help noticing and asking:

“Shouldn’t there be another plate for Amonas?”

Amonas had already dug in with a spoon, and seemed quite indifferent at anything else that went on around him and rather focused at enjoying his substantially rich meal.

“No point in using a plate if he’s gonna eat a whole bowl. So I brought the bowl. Now, eat.”, Philo said with a hint of retired disapproval.

Hilderich nodded slowly, shrugged and dug in like the others. He took a careful taste, and then started munching and gulping down large chunks of stew eagerly. It tasted delicious indeed.