

THE WORD OF IRON

Zach Hannum

:: The Word of Iron ::

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For Bella. I literally could not have finished this book without you. You are my constant inspiration.

—And for Adrian, Alan, Dane, and Jon. This story would not exist without your characters and the many hours we spent rolling dice together.

:: Prologue ::

EXCOMMUNICATION

Ino carried the tattered scrolls of ancient histories down the hall, barely able to peer over the tops of the parchments to see where he was going. He traveled through a section of the Church that was nearly deserted, and his footsteps echoed faintly in the quiet hall.

Under normal circumstances, he would not have come this way, since these halls were off limits to acolytes. This particular wing of the church had been abandoned for decades. The Masters did not want unsupervised acolytes causing mischief, so they had forbidden all access. But it was a convenient shortcut to his next appointment, and he was late. If he failed to deliver the scrolls to Master Renuin soon, he would find himself in the kitchens scrubbing pots until his fingers were pruned and raw. *Again.*

He was lost in thought, brainstorming excuses to tell his Master that would extricate himself from punishment due to his tardiness, when he heard faint voices coming from a room down a side hall as he passed by. Strange, he thought. Perhaps a group of new recruits

were foolish enough to wander through the forbidden rooms on a dare. He pointedly ignored that fact that he, too, was passing through the same halls without permission.

Curiosity getting the better of him, he carefully set the bundle of scrolls down on a nearby bench and crept towards the voices. His Master's grating voice chastised him in his mind, but he continued forward. Even with the shortcut, he would still be late for his appointment, so there was no harm in stopping to give a few initiates a good scare. A few more minutes would hardly make a difference, and he needed some excitement. Weeks of historical research had left him bored, and in dire need of entertainment. *Veritia's Compendiums* would have to wait.

He followed the voices to a room at the end of the hallway. The light was much dimmer here, lacking the natural light that poured in from the tall windows in the main hall. The walls were lined with pedestals, holding various bowls and vases of some religious significance. The door to the room was cracked open, so he crouched down and peered into the room.

Ino froze.

Inside, he saw an elderly man talking with two women. They stood in some kind of study, or library. Shelves of dusty books lined the walls behind them, and a distinct moth-ball odor emanated from the room. A sitting area comprised of a leather couch and a few chairs was set up off to the side, but it was unused.

It took a moment for Ino to realize that the old man bore the scarlet vestment that marked him as a patriarch of the Church. He had only ever seen a patriarch in person once before—when the archpriest himself had given a speech in Teldur's Square. To see one here, in some dusty, long-forgotten room was, to say the least,

peculiar. The man had a wispy, white beard that came to his waist, and looked nearly as ancient as the scrolls Ino had left behind.

One of the women was dressed in fine traveling clothes, dyed with rich indigos and emerald greens. They looked much nicer than any of the clothing that would normally be found in the church, of which the mandated fashion was plain brown robes. An outsider, then. They certainly looked well-worn, dusty and slightly crumpled, as if she had only just arrived in the city after months on the road. Ino's eyes widened at another oddity—she carried a longsword on her hip. How had she entered the holy city with a weapon? And to display one so flagrantly in front of a patriarch was nothing short of heresy. The laws of the city forbade the presence of weapons, and the punishment for such a crime was usually swift and severe.

The other woman seemed to be the exact opposite of the first. A simple, ragged shirt and pants were all that she wore. She stared down at her dirty, bare feet, unable to meet the eyes of the patriarch, or the woman who stood beside her. Ino was struck, yet again, by the strangeness of the situation. There were no beggars in the holy city. Like weapons, the law forbade them. Those unfortunate enough to find themselves destitute were either enlisted as acolytes, or banished from the city. But this woman did not wear the robes that would mark her as a new recruit.

Ino felt a sudden flash of guilt as he spied on the scene. He should not be here. And yet, he could not turn away. The unusual gathering compelled him. He turned his attention to their conversation.

"...another one, Lissia? Show me what you've found," the patriarch was saying. He stared inquisitively at the beggar. Although his posture seemed to indicate a sort of grandfatherly

kindness, his palms outstretched in a welcoming gesture, his presence gave off an imposing aura. He carried himself with the comfortable authority one gets from age, wisdom, and positions of power.

“Of course, father,” said the woman who carried the sword—Lissia, Ino presumed. She bowed slightly, then removed a knife from a sheath at her side. With a quick gesture, she drew the knife across her hand, and blood began to drip from the wound. A few drops pattered to the hard floor.

With her good hand, she lifted the beggars chin, offering the wounded hand, palm up. “Go on, you know what to do.”

Her words were soft, but they had a spring-coiled tension to them.

The beggar ducked her head in a small nod, and raised her shaking hands to envelop Lissia’s injured one. She spoke in a language that Ino could not understand. More than that, the words did not form in his mind. They slid off his consciousness like water, and he could not grasp the sounds she was forming. It tickled at his ears and the nape of his neck, sending a prickling sensation down his spine. It was almost pleasant, in a way, but it also felt distinctly *wrong*. Pale blue light seeped from between the beggar’s fingers. After a few moments, she stopped speaking, and the glow subsided. She let go, returning to her timid position—head down, her arms hanging slack.

Lissia flexed her hand, then held it up, presenting her palm to the patriarch. The hand, which should have been injured, was unmarred. Even the blood that had begun to coat her entire hand had vanished.

“Very strong *Entra* in this one,” she said. “Perhaps the strongest I’ve seen yet.”

Ino stared, stunned by the display he had just witnessed. *Entra*? He did not recognize the word, but what the beggar had just done could only be one thing: the Old Magic. The old Magic that had died out millenia ago, as his studies taught him. And yet, what he had just seen suggested otherwise. His heart pounded with the revelation. And the church was somehow involved... had their gods returned? His mind reeled.

“You’ve done very well, Lissia,” the patriarch said. A smile cracked the corners of his mouth. “It seems our relationship with the order is finally paying dividends. Their tactics may be... unsavory, but it *is* hard to argue with their results.” He turned to face the beggar. “My name is Astos. I am on of the patriarchs of the Church of the Triumvirate. You, my dear, have a very rare and special gift. Rest assured, you will be well taken care of, and your talents will be put to good use. Lissia, take her—”

He paused, suddenly, and raised his index finger, silencing Lissia’s reply. “It seems we have an unwelcome eavesdropper.”

The words broke Ino free of his shock, now aware of the fact that he had stumbled backwards, directly into one of the pedestals that lined the wall behind him. As if in slow motion, the pedestal topple to it’s side, and the vase atop it shattered, sending white shards of ceramic across the marble floor.

Cringing at the explosion of sound, he tried to scramble back down the hall, but he lost his footing on the glass, falling to his hands and knees. Sharp pain left him breathless, digging into his palms.

Before he could even process the pain, he was yanked from the ground by the collar of his robes. He winced as Lissia grabbed his arm, hard enough to leave bruises. Heat began to spread from his hands, and he felt the wetness of blood drip down his fingertips.

“What do we have here?” Lissia growled. Her grip tightened on his arm. Murder danced in her eyes, and her voice was laced with venom. His eyes tracked to the sword at her hip, and he tried to swallow the hard lump forming in his throat.

“I—uh, my name is Ino,” he stammered. “I’m just an acolyte, fetching some scrolls for—”

“Silence! You were sneaking about where you shouldn’t have. This section of the church is forbidden.” She flashed him a devilish smile. “You don’t know a quarter of the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into, *little* acolyte.”

Astos glided into the hallway, his long robes flowing behind him. He approached the pair, wearing a solemn mask that gave no indication of his reaction to the scene displayed before him. Then, he arched an eyebrow, and stared questioningly at Lissia.

“This one was poking around where he shouldn’t have,” Lissia explained. Her grip still held him firmly, and she gave him a little shake for emphasis. “Must’ve knocked the vase over trying to make his escape.”

Ino was keenly aware of the stinging of his hands and the beating of his heart against his rib cage. His throat tightened, and he found it difficult to breath. She was going to kill him. Today, he had decided to spend his time with Neara, making him late for his appointment, which lead to him taking this damn shortcut. And now this woman was going to kill him, ending his short life. What a worthless life it had been.

To Ino's surprise, Astos looked apologetic, not angry. "I'm sorry that you had to see that, my boy. You really should have learned to obey the rules set out for you. They are put in place for good reason." He sighed, eyes downcast, folding his fingers together and paused for a moment.

He closed his eyes briefly, then said, "Lissia, take him to the gates. Give him a week's worth of food and water, and send him on his way."

Lissia stared hard at Astos with wide eyes, her face flushing with anger. "You're *letting* him leave? I—I don't understand. He knows too much, father. You *know* what we have to do."

At that, Ino felt a sharp pang in his chest, cold fear pulsing through his veins. His eyes flashed to the sword at her hip again. She still had him by the arm, and he was completely at her mercy. His strength could not match hers, and any attempt to pull away was met with resistance.

"Now, now," Astos chided. "There's no need for such drastic actions. The boy has done wrong, to be sure, but he doesn't deserve that fate. We will brand him as an excommunicate, and discredit anything he would say against the church as blasphemy. It's no matter, anyway. No one will believe an orphaned acolyte."

He turned to address Ino. "Listen well, my child. You can still have a full life ahead of you. By the mercy of the Triumvirate, you will have it, but the church can no longer support your claim here. You will leave, and never speak of whatever it is you think you witnessed this day. Travel to Harrow, or Turin, or even as far as Achenar if you so choose. There, you can apprentice to learn a trade skill, or perhaps conscript in the military. If you follow these instructions, I can assure you that no harm will come to you.

However, the church has eyes and ears all throughout Ilris. Make no mistake, if we hear whispers of an excommunicate of the church spreading heresy, well, our agents will act accordingly. Do I make myself clear, young man?”

Ino bobbed his head fervently. He felt a chill as realization dawned on him. Already the adrenaline was beginning to wear off, leaving dread in its place. His life as he knew it was over. He would be stepping foot outside the church’s walls for the first time since being brought here as a baby. This life was all he had ever known.

Astos gave him a pat on the shoulder, offering a cheerful smile, oblivious to Ino’s internal struggle. “Wonderful! Have luck, my boy, and may the Trinity bless your journey. The Caetera teaches us that while our path is not always straight, all scales balance in the end. You would do well to remember that. Lissia, you may escort him to the gates. Have the keepers give him what he needs. And don’t worry, I’ll see to our new friend.”

Lissia fumed, but gave a short bow. “Yes, Father,” she managed through gritted teeth.

With a swish of his robes, he strode back into the library.

With Ino’s arm still in a vice grip, she tugged him down the hallway, passing the scrolls that lay abandoned on the bench. He absentmindedly realized that he wouldn’t have to scrub dishes.



The gates closed with a sharp clang behind Ino. The guards had left him with a small pack of dried meat and bread that would last him until he reached Harrow, and nothing more. The brown acolyte’s robes had been traded for a plain white shirt, brown pants, and a thin, rust-colored cloak. In truth, the clothes were more than anything that he had ever actually owned. Almost everything he

once had was the property of the church, even his robes. Even so, those things—his books, drawings, and trinkets—he had collected over the years had *felt* like his own, now left behind.

Everything that had marked him as an acolyte of the Holy Church of the Triumvirate was stripped from him. Everything that he had ever known, forgotten in an instant. They hadn't even given him a chance to say goodbye to Master Renuin. That life was over, and a new one awaited him.

There was one thing, however, burned into his mind, that he could never forget. A potentially world-shattering secret. One that he could never speak a word of to anyone for fear of the consequences. The Old Magic—real, true *magic*—was real.

:: Chapter One ::

ASH AND WORDS

Sieges were always hell. Marcus had seen it before. Soldiers clustered in groups around campfires, sharing food and conversation. Most looked to be in good spirits, but they had only been here for a few days. When their food began to run out, and disease began to spread, this camp would begin to look very different.

Marcus made his way through the grounds, towards the red and gold flags that fluttered above the white tents, marking his destination. He passed row upon row of pitch tents—hundreds of them, placed meticulously to form an almost perfect grid. High Marshal Fastaar certainly liked his strict formations.

When word of Valla's besiegement had reached the capitol, reinforcements had been hastily assembled and sent south to Valla. Enemy forces had seemingly appeared out of thin air, surrounding the city. Not a single Ilrian spy gave warning of the attack. All of Ilris' resources had not even indicated that Antuza was amassing its forces. It was as if the legions of the empire had been displaced, out

of time, directly onto Valla's doorstep. And now that reinforcements were here, what could they do against a force so much greater their own?

He arrived at his destination less than ten minutes later, peering inside to find his old companion and commanding officer Vincent Reld, along with his second, Sigmund Rowe. They were examining a large wooden table with a map of the region placed on it, little wooden pieces representing armies strewn about with no real order.

Colonel Reld was a formidable man, grizzled with age and war. His hair and beard were nearly all white, and his breastplate had seen better days, tarnished and scratched. A black patch covered his left eye and he had hairline white scars criss crossing his cheeks. A heavy axe hung from his hip, and a burgundy cloak flowed from his shoulders. All in all, he embodied the cliché of a war veteran quite well.

"We'll need to hit them harder next time, here, here, and here. If Fastaar let's us send a few extra companies tomorrow, we should be able to make more of an impact," Vincent said, jabbing at locations on the map at key points around the city's perimeter to accentuate his words.

His companion nodded. "I have my doubts. I expect he'll drag this engagement out as long as he can. They don't call him Fastaar the Patient for nothing, sir."

"What we're doing isn't enough," grumbled Vincent. He let his head sag in frustration, leaning on the table with both hands. "We're attacking with barely a tenth of our troops. Minor skirmishes that accomplish *nothing*. Valla won't be able to hold forever. The Antuzans know they have taken the upper hand. They aren't nearly as disorganized as they were last time. Their siege

equipment continues to batter the city while their troops keep us at bay. The longer we wait, the worse our odds look.”

He looked up and spotted Marcus standing near the entrance, and his eyes lit up with a fatherly glow. “Ah, Marcus! It’s been too long, my boy.” He crossed the span of the tent and captured Marcus in a bear hug.

My boy. I’m nearly forty and he still thinks of me as *my boy*. He couldn’t help but smile just a little at that. “It’s good to see you too, Vince.”

Vincent pulled away and grasped his shoulders, eyeing Marcus up and down. “Look at you. A Captain in the Royal Military. Another decade or so and I expect you’ll be taking my place.”

Marcus laughed. Last time he saw Vincent he’d still been a fresh recruit, and Vincent had been *his* captain. “Not so long as you’re still kicking. I’ve got a long way to go before I catch up to you.”

“And your hand!” Vincent exclaimed, Looking down at the metal prosthetic that took the place of Marcus’ left hand. “That brings back memories.”

“You’re not going to continue holding that over me, are you?” Marcus touched the metal with his good hand. He still remembered vividly. On the day his old Captain spoke of, Marcus’ mistakes had resulted in the deaths of many of his friends, and the loss of his hand. His replacement served as a constant reminder.

Vincent sobered. “No, of course not, my boy. I didn’t bring you here simply to reminisce over old times, and certainly not to dig up painful memories. I’ve got a favor to ask you.” He walked back towards the table, and beckoned for Marcus to follow.

Vincent pointed at the city labelled Valla on the map. There were at least ten wooden soldiers, painted black, placed in a circle

around the city. “The Antuzans have completely besieged Valla. Our best estimates put them at ten thousand, but they’ve spread themselves out to cover the land surrounding the city. Still, their investment is strong. They run consistent patrols between encampments. We’ve been able to engage them in several skirmishes so far, testing the waters. But I fear what we are doing isn’t enough. The Vallans are not prepared to hold out through an extended siege. They’re bound to run out of supplies soon enough. Fastaar bides his time, and while a slow burning front is beneficial on our side—especially as more reinforcements are being dispatched from Achenar—the city of Valla will starve long before we can help them at the rate we’re going.”

Marcus leaned on the table and surveyed the map. It showed the south eastern region of Ilris, the two major cities, Valla to the east and Cenna to the west, along with a number of fishing villages along the eastern coast. Far to the west, the Spine of Karna snaked north to south. He nodded. This information was not not entirely new to him, but hearing it from Vincent confirmed that Fastaar had no intention of breaking the siege on his own. “I understand, Vince. But, what does that have to do with me?”

Vincent gestured to Sigmund. He was a thick, stocky man. Bald, with a face like an anvil. “My second, Major Sigmund, is actually from Valla. Before he enlisted with the Crown, he worked as a city guard. He has brought some interesting information to light that I think we may be able to put to good use. Sig?”

Sigmund spoke, eyeing Marcus warily. “Are you sure he can be trusted, sir?” His voice was deep and gruff, and stood stiffly off to the side, his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Of course we can trust him! I’ve known this man since he was barely old enough to enlist.” Vincent lowered his voice, speaking conspiratorially. “Look, Marcus, this little task I have for you isn’t exactly... on record, so to speak. Fastaar has a somewhat narrow view of how to get things done, and well, frankly, he doesn’t listen to much input from me or Marin.”

At this, Marcus hesitated. Working outside the bounds of official command was grounds for severe punishment. A court martial leading to dismissal from his division if he was lucky. Worse if he wasn’t. But he always trusted Vincent. And he had gone outside his superior’s command for him before. It had worked out—kind of—then. He glanced down at his mechanical hand. Would this really be any different?

He sighed. “Alright, you have my word. If you think whatever this is will help the people of Valla.”

Sigmund glanced at Vincent once more, who gave a nod of encouragement, and turned to the table. “When I was in the city guard, I heard rumors of a tunnel that smugglers used a few centuries ago to transport goods in and out of the city. They called it Tharin’s Passage.” He took one of the map markers and placed it on a spot due west of the city. “I don’t know the exact location, but from what I heard, the exit was somewhere west of the city. Ten miles or so of tunnels leading to a cave.”

Nodding eagerly, Vincent added, “It may seem like a long shot, but if we can send a small team to locate the passage and enter the city, we would be able to assist Valla’s situation from the inside. If we can initiate contact with Valla, then perhaps we can coerce Fastaar into a more committed assault.”

"If the passage is still operational, why haven't they sent anyone through it to contact us?" Marcus asked.

"That's the thing. It isn't. The tunnels haven't been in use for over a century," said Sigmund. "All of the known exits were either deliberately destroyed or naturally caved in. The tunnels themselves still exist, but you'd have to find your own way in."

Marcus was quiet for a moment, staring down at the small pieces on the table that represented the lives of thousands. Finally, he said, "I'll do it." He turned and met Vincent's gaze. "Who else knows about this?"

"No one, yet. I'll leave it to you to assemble your crew discreetly. That being said, Rykker Adarien, the engineer, and Viggo Daen, a field medic in my eighth company, will be coming with you."

Marcus was taken aback. He didn't know much about this Rykker fellow, only that he was a well-known artificer that worked with the military from time to time, selling them new ways of making war. He had never heard of anyone named Viggo. "With all due respect, sir, why them? Soldiers from my own company would be—"

Vincent raised a hand to cut him off. "I know your men are capable, my boy. But this mission requires not only the utmost discretion, but a very specific skill set. I've hand-selected these men for what they offer. By putting your faith in them, you're putting your faith in me."

Marcus rubbed his chin and began to pace the tent. It seemed like an odd group, but he decided that Vincent had his reasons. "So we sneak our way in, assess the situation, then get out? That simple, eh?"

“When you put it that way, sure. We’ll have a way to communicate with those we are trying to save.” Vincent gave a noncommittal shrug.

Marcus stopped pacing and faced his old friend. “Alright, where can I find Rykker?”



Watching his master work was always a calming experience. Or, at least, Sev thought it was. While he couldn’t grasp the human concept of emotion, something within his mind felt at ease while watching the artificer tinker with his inventions.

He watched as Rykker pried a plate off one of his floating engines. His master was young for a human, in his twenty-fifth year. He was thin, with dexterous hands for his delicate work. Normally he kept his face clean, but a dark shadow had begun to appear over the last few days.

The engine looked like a metallic rounded cube, hollow in the center with open holes on each face. Multiple fins protruded from either side of the main body, giving the device a vaguely fish-like appearance. Sev stood silently off to the side, waiting for instructions.

Without looking up, Rykker held out a hand, palm up. “Sev, pass me the needle-nosed pliers. I think I’ve found the issue. The propulsion construct was dislodged.”

Sev crossed to the tool chest, a heavy wooden box that, when opened, unfolded into multiple tiers of shelves lined with tools. He had to lean down to extract the tool Rykker had asked for. He made his way back over to the bench and placed the tool in his master’s open palm.

They often worked like this, in near silence. Their cadence became like clockwork, with Sev performing ancillary tasks to support Rykker as he tinkered. Sev relished in the work. Each step brought them closer to an end result. An invention. He sometimes wondered if it was someone like Rykker who had created him. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure if he would ever find out.

Rykker reached into the engine with the pliers, scrunching his face in concentration as he tried to reach something. After a few moments, there was a series of clicks. He sighed and pulled his hand from the engine. As he did the core began to glow with a red, fiery light. The device gave a low hum and lifted from the workbench, floating in mid-air.

"There we go! All better," Rykker exclaimed. He set the pliers down on the bench and brushed his hands against his leather smock.

He watched with curiosity as the engine bobbed up and down. "You know, I still haven't quite figured out how it's powered. The construct generates some sort of force that affects certain metal objects, but for the life of me I can't figure out how they did it." Sev had heard this all before, but he knew that Rykker liked to talk through his thought process. Sometimes it led to new revelations.

The bell outside his tent chimed and voice called from outside. "Hello, Rykker? This is Marcus Wyr, Captain of the third division."

Rykker's noise crinkled in distaste. Sev could understand why Rykker hated dealing with the lower ranked soldiers. They always were too brutish for his taste. All they ever wanted from him were things that could shoot farther, or hit harder. He eventually gave a

sigh. "Come in, *I suppose*." The last bit he added too quietly to be heard from outside.

A stocky man entered the tent. He was wearing the standard issue military plate, but there was a distinct lack of pauldrons or gauntlets. Instead, he favored a shirt underneath the chest plate that allowed his bare arms to be exposed, which rippled with underlying muscle. He carried no weapon, but Sev noticed that one of his hands had been replaced with a mechanical one made from a dark metal.

The man gave a quick salute with his human hand. "Name's Marcus. I'm here on behalf of Colonel Reld." He gave uncertain looks at both the floating engine and Sev, but otherwise made no comment. Word had passed through the camp of their existence, but Sev was unsure why he caused such discussion.

Rykker slumped in his chair, looking bored. "Do they have a need for me, finally? I've entreated them to employ my binoculars to some of the scouts, but I've heard nothing from them these past few days. I'm beginning to wonder why I came along in the first place."

"I don't know anything about that, but things have been rather... busy in the camp these past few days. What with the siege and all..." Marcus trailed off awkwardly. Sev was curious about this soldier. He didn't seem as arrogant as the others Rykker had talked to. Despite his size, his movements were deliberate and almost graceful, and he seemed to choose his words more carefully than other soldiers he'd seen.

"Well? What *are* you here for?" Rykker folded his arms over his chest, looking expectantly at Marcus.

Marcus motioned with his hands, as if searching for the right words. "You've been selected to take part in a mission."

At this, Rykker perked up. "A mission? I'm a non-combatant."

Marcus lowered his voice and stepped a little further away from the tent's entrance, glancing briefly over his shoulder. "While that's true, this assignment is... outside of official orders. It comes from Reld directly."

Rykker raised his eyebrows at that. He sat a little straighter in his chair. "Is it? Now *that* is interesting. What exactly does it entail?"

While Rykker talked with the newcomer, Sev stood quietly by the back of the tent, waiting patiently. He was used to becoming a wallflower when Rykker interacted with others. If Sev spoke too much, they usually became uncomfortable. He wasn't sure why. He tried to copy their human mannerisms as best he could. Rykker would tell him that it was hard for them to be comfortable around things they couldn't understand.

"—sneaking in to Valla without being detected," Marcus was saying. "There's supposedly a series of tunnels that smugglers used to carry goods in and out of the city. Our mission could be instrumental in the survival of Valla."

Rykker removed his leather apron and was beginning to place his tools back into their respective places. "I'll be honest with you, my friend. Being cooped up in this tent has been driving me mad. I can't imagine why Reld would want me, but I have a feeling I won't be missed here. When do we leave?"

"Nightfall. Best to make our way past Antuzan forces under the cover of darkness." With that, Marcus turned to leave.

Rykker called after him. “I do have one condition, though. My companion travels with me. Don’t worry, though. He won’t be a liability. In fact, he’s quite good with a hammer.”



The man’s leg couldn’t be saved. Of that much, Viggo was certain. His wounds were too severe, and although he tried to stave off the infection, it continued to spread. The only course of action was to remove the source.

The soldier was young. Far too young to live the rest of his life like this. If he managed to survive the amputation. Even now, his breath rattled with the throes of impending death. The infection seemed to possess the man, a demon poised to consume its victim entirely. Viggo was surprised he was able to stay conscious.

The patient continued to recite the words to an old Caeteran prayer he had been repeating for the last ten minutes. “*Balance for the heart, balance in the mind, balance brings death, and to dust shall I return.*” His eyes were glazed over, staring obliquely at the ceiling of the tent.

The presence of the Caeteran religion in an Ilrian war camp struck Viggo as pleasantly ironic. He wanted to tell the man: *Your gods won’t save you, they abandoned us long ago.* But he knew that his personal distaste for the religion wouldn’t help.

He reached into his pack and retrieved a distillation of dewblood. Carefully, he emptied a few drops of the dark purple liquid into the man’s partially opened lips as he spoke. “Here, this is a powerful sedative. It should ease your pain, at least.” He wished he could do more. Regardless of the soldier’s personal beliefs, he didn’t deserve this.

He sighed and stood to leave. The harsh reality was that there would be many more like this one in the coming months. War was always good at that. Good for business, he supposed. That was a morbid thought, even for him.

He turned to go, and almost sneaked a swig from his flask when he was surprised to find a soldier waiting for him. He had broad shoulders, and his arms were exposed revealed muscled arms. He found it odd that the man seemed to carry no weapon of any kind, although he did have a prosthetic hand made from some kind of metal. He gave a hasty salute, and Viggo returned the gesture, albeit with sloppier form.

“Viggo, right?” After Viggo nodded, the man continued. “I’m Captain Marcus Wyr. On behalf of Colonel Reld, I’ve come to recruit you to an assignment.”

Viggo hoisted his pack over his shoulder. *An assignment? This wasn’t strange at all. Take the medic who should be treating the wounded into the field, away from his patients.* Yet his curiosity got the better of him. “What kind of assignment?”

“A small team is going to infiltrate the Valla through a long-forgotten smuggling route to establish contact with the city. Reld specifically requested you. What we’re doing could help save—”

Viggo raised a hand. “While that sounds utterly insane and fascinating, I’m doing what I can right here. The longer this siege continues, the more I’ll be needed here.” He walked over to the next patient cot and set his pack down. This one wasn’t quite as bad off. An arrow protruded from the soldier’s side.

Marcus trailed behind him, pleading. “I’m afraid I must insist. Reld requested you specifically. I don’t know why, but he insisted it

be you. For what it's worth, what we're doing could save many Vallan lives."

Viggo focused on his work. He began to treat the area around the arrow with a salve. "I just don't know what I could possibly do that is more valuable than what I am doing now."

"I don't know, but Reld seems to believe you're instrumental in our mission's success. I trust his word. If you want to save Valla, come with us." Marcus sighed. "You want to stay here and help. I understand that. But if you could do even more, if you could save thousands, would you?"

That gave Viggo pause. What if he could do more? He stared down at the arrow protruding from the man's side. He saved as many as he could, but sometimes the best he could do was ease their pain. Why had a colonel requested him specifically? He was sure he'd never even met Reld personally. Something felt strange about it. It tickled the back of his mind. He supposed that Trin and the other medics would manage without him. "Alright, what exactly do I have to do?"



The fire had begun to die down, and the red-hot embers glowed dimly as dusk gave way to night. Vincent stared down at the embers intently, as if he might glean a deeper meaning from them. Perhaps they could tell him at what point his life had gone so astray. He turned the paper over and over in his hands absentmindedly. It was a fancy, thick parchment, with a pleasant texture. The sort of paper you'd find in a Lord Governor's manor.

The words that were written on the paper had been etched into his memory. They contained the secrets of his life, laid bare on to the page. Some of those secrets had never escaped even his own lips.

They were a threat. They said: *I know you. I know who you are. I have power over you.* Not in so many words, but he knew the implication.

The most important contents of the note were what followed. The details of his plan to enter Valla through the tunnels. Except that he had received the note *before* he had even thought of the plan.

In fact, it was the moment his second had informed him of the tunnel, the letter unbeknownst to Major Rowe, that he realized the terrifying truth of the letter he had received. It instructed—no, *commanded* him to send the individuals known as Rykker Adarien, Marcus Wyr, and Viggo Daen, constituents in the Royal Ilrian Military, to carry out the mission. The letter gave no explanation beyond the simple fact that the fate of all Valmere lay in the hands of the three. How could he have refused?

He didn't think he believed in destiny, or a higher power, or any such Caeteran nonsense. But someone, or something, had sent him this letter. An impossible message. The reality of it frightened him. The best thing for it was to carry out the task. Now that he had done so, he could move on.

A war was brewing for the second time in two decades, threatening to destroy his country. He couldn't be bothered with worrying about the fate of the entire world. Though, something had changed after receiving the letter. It felt as if everything around him looked strange, as if cast in a slightly different light. He couldn't quite understand why, yet.

Vincent crumpled the paper in his hands and tossed it into the dying fire. He watched as the flames grew and licked at the edges.

Eventually the paper blackened and crumpled until it was nothing more than ash. Ash and words.

:: Chapter Two ::

RIDGE WALKING

Night fell over the camp, a dark blanket that smothered the last tendrils of light peering over the horizon. Marcus waited for his new team, standing just past the eastern guard post, his torch a beacon in the darkness. He watched his flickering shadow dance back and forth.

Viggo was the first to arrive, and nodded a silent greeting to Marcus. He was dressed in the traditional field medic's uniform, save for a unique blue sash across his chest. It stood out against the muted brown tones of the leather jerkin. A small traveling bag hung casually from one shoulder, and a modest blacksmith's hammer was fastened to a loop on his belt.

He reached into his bag and pulled out a metal flask. He took a quick swig before offering it to Marcus, who declined. Viggo shrugged and stowed the flask away.

They waited in comfortable silence until Rykker finally appeared. The device he had been working earlier that day floated over his shoulder, smoldering flames within the core casting a radius

of warm light around him. Marcus was in awe. He wasn't sure what was allowing the thing to fly. He could see why the military paid the artificer well to outfit them.

He had also brought his silent companion. A great behemoth, standing at least seven feet tall with broad shoulders. He was humanoid, at least, but his body was forged from a stone-like material. It almost looked like armor, but it covered his entire body. Or maybe it *was* his body? He wore a dark purple cloak, tattered with what seemed like decades of wear, and kept the wide hood up, obscuring his face. Still, Marcus could see his eyes, perfectly oval, glowing with a yellow light. He carried a comically large warhammer. In his hands the shaft seemed small.

The odd pair approached, and Rykker gave a wave. "Is this everyone? Hmm. Less than I would have thought."

Marcus nodded. "The smaller the crew, the easier it is to get in and get out. That device casts a fine light. How long does it last?"

"As long as it needs to," Rykker said with a shrug.

The non-answer irked Marcus, but he ignored it. "Well, it seems to give off enough light for the rest of us." He doused his torch. The light the device gave spread into a wider radius and was more even than a standard torch.

They headed east, away from the camp, towards the forest that would take them closer to Valla. The ambience of the camp faded into the night, giving way to the buzzing sounds of nature. The familiarity and comfort of the quiet night was a farce, a deception—for they now drew closer to enemy lines.

"So... that thing knows how to follow you?" Marcus pointed at the floating device that trailed behind Rykker.

"That *thing* is my engine. And of course it does. It's keyed to me," Rykker said.

"Well, I hope you can dim that light."

On queue, the light within the engine reduced to a candlelight glow for a moment before flaring back to torch strength. Rykker made a showman's gesture towards the floating engine.

"Neat trick," Viggo said, although he didn't look impressed. "Why doesn't every soldier in Ilris have one of those?"

"Limited availability," Rykker said, as if that explained anything. "By the way," he jabbed a thumb towards his companion. "This is Sev. He'll be coming along with us."

"Hello," Sev said, raising his free hand in greeting.

Marcus blinked. He... could talk. He'd heard the camp rumors of the autonomous machine that looked human but wasn't quite human, but hearing him speak was another matter entirely. "How did you create him?"

"*Create him*? I didn't create him. I found him."

"You... found him?" Viggo said. He eyed Sev with a mixture of curiosity and confusion.

"Exactly," Rykker said, and left it at that. They walked in silence for a few minutes before he spoke again. "My inventions are just that, clever manipulations of science." He brandished a small black device in his hand. Turning a dial on it, the lights on the engine changed in intensity. "Just clever, useful, tricks. But Sev here, Sev is much more than that. He's a living being, although he doesn't need food, water, or sleep like we do. I can't tell you where he came from, and neither can he."

None of them had much to say to that.



The forest at night was a dark place. Now, the treetops blocked even the moonlight, and their only source of light became the floating engine. It would be a significant trek before they reached the location specified on Vincent's map.

Marcus studied Sev as they hiked. It was nearly impossible to read any emotion from his flat, stoney face. Underneath his yellow eyes, an angular line bisected his face in a caricature of a grin. He seemed to be unperturbed by the conversation about him. From what he could tell, Sev wasn't *bothered* by anything.

Looking at the rest of Sev's body, he got the impression that whoever had created Sev gave him the rough features of a human, but abruptly stopped when they had to fill in the details. He stepped through the trees softly and with care. It made Marcus wonder how well he knew how to use that hammer he carried. The thing looked like it weighed nothing in his grip. Marcus decided he didn't want to ever find out what it was like to be on the other side of it.



They marched through the trees for hours with nothing but the dim light of Rykker's engine to guide them. As they ventured deeper into the forest, the trees grew denser. The terrain became more rocky. The land to the west of Valla was rife with canyons created by meandering rivers and streams that wound their way towards the sea. The going was slow, as Marcus had decided to avoid well-known trails to minimize their chances of coming into contact with Antuzan forces. Although their destination was just outside the perimeter established by the enemy, there was always the chance of running into a scouting party.

For awhile, the only sounds were the quiet crunching of their boots on forest detritus. It reminded Marcus of a time long before. Two decades ago, when the Antuzans had first crossed Plys sea and waged the first war against Ilris for the glory of Odeth, he had been a fresh recruit. He lost his hand on a similar night, in a similar forest.

Viggo eventually broke the silence. He had found some sourleaf and was idling chewing on a piece. "I've been giving this some thought, and there's one thing I don't quite get. How are we actually supposed to find this tunnel? In the middle of the night? In the dark? I'm assuming it isn't just out in plain sight."

Without turning to look back, Marcus said, "We're close to a river system that cuts through the forest, running east to west towards the coastline. My bet is that we'll find an entrance to the cave near the river or down a stream offshoot. As for finding it in the dark, well, I didn't say it would be easy."

"I thought we were looking for a *man made* tunnel," Rykker pointed out. "Why does it sound like you're looking for something natural?"

"The passageways weren't carved out from scratch. There had to be some existing cave system to begin with. The main entrance has since been destroyed, but there's a chance other natural openings exist."

"Huh," Viggo said, a note of surprise in his voice. "You are strangely familiar with caves."

"Yeah, well, where I grew up, if you found yourself stuck out in a cold blizzard, a fire wasn't always enough. You had to know how to find shelter from the elements." It had been a long time since Marcus last thought of home. And far longer since seeing it. He

realized that the thought of it did not sting so much as last time. Perhaps someday he would return. Though that prospect was less likely now, he thought grimly. The north was a long ways from Valla.

“Where are you from?” Viggo asked.

”*North* of Northhaven. A small village you wouldn’t of heard of, far into the hinterlands. It’s called Tatun.”

Rykker gave a low whistle. “I can see why you decided to enlist and come south.”

“It had its charm,” Marcus sighed. He even smiled a little. “But you’re right, of course. Not much to do up there but fight and—”

“Fuck?” Viggo snorted. He spit his used up sourleaf onto the ground.

“Freeze. I was going to say freeze.” Marcus shook his head, chuckling.

Rykker laughed. “I’m sure that place had as much charm as—”

Marcus held up a hand for silence. Up ahead, he could barely make out the faint sound of water. “Do you hear that?”

“Aye. Water. Sounds like the river,” Viggo said.

“There’s something else. I hear voices up ahead.” Sev’s voice startled Marcus. His inflections were unique, if slightly unsettling, and his speech was clear and precise. There was a slightly monotonous, inhuman quality. It was as if he learned to speak like a human by reading instructions from a book. “Three, by the sound of it.”

“I don’t hear anything.” Viggo cocked his head towards the sound of the river.

"My hearing is quite good," Sev said. "There are three humans near the river. Conversing, but I cannot make out what they are saying. Their accents are strange."

"Antuzans." *Shit*. Why was his luck always so poor? He was afraid that this would happen. He always hated what came next. "It has to be."

Marcus motioned for them to crouch down. They huddled in the brush, and he could see their hesitation.

"Can we sneak past them? Use the river to mask our sounds?" Rykker had dimmed his engine as soon as Sev spoke, but there was still enough light for Marcus to see the doubt flash across his face. He'd probably never been in a fight. Not like this, anyway, where the other side just wanted to put you back into the dirt.

"We can't. It's too risky. If the Antuzans find out what's out here..." He shook his head. "No, there's only one way this ends."

He looked at his new companions as the doubt across their faces solidified into resolute masks. They had no choice but to fight. Marcus watched as they readied themselves. A crossbow appeared in Rykker's hands. Viggo hefted his hammer, giving it a quick twirl. Sev simply stood, warhammer still grasped in one hand.

On Marcus' command, they crept forward, towards the river. Rykker and Sev moved around to set up a flanking position parallel with the beach. Marcus and Viggo approached head on. As they got closer, Marcus finally heard the voices. Their rough accents confirmed his suspicions that they were Antuzans. Raucous voices carried over the rushing of the river. The four of them stalked all the way up to the edge of the riverbank, just out of view.

Peering through the bushes, he saw a meager campsite. Three soldiers were clustered around a lively fire, which was their only

source of light. A blackened pot hung from a spit over the flames, and the smell of strong spices wafted through the air. They were laughing loudly.

“I tell you true,” a large man with a thick, dark beard was saying between fits of laughter, as if he had just told a joke. “The hound followed me all the way to Kephi before he realized his mistake.”

As their laughter died, one of the other men, who was much younger—No older than when he himself had first enlisted, Marcus thought—leaned in to check on the pot. “The stew is almost ready. You’re going to like it. It was my mother’s recipe.”

The first man rolled his eyes. “You’ve said that already. Let us taste it already!”

He forced himself to tune their conversation out of his mind as he readied himself. They would charge, on his mark, into battle. Closing his eyes, he honed in on his breathing. He had fought countless times before, and an eerie calm always came over him in the moments just before. He mentally said a small prayer. Not to any god in particular, since he wasn’t all that religious, but it always felt right to him. One never knew when a battle would be your last. He took a deep breath, straightened, and then stormed into the clearing.

As always, the tunnel vision took him. He was on the bearded man in seconds. His target’s eyes widened. Before he could react, Marcus sent his fist into the man’s jaw, the metal of his prosthetic colliding with a sickening crunch. This was his advantage. The man stumbled backwards, clutching the side of his face.

Next to Marcus, the clang of steel began as Viggo engaged with the young man who was tending the fire. He managed to pick up one of the spears that had been lazily cast on the ground. Viggo

swung his hammer in a wide arc and made contact with the shaft of the spear, splintering the wood. The man discarded the broken half and stabbed the still-good half towards Viggo, but he danced backwards, surprisingly nimble. Using his momentum, he lunged forward, bringing the hammer down in an arc, bashing into the man's skull. His foe crumpled, landing in the fire. The pot toppled, emptying its contents of boiling stew all over the sand. The scent of strong spice filled the air, burning in Marcus' nose.

A sudden impact hurled Marcus to the ground. The bearded man straddled him, a wild look in his eye. Dark blood matted his beard, and one of his eyes was nearly closed shut, red and swelling. Marcus was barely able to stop the dagger from reaching his throat with his good hand. It hovered mere inches from him, but he held the man's arm at bay. He strained, using all of his strength to push the man back. But his enemy had leverage, and bared down with his weight. He closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, pushing with everything he had. Then there was a crack and the pressure lifted from his chest. He looked up to see Sev standing over him. He offered a hand, and Marcus graciously took it, stumbling to his feet.

Looking around, he surveyed the aftermath. The three Antuzans lay, unmoving, in the sand. Sev had also taken out the third soldier, evidenced by the state of his caved in chest. Though Marcus also noted two crossbow bolts protruding from the man's soldier.

He grimaced as a thought came to him. "We have to hide the bodies. More scouts will eventually come around, and they'll know we were here."

Rykker surveyed the scene with distaste. "You bury. I'll... keep watch."

Marcus sighed, unable to argue, and pulled a pair of foldable shovels from his pack and tossed one to Viggo. They were intended to be used on potential tunnel entrances, but they'd do just fine for this purpose too. "We should get digging."



The last bit of earth was packed down, leaving no trace of the Antuzans. Marcus wiped dirty sweat from his brow. He eyed Viggo, who looked equally as haggard. "I think I'll take that drink now."

Viggo proffered his flask, and Marcus took it, downing a large gulp. The liquid burned with a bitter taste all the way down his throat. Nothing like the warm, sweet licorice drinks they had in the north. No, this was a drink with a singular purpose. To dull the pain. It did its job well.

"It's time to go," he said. "It's still early, but we've got a lot of searching ahead of us."

He groaned as he stood. Pain crept up his spine, a dull, deep pain. He wasn't quite old enough to feel this kind of ache, he thought, but the Antuzan had hit him hard. He'd feel it for a few days at least.

They made their way back to the riverbank, and quickly set about destroying the campsite. They tossed the spears into the river, hid the pot in a bush, and kicked sand to cover what was left of the campfire and spilled stew. The faint scent of spices still permeated the air, intermingled with the smell of blood.

"Damn shame about that," Viggo said. "I know we're supposed to hate them, but the spices they get from the free cities make their food smell downright divine."

"That boy had said it was his Mother's recipe..." Marcus trailed off, biting the words off before he could say more. Why even bother

going down that train of thought. It was a pointless endeavor to find guilt in killing his enemy. Even if that enemy was just a boy. A boy cooking his mother's stew.

His jaw tightened, and he set out down the river without another word. He could hear his companions follow, though they did not respond to his comment. He silently thanked them.

Attempting to clear his head, he focused on the task at hand. The river ahead began to carve a small canyon through the land. That was a good sign. They were in the right place, at least. He could see bands of light colored rock along the canyon walls as they approached, barely noticeable in the dim light of the engine. Another good sign.

"This looks promising," he said to the others. "We'll split up, each take one side of the river. Rykker and Sev, you take this side, Viggo and I will take the right. Any offshoot creeks or streams, travel up them for a few minutes before heading back. If you find anything strange, odd patches of vegetation, small cracks in the earth or along the canyon walls, and, most importantly, if the running water of a stream simply vanishes into the ground, let me know. Those are all the strongest signs of cave formations nearby."

They all nodded. Viggo surveyed the canyon walls that lay ahead. "Teldur smite me if I thought I'd spend my time in the military searching for a long lost cave in the middle of the night to save a city under siege."

"All part of the job description," Rykker called wryly as he waded through the waist-deep water. Sev trudged along beside him, uncaring as the current pushed against his legs.

They spent the next several hours meticulously combing the riverbank for signs. Marcus became frustrated at the sheer quantity

of creeks that bisected the river, leaving them with a large amount of ground to cover. He also became increasingly paranoid that they would miss the signs due to the darkness. The task before them was daunting at best, impossible at worst. The combination of skill and luck it would take to find what they were looking for—if there was anything to find at all—was disheartening.

Their torches could only provide so much light, and the flickering caused shadows to occasionally dance along the canyon walls, like river ghosts come to haunt their path. He missed the steady light of Rykker's engine.

Still, they marched on. Eventually he and Viggo returned from exploring a particularly frustrating creek to find Rykker, standing triumphantly on the other side of the river.

"I've found a stream that is vanishing mysteriously into the ground," he said with a broad grin, parroting the words Marcus had said earlier. "Is that what you're looking for?"



They stood at the edge of the flowing water as it receded, and Marcus could see that they were close. The stream was only a few yards across, but had a strong current. A disappearing stream almost always led to a cave system. It was now just a matter of finding a way in.

"Follow me," he said, and continued onwards.

They came to the top of a small ridge, and slowly made the descent, navigating the steep cliff side. The dark made difficult, but eventually they found themselves in a small clearing, surrounded by a half-moon ridge that partially encircled them.

Marcus, giddy with excitement, walked the edge of the clearing, scanning for a possible way in. The last time he ridge walked was

with Sen. They had been so young then, and reckless, caught in a blizzard in the dead of winter.

His eyes methodically traced the canyon. Up and down, side to side. He'd find it. Eventually. He was never wrong about these things.

During that fateful winter, he and Sen had found refuge in a cave that was just barely big enough for the two of them two huddle together and light a fire. That was all they needed back then.

There! His eye caught a fissure in the canyon, about two meters up, large enough for a small child to squeeze through.

He let out a holler. "Here! I've found it!"

His companions came over, and Viggo gave a low whistle. "I'll be damned. You actually did it."

"Looks a little small, though," said Rykker.

"Well it's our best bet," Marcus said. He walked up to the fissure and felt the air inside. Cool, and there was a slight draft. Hopefully that meant it didn't just dead end. "Just be glad there's still *any* openings after all these years." He frowned slightly. The rock looked too hard for the shovels to be effective. "Hey—uh—Sev? Do you think you could give me a hand with that hammer of yours?"

Sev nodded and stepped up to the crack. Marcus retreated to give him a wide berth. He hefted the greathammer with both hands and swung the weapon in a wide arc, making contact with the side of the fissure. With a deafening crack, the rock exploded, causing rubble and dust to go flying.

"Hope no one heard that..." Viggo mumbled.

The opening was now wide enough to allow even Sev to fit through. They stared into the darkness that even Rykker's engine could not penetrate.

"On second thought, I'll just stay here and wait for the Antuzans to come along. I think I prefer them to whatever is waiting for us inside that cave." Viggo took another swig from his flask.

"I'm with the medic on this one," Rykker said. "I've led archeological digs before, but wandering into a dark tunnel, in the dead of night, surrounded by enemies seems like a death wish. What if there isn't anything on the other side, and when we return they are waiting for us?"

"Yes, it does seem quite dangerous," Sev echoed. His eyes seemed to glow even more intensely, like warning beacons.

The darkness did not frighten Marcus, but there was some truth to their words. If they became lost inside, and followed the tunnel to a dead end, they might not find their way out. Or worse, in disturbing the tunnels, they caused a cave-in and became trapped for good. He sighed.

"You've come this far, and you knew what you were signing up for. There's nothing to do now but keep pushing forward. It's our mission."

"It's *your* mission," Rykker said. "I just came along because I was bored. But going in there..." he trailed off.

Could he really ask that they plunge themselves into the darkness at the whim of his old friend and commander? His mind flashed back to the day twenty years ago when he had asked his troops, his friends, to follow him into battle. *And look how that turned out.* Still, this was different, right?

“Look, I know we barely know each other. But you just have to trust me. The fate that waits for Valla is far worse than whatever we’ll find in this cave. Whether you’re coming or not, I’m going to keep going.”

With that, Marcus set his still-lit torch onto a rocky outcrop and hoisted himself up to fissure. He picked his torch back up, and with a deep breath, stepped into the cave.

:: Chapter Three ::

MIDNIGHT PRIORIEM

Cold and damp. Those were the only feelings that Rykker could muster as he walked through the dark tunnel. He had wanted to stay behind. He really had. But he was going to be damned if he let Marcus go alone. They had been walking for over an hour now, and the uneven rocky terrain was causing his feet to ache.

He glanced back at Sev, who was strolling down the tunnel, easily keeping pace with the rest of the group. It must be nice not to feel any discomfort. *Oh Sev, who followed him no matter how stupid the idea. Fantastic idea, Rykker. Follow the crazy, one-handed soldier into a dark cave. I'm right behind you.*

His mind, struggling to distract from the dark, rocky tunnel, wondered for the thousandth time since finding him what compelled Sev. Humans, of course, had biological drives at their core. Some semblance of design by nature that gave them purpose. But Sev wasn't human. He had been designed by *someone*. Or *something*. Every since he had uncovered the automaton—he never

really had worked out *what* Sev really was—they became inseparable. Why had Sev *chosen* him? Simply because he was the first person Sev saw? He unconsciously fingered the ring on his right middle finger, the one he had also found amongst the artifacts uncovered that day. Sev remembered nothing from his time before Rykker had awoken him.

Marcus' rough voice cut through the silence, disrupting his train of thought. "I think I see something up ahead."

He said that a quarter of an hour ago. As they got closer, however, the unnatural rock gave way to man-made stone. The stones were rough-hewn and looked old, but they were better than the uneven, natural rock. It also meant that they were approaching what he hoped was civilization. After spending all night in the forest it was all he could hope for. *Thank the Trinity.*

The passageway led them to a set of stone stairs that spiraled up out of view. There did not seem to be any other way.

"Onwards and upwards, I suppose." Marcus turned back, giving a nonchalant shrug.

"It's not like we have a choice at this point," muttered Rykker.

They ascended the stairs, and as they did the air grew slightly warmer—though it still retained the stale, slightly mildew quality that reminded Rykker of week's old bread.

Eventually, the stairs came to a trapdoor in the ceiling, abruptly blocking their path. There was a handle on the door, and Marcus pulled on it with no success. The door seemed to be sealed shut.

"Let me see." Rykker squeezed past and examined the door. "There must be some kind of latch. If this really was used for smuggling, the smugglers would have wanted a way to seal off their escape route."

After examining the door itself to no avail, he moved his attention to the stone walls surrounding them. There he spotted a brick that stood out from the others, ever so slightly a different gray than its siblings. He felt it, and found that he could push the brick into the wall.

A soft click emanated from the trapdoor. Rykker gave the handle a pull, and with little effort, the door swung down, thudding loudly against the top stair. The sound echoed down the tunnel. He cringed. "Sorry about that."

As it turned out, the trapdoor led them to an empty basement. The cold and damp properties of the cave were also present here, and he made his way hastily to the wooden staircase that he spotted on the far side of the room. He needed some fresh air.

He ascended the stairs, his companions following close behind, and found himself in a modest but comfortable living room, sparsely decorated with wooden furniture.

Across the room was a cozy dining nook. An elderly man sat at a table, spoon halfway to his lips, his eyes wide with shock as he noticed Rykker standing in the living room.

"Who in the hell are *you*?" the man cried incredulously.



The man—who called himself Renold—*insisted* on calling the city guard, although Marcus had repeatedly assured him they meant no harm.

He had nearly fallen out of his chair when Sev and the engine came into view. Rykker signaled for Sev to put up his hood. It usually helped a little bit. He powered down the engine and stowed it away.

Warning them to stay where they were, as if the old man could have done anything about it, Renold stopped a guard that was passing by on patrol. The guard was surly, with an unfriendly scowl that seemed permanently etched onto his face. Once Marcus explained who they were, his frown deepened even further—if that were at all possible—and left, to Renold’s dismay, to go find his captain.

They waited for an excruciatingly long time, especially since Renold refused to share some of the soup he had been eating, before the captain of Valla’s city guard arrived.

Len had dark hair, tied into thick braids that came down to her waist. She bore the deep blue of Valla, adorned with half-plate that looked like it was put to good use. A large sword hung from her hip, and she carried a shield on her back.

She eyed the four of them with an inscrutable expression for a moment. She talked slowly, as if still trying to process what she saw. “So, the four of you are from the Royal Military—a part of High Marshal Fastaar’s regiment, to be precise—that has been squatting outside our doorstep for the last five days. You found an *ancient* smuggling tunnel and followed it all the way here, to Valla, a city which is currently under siege by a sizeable Antuzan legion.”

“Um—yes, that sounds about right,” Marcus said. “Our mission is to assess Valla’s situation, help any way we can, and report back.”

“Valla’s *situation* is that we’re fucked,” Len said flatly, then sighed, shaking her head. “Well, come on then, the council will want to see you as soon as possible.”

They left Renold's home and stepped into the warm night air. *Ah, finally.* Rykker breathed deeply, trying to clear his nose of the moldy bread smell.

Len took them on a path through the city. As they walked, their surroundings changed from modest but well-built homes to market squares hemmed by taverns and shops, their windows empty. The squares themselves also had vendor stalls, but they too looked barren. Perhaps they would be filled with shopkeepers by morning, or perhaps they had been abandoned, for lack of customers.

Eventually they came upon larger manor homes, and arrived at their destination—an imposing building, ancient looking compared to many of the buildings in the city, built in the architectural style of the Caeteran temples of old, built entirely out of tan stone blocks, with towering spires and a great domed roof.

"Here we are," Len said. "The Prioriem. The Council will still be around, I'm sure. They've been quite busy as of late. Come along." She strode through the gates, and they fell into step behind her.

Inside was perhaps even more impressive. They walked through tall, arched hallways, adorned with historical tapestries, many that looked to be as old as—or older than—the Sovereignty. Rykker supposed it made sense. The original city of Valla was founded during a time before the Sovereignty existed. And has continued to exist long past its destruction, he mused.

They were led to a set of double doors, ornate and made of a dark wood. Two guards, dressed in a similar fashion to Len, flanked the entrance. Len turned, and she looked almost apprehensive. "Wait here. I'll introduce you."

She opened the right-most door slightly, just enough to slide into the room.

For a brief moment, Rykker could hear voices inside. "—the vial was found on—" a male voice spoke, urgency edging his words to a tenor. And then the door shut, leaving them alone in the hall with the two guards, who refused to blink even once since they arrived.

Minutes later, Len opened the door and beckoned for them to come inside. They entered a large chamber; a semi-circular table stood in the very center. The floor was laid with patterns of white marble, and the ceiling rose high above, arching into an impressive dome shape.

There were six people sitting at the table. Four of them, two women and two men, sat in the center of the table, while two men sat near the end, along the far right side. And they were all staring intently at Rykker and his companions.

With no chairs, the four of them stood awkwardly in front of the table, which was raised slightly on a dias, meaning that although the Vallan council was sitting, they were at eye-level with them. Well, except for maybe Sev.

Len spoke in a formal tone. "Lord Governor Finn, Major Brixom, and the Council of Four—I present to you Marcus, a Captain in the Royal Ilrian Military and his companions. I have confirmed that their identities are who they say they are. They have entered the city through an ancient tunnel known as Tharin's Passage, and have come bearing the word of High Marshal Fastaar."

Marcus cleared his throat. "Yes—well, not exactly. You see, Fastaar didn't send us, per say. Colonel Vincent Reld sent us. He believed that Fastaar has been too modest with his strategy, and sent

us to investigate the rumor that there was a way into the city.” He stumbled over the words quickly, as if holding on to the words caused him physical pain.

The council was silent for a moment. Perhaps they were in shock, Rykker thought. When said aloud, it certainly sounded crazy to him.

“Yes, you see?” One of the men sitting to the far right spoke, breaking the silence. His accent gave him away as one of the nobility. His head was shaved completely bald, and he had a short, well-kept beard. His piercing green eyes shot daggers at the councilmembers in the center of the room. “I believe this confirms my suspicions. Fastaar has no intentions of coming to our aid. The bastard wishes to keep his *precious record* clean. Despicable, if you ask me. This new information presents an interesting new option for us. A way out of the city, unknown to our enemy. We cannot rely on a washed-up war hero to save us. We should begin evacuations via this so-called passage.”

One of the women, younger with dark hair and discerning eyes, furrowed her brow in exasperation. “Lord Gareth, you cannot seriously be suggesting that we leave the safety of our walls. If our people evacuate, they’ll be completely exposed. Fastaar is our best hope. There is a reason he has the record he does. He must have the greater picture in mind. I’m quite sure he understands the stakes that are at play here.”

Lord Gareth fumed. “You also seem to forget the ticking clock that looms above us all. You’ve seen the reports. Our merchants collectively have two weeks of food stores left, and that’s with imposed rationing. Are we supposed to sit on our hands and let our people starve while Fastaar polishes his sword?”

The man next to Lord Gareth, surly with age, said, “You underestimate the length of time that would be required to evacuate the city. It’s going to take days to mobilize tens of thousands of people and funnel them through the passage.”

While the leaders of Valla bickered, Rykker shuffled over towards where Len was standing. “Er—this feels as if we’ve walked into something.”

Len’s hard face softened slightly. “Yes, I suppose you have no idea what’s going on, do you?”

Another of the councilmembers, an older man with frost-white hair, pounded his fist on the table. “Our. Priority. Is. Our. People.” Each word was punctuated with the thud of his fist. “Enel, you are correct that Fastaar may have the best interest of *Ilris* in mind, but if the cost of Valla can ensure an even greater victory, how can we allow him to make such a sacrifice? We must seize our fate with our own hands.” He sat back in his chair, satisfied that his point had been made.

Len leaned in and dropped her voice to a whisper. “The four in the center are the Council of Valla. Elected representatives that speak for the people. To the far right, you have Gareth Finn, the appointed Lord Governor of Valla. Cream of the crop from Achenar. The other man sitting with him is Major Brixom Umrud. He commands the division that is stationed here.”

“Hmm. Good to know,” Rykker pondered. He could see the appeal in an elected council. But it also meant that the decisions of such a governing body could move against you at every turn. Or—in the case of what he was seeing here—hardly move at all.

“Anyways,” Len continued. “If you just stay quiet and listen, you’ll be fine. You and your team have done your part.”

“There’s also the wealth that the Antuzans would be gaining if we simply left,” a young man with pitch black hair pointed out. “On the other hand, what value can we place on our citizens lives? This is not a decision to be made lightly.”

The older councilwoman nodded. “I too conclude that more deliberation is required to determination the correct outcome. Too many variables are at play.”

“Zigil and Amina, you are undecided, then?” Gareth stared unhappily at the pair. “Time grows shorter by the hour. Deliberation is a luxury we cannot pay for. We’ll need a full majority vote from the council for this.”

“Well, you know where I stand.” The man who sat near Gareth—Brixom Umrاد, Rykker figured—who had been sitting quietly and brooding finally spoke up. He frowned at the lot of them. “You distrust your own people with such ease. Men are risking their lives every day to liberate Valla from the Antuzan threat. And you think to just waste that effort because you’re afraid of a fight? We *will* fight, and we will win.”

The room settled to silence. Eventually, Gareth broke the stillness. “It seems we will not make any more progress tonight. We shall reconvene in the morning to further discuss matters. Perhaps we will reach an agreement at that time.”

“There’s still the matter of the vial,” Zigil said.

“I’ve tripled the guard patrols along the perimeter walls, but my men are stretched thin as it is.” Brixom withdrew a glass sphere, large enough to fit into both palms comfortably, and placed it on the table. It was filled with a dark ichor that swirled chaotically, of it’s own volition, against the glass. “I assure you, if we find any more

Antuzans with one of these, they will be apprehended immediately.”

“What is that, exactly?” Rykker cursed himself. The question just slipped out, unconsciously.

The council turned in unison to look at him. For a moment, no one spoke. Then Brixom said, “We... don’t know.”

“That is to say, we know a Antuzan spy was caught sneaking with this container near the outer perimeter of the city’s walls earlier this evening,” added Zigil. “Although, as Brixom has pointed out, we know not what it’s purpose is.”

Rykker knew he should have stopped then and there. He should have just ignored it. But he couldn’t help himself. It was *too* damn interesting. “I have a fair hand at alchemy. I could take a look at the vial, try and deduce what’s inside.”

At this, Lord Gareth laughed. “We have our own alchemists for that. I’m grateful to you for your part in giving us hope at a way out of the city, but to impart a task such as this to a stranger whom I have no way of judging worthy is nothing short of absurd.”

“Wait.” Brixom looked keenly at Rykker. “You’re Rykker Adarien, aren’t you?”

“You’ve heard of me?”

“I saw you at an exposition in Achenar once. Your demonstrations were far better than any of the other engineers. I remember you had those goggles that could magnify your vision, and a small device that could fly all on its own...”

With the flourish of a stage magician, Rykker removed the engine from his traveling pack, activating it as he released it from his grip. The engine hummed to life, glowing with a bright orange, and began to hover, bobbing slightly up and down.

A few of the councilmembers audibly gasped. Lord Gareth's eyebrows raised slightly, but he otherwise gave no reaction.

"If anyone can figure out what this stuff is, it's him. In any case, it was my men who found the vial, so I have the final say in how it is handled." Brixom stood with the vial in hand, looking down at Lord Gareth expectantly.

"Very well. Don't make me regret this."

Rykker approached the table at Brixom's request and took possession of the vial. It was surprisingly heavy. *The liquid inside must be dense.* "I'll need access to tools."

Lord Gareth was, at this point, already turning his attention to other matters. "Yes of course, Len can show you to the workshop here. Your companions are welcome to rooms here in the Prioriem as well. You are all to stay here until we've made a decision. We will reconvene tomorrow at first light."

With that, they were ushered out of the meeting chamber, Len following closely behind them. Rykker clutched the vial with both hands. He was eager to get to work.

"Do they ever sleep?" Viggo asked.

"Not much, as of late." Len herself showed signs of exhaustion. Dark circles masked her eyes, which were tinged with red. "They're doing the best they can, I think, given the circumstances."

"Why was Lord Gareth so insistent on beginning an evacuation?" Rykker asked. "It seems a little brash—even reckless—to abandon the safety of the city already."

Len shifted her eyes towards the doors, then dropped her voice to nearly a whisper. "It's his *daughter*, Annet. It's just been the two of them here in Valla, ever since he was given lordship. He would do anything to get her out of harm's way."

Suddenly things made more sense. Gareth didn't care about his people, he just wanted to evacuate for his own personal reasons.

Before they could leave, the doors behind them opened. Brixom stepped out, alone. He looked back to make sure the doors fully closed before coming over to them.

"Captain Wyr." He nodded to Marcus. "I wanted to talk with you before you retired for the night. Although the final decision is yet to be made, I'd like to send one of my men back through the tunnel to deliver a message to Fastaar."

Marcus looked hesitant. "Oh. Wouldn't it be better to wait until the council decides?"

"I fear that we may be running out of time." He glanced at the vial still in Rykker's hands. "We don't know what *that* is; perhaps the Antuzans do not intend to lay an extended siege."

Rykker saw conflict in Marcus' face. The soldier clearly wanted to help, but seemed to dislike the idea of disobeying the council. Ironic, considering his reason for being here.

Marcus sighed. "What can I do to help?"

"If you'll come with me, we can brief my runner on the location of Fastaar's camp."

He then turned to the captain of the city guard, her face a mask of concern. "Len?"

She hesitated. "*Nilos incarnate*, Brix. You can't ask me to do that. I've already quarantined the entrance with a dozen guards. No one is going in there without my—and by extension, the council's—permission."

"Please, Len. We've got to get word to Fastaar or this city is going to fall apart from the inside. What would Panra would have done? She always wanted you to do what you thought was best."

A flash of fire in her eyes seemed to suggest she might hit him. Instead, she took a deep breath. “Damn you for being right. The council *is* in disarray, and what they don’t know won’t hurt them.”

She punched him lightly on the shoulder. “I’ll let one of your men through, but on one condition. Send Callin. That boy’s always had a good head on his shoulders. If anyone deserves to get out, he does.”

The pair left. Rykker stared after them. He was intrigued by Marcus. At first, he had thought the man a simple soldier. But the longer he worked with him, he came to realize his depth.

Clearly he was very skilled at combat, though he carried no weapon. And he was a survivalist, able to navigate his way through the forest at night and even find a cave that had been lost for centuries. On top of all of that, he seemed to have a strange sense of morality. A duality of duty and righteousness.

“If you’ll follow me.” Len interrupted his thoughts. “I can show you to your rooms.”

She guided them through the halls and led them to a part of the Prioriem that contained guest suites. She showed Viggo to a room, and he bid them farewell.

She tried giving Sev a room, but Rykker had to awkwardly explain that they would be sharing. He was sure she had noticed the glow of Sev’s eyes, but she said nothing. It was good when people didn’t mind—or at least were indifferent—about Sev.

Eventually they entered a room that looked to be half-bedroom, half-workshop.

“We used to have a councilwoman who was an alchemist,” Len explained. “Ryveria. Brilliant woman. She insisted on having her equipment moved to the Prioriem when she was elected. Lord

Gareth decided to keep it here, even after she was gone. It's come in handy a few times. For now, you may use it as you see fit."

Rykker thanked her, and she left. After the door closed, he went over to the bed—dropping the vial on a pillow—and tossed himself onto it, groaning. "Oh, *burned sands*, my feet. What I wouldn't give to be you right now."

"But you cannot *be me*, Rykker. That is impossible."

"It's just a figure of speech, Sev." He groaned, and shifted in the bed to face Sev.

"Ah yes, I remember you telling me about those. The use of speech in a figurative fashion, usually to denote hyperbole."

"Uh-huh, exactly."

For a few minutes, they did not speak. Rykker much preferred the company of Sev in that regard. He was content to sit. Perhaps his thoughts wandered, or perhaps they did not. Either way, Rykker appreciated the time to think. He closed his eyes, letting his mind drift.

This was officially the strangest day he had experienced in a long time. Only a few weeks ago had he decided—on a whim—to join the reserve force when it left to march south. The truth was, he had been bored. His life had grown easy and comfortable in Achenar.

A steady, and not insignificant, stream of income was paid to him for his designs. Schematics for more efficient crossbows, binoculars, blast furnaces—all of which had been acquired by the Ilrian military for a handsome sum.

Those designs, of course, were made possible by his archaeological discoveries. That was what people usually forgot. He was an archaeologist by trade, if his degree meant anything. But, as it turned out, the old Magi from ages past were quite good at

engineering. His studies at the university had given him a wide range of skills, from alchemy to architecture. Still, even the most simple of their designs had taken him months to decipher. Now, even after years of study, understanding of their more complex creations remained a mystery to him.

The greatest of all—as far as he could gather—was Sev. He knew he couldn't be sure. But he *had* found Sev, buried in the ground, not far from the dig site. It was the most logical conclusion.

He sighed and opened his eyes. Sev still stood, quiet as a statue. Not once had Rykker ever seen him sleep. He didn't think sleep would come from him either. Not yet. He had work to do.

May as well take a look at this vial. He sat up, scooping the vial off the pillow, and made his way over to the other half of the room. Examining his surroundings, he concluded that this Ryveria had good taste in equipment. It was old, but well maintained. The tubes were relatively clean, if a little stained, and the glass of the beakers gleamed.

He placed the vial of black ichor on a stand that was too small. It would have to do. *First things first. I have to remember that whatever this stuff is, it's probably dangerous.* The vial itself was stoppered by a cork. Perhaps the liquid was to be used as a catalyst of some sort?

He found a specialized vacuum chamber on a shelf and worked to set it up. It consisted of a small round vial, a hand pump, and a rubber gasket to connect tubing. He would need to extract a small sample of the liquid from the vial for testing, but he had to be careful. There was no telling what the liquid would react to.

He sterilized the equipment, along with a set of tubing and a small two-way syringe, with some strong alcohol he had found in a cabinet. He hoped that would be sufficient.

Using rubber gaskets, he attached the syringe, tubing, and chamber. He worked the pump, a simple push-pull mechanism, to evacuate the air from the system. He pumped until it became too difficult. The vacuum wouldn't be completely devoid of air, but it would be good enough.

Carefully, he inserted the syringe through the cork, wincing as he did so, until the needle entered the liquid. He breathed a sigh of relief when nothing happened. He slowly pulled the plunger on the syringe, allowing it to suck in a small amount of the black ichor. He pressed the plunger back down, and the extracted liquid left through a secondary valve, into the waiting chamber.

He observed his prize—a small glass vial no larger than his thumb containing the dark liquid—with satisfaction. With this small amount, performing experiments on it would hopefully prove to be more safe, if only a little.

Now the real work could begin.

:: Chapter Four ::

THE SIEGE OF VALLA

The citizens of Valla were suffering. Viggo could see the evidence in their faces. They looked more like trapped animals than people. Surrounded on all sides by the enemy, forced to suffer the slow agony of starvation and disease—It was a wonder that stayed sane. It had been the better part of a month since Antuzan forces closed in. An entire month for food stores to run low, and clean sources of water to run dry. Prices were increasing, eventually leaving the poorest of them without a means to eat.

He walked down a cobbled street, towards the marketplace they had passed the night before. *What in Teldur's name was he doing here?* When he had awoken early that morning, he left the Prioriem without letting anyone know. He had just walked right out the front doors, without stopping to talk to anyone or tell them where he was going. Why, he couldn't say. He only knew he had to move his legs. The distraction helped him think.

The isolation, the *captivity* was crushing the common people of Valla. In a matter of minutes, he spotted dozens of grimy country

folk who had been forced from their homes outside the city. Used to the open spaces of their farms, they now clustered in small pockets, seeking shelter in alleys and under rudimentary tents. Their bodies were thin—beginning to waste away to nothing. The sight was enough to make him shake with frustration.

They could evacuate through the passage, if the council allowed it. Make their way north, or perhaps west to Cenna. Could he be sure, though, that they would be safe? Who was he anyway to determine the fate of so many lives?

A feeling of helplessness threatened to overtake him. It was familiar, like an old enemy, or maybe friend, that he was long acquainted with. There were many times in his life in which he had faced circumstances beyond his control. The mirror showed a very different man than five years ago. Those experiences had shaped who he was today. He supposed this one would, too.

He sighed and continued onward, towards Founder's Square, an outdoor pavilion a few blocks away from the Prioriem. Before retiring last night, Len had mentioned that this was one of the few marketplaces that still operated in the city. When he arrived, he found that many of the merchant stalls were still deserted. Only a few remained open, selling the most basic of necessities—dried meats, hard cheeses, breads, and alcohol. Not many could afford much else, given the circumstances. Though, few people were actually purchasing any goods. Even here, in one of the wealthier parts of the city, peasants and beggars alike filled the square. Most loitered near the public sitting areas, looking for reprieve. Some, however, were hoping one of the merchants would take pity and provide hand-outs. So far, none had.

He bought a small bottle of cheap ale for an exorbitant amount of gold from one of the vendors, exhausting a sizeable portion of his reserves. It was still early, but his flask had run out again last night. He took a long pull from the bottle. The liquid was lukewarm, but the familiar flavor eased him.

A quiet bench near a statue depicting Vallandra herself became the ideal spot for him to nurse his drink. She stood tall and proud, sword thrust upwards in a salute that bespoke adventure and triumph. Too bad her city is probably going to be sacked soon, he thought. He wondered if his mood would improve or worsen with the alcohol.

Dark thoughts brewed in his mind as he swigged the warm ale. Worse, then. All throughout the city, people struggled against the oppression of the siege. And yet the leaders of Valla refused to act. A decision, *any* decision, would be better than nothing. It disgusted him. In his experience, those in power rarely cared about the common folk. The theme seemed common among Ilrian nobility. They acted in their own interests, rather than the interests of the people they swore to serve.

For a time, he sat in the square, watching people come and go through the marketplace, buying what they needed—if they could afford it—to survive. They always walked away with too little for too much.

“I don’t know why, but I knew I’d find you here.”

Viggo turned to see Len, her azure armor significantly more disheveled than the night before.

“I like the solitude.” He shrugged, sliding over to make room for her on the bench. “Did you even sleep last night?”

“Would you believe me if I told you I went to bed wearing this?” She gestured to her armor, giving a half-smile—though her eyes looked serious.

“You know, I think I would. You seem the sort.” He took another sip from his glass, then offered it to her. She shook her head, eying at the bottle. “Hey, it’s good stuff. The lukewarm temperature really brings out the flavor.”

“I’m starting to think we are kindred spirits when it comes to dry sarcasm, but I think I’ll pass.” She sat down beside him, resting her arm casually on the back of the bench. They sat in companionable silence for a few moments.

She looked up at the statue that stood over them. “You know, she supposedly founded this city to out-do her sister, Cennadra. The story goes that each of them attempted to one-up the other, until one day they both founded cities, claiming that theirs would outshine the other.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard that one,” Viggo said. “I’m also familiar with the twin sister story—that much is the same. The way I’ve heard it told, though, is that the cities were founded to maintain balance. Each sister, and by extension each city, needed one another. One could not have been established without the other.”

“A very Caeteran way of looking at it. You’re not some religious fanatic, are you?”

He shook his head. “No, far from it. Just something I learned growing up.”

“They’re all just silly children’s stories in the end, I suppose,” she said. “I’m sure Vallandra and Cennadra were wonderful siblings.”

For a few moments neither of them spoke. A cool breeze blew through the square, welcome in the hot autumn weather. As he surveyed the market, something strange caught his eye in an alleyway across from where they were sitting. A cloaked figure lurked in the shadows of a building. And it appeared be watching him. He could almost feel a tangible malice emanating from the alley. His heart began to beat faster.

“Do you see that? Over there. In the alley straight across the way.” Throngs of people milling through the square obfuscated their view.

She looked towards where he was pointing and squinted. “I... don’t see anything. What was it?”

He looked again, and sure enough the figure was gone, the malicious aura along with it. Viggo shook his head in disbelief. “I swear on the sands that I saw someone over there. They looked shady. It felt like they were watching us.”

“Are you sure you should be drinking that stuff?” She arched an eyebrow at him, glancing down at the bottle.

“Probably not,” he admitted, setting the drink aside. “But I know I saw something over there. It felt... wrong.”

She stood up and arched her back in a stretch. “Well, I *am* captain of the guard. If a citizen has a concern, it’s my *duty* to investigate.”

She marched across the square, Viggo trailing in her wake.

The alley, as it turned out, was completely deserted. Not a trace of the shadowy figure remained. If it had ever actually existed at all. A quick investigation of the area yielded no evidence of any kind. Maybe he *had* just imagined it.

“Look, maybe you saw someone, maybe you didn’t,” Len said as she finished poking at a particularly dirty set of rags piled into one corner of the alley.

“I... I don’t know. It was just a quick glimpse.” It was true that he didn’t get a good look, but he had *felt* something. He couldn’t explain away the feeling. Eerily, the wrongness had seemed familiar to him. That frightened him more than anything.

“Fact is, even if someone really was there, snooping around an alleyway—while it is kinda creepy—isn’t really a crime. Maybe someone was just confused at the Ilrian soldier loitering in the square drinking expensive alcohol,” she said, a hint of mocking in her tone.” We should be getting back now anyways. We’ve got larger concerns. The council met again this morning.”

Viggo, taking one last glance back down the alley, not sure what he was hoping for, turned to go. They left the dark shadows of the alley, heading back into the main pavilion.

“Let me guess. More indecision?”

“You’re starting to get the hang of politics, I see.” She gave another half-smile, but this time it contested with a grimace.

They began their stroll back to the Prioriem, making small talk, trying to avoid the proverbial shadow that loomed over their heads. He realized with dismay that he’d left his drink on the park bench. *Damn, that was an expensive ale.*

The rumbling basso of a horn sounded throughout the city, drowning out their conversation. It persisted for a few moments before stopping. The sound bounced off the walls of buildings, reverberating loudly.

“What in the hell was—” Viggo’s voice was drowned out by a second blast of the horn. It was distant, but still carried a tremendous volume of sound throughout the city.

Len held up a hand in a wait-a-minute gesture. A few moments later, a third horn rang out.

“Damn it. Damn it all!” She said. “Come on, we’ve got to move.” She grabbed his arm and pulled him forward, walking with a brisk stride. There were other citizens in the street, many of whom began to scramble into the nearest building, looking panicked.

“What is it?” He asked.

“I wonder what it’ll be this time!” Len shouted into the air, ignoring his question. Her pace increased to the point where she was nearly jogging, and Viggo struggled to keep up. “Hurry up,” she called without looking back.

Before he could ask again, he heard a low rushing sound coming from high above. He stared in shock as a flaming ball of rock hurtled over their heads in a wide arc. The distance was hard to gauge, but his best guess was no more than a span or two across. With a thundering impact, the projectile crashed into a building a few hundred paces down the street ahead of them, causing the roof to collapse in on itself; a burst of flames snaked into the sky, and a cloud of embers sprang forth into the air.

Oh. *Oh gods above. This is bad.*

“Oh, Trinity’s *fucking* sake,” Len said. “They’re much closer than before!”

“Much closer to what?” Viggo shouted as another fireball collided with another building, this time to their right. People screamed. Shouts could be heard from all over, crying out names, yelling urgently, rising to a cacophony that became unintelligible.

"The Prioriem," Len shouted over the din.

In that moment, Viggo realized what direction they were headed, his feet carrying him without thought. The Prioriem. It's courtyard was only a block away. The Antuzans were trying to *bomb* the Prioriem.

He heard the sound of a third fireball crash into the street, no more than a hundred paces behind them. A harrowing scream, unlike anything Viggo had ever heard, pierced through the veil of sound around him.

He turned to look back, nearly stumbling in the process, and could see a young girl on her hands and knees. By some miracle the fireball had missed her—had it landed a few feet to one side, she would have been crushed. He watched as she tried to crawl closer to the point of impact, but the rock was still on fire, and the heat was too intense. She shied back, tears streaming down her face.

No time to think. He pulled himself away from Len, pivoted, and sprinted back towards the girl. Len called out behind him, but his attention already focused ahead. His feet flew, and he skidded to a stop in front of the massive crater. He had misjudged. The rock was closer to three or four span across, about the size of a horse-drawn carriage. He caught a glimpse of a body underneath the rock, crushed beneath the weight. An outstretched hand peeked from below, now blackened from the fire. It seemed to be reaching for the girl. Only his years of medical training allowed him to keep his composure. Who was it? Her Mother? Father?

Tearing his eyes from the sight, he scooped the girl up in his arms and ran for the nearest building. At first she tried to pull away, back towards the crater. Towards the body that lie underneath. He kept running, and eventually she gave up, clutching him tightly.

Another fireball crashed into the second floor of the building he ran towards, causing it to explode into rubble. *Shit*. He pivoted, diverting their path, and dashed for Len, standing outside the gates of the Prioriem, eyes wide, waving her arms frantically.

They raced to the gate, through the courtyard, and finally into the old building. Len closed the doors behind them, and a sudden quiet filled the space around them. The clamor outside was shut out, leaving a heavy silence. Another crash shook the Prioriem. “Follow me,” Len said. “There’s a basement that should keep us safe.”

Viggo followed Len as they navigated their way to safety, down a flight of steep stairs that was hidden in one of the kitchen pantrys. The girl had buried her face into his chest, grabbing him so tight it was hard to breathe.



The basement turned out to be an entire furnished floor—extra bedrooms, living spaces, and even a library. Len explained that the space had been used to harbor fugitives during the collapse of the Sovereignty. This city seemed to have fragmented memories of the old world everywhere.

The entire Council of Valla and their families, Lord Governor Gareth Finn and his daughter Annet, Marcus, Rykker, and Sev, and the entirety of the staff had already taken refuge below. They sat in one of the parlor rooms, scattered across a mishmash of chairs that they had pulled together. Conversation was sparse, most sat huddled in small groups, talking nervously.

It was strange to be in such company. He currently sat in the same room as the most important citizens of Valla. Something about seeing them sit about and worry as normal people struck him

as odd. It humanized them, if slightly. They were trapped in this city just as much as the rest of them. Whatever bed they chose to make, they would lie in it all the same.

He sat the girl sat down in a chair next to him, and she finally released her grip, a vacant expression on her face. Who *had* the body been underneath the rock? He shuddered. To lose someone important at such a young age. He hadn't ever even known his parents, which was the pleasant scenario by comparison.

Len brought the girl some water and asked her what her name was. She took one sip, responded "Mel" and then returned to her empty staring. Len tried to pry more out of her, but Mel simply ignored her.

Viggo—looking for a distraction—noticed Annet, sitting across the parlor talking quietly with her father. She was only slightly younger than him, he guessed. She was also beautiful. The thought was probably innapropriate, considering their situation, but the thought barged into his mind, without regard for social propriety. Given her father's looks, her beauty surprised him. She was, in fact, taller than her father, and had none of his stocky features. Her lively green eyes were their only shared feature. With a start, he realized that she was staring back at him with a discerning look. He pulled his gaze away, scratching the back of his head sheepishly.

After an hour of waiting, Len left to investigate the situation top-side. She returned a few minutes later to give the all clear. The bombardment had stopped.

Together, they made their way back upstairs. The girl stuck close to Viggo. Although she hadn't said a single word to him, it seemed that she considered him her guardian for the time being. Her eyes were still fixed wide with perpetual shock. Dirt—or maybe

it was soot—smudged her face. She did manage to hold on to his hand, though, as he guided her.

“I can take her from here,” Len said as they came to the front entrance. “She said her name was Mel. I think her parents run the smithy down the street.”

Len reached her hand towards the girl. She recoiled, taking a step backwards. The image of a burnt and bloodied hand reaching out from underneath rock flashed across his vision. “No,” he said, and squeezed Mel’s hand. “I’ll see this through.”

“Let me at least come with you,” she said. Her brow furrowed in a look of concern as she noticed his dark expression. He nodded. The truth was, he didn’t *really* want to do this alone.

He left the Prioriem for the second time that day, with Len and Mel in tow. Although none of the fireballs had impacted the building, one had landed in the courtyard, leaving a sizeable crater.

The walk to the smithy was short. Viggo purposefully took them down the opposite side of the street to where the crater had landed, being sure to put himself between it and the girl. There was no need for her to see that again. Once was bad enough.

Their destination was only a few blocks further. A row of shops, mostly intact, lined the street. Last in the row, the smithy’s storefront was modest, with a sign hanging above the door that read *Devir’*, an emblem of a hammer and anvil etched into the wood above the name.

Viggo touched the hammer that hung from his belt. Years ago he had earned it working as an apprentice smith in Turin. Now, though, the hammer’s main use was violence. Or dispensing justice, as he liked to see it. Seeing this place brought back painful, but also

fond memories. Becoming a smith had been the first step in his transformation.

Other than the sign, there were no other adornments decorating the facade. Len wrapped her knuckles on the door.

“Please, have you seen—” A woman’s voice, frantic, called out as the door swung open. Her eyes were wide with panic, cheeks streaked with tears. As soon as she saw Mel, she collapsed to her knees and embraced her, pulling the girl in close. “Oh, thank the Trinity. They told us to stay inside but—but I couldn’t find her.” She sobbed between words. She grabbed at the girl, patting her down as if to check for injuries.

“She’s alright. We found her wandering the street when the raid began,” Len said, her voice careful and soft.

“Oh my gods, I’m so sorry my love. I shouldn’t have left this morning. When I heard the horns, I came as fast as I could, but I couldn’t find you or Devir and the guards made everyone go inside. I just hoped he had you.” The woman up sharply, voice raising an entire octave. “Wait. Where’s Devir? Where is my husband?”

So, Father, then. Viggo couldn’t keep his reaction hidden.

When she caught the pained look on Viggo’s face, a choking sob caught in her throat. She let go of her daughter, fresh tears streaming down her face. She composed herself slightly after a few moments. “Mel, honey, go wait in the washroom. We need to clean you up.” Her daughter obeyed, leaving without another word or glance back, head bowed. He hoped the poor child would remember little from this day.

“How?”

The solitary word carried a heavy burden with it. “I don’t think —” Viggo began.

“Please,” she begged, still on her knees. “Tell me how he died.”

He caught a sidelong glance from Len, but her expression was inscrutable. He hadn’t told her what he had seen. He took a deep breath. This woman deserved to hear it, if only because she wanted to. “He... One of the fireballs hit him.” Best not to go into detail, or mention that her daughter saw everything.

The woman covered her hand with her mouth and let another sob escape, letting her head sag. Eventually, she pulled herself up, taking deep breathes and wiping her face.

“Thank you,” she said, looking at Viggo with red eyes. “Thank you for bringing my daughter back to me.”

All Viggo could do was nod. He left to go wait outside while Len talked with the woman, no doubt discussing the logistics of her husband’s death. In other words, when and where to pick up the body. What was left of it, anyways. *You really ought to stop looking at things so negatively. What we do here is make purpose out of that which has no purpose.* He could hear his old master’s words as clear as the sound a hammer makes on heated metal. Unfortunately, his master’s lesson had never really stuck with him. Cynicism was his religion. What lesson could possibly be gleaned from something like this? There was no reason to it. No purpose.

After they left, Len flagged down a pair of guards and tasked them with removing the boulder and retrieving the body. Their stoic expressions indicated that the request was not unusual; in fact their reactions were so nonchalant it gave him pause.

“Has this been a regular occurrence?” Viggo asked as they walked back to the Prioriem. He waved his hands in a vague gesture all around him, indicating the bombardment.

Len kicked a loose rock down the cobbled road. Her expression was sour. "I'm afraid so. It's been like this for a month now. Every week at least. It's not always rocks either. A week ago it was the rotting remains of livestock from the farms we abandoned." She scrunched her face in disgust. "It's hard to clean up hundreds of corpses off the street. Not before hundreds of people end up in the hospital, ill from disease."

A thought occurred to him, something curious he had nearly forgotten in the heat of the moment. "During the attack, you suggested that the Antuzans were targeting the Prioriem. How did they know where it is?"

She shook her head. "They don't. Well, not exactly, anyways. The Prioriem came first, everything else in Valla built around it. To this day, it lies in the exact center of the city. I guess the Antuzans have been trying to estimate exactly where the center is with each go around. And they've been getting closer each time."

"I still don't understand," he said. "Why go for the Prioriem in the first place? Why not just target the walls and storm the city? They greatly outnumber us. They have to know we are surviving by a thread. Not to mention the strange vial. It doesn't seem to add up. Why all the theatrics?"

Len shook her head and shrugged. "I wish I knew, Viggo. One thing is for sure, though, they *are* planning something. I can feel it."

"Well whatever it is, we're running out of time," he said.

"Indeed," she nodded, her face twisted in a defeated smirk. "I just hope we can get out or beat them back before it's too late. Maybe Fastaar will pull through."

They walked the remainder of the way in silence, giving Viggo time to think. The city was cracking under the weight of the

Antuzans. They applied pressure from all sides. He did not know what their end game was, or why they had not simply overwhelmed the city with an attack. But it was only a matter of time before the force of their efforts came crashing down, crushing the people below. And yet those in power, both in and outside of the city, those with the power to act, did nothing. Deliberation was a luxury they could not afford. Although he hated to admit it, the Lord of Valla could be right—beginning evacuations as soon as possible might be the only way.

On the other hand, Vallans were tougher than they appeared. Mel's Mother was proof of that. He had seen a fire in her eyes. A burning hatred for their common enemy. She showed immeasurable strength in the face of her tragedy. Perhaps they could rally the people, stand, and fight. Gather every able-bodied soul and push back. Would they stand a better chance at survival? They could even motivate Fastaar to join the fight, and surround their attackers.

Great, now I'm debating myself back and forth, he thought.

:: Chapter Five ::

THE STONE FALLS

Rykker carefully placed the round vial of dark liquid on the table before the leaders of Valla. Today, he addressed them alone. He had left Sev back in the room, and he hadn't seen Viggo and Marcus in days. An entire week had passed since he and his crew arrived in Valla, and he had spent nearly the entire time secluded in his room, working with the dark elixir.

"You're not going to like this," he said. He slowly turned to meet each of their eyes directly, hoping to impress upon them the gravity of his news. They remained silent, eyeing him warily. *Press on, then.* He cleared his throat. "I have deduced the liquid's purpose."

"That much we surmised when you called this meeting," Lord Gareth said. "Any less would have been detrimental to your authority. Please continue."

Rykker ground his teeth, forcing himself to hold back a retort. The Lord Governor of Valla dragged every word through a slurry of nobility and meaningless babble in a way that made Rykker want to

damn the whole thing and escape while he still could. But he knew he couldn't. This was bigger than a single—if infuriating—man.

“My initial assumption was that this was some type of alchemical reagent. At first, I extracted a small sample of the liquid, ensuring it remained in a vacuum. I couldn't rule out air as a potential catalyst. Many alchemical bombs are made this way, to react violently with the air when thrown and broken against their target.

“Unfortunately, this meant that air *would* be the most likely candidate for a catalyst. Testing on a small sample of the liquid would ensure the explosion would be contained to a small radius. As it turned out, when exposing the reagent to air, nothing happened.”

Gareth rolled his eyes, crossing his arms. “Might you get to the point? I'm not interested in your process, Rykker, only in your results.”

Biting back another insult, Rykker skipped to the end. “I tested another thirty or so substances, all likely candidates for reaction. None were successful. Then I remembered *where* the vial was found. The Antuzan soldier was detained at the base of Valla's walls. I took a trip to the ramparts and collected some of the mortar used to bind the wall's stones. As it turns out, it seems that this liquid has been specially devised to react, quite strongly, to the mortar contained within city's walls.”

Finally, Rykker saw the reaction he expected. Even Lord Gareth's eyes widened.

“What are the precise implications of this revaluation?” Zigil asked. His brow was furrowed in concern, but he otherwise held composure.

“In alchemy, you can create a potion by binding the reagent, many of which have different properties, to a reactant. It’s messy and complex, but once this binding process has occurred, your reagent will react to any substance that is exactly like, or even similar to, the reactant used in the original binding process,” Rykker explained. “The mortar was most likely made using the limestone rock that is common in this region. It seems the Antuzans have guessed this. The small droplet of liquid I tested with created a... rather unexpectedly large explosion. On a related note, some of the equipment in the lab may need to be replaced.”

At this a few of the council retreated slightly from the vial that sat a few feet away.

“What can be done?” Brixom spoke with the even tone of a soldier in control of his emotions. “Is there a way to counteract this effect?”

“Not unless you want to rebuild the miles of walls that surround the city,” Rykker said. “I suppose if I knew enough, I could create a reagent that would counter the reaction, but the alchemist who created this is beyond me. I’ve only dabbled in the art. As far as I know, few are few true masters at the skill.”

“It seems clear to me that this resolved our prior dilemma,” interjected Zigil. “I was not sure if abandoning the city was the right move, but given this advantage, I fear we have no choice.”

The other councilmembers began to nod, murmuring their agreement.

“Hold now,” Brixom said. His jaw was set tight, mild frustration flashing across his face. “This changes nothing. It’s been a week since the spy was found, and my patrols have seen nothing

since then. Is it possible that was all they had? Or perhaps it was merely a decoy to set us into a panic.”

“Alchemy is a slow and intensive process,” Rykker said. “I would not be surprised if this reagent took multiple days to bind.”

“If what Rykker says is true, then—” Lord Gareth was cut off mid-sentence by a guard bursting through the chamber doors.

The man, dressed in the uniformed attire of the Ilyrian military, looked wide-eyed. His mouth gaped open, breathing heavily. Catching his breath and regaining some of his composure, he spoke. “Council, the Antuzans are mounting a full-scale attack near the Southern gate. They bring with them siege towers and a battering ram, alongside a force of three thousand, perhaps more.”

After delivering his message, the soldier looked as if he wanted to collapse. He glanced at Brixom, awaiting orders. With a nod from his commanding officer, he retreated back through the doors with haste.

“It seems as if this alchemy is the least of our concerns now, council,” Brixom said through pursed lips. He stood and pushed back his chair. Rykker thought he almost saw the mask slip—a glimpse of the real face behind the harsh, blunt exterior. A face of fear. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve a city to defend.” He strode from the chambers, leaving a stunned council behind.

Rykker could see the rest of their masks slipping. Cracks of fear began to shine through. Noble or poor, the city was as good as a paper cage surrounded by hungry wolves.

He wondered if he too felt that same fear. He supposed he did, but for some reason he felt detached from it. As if his current situation was happening to someone else, and he was merely a witness.

“Adarien Rykker, you are dismissed.”

Lord Gareth’s words startled him from his thoughts. He nodded absentmindedly and turned to leave, only barely paying attention to the panicked discussion the council began to have behind him.

He set a brisk pace down the corridors, deep in troubled thought. His task had kept him busy these days passed, but now, with nothing to distract him, reality struck. Everything that they did—sneaking through the passage, making contact with the council, even investigating the mysterious black liquid, they were merely delay tactics. A means to pass the time until the inevitable struck.

Soon, the city would fall. An optimist might hope that they could ward off their attackers, but Rykker was no optimist. A pragmatist saw their actions for what they truly are: the desperate acts of a cornered animal. Already, Antuzan forces marched upon the walls. How long would the city guard and Brixom’s limited forces be able to fend them off? A day, perhaps two?

Once they breached the city walls, the vicious invaders would sack the city, burning homes, looting, and killing. If you were lucky, you’d be killed quickly. He figured, given hearsay of the Antuzan’s savage nature, that most would not be so lucky. If one was truly blessed by the forsaken gods themselves, they might be taken prisoner and shipped to the Empire to become a slave. The Antuzans were not known for their restraint or mercy. He continued pacing through the halls of the Prioriem for nearly half an hour, his thoughts grew dark, but his resolve was hardening.

His head was beginning to clear now, and see the full picture. He had to leave. Get out now, while he still could. He needed to

head back to his rooms, retrieve Sev and his belongings, and make his way to the passage. Len had said they were granted special access. He thought he could remember the way back to camp. Straight up the river, then due west. Once he was back to camp, he could—

His thoughts were cut off when he nearly crashed into Marcus, who had appeared from around a corner. “Shit!” He called, stumbling back.

Viggo trailed behind him, and both were dressed for battle. Marcus wore his half-plate, his short sleeves exposing rippled muscle beneath. As usual, he carried no weapons, but his mechanical fist gleamed viciously. Viggo bore his leather jerkin, and his hand rested lightly on his blacksmith’s hammer. Rykker could only assume they too had heard the news.

“Rykker!” Marcus said. “Where have you been? The Antuzans are marching on the walls.”

“My work has kept me busy these past few days. Look, I’ve, uh, got to go.” He pushed past them and continued down the hall.

“Wait, where are you going?” Marcus called after him. “Viggo and are going to the wall. Major Brixom has ordered his forces to man a defense, and we are going to join him.”

“Good for you,” Rykker said, still not looking back. “I’m getting out of this city.”

“After all this, you’re just going to leave?”

There was no enmity in Marcus’ voice. No disappointment, even. He simply sounded surprised. “I’m sure you have your own reasons for being here, Rykker. You seem the type to always have ulterior motives. But I thought some part of you was here because you cared. At least a little bit.”

Rykker stopped, but did not turn to face him. "You thought wrong."

"I know you aren't technically a soldier, and I can't give you orders, so I can't make you stay. But we could use your help, not to mention Sev's. Back in the forest, I saw you fight. You could make a difference."

Rykker sighed. Damn all of this. "I made a mistake coming here. I should have never left Achenar." He continued down the hall, leaving Marcus and Viggo.



Back in his room, Rykker hastily packed his bag. Sev hovered quietly, watching him. The right thing was to leave. There was nothing he could do for them now. He had helped them get into the city, even discovered the dark liquid's purpose. But the dice had now been cast, and there was nothing he could do.

"Are we leaving?" Sev asked.

"Yes, Sev. We're getting out of here. The city is going to fall soon."

"Fall?"

"Sacked. Destroyed. The enemy will be here soon." Rykker continued to pack, throwing clothes carelessly into his travelling bag. Fortunately he had packed lightly.

"I see." If he didn't know Sev, Rykker almost would have thought Sev was being short with him.

Sev was quiet for a few minutes. Slinging his bag across his shoulder, Rykker headed for the door, motioning for Sev to follow.

"What about everyone else? Marcus? Viggo?"

He turned to face Sev. As always, he could read no emotion on Sev's stone face. Golden eyes, however, seemed to gleam

questioningly. Sev was still standing in the room, not moving towards the door.

"They are staying to fight." Looking away, Rykker pushed the door open. "Come on, Sev."

"But shouldn't we help them?"

Rykker stopped, hand on the door. Groaning, he let it close. He retreated back into the room. Leave it to Sev to suddenly have a conscience. "What do we owe them? Sev, we barely even know them."

"But we came to help, didn't we?"

Rykker felt a twinge of guilt. He was acting a coward. A selfish coward. But why shouldn't he? He wasn't a soldier. There was no need for him to risk his life over this. The justification felt hollow. The moment he had stepped outside of camp, he had become a soldier. He had joined the fight. And now he'd have to see it through. Nilos take him, he had to stay. "Alright, Sev. You win."

He emptied his pack onto the bed, and kept only the essentials—his crossbow, bolts, engine, and a pair of binoculars. "Come on. Time to save a city."



The only emotion Viggo could muster as he watched the Antuzan army approach was terror. The black and white clad soldiers looked formidable as they marched to the beat of a drum that thundered a steady rhythm, like a heartbeat. Perhaps it was meant to represent the beating heart of Valla, drawing its last breaths, he thought. Their only hope was that High Marshal Faastar would act, bringing the full might of his regiment with him.

Standing with Marcus upon the ramparts, he looked out across the fields in which the Antuzans made their approach. Four siege

towers, built of wood and wrought iron, were slowly being pushed towards the walls. A group of ten men carried a large wooden pillar on its side—a battering ram. Bringing up the rear was a row of trebuchets, more than likely the same that had launched the attack against the Prioriem nearly a week ago. Viggo guessed that they still had a little less than a mile until they reached the walls. The archers would begin shooting long before that.

Major Brixom had climbed to a high perch on the ramparts and was addressing the battalions that manned the wall, a mixture of Ilyrian soldiers and city guardsmen. No doubt his speech was rousing, but Viggo wasn't listening. His hand traced the handle of his hammer as the beating of the drums thundered through his chest. Surely they could not be that loud, given their distance. And yet, the pounding was there. Or perhaps that was his own heartbeat? Either way, it was impossible to hear anything over the thumping.

He turned to look at Marcus, who was fixated on Brixom's speech. Was he the only one who could hear it? It was so loud, overpowering everything else. The men around him rattled their swords to their shields. Their mouths opened wide, letting loose fierce battle cries to rally their spirits. And yet all he heard was the booming of the drums.

Soldiers prepared a great ballista that was mounted to the nearest bastion, loading a heavy looking bolt into the skeins and drawing the bow back.

Archers took to their posts, lining the parapet. They drew in unison, pointing towards the sky. A command he could not hear must have been uttered, for they let their arrows free, and the blue-feathered shafts arced through the sky before meeting the enemy.

Viggo watched as the Antuzan forces took formation, using shields to fend off the attack. Many found their mark anyways. Some of the arrows met with the soldiers atop the siege towers, and they toppled off the edge, plummeting fifty feet to the ground.

Volley after volley flew, bringing many of the enemy to the ground, and yet more came. The siege towers continued their slow crawl towards the wall. They would be upon them in minutes.

A black tipped arrow flew past Viggo. He blinked, as if waking from a daze. He realized that the siege towers themselves housed archers of their own. He watched as a few Vallan bowman fell to the ground, black feathered shafts sprouting from their chests.

Without warning, it all came rushing back, the sounds of the world crashed into his silence with a force that struck him, shouting, the clang of steel, the twang of bowstrings. Someone was shouting in his ear.

“Get down! Viggo, get down!” Marcus yelled, pulling at his shirt as he ducked for cover.

Viggo obliged, kneeling beside his companion as more arrows soared overhead.

Together, they retreated to the rear of the ramparts and surveyed the scene. Archers exchanged volleys back and forth, and a battalion of Ilyrian soldiers erected a wall of shields along portions of the parapet where bowman had fallen.

The nearest siege tower came within a few hundred span of the walls, and Viggo watched as the ballista, operated by two city guards, took aim. The bolt shot through the air, colliding with the tower, exploding into a shower of wood shards. They fired again, this time connecting with the top platform where Antuzan bowmen perched. The tower, unable to withstand the second

impact, seemed to sag, as if it were suddenly too tired to carry on, and collapsed in on itself, crashing to the ground below.

Men on the wall suddenly cried out, their eyes searching the skies. Viggo watched with horror as the familiar sight of a large chunk of rock came hurtling through the air towards the walls. With a deafening crunch of earth shattering, the rubble struck the wall a few hundred feet to their right taking a large portion of the rampart with it. Screams filled the air. A second projectile descended from above, obliterating the bastion that held the ballista, scattering fragments of wall across the ramparts.

The walls were in chaos. Their line of bowmen was broken, and soldiers lay dead or dying, crushed by rubble, stuck with an arrow, or both.

The second of the siege towers made its final approach. The draw bridge began to lower, and Viggo saw Antuzan spearmen on the other side ready themselves for battle.

Marcus stood upon the ramparts, shouting to the soldiers that remained on the wall. "Get up, soldiers! It's time to meet the Maker face-to-face. We've a city of thirty thousand souls to defend. We're not going to let these invaders come to our home and take what they desire. Get up—if you can stand—and fight with me!"

And so they did. A surprising number of survivors remained on the wall, and rallied to Marcus. When the bridge finally came down upon the wall, he led the charge against the enemy. Viggo ran alongside him, into the fray.

A scrum formed along the wall, a mass of bodies clashing together, metal grinding against metal.

Viggo, caught in at the epicenter of the struggle, flailed his hammer about in an attempt to clear a space. A Antuzan soldier

pushed up against him, and he bashed the man's helmet, sending him crumpling to the ground.

Slowly, the Antuzans pushed the scrum line inwards, and the Vallan defense faltered, and the battle thinned, giving the Antuzans a chance to use their spears to greater effect.

In the confusion, Viggo had lost sight of Marcus. A pair of Antuzans cornered him, backing him against the parapet along the outer perimeter of the wall. It would be a hundred foot drop for him, or the tip of a spear. No great choice either way.

Instead, he threw his hammer as hard as he could towards one while unsheathing his dagger and approaching the other. He dodged in close, stepping on the spear that was thrust toward him, and stabbed the man through the neck.

He turned to see the other man charging him. His hammer lay far to the side, behind his enemy. Viggo ducked and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the attack. His back was to the edge again, and this time he had no hammer.

The Antuzan approached more cautiously now, adopting a defensive stance. Viggo held his knife ready. He lunged forward, hoping to close the gap. This time, the spear grazed his side. His jerkin caught some of the damage, but he felt a hot flash of pain near his ribs as the blade of the spear sliced his flesh. He winced, crying out, but continued his lunge. He tackled the man, piercing him through his stomach with the dagger. He twisted, then wrenched the knife out, rolling away, towards his hammer.

Struggling to his feet, he gripped his weapon, ready to push through the pain and continue the fight. But the Antuzan did not rise.

More came. The third and fourth siege towers made connect with the wall, uncontested, and even more Antuzans poured in, scattering the Vallan defenses.

The weight of his hammer felt heavy, but Viggo fought. Soon they would be entirely overrun, and the Antuzans would breach the walls entirely. And there was nothing Viggo could do to stop it.

Although it was nearly winter, sweat dropped from every pore in his body. He could feel the strain on his muscles, tearing them bit by bit until there was nothing left of him. He was sure he would die here.

At some point, Marcus had fought his way back to him, and he, alongside two dozen other men, fought against the invaders.

“Reinforcements should be here soon,” Marcus shouted as he threw a jab at a Antuzan, caving in helm and face alike. “Brixom has gone missing, but I overheard a runner saying Len has a hundred men on the way.”

“Lot of good that’ll do,” retorted Viggo.

Marcus glanced out over the parapet, into the fields where the remainder of the Antuzan force say in wait. “Dammit, Fastaar, where are you?”

More Antuzans came, and yet they held the line. Reinforcements came, and they pushed against the might of the enemy, refusing to break.

Every muscle and bone in Viggo’s body screamed. It could not have been more than a half hour since the fighting began, but in the heat of battle, every minute stretched to an eternity.

“Agh!” Marcus cried. Viggo turned to see Marcus clutching his bare arm. Blood spilled from a deep gash across his tricep. The wound looked painful, and would not stop bleeding on its own.

“Fall back!” Viggo called to him.

Together, they pushed to the rear side of the wall, where they were sheltered from the worst of the battle.

Marcus lowered himself to the ground with his good arm, wincing in pain. He leaned back against the parapet, resting his head and sighed. “The fucker got the wrong arm, at least.”

Viggo noticed that the wound was on Marcus’ good arm, allowing him to continue using his prosthetic as a weapon.

He kneeled beside Marcus, fishing a suture kit from his pack. He also removed the flask, which he had fortuitously filled the day before, unscrewed the top, and passed it to his comrade. “Drink this. Should help with the pain.”

Marcus took the flask wordlessly and brought the metal container to his lips, tossing his head back. A wet cough escaped his lips; some of the clear liquid dribbled onto his chin. He used a dirty sleeve to wipe his face.

Viggo set to work on the gash, first cleaning the wound and surrounding area with an alcohol solution, and then beginning to stitch the skin back together. Luckily, it was a clean slice, and he was able to close the gash up easily. He glanced up from his work, surveying the battle. They were losing. The Vallans fought well, but this was a war of attrition, and more Antuzans continued to pour through siege towers.

He returned to his work, shaking his head. All of this, everything they had fought for—finding Tharin’s Passage, warning the Council, it was going to be for nothing. He didn’t know High Marshal Fastaar personally, but odds were Viggo would dislike the man. He was a coward, and the reason they were all going to die.

Finishing the suture, clipped the excess thread and gave the wound one last once-over with alcohol. After returning his equipment to his bag, he lowered himself beside Marcus, resting his back against the parapet. He was still young, but the fighting had exhausted him. Now that he had stopped moving, a fire was swelling in his arms and legs. The strain of the battle had taken its toll. He felt worse than he had after an entire day of swinging a hammer in the forges.

“So this is it, huh?” He said aloud. He wasn’t really talking to Marcus in particular, just thinking out loud. For all the twists and turns his life had taken—to end up here, farther South than he had ever been in his entire life, was not what he had expected.

“I guess so,” Marcus answered, not realizing Viggo had spoken rhetorically.

They watched the fighting continue from afar. Both Vallan and Antuzan fell, and more stepped in from behind to take their place. But their ranks were thinning. Each moment that passed, however, less defenders, clad in the azure blue of Valla and the crimson of Ilyris, still stood. They were caught in a vicious cycle that would eventually come to an end, once the defenders had no one left.

“I hope, at least, some people have been evacuated,” Viggo said, turning to look at Marcus. “The least we can do is give them a chance. Maybe Rykker and Sev got out.”

Marcus nodded wordlessly, not turning to look at him.

He turned his eyes back to the battle. The worst of it everything was that he thought that maybe he had been doing something special. Perhaps, for once in his life, he would have a greater purpose. Do something good. But, as it turned out, the gods spat on anyone who thought themselves to be anything more than what

they were: creatures without purpose, wandering aimlessly until they died. There was no grand plan, no great vision that could be seen if only from afar. There was only chaos.

In that moment, Viggo's world shook. The wall beneath him tossed violently, and an explosion filled his ears. He was sure the entire wall would come crashing down around them. Cracks formed between the stones, leaving wide fissures in the wall. Eventually, the air calmed, and echoing vibrations continued for a moment before subsiding, the ground beneath him becoming still.

"What the hell was that?" Marcus said. He struggled to stand, his injured arm clutched to his chest.

Viggo rose, his muscles protesting against the movement.

The tremor had caused a shift in the battle upon the wall. Viggo stared in shock as realization dawned on him. The siege towers were *gone*. The place that they had occupied on the wall was now empty, and the Antuzans had been cut off from their source.

All hope was not lost. The rough wood of his hammer felt comforting as he removed it from his belt once more. Passing a sidelong glance at Marcus, he saw that his friend displayed a fierce grin. Again, they joined fray.

The remaining attackers faltered, and they were soon overtaken by what was left of the Vallan defense.

The fighting subsided after ten more brutal minutes. No Antuzan had been spared.

Perhaps a hundred soldiers were all that remained of their defense. Although many looked just as exhausted as Viggo felt, and others now nursed severe wounds, the Vallans cheered at their victory, and most remained on the wall, too tired yet to do anything

else. Viggo and Marcus found brief respite, returning to their seats along the parapet, enjoying the last dregs of Viggo's flask.

Viggo was relieved. Not happy, by any stretch, but compared to his prospects a half hour ago, he could not complain. Perhaps not all was so lost as he had once thought. His hunch about the Vallan people had been right. Their iron will had allowed them to persevere to victory. Yet, the uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach bothered him. Something did not sit right with him, and he realized it was the same uneasy feeling he'd gotten in the square nearly a week ago, when he'd thought he saw someone watching him. It was the feeling that not all was as perfect as it seemed, that waiting just beneath the shiny veneer was an unpleasant mold.

Sure enough, their reprieve did not last. Celebratory chatter turned to panicked shouting. Viggo and Marcus had set themselves apart from the rest, and they wandered back to the main group to investigate the commotion.

One soldier, a captain, who did not have the look of battle upon, his armor still rather clean and free of the scrapes and dents, was shouting above the rest. "Quiet! Listen here!" The crowd of soldiers quieted, and then he spoke again. "The eastern wall has been breached. Some kind of explosion has reduced a portion of the wall, perhaps a hundred span in length, to rubble. With our forces concentrated here, the Antuzans have seized a large portion of the Warrens. We were able to mount a counterattack, setting up choke points nearer the city proper, but we need more men. Report to your Lieutenants, and ready yourselves. The last fight for Valla has begun."

The shouting began again, and the soldiers upon the wall, still recovering from the last attack, readied themselves yet again. Some

looked angry, others too tired to carry on, but many had a look of stone, having reached too far, too deep to care for such emotions any longer. They were driven by the feet that carried them, and the rough voices of their commanding officers.

"I suppose I should be reporting to you," Viggo said, giving Marcus a questioning glance. "What do we do now?"

Marcus stretched his injured shoulder, wincing. He hesitated a moment, then said, "We fight."

He hadn't known Marcus for more than a week, but Viggo had expected that answer. "I thought you might say that."

They had only just made it back down to street level when Viggo noticed a familiar hulking shape traveling towards them, against the flow of soldiers to the east.

"I thought you were leaving," he said as Rykker and Sev approached. "Thought your business was done here."

Rykker carried his crossbow, and a quiver of bolts hung from his belt. He glanced back at Sev, then shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, well, you know. Plans change. We're here to help now. What's going on? Where is everyone going?"

"We managed to repel the attack here, but something happened. The eastern wall was breached. Some kind of explosion," Marcus explained.

Rykker's fell, and he smacked his forehead. "Dammit. *That's* what that was. I thought maybe... but I wasn't sure."

"You know what that was?" Viggo asked.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. I'll explain later. So you're headed there now?"

Marcus nodded. "We're going to do what we can."

The engineer sighed, giving Sev another sidelong glance. "You happy now?"

The behemoth stared, then said, "Yes Rykker. I am."

Rykker blinked, startled by the response.

"Come on," Marcus said. "Let's get moving."

Marcus led them through the city streets, and it became clear that the Vallan defenses had not held. Already the city was swathed in chaos. Distant fighting could be heard from all sides, and the main thoroughfares were littered with bodies. It seemed that the Antuzan invaders had begun to sweep the city, leaving death in their wake.

They trod with care, slowly. Somehow, the active fighting always remained at a distance, always a few streets over. At one point, they rushed down an alleyway to avoid a Antuzan patrol as it marched through the street.

Their path took them close to the heart of the city. Even here, near the Prioriem, signs of fighting were everywhere. They passed by Devir's shop, and Viggo was relieved to see that the door was still in tact. Perhaps the woman and her daughter had made it out.

They came to the Prioriem itself, ancient and sturdy, and the evidence of conflict was here too. The wrought-iron gates to the courtyard had been forced in, hanging precariously from their hinges. If the city's heart had been taken, then the city truly was lost, Viggo thought.

"We should investigate," Marcus said. "There may be survivors."

The great wooden doors leading in to the Prioriem were splintered and torn asunder, leaving a gaping hole wide and tall enough to fit through. They stepped carefully into the dimly lit

entryway. The precious ornaments that decorated the halls were torn down, destroyed.

They followed Marcus through the desecrated halls, and when they came to an atrium, one of the many open rooms in the Prioriem dedicated to public forums, discovered a nightmarish landscape. Bodies were scattered on the floor, those of servants and soldiers alike. Many of them were Vallan guards, but Viggo could see a few of the black and white Antuzan uniforms.

“Burned sands,” Marcus said. His moth curled into a disgusted snarl, his fist clenching and unclenching. “They butchered them.”

A spluttering cough disturbed the somber quiet of the atrium. In the far corner of the room, they found a man, slumped against the wall. A streak of dark across the floor led them to him. The man, who Viggo recognized as Zigil, the young dark-haired councilor, stared blankly towards the ceiling, a bloom of dark blood covering his mouth and neck. His hands, stained the same dark red, hung limply at his sides.

Viggo knelt beside the man, checking his wounds. His throat had been slashed cleanly. By some miracle the large vein had been missed, though the wound had still had time to bleed a great deal.

“Can you speak?” He said, keeping his voice quiet and steady.

The man’s eyes shifted to Viggo, and his mouth opened as if to speak, but all that came was a gurgle as blood trickled down his chin.

Viggo bowed his head. *Shit.*

“Aren’t you going to stop the bleeding?” Marcus called from behind him.

“There’s no point,” he replied, keeping his head low. He unsheathed the small dagger he kept in his belt. “The bleeding has

progressed for too long. His lungs have already begun to fill. There's nothing I can do except ease his passing."

And he did.

They did not spend much more time in the atrium after that.

The continued their search through the winding halls of the building, and Viggo felt a gnawing in his stomach. He hadn't eaten since the early morning, and the days events and left him ragged. Every step left his body more feeble. He needed to eat soon, and he was sure the others felt the same. Perhaps they could scavenge something from the kitchens. And then a thought occurred to him.

"The kitchens," Viggo said.

Marcus came to a stop. "What?"

"The secret basement through the kitchens," he explained. "There could be survivors holed up there."

"Of course," Marcus said, his face lighting up with recognition.

The kitchens were undisturbed by the marks of battle. Rows of dishes and silverware were stacked neatly on shelves near the back wall. Dry goods—a variety of spices, powders, dried fruits, and pastas, lay carefully arranged along the counters. An abandoned pot simmered quietly on a stove-top burner, puffs of steam rising to the ceiling.

Viggo took the lead, pushing his way to the back of one of the pantries, and pushed the sliding door, hidden in plain view, aside. Down the winding staircase, they came to a cozy sitting area, and found what they had been searching for.

Lord Governor Gareth Finn sat in a dark leather chair, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees. His hands were steepled and his head bowed, as if in prayer. His daughter, Annet, sat cross-legged on the floor across from him, turning a dagger over in her

hands. Len, captain of the Vallan city guard, lay face-up on a couch, her right leg suspended on a stack of pillows. She wore a quilted tunic, and her armor had been deposited in a crumpled heap on the floor. Her eyes were closed, but her chest rose and fell with steady breaths.

Gareth looked up when they entered, and Viggo saw that his face was hollow, sunken. Dried blood caked the left side of his head. He stood, and his brow creased when he saw them.

“Well, you’re not who I was expecting to show up,” he croaked, his voice rough, and he sounded disappointed.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Rykker snapped from behind.

The Lord Governor’s face softened, and he held his hands up in a placating gesture. “Peace. I only mean that I sent Brixom out an hour ago to retrieve more men, and he has yet to return.”

Gareth sank back down into his chair, eyes cast downward. “How bad is it? We heard a great deal of commotion above not long after Brixom departed.”

“It’s... bad,” Marcus said. The big man stepped forward. “They have all but taken the city.”

Gareth’s frown deepened, and he closed his eyes. Viggo had never seen the man somber. “So that’s it, then. Valla has fallen.”

They were all quiet for a moment.

Viggo went to Len’s side, kneeling down. “What happened to her?”

“She hurt her leg.” Viggo turned to see Annet, looking up from her spot on the floor.

She stood up, coming over to where he knelt. She crouched beside him, setting the dagger on the ground. Her shoulder brushed

against his, and he was surprised to find that she smelled of lavender. "Major Brixom brought her in. We think it's broken or something, so we tried to straighten it and raise it up."

Viggo glanced towards her, long dark hair partially obscuring her face. She lightly touched Len's arm, pinching the fabric between two fingers. Her emotion played across her face. It was a look Viggo was well acquainted with.

He examined her leg, carefully rolling the pant leg up. Her shin was swollen, and an angry, dark bruise the size of a fist had formed.

"Probably broken," he said. "At least it didn't break through the skin. Her leg doesn't look too terribly bent, which means as long as we can keep it straight, and assuming the fractures inside aren't too sever, it should heal. It won't ever be the same, but she might be able to walk again."

He cleaned and dressed the wound, wrapping it tightly with linen. They broke down one of the unused chairs with Rykker's help, and he fashioned a makeshift splint, which he set in place with more linen strips. It wasn't his best work, but he hoped it would do.

"Thank you," Annet said, just as he finished tying the last strap in place. "You couldn't know how much it means to me."

"I—it was nothing, really. It's what I do," he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

She turned away and looked at Len, watching her chest rise and fall. Viggo stared after her, and he could not make sense of his emotions.

He did not get the chance. He looked up at a tap on his shoulder and found Marcus standing over him.

"I've talked with the Lord Governor," he said. "We decides that our best chance is to head for the passage."

“You mean—“

Marcus nodded. “We’re headed towards the breach.”

:: Chapter Six ::

ESCAPE

The pain in Marcus' arm grew worse. He tried to ignore the sharp sensations as they crept up his shoulder. He led the way through a ruined alley, keeping to the shadows. As they approached the entrance to Tharin's Passage, Antuzan forces became more frequent, and remaining unseen became more difficult. Each intersection they came to presented a new challenge.

He peered back at his companions. The Lord Governor followed close behind him. Annet and Viggo partially supported Len as she limped along, putting her weight on her still-good leg. Rykker and Sev brought up the rear. Marcus hoped that Sev's keen senses would prevent anyone from getting the jump on them.

He stopped just before the alley connected with a larger street. Across the way, he could see the old man Renold's house that contained the entrance to the passage.

And it was on fire.

The windows had been broken in, and angry flames snaked from them, curling up the brick walls. Thick black smoke curled

from the edges of the roof and out of the chimney. Thankfully, the structure still seemed to be in tact. The fire had not been active for long.

Shit. Of all the houses the brutes had decided to burn down, Marcus thought, why did it have to be this one?

Then he saw the bodies. Vallan guards, no doubt the ones who where assigned to watch over the house lay in a bloody pile on the side of the road, tossed carelessly to the side. He thought perhaps the Antuzans realized something was special about the house, but did not know what, so they decided to burn it to the ground.

He turned back to the group. They looked tired. More than that, they looked like they had been to the blightlands and back. They were broken and battered, and had been through too much this day.

“What do we do now?” Rykker asked.

“We can try the northern gate,” Len said. “There’s a chance what’s left of my garrison is still trying to evacuate people.”

“We’ll never make it that far, especially with your leg the way it is.” The Lord Governor looked particularly bad off. His head wound had started bleeding again, and he sagged against one of the alley walls.

“You seeing any other option?” She countered. “I can... make do. I think it’s feeling better already.”

Gareth gave her a flat look, then frowned. “No, I suppose I don’t.”

“I do.”

All eyes went to Marcus. He took a deep breath. Was he really prepared for this? He decided it did not matter. He knew that he had no choice. It was their only way.

"I'm going in there," he said, pointing back at the burning building. "I'll see if I can clear a path to the basement. Then you guys can follow."

"Don't be daft," Gareth snapped. "Look at the thing! You'll burn alive and leave us here."

"But you're right, we won't make it to the southern gate. I have to try."

"I'll go."

They all turned to look at Sev. The goliath pulled the hood from his head and released the clasp at his neck, shrugging the purple cloak off his broad shoulders. He gently handed the bundle of cloth to Rykker, who stared dumbstruck at his companion.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes, Rykker. I'm quite sure. I believe I can survive the flames."

"You *believe*? Have you ever actually tried?"

"No, but, somehow I know I can."

The engineer shook his head, but allowed the giant to pass. Without his cloak to shroud him, Marcus was struck once again by how massive he was. His stone body looked ancient and formidable. As he passed, he handed his warhammer to Marcus. The weight of it nearly pulled him to the ground. *Unbelievable. He carries it with one hand as if it weighs nothing.*

Sev stopped at the edge of the shadows, watching the street for a moment, then with bounding strides, ran to the house and up its short set of stairs to the front door. He flung it open and vanished inside.

They could only watch in silence as the flames continued eat away at the house. The common architecture in Valla, at least, was limestone brick, which did not burn easily. Their worry would be

the burning contents of the house, and fear of the roof collapsing upon them. Sev could solve their first problem and give them a chance. They needed to hurry, though, for the longer the building burned, the more dangerous it became.

After a span of minutes, the door swung open. Sev poked his head through and waved, motioning to come.

They all but darted across the street and up the stairs. Viggo and Annet struggled to pull Len along. They were taking too long, exposed out in the open, but with Len's injury, they could only move so fast.

Just as they made it to the bottom of the stairs, Marcus' worst nightmare came true. A group of Antuzans turned the corner onto the avenue, nearly a hundred yards away. They all wore bold black and white uniforms and carried wicked spears, save for one of them, who was dressed differently, carrying no weapon that Marcus could see. He tried to look more closely, but there was no time. By the time Len made it to the top of the stairs, the Antuzans had spotted them, and sprinted towards the house.

Marcus let his companions pass, then slammed the door behind them.

It was hot. Not summer's day hot. More like inside-of-an-oven hot. Much of the furniture, still ablaze, had been pushed to either side, and they had a short path to the basement stairs. Flames stroked the ceiling rafters, threatening to bring the entire roof crashing down upon them.

Marcus searched around for something to bar the door with, but everything was on fire. Sweat was already beginning to glisten on his forehead, and he felt it drip down his back. The acrid taste of smoke filled his mouth and bit at his lungs, making him cough. His

shoulder pulsed with pain, the heat bringing a burning sensation to his wound.

“We’ve been seen!” he shouted above the roaring of the fires. “Sev, help me block the door. The rest of you, down to the tunnel. Quickly!”

Sev bounded over to the door, then slid a heavy oak table, now streaked with black scorch marks, in front of the entrance. Marcus returned Sev’s warhammer, grateful that his shoulders did not have to bear the weight of it anymore.

“Good enough,” he said, nodding at the table. “We should go.”

They made it to the top of the basement stairs when something slammed into the front door.

Damn they’re quick.

Down in the basement, a musty underground smell replaced the bitterness of the smoke. It took a moment for Marcus’ eyes to adjust to the darkness, still burning and teary from the fire. As the shapes swimming in his vision took focus, he saw that Rykker had already flung open the hidden trapdoor leading to the passage. They just had to make it through, then they could seal the entrance behind them. If it was good enough for smugglers, it would have to be good enough for them.

One by one, they climbed down into the tunnel. Len struggled, but not nearly as much as Marcus would have thought. To bear the pain of a broken leg through all of this staggered him.

Marcus stepped onto the tunnel stairs just as an explosion of cracking wood sounded above. *What could have done that?* There was no point in trying to find out. He back-stepped half-way down the stairs, then closed the trapdoor. With simple push of the recessed brick, a quiet *click* locked the trapdoor in place.

He met the others waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“Let’s go,” he said. He pushed past them to the front, then looked back. “They made it into the house. Hopefully they don’t find the trapdoor, but even if they do there’s no way they can get through.”

“You sound confident,” Rykker said, a hint of sarcasm in his voice and one eyebrow arched in doubt. Then, more seriously: “I hope you’re right.”

“Me too,” Marcus muttered, turning towards the darkness of the tunnel.

Their pace was slow, not only because of Len’s leg, but because they were exhausted. Marcus guessed that it was probably only mid-afternoon, but it felt as though he hadn’t slept in days. His muscles and joints ached, and the pain in his shoulder was getting worse. He worried that it indicated infection. Left untreated, death would be slow and painful. He could not let the pain he felt distract him. Navigation through the tunnels required complete concentration. A wrong turn could lead them to a dead end, trapping them, and if they came across an unstable part of the cave system, it could collapse. He was their only chance for survival.

Strangely enough, being underground comforted him and eased his aches and worries, if only a little. It reminded him of home. Of Sen. The most fun they ever had together was exploring the wilds, seeking out caves and pretending to live like the Githum. His life was far more simple, then.

Sev’s voice broke the silence, pulling him from his reverie. “Marcus, someone’s coming.”

“Fuck.”

He quickened his pace. He had to think, and think fast. His heart began to race, and the adrenal response of the chase, of being prey, kicked in. There was no way they could have broken through the trapdoor so quickly. It made no sense. And yet they had.

He knew there was only one option. It could kill them all, but it was the only way.

He stopped and moved to the side. "Everyone, keep moving. Follow the tunnel, keep going straight. I have an idea."

He allowed everyone to pass except for Sev, placing a hand on his stone chest. "Hey big guy, remember when I asked you to open up the cave entrance with your hammer?"

The goliath bobbed his stone head, eyes gleaming in the darkness of the tunnel.

"I'm gonna need you to do it again. But this time, harder, and instead of making an entrance, we're gonna do the opposite."

The sounds of quick footsteps echoed quietly from the direction they had come, the sound of boots against gravel. *Four of them, or maybe five.* They were running out of time.

He studied the tunnel behind them, looking for the optimal target. If these tunnels had been used for centuries, chances are they were reinforced to prevent cave-ins. His search was rewarded when he spotted them: steel bolts embedded in the ceiling of the tunnel, placed at regular three-foot intervals, no doubt installed to prevent imperfections in the rock from causing the tunnel to collapse.

"See that, Sev?" He pointed to one of the bolts nearest to them. "I want you to hit that as hard as you can."

"Won't that cause the tunnel to collapse?"

"That's the idea."

The footsteps grew louder.

Marcus retreated down the tunnel, giving Sev enough room. The behemoth readied his warhammer, bending his knees slightly, then swung it upwards, towards the bolt. A thundering crack reverberated throughout the tunnel, but the bolt held. Once more, and another sound of splitting rock. The third and final hit sent a large fissure across the span of the ceiling. A spiderweb of cracks formed, and dust and pebbles rained down. A moment later, the immense tensile pressure released, and large chunks of rock began to fall.

Sev ducked out of the way, leaping around the debris.

Together, they ran.

The sound of crashing rock was deafening in his ears. He chanced a look back, and saw that the ceiling had collapsed entirely, sealing the passage and stopping their would-be pursuers.

After few minutes of jogging down the tunnel, they caught up with the rest of the group.

He came to a stop before them, placing his hands on his knees, breathing hard. He looked up, slowing his breathing, and his heartbeat receded back into his ribcage, no longer threatening to explode from his chest.

“Did you just—” Viggo stopped himself, unable to find the words.

“Yeah. Yeah, we did,” he gasped.

“I can’t believe it.” Rykker shook his head.

“That was damn foolish,” Gareth said. “You could have killed us all.”

“We’re still hear though, aren’t we?” Len glared daggers at the back of Gareth’s head as she supported herself against the rock wall of the tunnel.

“Yes, well, I suppose that’s true.” The Lord Governor waved his hands dismissively. “It doesn’t matter now, anyways. What’s done is done.”

“On that, we can agree,” Marcus said. “We should keep moving.”

Marcus estimated they were nearly half way to the opening they had created on their way in to the city. He only hoped he had remembered the path correctly, since they could no longer turn back.

Free of the chase, he finally had time to think and reflect on the events of the day. Valla was lost. The Antuzans surely had swept across the entire city. Evidently, the attack at the southern gate was nothing more than a distraction, so that they could get close enough to the eastern wall and breach it with the explosion. It was such a simple gambit to be fooled by. Such a simple mistake to have caused the destruction of an entire city. Perhaps some people made it out, though, through the southern gates.

His thoughts turned to Vincent, and the rest of their Ilrian battalion that had been lying in wait outside of Valla. Why had they not come to Valla’s aid? Did the boy Brixom sent never make it to his destination? Or perhaps Fastaar acted the coward and decided Valla was a lost cause. Marcus did not know whether their intervention would have turned the tides of the battle, but any chance would have been better than what they were given. He could only hope that next time, they would be more prepared. The next target for the Antuzans would likely be Cenna, but nothing about this invasion made any sense, so it felt a fool’s gambit trying to guess their enemy’s plans. Why this far south? Why Valla? The mystery of how an entire legion of Antuzan soldiers evaded

detection for so long also troubled him. Something felt off about it all, like a picture on the wall that's slightly crooked.

More concerning, though, was the strange figure he caught a glimpse of with the Antuzan soldiers just before they escaped through the tunnels. He did not appear to be a part of the Antuzan legion for lack of any uniform. He tried to recall any details about the man—all he could muster was that the mysterious figure had been bald, remembering the glint of sunlight across the shining dome.

What could the man have been doing in Valla, working with the Antuzans? It confounded Marcus. The man had honed in on the house like a bloodhound leading his pack to prey. He realized that he terrified him, even though he had no right to. He knew nothing of the man beyond his alliance with the Antuzans and his lack of hair. And yet, something about the mere thought of the man sent shivers down his spine and curdled his blood. Marcus was equal parts confused and frightened.

His fear melted into excitement when he spotted daylight ahead.

The world opened into a small clearing, flanked on all sides by cliffs. The monotonous drone of nature filled his ears, as he hopped down out of the tunnel, landing on the soft ground below, his descent cushioned by dry leaves.

It was early evening, and the sun set the treetops ablaze, casting a warm glow into the clearing. Marcus listened for any sounds of fighting, but only the quiet sound of cicadas greeted him. It seemed the tunnels had carried them far enough away from the city to avoid the battle. He allowed himself a moment of serenity. If he closed his eyes, he could almost forget about the horrors of the day—beyond

the drone of insects, he heard the gentle breeze nudging the trees, imploring them to part with their leaves. Moments such as this one transported him twenty-five years and a thousand miles.

But then the moment is gone, unfrozen by the rest of his companions as they climbed from the tunnel, blinking at the light.

Rykkker threw himself to the ground, stretching his arms and legs in the fallen leaves, a smile touching his face.

"Thank the trinity," he said gleefully.

Viggo and Annet led Len to a nearby tree, helping her lean against it.

"Not a bad place for camp," Viggo said, appraising the cliff walls that would provide them with cover from the elements, as well as prying eyes.

"Indeed," said the Lord Governor. "We will be well protected here, I think."

"How's your leg, Len?" Annet crouched down to examine the splint, touching it lightly.

"Better, honestly." Surprise lit her face. "It actually feels a lot better. I think the swelling has gone down."

Viggo began to clear a space in the brush, then pulled out a tinder kit.

"No," Marcus said quickly. "No fires. Not here."

"What, why?"

"We're still too close to the city. We can't risk it." Marcus shook his head. "And... I know everyone won't want to be here this, but, we have to keep moving until dark. We must further our distance from the city as much as possible. The Antuzans are sure to send out hunting parties looking for survivors sooner than later, and we'll want to be as far away as we can before that happens."

The disappointment in their faces was palpable.

"I know you're all tired. I am too. But we have to keep going. Just a little further. Rest now, but when the sun disappears behind those trees, we leave."

The sun gave them a few minutes more, and when the last rays of light finally died, they set forth into the forest.

Marcus guided them on a course due west, hoping to catch the road leading to Cenna. The city might be in danger, and they could warn the city council before it was too late.

They had perhaps an hour of light left until night truly came. It would not be safe to travel the forest at night. They had no trails to follow, and the rough terrain would be hazardous in the dark.

They pressed on, and when the stars began to peek through the spaces between the treetops, a lone gray slab of a building came into view. The building had long since been defeated by nature, hordes of creepers sprawling up the walls, covering the building with a green veneer. A single pointed spire reached for the sky in vain, unable to pierce through the forest ceiling.

The place looked like it had not seen a living thing in a many years. Sections of wall and roof were missing, and branches of trees were sprouting from the cavities.

They crept closer, and came to a small quad of broken stone. The remains of a fountain lay at the center, the statues too shattered to be recognizable as human.

Marcus placed his hand on the fountain, the stone rough and cracked beneath his fingers. "What is this place?"

"It's an old Caeteran church, if I'm not mistaken," Viggo said. He was staring up at the building.

From this vantage, the skeleton of a large domed roof could be seen, beams of some kind of metal forming a frame now devoid of glass.

“This place must be over a thousand years old,” Rykker said.

“Probably closer to three thousand, actually.”

“What’s a blacksmith-turned-medic doing with knowledge like that?” Marcus asked.

The medic shrugged, eyes searching the stone beneath his feet. He looked uncomfortable. “Just something I picked up, I guess. Saw a drawing in a book once that looked just like it.”

Marcus could not help but think that Viggo was holding something back. But everyone had skeletons in their closet. He decided not to press the man.

“Well, the gods might no longer be here, but their shelter will still serve our needs.”

They made their way through the open entrance, the doors having long since rotted to nothing. A wide entrance hall, overgrown with vines, led them to a spacious atrium, slivers of moonlight casting a pale glow.

Here, they set up camp. Marcus permitted a small fire; given the distance they put behind them today, he guessed that they would be safe. The fall days were getting cooler, and the warmth was worth the small risk.

Marcus cooked a basic soup using equipment and some provisions they had pilfered from the Prioriem kitchens—some broth, mushrooms, leafy greens, and a pinch of salt hardly made a meal, but to his ravenous appetite, it smelled amazing.

He looked up from his preparations and saw that Viggo and Annet were missing from the group. He looked to Gareth, arching an eyebrow.

The Lord Governor shrugged. "They run off to somewhere. Said they wanted to explore the place. Seems that boy has taken a liking to my Annet."

If the man seemed concerned about this fact, he did not show it. He carried the same dismissive expression he usually did.

Marcus had not realized the two were getting close. He supposed they stayed together through the tunnels and in the forest. He *was* out of practice, so he was not surprised he could not see the signs. It had been many years since he had felt smitten with anyone. He smiled, thinking back on happier times.

He tended to the soup, stirring the contents of the pot. The leaves wilted, and the mushrooms were starting to break down. He inhaled the steam, and his stomach growled in protest.

"Someone is coming."

Marcus looked up, stirred from his romance with the soup, to see Sev, standing on high alert.

"Viggo?"

"No. One pair of footsteps. Coming from there." The giant pointed to towards the entrance hall.

Marcus stood quickly, stepping away from the fire to put himself between the entrance and the rest of the group. His body went rigid. Someone followed them? How?

He stood there, ready for anything, as the footsteps grew closer.

"There's no need for that," a cool voice said. It had a lilting, poet's cadence to it.

The poet stepped into view, a bald man, tall and lean, wearing dark brown hunter's leathers. He carried no sword at his hip, but the tip of a large crossbow peeked from behind his back. His dull gray eyes glinted in the firelight as his gaze rested on Marcus, still poised to fight.

"Oh my, what a gift this is," the poet said, and he grinned.

:: Chapter Seven ::

THE MAN WITH GRAY EYES

Talking to Annet came easily to Viggo. It had been a long time since he had become such fast friends with anyone. Although they seemingly had nothing in common, they related to each other a great deal. They had a common view of the world, a common empathy, an understanding.

While she grew up in relative lavishness compared to him, she too felt purposeless, as if the actions of her life did not matter. Sure, her father was the Lord Governor of Valla, and held a great deal of influence over the southern province, but she shared none of that power. Especially now that Valla was gone.

“Through all of it,” she said softly. “It always felt like he cared more about everyone else than he did me.”

“That must have been hard,” he said, reaching out to squeeze her hand.

She looked at him and smiled, and Viggo felt a warmth come over him that he could not remember feeling.

She asked him about his past, and he told her of his time as a blacksmith before coming to the army. She looked as though she wanted to ask more, about where he came from, but the look in his eyes must have convinced her otherwise. He was grateful for that. He could not talk to anyone about that time.

Not ever.

They talked for what felt like hours, about everything and nothing, all while meandering through the empty rooms of the building. Only the stone had survived the millennia, and most of the rooms they passed through were barren save for the ever-encroaching presence of the wilds creeping in from the open windows and crevices.

Eventually, they came so far that they had circled back around to the atrium. Viggo could hear voices up ahead. He recognized Marcus' steady voice, but it was laced with tension. Another voice that he did not recognize, light and airy, answered. The sound of it made Viggo's hairs stand on end and his heart beat quickly. He turned to stop Annet from going any further. She was already frozen in place, a mask of fear plastered to her face.

Together, they slowly backed around the corner, out of earshot. They breathed a collective sigh.

"That voice..." she trailed off, shaking her head. They were close enough that Viggo could see the sweat glisten on her brow in spite of the cool night air that permeated the halls.

"I feel it too," he said. "Something about it makes my skin crawl."

"It's like... waiting for something bad to happen."

"How could anyone have found us here? It doesn't make any sense."

“What do you think they want?”

“I... I don’t know.” He had felt this before, the cold pit of unexplainable fear in his stomach. In the square in Valla, when he was sure someone had been watching him. He had brushed it off then as his over-active imagination, but what if *they* had come for him? But why now, after all these years? He had done what they asked. If they were here for him, he couldn’t let Marcus and the others get involved.

“I’m going to go out there.”

Annet grabbed his arm. “What? Don’t be stupid. We should leave. I don’t know what this is all about, but it isn’t worth staying around for.”

He met her eyes and pulled away from her. “I just—I have to, okay? Stay here, out of sight. Don’t come out no matter what. If something happens, just run. Go east, you should eventually find the road to Senna.”

His legs carried him around the corner and towards the atrium before she had a chance to respond.

The owner of the lilting voice was an extraordinarily tall man dressed in dark leather armor. His head was shaved bald, an easy smile spread across his face when he noticed Viggo. The man took languid strides across the atrium, staying clear of the campfire, his dull gray eyes scanning the room hungrily. When his eyes passed over Viggo, his stomach roiled with discomfort. He stayed near the door, placing himself just beyond the entrance, and placed his hand lightly on the handle of his hammer.

“Oh look, another one.”

“I’m going to ask you again,” Marcus said through gritted teeth. “What are you doing here? How did you find us?”

“One question at a time, please,” the man tisked, wagging his pointer finger. “And you are asking all the wrong questions, besides. You haven’t even asked me my name, yet.”

Viggo had never seen Marcus so flustered. His body was coiled like a spring into a fighter’s stance, and he circled the room with the man, keeping his body between the man and their campsite. Rykker, Sev, Len, and Gareth all sat by the fire, sitting uncomfortably.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Viggo said, “Who are you?”

The man’s smile widened. “Finally, someone who knows how to play the game. You can call me Vanen.”

“What do you want?”

“Now, now, not so fast. It’s my turn.” Vanen stopped circling the room and began to approach the campfire.

Marcus took a step towards him. “Don’t.”

Vanen held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Please, I’m unarmed. What harm could I possibly cause you?”

“The crossbow on your back,” said Viggo.

He laughed, then unstrapped the crossbow and held it up. “This old thing? I only carry it as a warning to would-be thieves and cretins. I couldn’t hit you where you stood.”

When they did not respond, he laughed again and shrugged. “So be it.” He set the crossbow on the ground and kicked it across the room. It slid to a stop by Viggo’s feet.

“Happy now?”

Marcus was silent a moment, and Viggo thought he would still deny the man’s request. Eventually, though, the captain stood aside begrudgingly.

"My deepest thanks," Vanen bowed with a quick flourish as he passed Marcus. "I'm famished. It has not been easy to follow you all this way. The lot of you are slippery, I'll grant you that much."

He crouched by the fire and leaned over the pot, breathing the aromas of the soup deeply. He produced a bowl from his traveling bag and ladled a modest helping of liquid into it. He blew across the bowl, then gingerly took a sip. He licked his lips, then nodded. "Not bad, not bad at all. Could use more salt, but I'm sure you took what you could from the Prioriem's kitchens."

Vanen sat down on one of the stone blocks of rubble they had dragged from the corner of the room and continued to sip from the bowl.

"What are the five of you doing with the Lord Governor of Valla? Or rather, should I say ex-Lord?" Vanen said in between sips. His gray eyes shifted to Gareth, who sat across the fire. The Lord Governor did not look particularly keen on answering.

Marcus sat down across from Vanen, his eyes never leaving the interloper. He was silent for a moment, then said, "He asked us to escort him from the city."

Vanen smiled. He waved the bowl enthusiastically, and drops of soup splattered to the floor.

"Now you're getting it," he said excitedly. "A perfect answer."

Viggo circled around the campsite and sat parallel to Marcus, the three of them creating a triangle around the fire.

"Why are you here?" He tried to keep his voice from wavering.

"I'm here for the same reasons you are," Vanen shrugged. "I too have been given a task."

"That doesn't really answer the question."

"Alright, I suppose that's fair. I'd better not cheat at my own game." Vanen's cool gray eyes locked on to Viggo, and a chill slivered up his spine. "I'm looking for someone."

Me. He's looking for me. But why? He'd forgotten that part of his life. Cut it out, just as they had asked. And now that his past had returned, the only question is what was to become of him.

"I must say, the lot of you make quite the ensemble. If I weren't on such a pressing errand, I would insist on learning all about you. Especially you, my towering friend." He winked at Sev, as if the two of them were in on a joke the rest of the room were unaware of. "If I'm not mistake, there's an Aeonnar in my midst, now that is *very* interesting. The stories you must know."

At this, Rykker sat up. "A what? Do you know what Sev is?"

A belly laugh shook Vanen in his seat. He mockingly wiped a tear from his eye. "Don't tell me you're in the company of Aeonnar without even realizing it. How quaint."

Rykker gritted his teeth. "Just answer the question."

"Now, now. That information seems all too precious for a silly game such as this."

"That's not fair."

Vanen seemed to consider, then said, "I suppose it would be a shame to end it so soon, so I'll tell you this much: the Aeonnar are eternal constructs made by the magi of old—those of the Veritas Guild. They were made to serve the ancient magi, but when the world fell, they vanished. You're friend there might very well be the last of them. Truly rare and exceptional."

Rykker seemed to understand what Vanen was talking about, though Viggo had never heard of this guild.

"I was right," Rykker muttered. He sat back, dazed.

Sev gave no perceptible reaction, but his eyes seemed to glow furiously. The Aeonnar stared intently at Vanen.

“Lord Governor,” Vanen’s gaze drifted to Gareth. “You have a daughter, do you not?”

The shift in conversation startled Viggo. He barely had time to process everything. What was this man’s true game? All he had done was dance around their questions, never reaching the true heart of why he was here. At first, Viggo had thought that perhaps the man did not know him by his face, and was trying lure him into confessing. To what, exactly? But now, he asked about Annet. It made no sense. No sense at all.

The Lord Governor flustered, and his eyes went wide. He looked to Viggo, who just stared hard at him. He hoped that Gareth understood his meaning. Vanen’s intentions with Annet, though unknown, were likely not virtuous. She could still get away.

Gareth’s face sagged into his hands, and he let out a rather convincing sob. “Yes, I did. She did not make it out of the city alive.”

His shoulders shook with continued sobs. He was quite good, actually, Viggo thought. The Lord Governor gave a passing performance of his daughter’s demise.

“Is that so?” Vanen’s brow furrowed, and he narrowed his eyes at the sobbing man. He apparently was not convinced. “I don’t like being lied to.”

“She’s not here,” Viggo spat. “What are you really after?”

Vanen sighed and looked down at his now empty soup bowl. “I think the game is over.”

He stood up and stretched, languid as a cat. "I think I'll take a stroll around this old place. See what sorts of mysteries I might uncover."

Marcus and Viggo stood in unison. His hand found the comforting wood of his hammer in an instant.

"I don't think so," Marcus said quietly. "We're not done here."

Vanen laughed again, cold and bitter this time, the facade of warm amiability stripped away. "You've got quite the wrong idea of what's going on here. I'm afraid you're out of your depth. I find you all very interesting, and that's the only reason I'm going to give you this chance. Step aside, and I'll let you leave here. Don't push me."

He turned his backs to them as if to leave. He made it two steps before Marcus charged, lunging forward with incredible speed.

Vanen turned slowly, and flicked a wrist towards the charging soldier.

"Stop."

The single word resonated throughout the room, and seemed to vibrate somewhere deep inside Viggo. The sound of it, a slimy feeling, trickled into his ears and down his spine. It was disturbing and overwhelming and sickeningly familiar.

Marcus froze in place, arms stretched out before him. His legs still trailed behind him, one knee bent mid-step. His body was suspended in an impossible position, and his face was a mask of pain and frustration.

Vanen turned, and leaned forward, mere inches from Marcus. "What did I tell you? The. Game. Is. Over. I'm doing you a favor."

Viggo had to act. Now, while he was distracted. He rushed forward. Vanen was completely oblivious, too busy taunting

Marcus to notice a blindside attack. Hammer raised, he struck a fierce blow in an arc, straight down on top of his enemy's head. He was thrown off balance surprised that his weapon found only air.

Vanen now stood a foot away from him, grinning wildly. His fist met Viggo squarely in the stomach, sending him sprawling to the ground with preternatural strength.

His breath abandoned him, and his vision swam. He gasped for air, but his lungs would not cooperate. It felt as though he had been struck by a sprinting horse.

He blinked, attempting to restore his vision in time to see Sev swing his warhammer.

As if in slow motion, Vanen sidestepped the attack with ease, then casually swept his leg out, catching Sev's feet. The goliath tumbled awkwardly to the ground.

Viggo coughed, and spat blood and mucus onto the dusty ground. He wobbled to his feet, forcing his world to stay upright. Slowly, he limped towards Vanen, who still looked down at the fallen Aeonnar with a mixture of curiosity and pleasure.

Viggo swung again, targetting his foe's center of mass. This time, Vanen had to slap the blow away with an open palm. He moved blindingly quick, and Viggo was powerless as his hand closed around his throat. Viggo's feet left the ground, and he stared down with bulging eyes at the man who was going to kill him.

Vanen's smile vanished, and Vanen's gray eyes flared to a startling silver. "You've given me a great deal of entertainment today, so I'll do you the favor of ending it quickly."

It became impossible to breath as his hands tightened around Viggo's throat. His hammer clattered to the floor. He tried in vain to pry at Vanen's vice-like grip. It was no use. The world blackened

at the edges, and everything began to dull. His arms hung limply at his sides. Dimly, the thought crossed his mind that no mere human could kill in such a manner. Strange, what one thought of in death. His head felt light, as if it might float to the ceiling. He heard the sound of screaming, a woman's voice. But it was so far away.

"Stop it, please! Don't hurt him!"

The force around his throat vanished, and the floor rushed up to meet him. He collapsed in a heap, unable to move. Gravel and stone scratched at his cheeks, the hard ground bruising his hands and elbows. Air filled his lungs again, and he gulped it in hungrily. Dark circles spotted his vision, but he could just make out Annet standing in the doorway to the Atrium, barely ten strides away. Something in her hand glinted in the moonlight and she waved it with a sharp gesture. He tried to call out, to tell her to run, but all that came out was a strangled cough.

Gareth, frantic, shouted what Viggo could not. "Run! Go, now!"

Vanen's back was now turned from them, facing Annet. Viggo tried to move, to get up, to do something, anything. But he could not. He could only watch.

"Well, you must be Annet. Back from the dead, are we?" Vanen strode towards the doorway.

"Stay back," Annet warned. There was no hint of hesitation or fear in her voice.

"Do you honestly think that thing is going to do you any good? I'm not going to hurt you, I promise. Just put the knife down."

"I said stay back."

She yelped as Vanen came for her and thrust the dagger towards him. In the blink of an eye, Vanen brushed her arm to the side. He

wrenched the dagger from her grip and grabbed hold of her in a single motion.

She struggled, but his grip was firm, and she could not break free.

Vanen, still as calm as the moment he had stepped in to the atrium, licked his lips, surveying the room. "What a mess I've made."

Viggo heard a grunt and a rustle of canvas, and he turned in time to see Lord Governor Gareth holding Rykker's crossbow. Though the man did not shake with rage, his eyes burned with cold fury. He took aim, laying the weapon across his arm, carefully, and fired.

Steel clinked, and the bolt buried itself in the stone a few feet from Vanen. He twirled the dagger with his free hand, gaze fixed on Gareth, and with a careless flick of his wrist, sent the dagger in a vicious arc.

The sharp steel met its mark, vanishing deep within the Lord Governor's chest. For a moment, he stood in shock, gaping at the filigreed hilt of his daughter's dagger, then he collapsed to his knees.

"It's been such fun," Vanen said. "But we must be off now."

"No!" Viggo croaked, stumbling to his feet.

Vanen spoke in unintelligible mumbles. A sensation hit Viggo like a wave, strange yet familiar. It washed over him, roared in his ears, and then vaporized, leaving a thick fog in its wake.

The man with gray eyes made a slicing motion with his hand, and the air itself cracked and was torn asunder, leaving a gaping maw of blackness in its place. Dragging Annet behind him, he stepped into the darkness and vanished. The split in the air stitched

itself back together. For a moment, the air wavered, like heat waves rising from hot stone, and then there was nothing.

All at once, Marcus stumbled forward, grabbing for a body that was no longer there. He collapsed to the ground awkwardly.

Gareth let out a wet cough. Viggo stumbled to the back of the room, falling to his knees at the Lord Governor's side, and saw that the man was already dead. He lay on his back, hands clutching the hilt of the dagger.

:: Chapter Eight ::

REFUGE

“Damn it,” Viggo spat.

For a few moments, his curse hung in empty silence. His companions, still picking themselves up from the fight, said nothing at first, still dazed from the chaos moments before.

“What the fuck just happened?” Len, still sitting with her leg propped up on a stone, looked wildly around, as if one of them might have the slightest idea.

“I... Have no idea,” Marcus said, shaking his head. He walked over to the space where Vanen stood with Annet only seconds ago, waving his hand through the air as if he might stir something.

“Strange, it’s warm.”

“Strange is an understatement,” Rykker muttered. “Who *was* that man? What... What did he *do*? And why did he take Annet? And how did he know so much about Sev...”

The engineer trailed off, and he turned to his companion, who sat as still as a stone by the remains of the fire, eyes wavering with a

faint glow. Sev looked up to Rykker, expression unchanging. "I am... an *Aeonnar*?"

Rykker, still shaking his head in bewilderment, placed his hand on the Aeonnar's stoney shoulder. "I mean, it seems impossible, but it *would* explain a lot."

"Did you understand what he said?" Marcus asked.

"Sort of," Rykker hedged, rubbing the back of his neck. "I know a little of the time before the dark age, before the falling of the world, from bits of old text I've picked up here and there. But not much. And I never could have conceived that Sev could be that old... that must have been, what, thousands of years ago?"

"How is that even possible?" Len adjusted her position to face the Aeonnar.

"I have no idea."

Viggo climbed to his feet, finally, wiping his hands on his pants. He sighed deeply, and felt the heavy weight of resignation set upon his shoulders. A deep ache, one that he had buried far down inside long ago, crept to the pit of his stomach.

"I can't explain everything that just happened," he said. "But I think there is something I should tell all of you. Something that might hold great importance to what we have just witnessed."

They turned their attention from Sev in unison, shock painted clearly on their faces.

"Well, I haven't always been a medic in the royal army. Or a blacksmith."

He walked back to the circle and sat down, rubbing his chin vigorously. After all this time, he would finally break his promise. Unleash a secret that would surely mean his death and the destruction of the life he had built so carefully for himself over the

years. One that he had come to like, maybe even love, in its own right. He had at least been saving lives. All of this had almost all come undone once before, and he had managed to avoid it then. But now? He had no choice. Not after Valla. Vanen. Annet. It was too much.

“Look, what I’m about to tell you, it’s something that I’ve never told anyone. Ever. You have to swear on the gods above, should they exist, not to tell a single soul what I am about to tell you.”

They each nodded in turn.

He must have given something away on his face.

“You’ve seen something like this before, haven’t you?”, said Marcus.

Viggo ignored the direct question. “A lifetime ago, I was an acolyte of the Church of the Triumvirate. I was an orphan, left on their doorstep as a baby. I grew up there, lived my entire childhood within the walls of the holy city. It was my home. Every friend, enemy, mentor, teacher, family, I ever had was in that place. My entire world ended at the city gates. Then, one day, I saw something. Something that challenged the very nature of my reality.

“I saw Magic. Real, true, magic. I wasn’t supposed to see it, and not only did it fundamentally change my understanding of the world, it destroyed it. They banished me from the church, and threatened that if I should ever reveal what I had seen, to anyone, they would kill me. What I saw today, what Vanen did, what it *felt* like, was exactly what it felt like the last time, all those years ago. Vanen, somehow, I don’t know, was using the old Magic. The Magic that was lost millenia ago.”

For a moment, they sat in stunned silence. Marcus looked troubled. Rykker stared inquisitively at Viggo with a newfound interest.

Len broke the silence. She spoke softly. "Viggo, I'm so sorry that happened to you. I can't even imagine what that must have been like."

"It's okay. It was a long time ago," Viggo said. "Feels like another life."

"But why Annet?" Rykker asked.

"I think I might know." Wincing, Len leaned forward to stand up.

"You're leg—" Viggo began.

"It's okay," she made a placating gesture, and straightened her leg, still wrapped in a splint. "It feels much better."

"But how—"

She picked at the wrappings and unraveled them, loop by loop, until the splint fell away. "It's stiff, but I should be able to walk on it."

"But your leg was shattered," Viggo cried, incredulous. "It was going to take months to heal, and there was a good chance you wouldn't be able to walk on it ever again."

"After everything we've seen today, this is what shocks you?" she asked. "Annet was always special."

"Of course," he said, understanding dawning on him. Just like the woman he had seen all those years ago. Annet was just like her. Just like Vanen.

Len nodded.

Marcus glanced at Rykker, then Len. "What? What is it?"

“Ever since she was a little girl, Annet could do things. Inexplicable things,” Len explained. “We called it her Gift. Every bird or small creature that would wander into the Prioriem’s courtyard, injured, she would take care of them. No matter how hurt, she would have them good as new in mere hours. At first, Gareth wasn’t sure what to make of it, but when her *gifts* started to manifest further, he started secluding her away. And when her Mother died, well. I’m surprised she had as many friends as she did.

“There was one summer,” Len said, and a slow smile crept on to her face as she did, “when that girl got so sick of being stuffed indoors, that she ran away from home. Gareth had the guards in a frenzy. He was furious. They searched the city, high and low, to no avail. Eventually, they found her trudging through the forest outside the city, three days worth of food in a pack and nothing else. She was trying to walk to Achenar to find some wizard she read about in a storybook to help her control her powers.”

Her smile faded, and her eyes slid to Gareth’s corpse that still lay collapsed on the stone floor. Her brow furrowed, and suddenly she looked very tired. “He *did* love her, in his own way. Maybe not the right way, but he did his best.”

“What’s going to happen to her?” Rykker said. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” Viggo said. “I don’t know what we should do. But we have to do something.”

“I think I can get us back to Fastaar’s camp from here,” offered Marcus.

“What are the odds they haven’t packed up and left by now?”

“Rykker has a point,” said Viggo. “Whether Fastaar made it to Valla in time or not, they likely have broken camp at this point. And with Valla gone...”

“To Senna, then?” Len asked.

Marcus shrugged. “It *is* the closest city. Any survivors from Valla will probably end up there. Fastaar and the rest of the army, too. From there, we can regroup, rejoin the army if possible. After that, I’m not sure.”

The rest of the party agreed to the plan, and decided to leave at first light. Sleep did not come to Viggo that night, and so he spent the hours before dawn keeping watch over the camp, peering into the smoldering embers of the dying fire.

The way to Senna was not particularly difficult, but was made more-so by their avoidance of any well-traveled roads. Marcus thought it was for the best, in case the Antuzans employed scouts along main paths to look for survivors of the siege. So they stayed deep within the forest, Marcus’ expert tracking preventing their course from straying.

On the third day, they intersected with a small group of refugees, heading in the same direction. Citizens of Valla. Dirt-covered and weary though they were, they offered bright smiles to Viggo and his companions. Even though they had just lost their entire world, he thought, they still keep their heads high. The people of the southern province were hard to break.

Over the next few days, they crossed paths with more Vallan survivors, and with each encounter their cluster grew. Before long, just shy of a hundred folk walked together through the trees.

It seemed that more had made it out of the city than they initially realized. Perhaps Fastaar had come through after all, staving off the enemy long enough for some to escape fate at the hands of the Empire.

On the sixth day since the fall of Valla, their division of refugees arrived at city of Senna.

Senna, the twin-sister city of Valla, looked much the same from the exterior, with tall gray-beige walls, round turrets evenly dispersed in either direction. They came to one of the gates, a tall wood-iron arch, where a small garrison of guards stood watch atop a parapet.

As they approached, Sev pulled the hood of his cloak over his head, covering most of his features in shadow. It took Marcus a moment to realize that he was hiding himself. Over the past few weeks, he had grown accustomed to the Aeonnar's look and size. Even the refugees from Valla had not taken much notice at first—though they had more pressing concerns, to be fair—and by the end of their journey to Senna barely gave him a passing glance. Still, he supposed it always paid to be cautious around strangers. Likely it was standard practice for Rykker and Sev wherever they went.

Marcus pushed his way to the front of the crowd and called up at them. "Hello there! My name is Captain Marcus Wyr of the Royal Army. With me are refugees from Valla. The Antuzan Empire has invaded Ilris, and Valla has fallen. You must open your gates to any and all survivors. They have no where else to go."

A few of the guards ducked out of view in response, and for a few moments there was no response.

"Please," Marcus shouted. "Many of them are tired, and haven't eaten in days. There are only—"

His words were cut off by a series of metallic clanks. The doors of the gate slowly opened.

On the other side, Marcus was met by the steady gaze of a guard who held up a hand. "Halt. You may go no further until such time that you are searched and deemed safe for entry into the city."

Marcus raised his hands in a placating gesture. "Of course. We don't want any trouble. Many of these people are unarmed. They seek only food and shelter."

He took a few steps back, gesturing for his companions to step to the side.

"Let's wait here," he said. "I want to make sure that everyone gets into the city safely."

The entire process took less than an hour. Once everyone was inside, Marcus breathed a sigh as he and his companions watched the Vallan refugees shuffle into the city. After all the destruction and death they had surely seen less than a week ago, they still held together. He marveled at their resilience.

"Where will they go?" Rykker asked.

Len tore her eyes from the procession, and Marcus caught a look of sadness or anger, or perhaps both. "Some of them may have family here to stay with, or kept enough coin on them to pay their way. For those that have neither, the guard will set up refugee camps. It won't be much, but it'll be enough. For them."

Marcus felt a pang of sympathy for her. In the midst of all that had happened to them, he'd forgotten that she *was* Vallan. *Her* people—friends, family, loved ones—had just lost everything.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. One corner of her mouth twitched up in a half-hearted smile, acknowledging the gesture of good will.

"I mean it," she said. Muscles tensed in her jaw and her eyes went dark. "It will be enough. We Vallans are not so easily broken. The Antuzans *will* get what they are owed. That much I can promise."

For a moment, standing in her armor, blue cloak of Valla, now tarnished with mud from the road, trailing behind her, Len looked as if she would take on the legions of Antuza by herself. Then she deflated with a sigh. "I suppose it can wait, though. After everything, a hot meal and a warm bed sounds better than revenge right now."



The streets of Senna were more narrow than the wide two-lane roads of Valla. Buildings along either side of the main thoroughfare clustered tightly together—some sharing walls, others leaving even narrower, dark alleyways.

It was nearly sundown, and the occasional two-story building cast long shadows across the street, leaving strips of golden sunlight between them. It would be dark soon, so Marcus led them deeper into the city in search of an inn for the night. What little change they had left between them would not afford them much.

It was not long before he sensed it.

Years of trekking the Northern wilds and being in the army had honed this particular sense of his. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he felt a prickling sensation behind his ears.

They were being followed.

Not this again.

Without looking back, he spoke in a quiet tone, just barely audible enough to be heard by the rest of the group. “We’re being followed.”

Rykker groaned, making no attempt to hide his surprise.

“Shh!” exclaimed Viggo, nearly as quiet as Marcus. “Not so loud. What’s your move?”

What should they do? Marcus feared that if their stalker was anything like Vanen, there wasn’t much they *could* do. Run and hide? Stand and fight? Neither option seemed like it had a winning chance. The streets at this time of the evening were bustling. What if innocent bystanders got hurt? Or saw something they shouldn’t see? Marcus had no way of knowing how secretive Vanen, and others like him—if there *were* others like him, were prone to being. If word got out that the Antuzans had allies that could create portals and crush your windpipe with their bare hands... he shuddered to think of the consequences.

“Just keep walking, then follow my lead.”

He led them a few more blocks down the main street, waiting for the crowds to thin at least a little bit. Then, without warning, he moved. He pivoted on his heel and dashed down one of the narrow alleys.

The walls here were claustrophobic, less than an arm span. It was also dark—the light from the setting sun did not make it’s way to the dark recesses between the buildings. Marcus ran deeper into the alley, and only when he came to a stop did he turn. His party was fast on his heels, but their would-be assailant was nowhere to be seen.

“Did we lose them?” puffed Rykker between ragged breaths. Clearly the engineer did not have much in the way of athletic ability.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“How can you be sure?” asked Viggo.

Without giving an answer, Marcus pushed past them, taking a few steps closer back towards the main road. He could still feel them. He didn’t know *how*, but he could. He always could.

Enough games. This ends now.

“Come on!” he shouted. “I know you’re there, just around the corner. We’re not afraid of you!”

A dry, feminine laugh rattled down the alley.

A short figure, cloaked in flat gray robes, stepped from around the corner. Their face was obscured by a wide hood. As they stepped closer, delicate hands reached up to remove the hood, revealing a pale face, round as the moon, framed by thick black curls of hair, tumbling down to her shoulders. Her eyes, a bright amber, seemed to pierce into Marcus’ very soul. There was an otherworldly look about her—something that he could not place. It was as if she had all the wisdom of a battle-hardened marshal behind those eyes, but she could not have been more than twenty-five.

“I’m sorry,” the woman said with a smile. “I did not mean to startle you. To be frank, I’m surprised you noticed me at all.”

“We’ve been through too much already to deal with more of these games,” Marcus spat. “Who the hell are you?”

At this, her pencil-thin eyebrows threatened to jump off her head. “My, I don’t know what I did that would warrant such hostility.”

“It’s not what you did, it’s what your partner, ally, or whoever did,” Viggo growled from behind Marcus.

The woman frowned, looking down as if suddenly distracted by something. When she swept her gaze yet again over the group, her frown deepened into a scowl. "Wait, where is the girl?"

She's talking about Annet.

"Or the Lord Governor, for that matter," she continued, more to herself than to Marcus. "I don't understand how this could have happened. You were supposed to escort them out of Valla safely."

"Yeah, well, clearly that didn't happen," Marcus said flatly.

Something was different about this woman. Around Vanen, Marcus had felt almost sick, as if looking at the man--creature, or whatever he was—was enough to give one vertigo. She, on the other hand, had no such effect. Clearly she had some of the same knowledge that Vanen did, but he got the impression that she was genuinely surprised that Annet and Lord Gareth were not with them, which meant she did not know that Vanen had taken Annet.

"They're gone," Viggo said. Evidently the medic had the same intuition about trusting her that Marcus did. "A man that went by the name of Vanen killed the Lord Governor and took Annet."

Pure rage and disgust played across the woman's face. She turned away, pinching the bridge of her nose. "By the old gods above, that's the worst news I've heard all week. This doesn't make any sense..."

"Who are you, exactly?" asked Marcus.

After a moment she looked up, and her face was placid again, the anger wiped away in an instant.

"My name is Silmendara," she said. "But you can call me Mara."

"Well, Mara, how did you know we were going to bring the Lord Governor and his daughter to Senna?"

She bit her lip in thought. "There is much I need to explain, I think. This turn of events changes things a great deal, and to be honest I'm not quite sure how to proceed—which if you knew me well at all, is terribly out of character."

"I think I speak for all of us in saying that we would very much like some answers," Marcus said.

:: Chapter Nine ::

ANSWERS

The owner of The Silver Spoon inn was a stout, angry man. His wide face had layers of wrinkles, and he squinted at Mara with disdain. He placed a thick hand on a large, leather-bound book on the counter that he stood behind. It's pages were yellowed and folded with age.

"There's no vacancy," he said.

Mara peered up at him and clasped her hands behind her back.

"I find that hard to believe," she said as she swept her gaze across the nearly empty common room. A lonely man sat at the far end nursing a dark bottle, graying hair falling over his face and obscuring his features. He appeared to be either asleep or dead.

The owner looked past Mara, eyeing Rykker and the rest of his party with a discerning look. "They look like troublemakers. I don't take in troublemakers."

Mara reached into her pack and brought out a pouch that sagged heavily. It clinked as she emptied its contents onto the

innkeeper's countertop, triangular flat chips of glittering metal clattering against the smooth wood.

"This should be enough to rent all the rooms in your inn for a month," Mara said, her voice tinting a shade towards frustration. "I just need three rooms for a week, and use of your private dining room."

The innkeeper picked up one of the chips. In his hands, the piece looked miniature. His brow furrowed and he held it up to his face. He looked from the coin back to Mara with dark, suspicious eyes.

"It's Gyish coin," she noted. "I'm sorry, I haven't had time to see a money changer since my arrival in the city. I can assure you, it's worth what I say it is. Take it to any blacksmith and they'll pay you handsomely for it."

The owner of the inn grumbled, then placed the coin back down on the table. "I know what it is. What are you doing with it is what I am wondering."

"I've been... traveling abroad, lately."

"That so?"

"Indeed it is."

For a long moment, he simply stared. Then he glanced down at the rather large pile of coins atop the table and licked his lips. Evidently, the innkeeper's greed surpassed his distrust. He began to collect the coins, stacking them neatly into piles ten high. He then took each stack and carefully placed them into a wooden tray on a separate counter against the wall behind him.

Once he was done, he reached for something beneath the counter, retrieving two brass keys, their ends looped with lanyards made of coarse yarn.

“Two rooms,” he said flatly. “Wait here, the dining room will be ready soon.”

Without waiting for a response, he turned, picked up the tray of coins, and retreated into the back room.



Rykker's stomach growled audibly as the sweet aroma of hot food wafted into the dining room. The last decent meal he had was back in Valla, and he'd barely even appreciated it since he was so focused on his research at the time. He resolved to enjoy every bite of this one.

A server entered through a door towards the back of the room carrying a large round tray filled with plates of steaming food. The server placed the large bowls of food at the center of the table, then gave everyone a clean plate of their own, along with silverware. While the innkeeper had been boorish with their accomodations, Rykker could not deny that the display was impressive.

Not one for pretense, Rykker reached for one of the plates, helping himself to a large portion of the dish. It seemed to be some kind of breaded and fried meat, coated in a sticky red sauce, laying atop a bed of long grains. He took a bite, and although the steam filled his mouth with heat, the food was delicious. He gave a start when Marcus nudged his arm.

“Oh,” he said through partially full mouth. “Sorry.”

He slid the serving plate to Sev, who sat to his right. Sev looked at the plate for a moment, then passed it along. Rykker had never seen Sev eat anything, or even give any indication that he could.

Others around the table took more serving trays from the center, helping themselves then passing them around in a similar fashion. The meal included a variety of cooked vegetables, a

different kind of meat, this one grilled with a brown gravy, and a dark, fluffy bread, round in shape and mostly hollow on the inside.

For a time, they ate in silence, only the occasional clink and scrape of silverware against ceramic. It seemed to Rykker that the others felt similarly to him—it had been a long while since they had had a moment of peace. A moment to relax.

He studied Mara, who sat at the head of the table. She had taken some food, but had barely eaten any of it. Rykker wasn't sure what to make of her. In the presence of Vanen, there had been an overwhelming sense of *wrongness*. Marcus and Viggo had mentioned it as an almost physical reaction, and while it hadn't been that extreme for him, there *was* something. Some feeling that he had. To him, the feeling was akin to walking through a house that was on a slant, as if it hadn't been built properly. Something broken that couldn't be fixed unless it was destroyed. On the other hand, Vanen had known what Sev was. An Aeonnar. He seemed to have answers to questions that Rykker had been asking since the day he had dug Sev from the dirt.

If Mara was anything like Vanen, he wasn't sure the answers would be worth the cost. She didn't give him the same feeling, though. She *was*, admittedly, rather odd, but not in the same, dark way. Perhaps she, too, had knowledge of the Aeonnar and the years before the Dark Age. Her eyes had lingered on Sev for quite some time during their encounter in the alley, though that was not uncommon for folk who saw Sev for the first time. Still, if there was even a chance he could learn more, he had to try.

Shortly after the food was gone, Mara cleared her throat, making a curt noise. All eyes in the room turned towards her, and she tilted her head slightly, flashing a brief smile.

"Thank you all for agreeing to come with me," she said. "I know your experiences with strangers of late have been... less than cordial."

At that, Viggo snorted. "You could say that."

"I can assure you that I have *nothing* to do with Vanen and his ilk," she continued. "In fact, my associates and I act in opposition to his organization."

"Organization," Marcus asked, leaning forward in his chair. "There are more out there like him?"

Mara grimaced. "I'm afraid so."

"By the trinity," he muttered, shaking his head. "What do they want?"

"That *is* the golden question, isn't it?" she said. "One that I'm not entirely qualified to answer. There are great machinations at work in Asdel, far greater than the kidnapping of any one person. There are, though, puzzle pieces that may fit the larger whole. I admit, I'm still working out how they fit together."

"Alright", Viggo chimed. "But what can you tell us? Why did they take Annet? What do they want with her? Did it have something to do with her Entra?"

The air fell silent, and Mara drummed her fingers against the wooden table. She stared at Viggo for a long moment. "It seems the medic knows more than he's let on. Where did you hear that word?"

He floundered, clearly losing his nerve. "I overheard someone say it a long time ago."

"Before I answer," she said, speaking slowly. "There is something you must understand."

She swept her eyes across the room and received a chorus of nods in return.

“What we are to discuss in this room is not to leave it. I tell you only because Vanen has let you live, and clearly taken an interest in you. It is likely that you will cross paths with him again, and it is my hope that this knowledge will aid you in his defeat. However, if the general public were to learn these secrets, it would cause nothing short of mass panic. Another war with Antuza is bad enough without needing to worry about monsters masquerading as humans come to steal you away.”

Another round of nods.

“The truth is, whether you like it or not, you are now a part of this. Each and every one of you.”

“We don’t even know what *this* is,” Rykker blustered. The woman was nearly as bad as Vanen, dancing around answers without ever getting to the heart of anything.

“I’m getting to that.” Mara ran her fingers through her hair and sighed. “Where to begin? Vanen, the creature that you met and fought with, is what we call a Scathe. Human, once, but no longer. The Scathe are both more than, and less than human, in some ways. They mostly retain their human form. Physically, at least. But their *humanity*, much of that is lost in their transformation.”

“Transformation?” asked Viggo.

“The Scathe are born of a pact with a terrible being, not of this world. This pact changes them, but it also gives them a particular aptitude for the arcane.”

“Arcane, like... magic?” Len had been quiet for most of the meal and conversation, but now she leaned forward eagerly.

”*Exactly* like magic.”

Marcus tilted back in his chair and puffed out his cheeks, then blow out the air with a sigh. "This is beyond me."

Mara stood up and began to pace her side of the room, hands clasped behind her back. "I know this is a lot to take in."

"Where did they come from?" asked Rykker.

"To answer that, we must first go back to a time when magic flowed freely in Asdel." At this Mara almost sounded wistful. "Before Ilris, and the Antuzan Empire, before the Dark Age, even, great empires ruled, and the Veritas Guild, an order of great magi had influence on nearly all six continents across the world. Then, in an event known as the Excidium, the world collapsed, taking many empires, including the guild itself, with it. Many theologists and scholars alike believe that this incident coincides with the exodus of magic from the world, or as it was known then, Entra.

"It was thought that this mass departure of magic was like a great blip, as if all the sudden all the lakes and rivers and oceans of Entra in the world were all of the sudden dried up, never to be seen again. But that is not how it works. It's more like... the faucet was turned off. What we already had we could keep, but very slowly, it would drain from the world, spiraling into nothingness.

"For now, at least, not all Entra is gone. But where it was once in abundance, now is terribly scarce, found only in the smallest of quantities. Residuals of an age long past. To most, almost gone and *gone* are indistinguishable. But for some, they have an extraordinary gift, and aptitude to sense these residuals, and, in some cases, harness them. Annet is one of such disposition.

"The Scathe, are, by many definitions, an perversion against the natural order of the world as we know it. I do not know when they came about, only that it was some time after the Dark Age began.

They worship a dark god—it has gone by many names, but the one you may be familiar with is Odeth. A Scathe is created when a human makes, willingly, a deal with Odeth. With this pact, they are free to *consume* the Entra within others in a way that gives them power far beyond mortal capabilities. What their greater scheme is, I do not know. But one thing is clear: they are growing in numbers. All across Ilris and beyond, individuals like Annet are being taken. Individuals that I have kept a careful eye on—and yet they manage to spirit them away all the same. I fear the capabilities of a Scathe with the innate talent of someone like Annet.”

“So, what? They are going to turn her into one of these... things?” asked Len.

“There is a catch. To become a Scathe, the human must be willing.” Mara sighed. “Though they do have... compulsory ways of getting what they want.”

She sat up a little straighter in her chair. “Annet is strong. They can’t force her to do anything.”

Mara grimaced, clasping her hands together. “There is ulterior motive for the individuals they hunt. If they cannot be coerced into joining their ranks, then I’m afraid they are *consumed*.”

The way she said the word made even Rykker shiver. He did not know whether she meant it in the metaphorical or literal sense. Maybe it was both.

“Annet must be saved,” she said. “But these events will start a chain reaction. The empire invading Ilris. The Scathe growing at an exponential rate. A war is brewing. A war that will be fought on two fronts.” Mara paused, holding her gaze on each of them for a moment. “And all of you in this room are involved in some way.”

Rykker laughed. He couldn't help it. He tried to stifle it, and he snorted through his nose.

Mara did not react. "You realize this is not a joke."

"No, no... I know," Rykker said. His fit was over, and he regained his composure. "It's not that. I completely believe you, after what we've been through this past few days."

"Then what?"

"It's just... you are pitching this whole *thing* about being important after telling us the 'world is in danger'. It's just so rote. I have a life. I have a job. Don't get me wrong, I feel bad for the girl, but in what capacity could I even help? What makes you think I want any of what you're selling?"

Mara smiled at that. "You have a very skeptical mind."

"Thank you."

"But you are also very quick to blind yourself. I'm not selling you anything, Rykker. I think you will find that you more than most are tied to what will unfold, whether you like it or not." She addressed the table again. "I know each and every one of you will have your own doubts and fears at what I have to say. But I also see in each of you a hunger. A drive to know. Let me assure you that the path I offer has what you seek."

Rykker thought about Sev. About the countless years he had spent trying to understand where he came from. Libraries all across Ilris—access to Universities and personal collections of scholars, governors, and socialites. None of it had turned up a shred of insight into the nature of Sev's being. And then, after all that, Vanen had just *known*. How much knowledge was locked away, hidden within this clandestine world of Magic and monsters? The possibilities of what he could learn where limitless.

"I guess I've got nothing better to do," he said, adopting a mock casual tone.

"You're quick to change your tune." Viggo eyed him with a look of distrust.

Still, though, Rykker could tell his heart wasn't in it. The craving was there, too, behind his squint.

"We can't just desert the army," asserted Marcus. "Unless you want to be court marshalled when you get back to Achenar."

"The city of Valla is turned to rubble. It would not be uncommon to assume you are simply another casualty of the seige," offered Mara.

"We'll be back eventually."

"Perhaps. Though the world may look differently by the time you do."

"What exactly are you asking of us?"

Mara tapped her finger along her jaw. "Now that is the question, isn't it? In the simplest of terms: Find Annet. Save her from a fate worse than death."

"Simple terms, yeah."

"I said simple, not easy. At this point, you all know the conditions of what I ask. For what you seek—knowledge, power—I offer in exchange for your complaisance. If that is not enough, know that you will be serving a greater good. I am not alone in my crusade against the rising darkness to the West. You could think of it as joining a sizeable but decentralized organization dedicated to fighting the war that your armies cannot. A terrible fate awaits your lands at the hand of the Empire and the Scathe should you not act."

Before anyone could answer, a sharp, formal knock rattled the door.

“Ah, about time,” Mara said. She stood and skated to the door. “I was beginning to worry.”

A tall, slender man wearing a plain but well-cut long coat stepped into the room, bird-like eyes surveying the room with a swift efficiency.

“Hawthorne, I’m glad you could join us,” said Mara. “This is the cohort from Valla I told you about.”

Hawthorne placed his hands behind his back and gave a curt bow in the direction of the table. “The honor is mine.”

“I’ve told him he doesn’t have to do that here,” Mara dismissed. “He’s from Sohntu. One of my associates and an invaluable asset to our cause.”

After a round of introductions, it was Rykker that spoke next. “Let’s say we agree to do this. What’s our next move? I saw that... rift Vanen opened. One second they were there, then nothing. Gone. We have no way of tracking them down.”

At this, Hawthorne stepped forward smoothly, like a reed blowing in the wind. Mara had offered him a chair, but he refused. He spoke softly, but with a deep reverberating basso. “Our intelligence has narrowed Vanen’s location to a region south of Saurkar, in Western Antuza.”

Saurkar was a long way from Senna. Rykker had never been to the continent of Kador, but it lay across the narrow Plys Sea and required the charter of a ship to make the journey. “Wouldn’t that take weeks?”

“If you’re taking a direct route, yes. But we will not be,” explained Hawthorne.

“What does that mean?”

“It’s easier to show than to explain.” Hawthorne spoke with a finality that indicated he would say no more on the matter.

:: Chapter Ten ::

THE BOUNDLESS FOREST

Hawthorne took them out of the city and into the forest. He still had not explained what they were doing or where they were headed, and Marcus was beginning to question his decision to come along. Rykker, Sev, and Viggo had also decided to take Mara up on her offer. Len had stayed behind to meet with Senna's Governor and bring news of Gareth's death, but also to help the Vallan refugees that found their way to the city. Mara, too, stayed in the city, claiming she had business elsewhere. She had wished them luck, assuring that they were in good hands.

Marcus felt as if he was abandoning everything as he always did. But that was what he did, was it not? Run? First Sen, his village, his kinsmen. And now his country. At the first chance he got, he ran from his problems when they became too big for him. In this case, though, did he have a choice? If what Mara said was true—if she was right about the role they had to play in all of this, then just

maybe he was where he was supposed to be. He hoped he wasn't being played for a fool and falling into bad habits.

With everything that had happened since he left Fastaar's war camp, Marcus couldn't have just walked away. Something told him that whatever this was—Vanen, Annet, Mara, the Scathe—was important. The Empire *had* arrived rather suddenly at Valla. No Antuzan ships on the horizon, or whispers from Ilrian spies that war was brewing. No, Mara must have been right on that account. The Scathe pulled the strings of the Empire from the dark, and were somehow helping them wage war against Ilris. A shudder ran through Marcus at the thought. His mind raced through the possibilities of what they might be after. It seemed likely they were tied to this religion—Odeth, he thought they called it. Perhaps they just wanted to destroy heretics. But why Ilris? Why not Dei, or Gyim? They were much easier targets than Ilris, who was at least shielded by the narrow sea. He did not know.

Their new guide took them deep into the wood north of Senna, outside of any road or well-traveled path. It was early morning, yet the sun barely pierced the thick canopy of the trees. It felt more like a perpetual twilight, and Marcus couldn't help but imagine that they were in another world entirely. A muffled quiet lay across the wilderness, as if all manner of creature, even insects stayed clear of the area.

Hawthorne led the way through the dense undergrowth without pause or so much as a look back. Surprisingly, Viggo and Rykker had barely said a word since leaving the city. This came as a shock to Marcus—they seemed to always have an opinion on everything. Perhaps the fear of the unknown, of what awaited, gave them pause. Or perhaps they were simply too fixated on their own

thoughts. On the things they had learned these past few days. He certainly was.

Marcus tensed as he felt Hawthorne's pace slow and become more deliberate, as if sensing for something. Then, they stepped into a small glade, just enough for each of them to have a space to stand. A stone monolith stood at the center of the clearing, slightly taller than Marcus. It looked old—no, ancient. Even older than the fateful temple they had found themselves in after the fall of Valla. Harsh, angular runes etched their way across its surface in a language that he did not recognize. Although the stone was rough with wear, pocked and eroded in places, the runes themselves were still legible. The monolith, slightly askew, protruded from a small crater in the earth where no grass or shrub grew. A perfect circle encompassed the obelisk.

Marcus kept his distance from the thing—it was probably best to be cautious. Rykker pushed his way past, eyes locked on the slab. He nearly took a step down into the pit before Hawthorne reached out to stop him.

"Wait," the tall man said, reaching out to stop him.

"What is it?" Rykker's eyes did not leave the center of the clearing. He brushed away Hawthorne's grip.

"It is a Lith. A gateway. A way to go where we need to go. To the Boundless Forest. Stay here." Without further explanation, Hawthorne dropped his pack on the ground and climbed down into the crater and approached the monolith. It seemed to shrink in the presence of him. Marcus could not tell if that was a trick of the eye or something else.

Hawthorne laid a thin hand upon the stone and began to speak. Marcus frowned, realizing that he could not understand what the

man was saying. No, that wasn't quite right. The words themselves vanished before him, snatched from the space between hearing and understanding. He was sure that the Hawthorne was talking, but the harder Marcus tried to focus on them, the more they slipped away. A faint white light shone from beneath the hand on the stone, spreading outwards to encompass the entire pillar.

The light grew until Marcus could not keep his eyes open. He threw his arm up to protect his face as the illumination became blinding. As quickly as it came, it was gone. For a moment, patterns danced in the darkness, and he squeezed his eyes shut before opening them, blinking the momentary bluriness away.

When his vision returned, his first thought was that nothing had changed. It did not take long, however, for his senses to make the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. Although the clearing they now stood in looked nearly identical, Marcus was sure that they were no longer mere miles from Senna. Something about the way the air felt, the thickness of it, and the sky—he was sure the light was different here. More gray, somehow.

"Where are we?" he asked.

Hawthorne released his touch from the Lith and took a step back, looking around. For the first time, Marcus noticed a small smile. "This is Indenos. The Boundless Forest. The Wood."

The air was thicker here. The effort required to draw breath required that the act be a conscious effort. Upon closer examination of his surroundings, Marcus saw that the trees here were unlike anything he had ever seen. Pale, knurled trunks thicker than his wingspan ascended to towering heights. Twisting leaves longer than his forearm sprouted from a multitude of branches. They seemed to

reach for him, beckoning to step into their dark embrace. A faint dusk cast sleeping shadows that crawled along the undergrowth.

"Inde—What?" said Rykker. He took a few tentative steps towards one of the trees, reaching out slowly as if contemplating whether the thing was going to snatch him up. "What happened? Was that Magic?"

"Yes." Hawthorne climbed out of the crater. Dusting off his dark pants, he said, "I wouldn't touch that if I were you."

Rykker's hand snapped back. "Why not? Is it poisonous?"

"I don't think so, but the Forest doesn't typically like to be messed with."

"Doesn't *like* it?" Marcus said. He peered again into the tree line, trying to see if the branches were moving in accordance with the slight breeze or not.

Hawthorne shrugged. "I just think it's best to be safe when it comes to these matters."

"Well, Okay," Viggo said, carefully stepping away from some of the undergrowth. "But you still haven't explained *where* we are."

Their indiscernible guide collected his belongings from the ground and slung them across his back. "Let's get going. I'll explain along the way."



As it turned out, the Forest remained docile, even as they tramped through the heavy wood. There was no path to follow, and Marcus wondered how Hawthorne knew the way. It had been at least an hour. Maybe more? It was hard to tell, here—the angle of shadows had not changed in all the time since they had left the

clearing. Disconcerted though Marcus was, Hawthorne led on with a confident stride, picking his way through the dense trees.

“Indenos is not of the world you know,” Hawthorne explained. “You could not point to it on any map on Asdel. It is... outside of our world.”

“We’re on another world?” Rykker gingerly pushed a branch back as he stepped forward.

“Sort of, I guess you could think of it as such. But it is not so simple. The Forest *was* another world, long ago. It was dying, and the old magi of our world siezed it, lashing it to our own. They bent Indenos for their own needs, warping the land. They created the Monoliths, and now this place is bound to ours in many places. But these links—while they are many miles apart in our world—are not so far in this one. The magi used the Forest to traverse their great Empire, taking journeys of a thousand miles in a few days.”

“Unbelievable.” Rykker shook his head with awe. “Sev, do you think you’ve been here before?”

“I don’t know.” The Aeonnar trod lightly considering his size, keeping to the rear of the pack. It sometimes amazed Marcus at how invisible the goliath could be. He tended to just blend in to the background most of the time. “I wish I could remember, Rykker.”

The engineer glanced back at Sev and grinned, an uncharacteristic twinkle in his eye. “That’s alright, Sev. We’ll figure you out. Just wait.”

“So this place,” Marcus said. “It’s going to get us to Antuza?”

“Yes.” Hawthorne slowed his pace as he worked his way around a thick bush of thorny vines. “I think our path will take us no more than a day, although such timekeeping methods will be all but useless here.”

“Yeah, I’ve notice that.”

“There is no ‘sun’, so to speak, in Indenos. The light we have here is a remnant of the magi that once maintained it. Eventually, it will go out, and the Forest will be plunged into darkness. Even the trees were cared for by the wizards. It is said that there used to be great avenues leading from one Monolith to the other. The Forest allowed for unmitigated trade between nations all across Asdel. It’s no wonder the magi ruled the world.”

Marcus looked around at the trees, with their incomprehensibly thick trunks and towering height. They must be thousands of years old. What kind of power must one yield to tame such giants?

“How do you know all of this?” asked Rykker. “I’ve read a lot of books about the magi and I’ve never even heard of this place.”

“Most of the books you find about the magi barely have any truth left in them.” Hawthorne spoke matter-of-factly, and Marcus felt Rykker tense up. The engineer did not like to be made to feel foolish. “But I’ve spent my entire life dedicated to learning all that I can about this place. Its history. How it was created. Reading the runes. Traversing its expanse. Unlocking every secret behind every leaf.”

Rykker stomped over a bush more forcefully than necessary.

Hawthorne glanced back at the sound of a branch snapping. “I’d be happy to share my knowledge, Mr. Rykker. Should you survive your journey to the Empire, it would be my pleasure to impart what I have learned.”

“Why would you—”

Before Rykker could finish his sentence, a guttural cry bellowed overhead. The very trees themselves seemed to recoil at the sound,

and what little light the dusk offered them shuddered for a moment.

Years of practiced reflexes had ingrained in Marcus what he likened to a sixth sense, which screamed at him to move. *Move*. He dropped to the ground, ignoring the sharp painful impact against his knees. A shadow fell over him, and Marcus rolled to his right. Pushing himself into a crouched stance.

Before him stood a creature unlike any other natural thing that walked in his own world. Taller than he by half, the beast craned its elongated, jagged maw and loosed a series of foul croaks and clicks in his direction. Dark, leathery wings flapped as it stalked towards Marcus. Dregs of black vapor sloughed off of its body, pooling at its clawed feet. Snapping jaws gleaming with yellow teeth and red eyes prowled ever-closer, and Marcus readied himself, rolling to the balls of his heels. He brought his fists up to protect his face.

“Don’t!” Hawthorne shouted from behind. But it was too late.

Quicker than he could have imagined, the creature lunged. A feathered bolt sprouted from the monster’s eye and it gurgled, swaying to one side, giving Marcus a chance to narrowly evade the charge. Using the full weight of his momentum, he swung his metal fist into the beast’s jaw. A satisfying crunch. An otherworldly shriek. A rush of air knocked Marcus momentarily off-balance.

In an instant, the monster took flight, still shrieking its awful melody. Then, the forest was lit by a column of orange fire. Marcus whirled to see Hawthorne, arm raised, his other arm supporting the gesture. Tendrils of smoke still billowed from his closed fist.

The fiery blast had missed the creature by a few feet, and as the flames died, the dark form disappeared into the trees, though it’s cries still pierced Marcus’ ears.

"Cursed sands." Hawthorne dropped his arm. His body seemed to sag under its weight, as if the magic had taken a great deal out of him. "That's not good."

"What. Was. That?" Marcus whispered. His mind reeled, hazy from the magic cast by Hawthorne. Fire magic. Destruction. The shrieks still rang in his ears. They seemed to reverberate in his skull. *That was a close one.* If Rykker hadn't managed to shoot the creature, he wasn't sure if he could have avoided its onslaught.

"I call them Stridors." Hawthorne straightened, dusting soot from his arms. "Creatures from the outer realms. From beyond the veil of reality. When the magi cultivated the Forest, the boundary to beyond held firm, but now..."

He shook his head, then embarked yet again on his unseen path through the trees, leaving Marcus and the rest in stunned silence.

"Come now," he called. "We must hurry, for Stridors travel in packs."

At this, they hastened to follow, unwilling to be caught by any more of the creatures without their guide.

Marcus' senses were on high alert. He kept his head on a swivel. Viggo hefted his blacksmith's hammer in one hand. Rykker's fingers stayed locked on his crossbow. Sev held up the rear, his great warhammer poised in deft, stony hands.

Hawthorne's pace quickened, his long legs carrying him swiftly. They set into a steady march to keep up.

It did not take long for the howling shrieks to begin again.

The din seemed to resonate from all around them, bouncing off the trees, a cacaphony of dissonance that made Marcus want to lie down and plug his ears. Hawthorne jogged faster now, setting the

pace to a near sprint. He did not look back. Marcus slowed, allowing Viggo and Rykker to pass, and he fell into step beside Sev.

He cast a sidelong glance at the behemoth, already starting to pant as he spoke between short breaths. "We always find ourselves here, huh?"

"We protect, Marcus." Sev's golden eyes beamed with an intensity that shone in the dim light of the Forest.

Marcus afforded a small smile. "That we do, my friend. That we do."

His smile faded quickly, and he took a quick look behind. Red eyes. They glinted from beyond the darkness. There must have been at least fifty. Maybe more—It was hard to count while running.

"For Teldur's sake," Marcus gasped. "There's so many of them. We can't keep this up for long."

A shrill wail rose above the tumult. A glimpse behind revealed that one of the Stridors, bolder than the rest, had broken from the pack. Black wings spewed liquid smoke as it hurled towards them, jaws alight with row upon row of fangs. Marcus readied himself. He dared not stop, not yet. Not until it was closer. The Stridor's incessant screams grew to unbearable levels.

Marcus waited for his moment. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled as his instincts fired. *Now*. As he turned, he saw Sev. The monster was nearly upon them, mere feet away. Wicked, clawed feet stretched out before the beast, grasping for its prey. The Aeonnar, in one fell motion, pivoted, using his greathammer as a fulcrum, and delivered a blow to the Stridor's skull. In an instant, the shrieking stopped as festering chunks of flesh and bone painted the forest floor in black blood and swirling smoke. Sev completed his turn and continued to sprint without missing a step.

Protector. Destroyer. Marcus had forgotten the preternatural strength that the otherwise docile goliath possessed. He was glad that Sev was on their side.

The otherworldly din closed in around them. There were no beasts to single out, anymore. The rest of them seemed to have enough sense to share their prey after what had happened to the other two. *It couldn't be much further, could it?* Marcus wondered. Had Hawthorne told them how much further it was going to be? He wasn't sure. They had mere seconds before the horde of creatures overtook them. Marcus decided to focus straight ahead, eyes fixed firmly on his companions ahead of him, ignoring the ever growing symphony as it crescendoed behind him. His breath was tight in his chest, and a stitch began to claw at his ribs. He strained, his legs on fire, willing himself to go just a bit further. He could almost feel the snapping of jaws and gnashing of teeth just outside of reach. A primal hunger so overwhelming and otherworldly it frightened Marcus, and not just because it wanted to kill him. No, it was deeper than that. The creatures that dogged them were not simply predators. There was a chaos to them. A primordial aspect to them that had escaped Marcus until this singular moment. Bile rose in his throat as a feeling of utter helplessness crashed into him. A bottomless, irrational fear. The end. He was sure of it.

Then all at once, the discord receded. He gasped out a breath and stumbled as he realized that the others had slowed. He turned and realized that the creatures had fled. He could just make out their cries in the distance, quickly fading.

"What the—" Marcus stopped. His words sent a billow of cold mist from his lips, and his body involuntarily shuddered as if all at

once it recognized the now frigid air. He hugged himself, scrubbing his bare arms in an attempt to generate heat.

Hawthorne frowned. "Something is wrong. There are no seasons in Indenos. The Stridors turned back. They sense it, too."

A quiet stillness had fallen on the Forest. Hawthorne led them further, and as they progressed, the air grew colder. Soon, the Forest was covered in a thin blanket of snow. White flakes drifted lazily from the sky.

"What is going on?" Hawthorne mumbled. He held out his hand, letting the snow accumulate on his palm. "This shouldn't be possible. Unless..."

"Unless what?" Marcus said.

Hawthorne did not answer. Instead, he took them to the heart of the weather. They emerged into a familiar clearing. A stone monolith stood at the epicenter, nestled into a deep crater. By now, the snow was coming down in flurries of wind, gusts sent a chill through Marcus.

"Is this it? Did we make it?" Marcus stepped up to the edge of the pit, peering down. It seemed deeper than the last.

"No." A deep scowl formed on Hawthorne's thin face. "This is a different place. I fear this weather is no coincidence. A trap has been laid. For us. Whatever magic that has done this lies on the other side of this Lith. It has bled into Indenos, drawing the Stridors near, although they dare not get too close."

"Vanen?"

Hawthorne nodded grimly. "If you are to prevail, his mechanations must be put to an end."

He climbed down into the hollow, preparing to take them back to the world they knew. "Ready yourselves. I know not what we will find on the other side."

And then there was a bright flash of light.

:: Chapter 11 ::

VALLEY OF FROST

The tempest that struck the Siunna Valley filled the vale with snow and ice. The trees of this new forest, unprepared for the sudden winter, recoiled from the cold, their green leaves now frosted over. A deluge of heavy flakes and howling wind confronted them as they exited the treeline. Standing atop a knoll, Viggo studied the landscape before them. Siunna was quite small, surrounded on all sides by well-worn mountains that seemed to fade into the distance, heavy fog obscuring their view even from this height. A steady river bisected the valley, snaking its way through the terrain as if searching for an escape from the mountains and canyons that kept it from the sea.

Gyim. In a matter of hours, they had traveled all the way to Gyim, across the Plys sea to the continent of Kador. Gyim was, of course, on the wrong side of the continent, near the northern tip. Antuza made up the southern coast of Kador. They were many hundreds of miles from their destination, but Hawthorne assured them that the Indenos did not work linearly, and that this Lith had

been 'on the way'. Viggo did not even attempt to understand the laws of such things.

Ever since leaving Senna, this world of myth and magic and legends had left him feeling dour. From his experience, those that dabbled in such arts had no good intentions. He thought back to that day in the church. The day that any chance he had at finding out where he came from—who his parents were—had disappeared. The church and all its ilk had thrown him out all because of what he had seen. Magic. He never could figure out what *exactly* they were doing. He had often thought about going back. To try and uncover their secrets. But the truth was that he never wanted to. He had found comfort in his new life. First as a blacksmith, then as a medic. But still, there was always that inkling—that shred of doubt that plagued his thoughts. Perhaps his parents had been nothing. Derelicts that had pawned him off to the church at the first opportunity. Something, *something* told him there was more. A belief. A hope that there was some grand purpose to it all. All throughout his life he had held firm to that hope, stronger than any faith he ever put into the gods. He longed for a greater meaning to his life.

He shook off his thoughts as they approached a narrow pathway carved into the side of a steep canyon. With practiced steps, Hawthorne led them down the precarious footpath. The trail had been made for access to the Lith, Viggo had no doubt.

Ice and snow covered the ground, crunching under their inadequate boots. Viggo shivered. His thin jerkin could not stop the frozen wind from chilling his bones. From their vantage, Viggo could just make out the city, nestled deep in the valley below.