

The Zealot

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“Korik, God of War and Blood. First Brother of the Triumvirate of Southreach. Heed my prayer, and help bring your guidance to this wicked city.” I sat and prayed as I always did. Alone in the sole church present in Storm’s Hope. A decrepit, and dilapidated structure that stood by my faith and conviction alone. “Please send an emissary, a messenger, even just a vagrant to hear my sermons, and help deliver this city to You and Your Brothers.” The circle of flame danced around me. The Blessed Oil was ever burning. “Let my words reach someone today, and touch them as you’ve touched me.” I rose from my knees, and left the church. The fire remained dancing behind me, as I exposed myself to the heathens of the city.

Carts and workers raced through the streets, most men clad in plain brown clothes. Quite frankly I must have looked like a noble amongst the folks of Old Town in the sandy robe with red trimming. I didn’t fault them for their lack of wealth, or their apparent need to constantly move and work. As a matter of fact, I pitied them. Their work ethic was going to waste making money for others. Had they just devoted themselves to the Gods as I had, perhaps things would have been different.

“Take heed citizens of Storm’s Hope! This constant back and forth, this constant work for nothing more than coins is a futile attempt at happiness. When your debt is paid off what then? For who or what will you work for?” They largely paid me no mind. No matter what I preached, they went about their lives, moving things from one gate to another for paltry amounts of money while the true nobility gained heaps. “You sir! Yes you! I’ve seen you carrying bags, and kegs, breaking your back. Tell me how much do you get paid for taking these to the upper city gate?”

“Four coins a barrel. More than you get for shouting at people about your false Gods. You ever even see ‘em?” The man made a point to spit directly on my feet. “Feh. Thought not. Korik’s been dead ages. Everyone knows that.” He rehoisted his barrel for a better grip and carried on.

“I’ve felt him. I haven’t seen him yet in this city but I’ve felt his presence. Korik walks the streets of this city, and we all know what follows the Great General of Southreach. Brothers and Sisters please, enter the church and make yourself known as a disciple before he makes himself known to you,”

Most days went exactly that way. I would try and get people into the church in any way possible. Perhaps preaching the truths of Justice and Peace would have gotten more people to hear of the Triumvirate, but those were not mine to preach. Some days were more eventful than others, some days debate was had as to whether or not folks believed in Them or not. It was never about whether they were real to me, it was about when they would show up and allow me to be by Their side. I grew up with many of these people, and found my faith at a young age. I watched the membership of my church dwindle to a sole worshipper. For decades I would pray alone. My skin wrinkled, my hair grew grey, and my fervor for Korik grew over the years. I was mockingly called a prophet, sometimes I would be called a madman, or a cultist. Some days I thought they were right, that all my years of dedication to someone unknown would never result in anything. Then one day the most unlikely man sat and listened to my entire sermon. Every word that left my lips was absorbed by him. And he showed me the path to bring Korik to me.

“Korik brought to heel the warring factions in Southreach within a week. Decades of strife and hatred against the law, and the nobility, quelled within a mere seven days. What do you think Korik will do when His legions approach the gates? How long until the Kingsguard falls? Before the army submits to the will of the God General? Join me and I can assure you, His disciples will be offered an eternity

with Him, and be able to bear witness to a new era!" A young man stood on the other side of the road. He took in every word I spoke, and seemed to absorb it unto himself. "You there young man. You've been listening to me all day, come closer." He approached me with confidence I hadn't seen in a long while. My eyes started to go years ago, so it took me a while to make out his face. But when the Crown Prince Caleb got close enough, it was impossible for me to forget such a charming, and handsome looking young man. "Gods, I'm sorry for addressing you in such a brash manner. What brings you to my humble church? After all I thought you and your family don't believe, or at least don't worship." His eyes pierced into mine and he let out a low chuckle. His smile was infectious and spread from ear to ear. Admittedly I responded in kind.

"I have different feelings towards the rulers of Southreach it's true. My family and I don't normally see eye to eye on that, or many things for that matter. But I think my thoughts and plans for our neighbors down south are a little more...ambitious than my father's." The words were like honey flowing from his mouth. I found myself enamored with him. Not only was he listening to me, but engaging with me afterwards. It reminded me of when there was a true congregation, even if it was only one man.

"Apologies for being forthright with this Prince Caleb but..."

"Please just call me Gabriel. I detest the name my father gave me,"

"Very well Gabriel, well apologies again, but what brought you to my sermon?"

"I heard there was a man preaching of the southern Gods in Old Town, and I figured I should pay a visit to see what I can learn of our neighbors to the south,"

"They wish me to be silent don't they? The people who informed you. Afterall this church has been in my care for over thirty years now,"

“They tell me your sermons have been more...aggressive shall we say, as of late. As if you’re trying to stoke fear in the hearts of our laborers,”

“It’s not fear im trying to instill my friend, merely trying to bring them salvation,”

“And who is to bring them salvation? Certainly not Korik. He’s a soldiers God after all. Are you so surprised that you no longer have a flock?”

“I suppose not. But Korik is my god. Justice and Peace had never shown themselves to me, so how could I sing their praises?”

“You misunderstand me, you merely need to adjust your audience. Come, follow me.” Gabriel had ushered me to follow, and without thinking twice I obeyed. There was something around him then, some kind of magnetism that just drew me towards him like a moth to a flame.

He took me to the Trade District, but all I saw were more of the same kind of man I saw day in and day out. Men and women shouted over prices, and all the while Gabriel was spinning a yarn of his time in court. Just as he had listened to me, I had listened to him. His father gave him teachers as a child, all of which were fantastic according to Gabriel, but each one tried to spurn his interest in the Gods, and dismissed them as southern propaganda. Some even insisted these were fairy tales. That didn’t stop him from seeking out that knowledge, and even going behind peoples backs to find a scholar to teach him more. Eventually after enough rambling he showed me a giant black house, surrounded by a large fence and a wrought iron gate.

“These are the people you should be preaching to. Mercenaries who will do anything for coin,” A man clad in black strode through the iron gates and gave us a look like we didn’t belong. A peculiar looking bow hung off his back behind a long black cloak. “Whether it’s here in the city, outside in the

farms, and even to the far west I've heard they make money through spilling blood, cleaning up after noble mistakes, and occasionally, even some honest work." The man sauntered off paying us no mind. Gabriel paid him no mind as well and continued. "In the castle there's nobles chomping at the bit to send some boys down where you live off to die for metals, woods, and who knows what else. You merely need to attract them to the lower part of the city." I wasn't sure if he was right, that I needed to attract them to me. But I can't say I disagreed. The poor folk near the church lived day to day, and their ambition was merely to make enough coin to keep their way of life. However I knew what I must do. I needed Korik's guidance.

"Thank you Gabriel. You've given me a lot to think about. But, I can't rightly uproot my church, and convincing higher born folk to visit Old Town may be quite the challenge. I will pray on it. Do stop by if you are in need of spiritual guidance, my Prince." I shuffled back to my church after that, and never felt more elated in my life. After what felt like an eternity I had touched another soul with my truth, and hopefully brought him closer to enlightenment.

I entered the church, the ring of fire had dwindled to almost nothing. Despite the sun setting, and no candles being lit, the church never felt more alive in that moment. Everything seemed to bright and ready to face the next day. I stamped out the remaining flames, and picked up the Blessed Oil cannister and traced a circle. The match struck and ignited the circle, making the room dance with shadows. That prayer will be with me until my final days on this world.

"Korik, God of War and Blood. First Brother of the Triumvirate of Southreach. Heed my prayer. I seek guidance in this trying time. I have reached a point where I have no flock, save for one man. A royal man at that. He wishes for me to attract more followers to come from their homes, their estates. Leave their jobs, and seek the truth. I admit, outside of my sermons I don't know how else to bring people to me. I know these people can be saved, but I need your help. In Your name. Amen," I went to bed and

dreamt again of fire, raging throughout the streets of Old Town. Only the church stood. In my dream I stared, aghast at the inferno. Then down the street a young man, clad in sandy plate strode through the flames, and offered me a hand. He stood much taller than me, and we strode side by side through the streets, untouched by the flames. He assured me that as long as I follow him, and follow his emissary, then I will live for eternity with Him.

I woke that morning with renewed vigor, despite not having a clear answer to how I extend my reach. A flock of one may have been awaiting me after all. I donned my robes, said a quick prayer, and made my way to the street. Sure enough, people passed by and made no notice. But this day was different, I spoke with purpose. I spoke with fire. I spoke to get these men to see beyond the next day.

“Deny the truth all you wish. But working through to the next week, the next month, will bring you no closer to happiness. The people you work for can drop you at a moment’s notice. Realize that the worker next to you shares your plight! Korik is with you brothers and sisters, He walks these very streets and will help you with your cause. Enough of this back breaking labor for a meager 4 coins a barrel. Devote yourself to something more than coinage, devote yourself to your fellow man, devote yourself to a cause!” During my sermon a skinny man dragged a guard towards me. Admittedly I spoke more from passion than reason that day. Gabriel hadn’t returned. I did what I needed to make my voice heard, and hoped that maybe it would reach further.

“There he is sir. This fuckin’ zealot stands here all day screaming about taking this and that.”

“Zealot? I’m a man of Korik. I am not some fanatic, despite what you were raised to believe,”

“That’s enough both of you,” The armor clad guard broke his silence. “Look. You’re disturbing the peace. Just go back inside and tend to your church. Looks like it could use a little care after all,”

“Peace? There is no peace in this city.” My voice faltered and lowered to a mere whisper. “I’ll retire for the day. But I plan to continue my sermons until Peace is truly able to descend upon this city.” I meandered through the cracked and molded wooden door.

I sat and meditated for what seemed like hours. No answers came to me. No one listened. No one sought to learn that which would bring them enlightenment. I sat. I ruminated. I plotted and schemed. I prayed to Korik and received nothing. The circle of flame around me began to dim. I knew not what to do until I heard my door creak open.

“I heard you caused quite a scene earlier today. Something about ‘the worker next to you shares your plight’ and to ‘devote yourself to a cause’. I imagine no one stopped to listen to your thoughts?” I sat in my circle, and didn’t make a move. “Well you were the talk of the town today. If you heard other people telling it, they believe you’re going to start a revolution. Make the workers of the city storm the gates of the castle, and take the crown for yourself,”

“You left me. I thought I had finally begun to rekindle my congregation, but you left me. Was this some game you nobles play? Give a shred of hope to an old man seeking to keep the faith alive in a hostile city?”

“Quite the opposite my friend. I am a true believer of Korik. His brothers are not mine to comment on,”

“How do you worship? Do you pray to him too? What would a noble pray for I wonder?”

“I pray in the old ways. A small sacrifice of my own, and a quick prayer of what I wish to gain in exchange. Power, land, the thrill of battle, all things an aspirational leader like myself would love to have. Justice and Peace have nothing to offer someone like me. Therefore, they have no place here in the north. But war? War is on the tips of everyone’s tongue, they’re just too afraid to say anything.

Perhaps not a sermon, but a demonstration of what can be accomplished in Korik's name will bring some people into the light."

"A demonstration?" I couldn't help but laugh out loud at the suggestion. "Yes well, perhaps I should charge the gates myself. Have the people of the city see an old frail man clad in priest robes raving about the God of War and Blood be cut down in mere second. That's sure to inspire."

"Merely a suggestion friend. And I do apologize for not attending today. Matters came up that required I be there. However before I make my leave, I make you a promise." My ears perked. I was getting that sensation again that had been absent for so long. "I will return to this church every day and make my offering." My heart thundered at the prospect of an ear to preach to. Even with his slick way of talking, Gabriel had made me feel as though I had something of worth to say.

"I would like that very much Gabriel." Those were the only words I could say. His boots strode back across the floor, and ended with the door creaking shut. I began questioning things in that moment, whether I could truly call myself a Priest of Korik without having been a soldier, or without spilling blood myself. I thought about a lot of things that night, but what came to the fore was my dream the previous night. Korik did indeed walk the streets of Storm's Hope, and if I couldn't get the attention of mortals to listen and follow him, I figured I may as well get the attention of a God in the only language He understands.

I grabbed burial urns laying throughout the church and emptied them of ashes, refilled them with Blessed Oil, and placed them in a crate. A lantern that had long since been used had a leaky reservoir, I filled the reservoir to the brim, and covered the leak with my finger. I would give one last sermon to the people of Old Town. I left the church and uncovered the leak, leaving a trail of Blessed Oil everywhere I walked. I made sure that no one would misunderstand me when I knocked on their door.

"What'ya want? Its late old man and this aint that kinda house"

“All I ask is that you take this urn, and return it to me at the church once my bell tolls,”

“Oh. You’re that man always yellin’ about kennik or something? Sorry love, none of that cult nonsense in this house.” She slammed the door in my face. I left the urn next to her door, and blessed it.

The next house sounded like it had already gone quiet for the night when I knocked. A disheveled half asleep man answered the door.

“Fuck me what’re you doing here?” It was the skinny man from earlier who called the guard on my “zealotry”.

“I just wish to extend my apologies. Here, please accept this urn, but I need you to return it to me when my bell tolls.”

“What sort of mumbo jumbo is this? You putting a hex on me? Giving me something only to return it to you?” he quickly shut the door and shouted. “Fuck that, and fuck you. Crazy old hermit” Once more, I blessed the urn, and placed it at his doorstep.

I did this for every home in Old Town. Most faces that came to the door I recognized. I saw them on days when they were working, days when they were having fun. I saw children and soon to be mothers answering the door. Every one of them responded in kind, a rude word, followed by me and leaving the urns at the door. It broke my heart that no one would heed me. But Gabriel was right. A demonstration of what Korik is capable of was necessary to get people to see my truth. No sermon would have reached as far as this.

By the time I made my way back to the church the lantern was completely empty. I grabbed the remaining Blessed Oil, and traced a line from the front of the church to my prayer circle. I went and rang the church bell three times, and waited. I held my breath and prayed to whoever would listen to bring the people of Old Town to their senses and return what was given. Not one person walked through the

doors of my church. I sighed and grabbed my matches and sat down in the middle of the church. The match was in my hand, ready to be struck and for a display of true power. Then the strangest thing happened. I couldn't strike the match. I placed the match head to the box, but my hand refused to follow through. The box in one hand, the match in the other, and the smell of oil rising from around me. The stillness around me caused something to stir in me. I sobbed and threw the matchbox across the floor. [] I broke down. I sobbed and retched at my failure in His service. I had gotten right up to the end, prepared everything, only to be stopped short by something as trivial as humanity. As simple as caring for the common folk that I surrounded myself with. Trying to reach people would scorned me, and wouldn't give a damn if I were caught in the very situation they were now in. Then heavy boots meeting wood echoed throughout the church.

"Good evening, friend," Gabriel still looked stunning in his royal clothes. He produced an urn from behind his back. "You left this at a friend's door, he seemed to think you were some kind of madman. I assured him you were quite sane, and that I would return it. But I do wonder what you've been up to tonight," His cursed silver tongue still haunts me. The way he spoke was so slick he could make a snake and mongoose become friends.

"You mentioned 'a demonstration' earlier. I was preparing one. But I admit I cannot follow through. I always fancied myself a true priest of Korik. But what Priest of War and Blood can't shed a single drop without feeling guilty?" I felt my heart sink to the very depths of my soul. My life had felt as though it were a lie in that moment. Gabriel walked over to the matchbox and picked it up, along with a sole match.

"You've done a wonderful thing tonight. Even if you don't strike the match, you have brought about exactly what Korik would have wanted. You've set a powder keg in a volatile city, and primed it to burst at a moment's notice," Gabriel walked over to me and looked down. "I still plan to fulfill my end of

the bargain friend. I will come by every day, repent, and pray for your forgiveness.” He struck the match and dropped it on the prayer circle. My body was refusing to move, no matter how hard I tried I couldn’t even raise an arm to stop the match from hitting the stony floor. “I’ll see you tomorrow, and we will rebuild with whatever is left.”

The fire spread around the circle and out the door in a flash, Gabriel walked right beside it as the fire followed my path throughout Old Town. Within fifteen seconds I heard the first explosion. Then a cacophony of noises that all blended together. I don’t remember getting up and walking to the door. But what I saw will haunt me for eternity. Flames rising higher than I thought possible. Illuminating even the trade district in light. Fireballs continued to erupt into the air, and smoke filled in the gaps of the orange inferno. A moisture coalesced under my eyes and I collapsed to my knees. I felt a presence behind me and turned my head.

Korik, God of War and Blood stood before me, a sandy platemail with a red trim, glittering from the eruption of Old Town. His ever young, stone jawed face looked down on me. He gazed upon me with sorrow and regret. When he spoke it wasn’t gruff, like I had imagined it would be. It was a soft, calming voice. One that you want by your side to reassure you that everything is going to be fine, even if everything you knew was being burnt to ashes behind you.

“People will blame you for this. You’ve devoted yourself to Me, and My Brother’s your whole life, even when it seemed impossible. If you still wish, I can fulfill what was promised and give you an eternity with me. Is that still something you want?” I was awe struck and the glory that was standing in front of me. I couldn’t make out any words. I merely nodded. “Very well.” He pulled his dagger from his hip and slid the blade across my throat.

I didn’t feel pain. I watched the blood flow not to the ground, but into the blade itself. I felt myself being pulled inside the dagger, and I could feel Korik’s emotions intimately. Korik, God of War

and Blood, felt remorse for what he did. He felt sadness that he had taken the life of what he believed was his most devout follower. And he felt sadness that the world will never hear my sermons again. And here I sit for eternity, with all the other followers who chose to follow Korik until the end of days. I finally have people to talk with, and who will listen to me intently. We each have our stories to tell, and more than enough time to hear every one of them.