

FELIX O. HARTMANN



# DARK AGE

WHEN WALLS ARE BUILT ON LIES,  
ONLY TRUTH CAN BRING A DICTATOR TO HIS KNEES.

# DARK AGE

FELIX O. HARTMANN

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*To Mom and Dad*

*Acts of the most unwavering love take longest to be understood. Thanks for all that you have done for me.*



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I



# A Thief

*If I had known  
That day follows the night,  
That every shadow is cast by light,  
I would have understood  
The actions that he took.*



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## Chapter 1

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I SAT ATOP the Mount, the rooftop of the city's cathedral, engulfed in the calming silence of the night. All shops closed, all men retired, and the last candlelight vanished into the ever-darkening sky. Above me, the horizon seemed infinite, yet the stars and the moon appeared so close to grasp; like all those dreams that run out of our reach, yet stay close enough to keep us chasing along.

I came here on special occasions. The view made my world look like a game, taken from a merchant boy's toy collection. The guards stood idly, like tin knights scattered throughout the scene, stationed around houses that appeared to be nothing more than tiny boxes. The high outer wall separated the city from the rest of the world like a dark curtain, never to be lifted.

Impatiently I turned my head to the bell tower that loomed over the city with an air of menace, ticking away our seconds. Thirty minutes to midnight were left on the clock-face. In half an hour, I would turn seventeen, leaving only one year until being forced to join the Grey Guard for the next ten years of my life.

Far above the dark spire of the bell tower, Orion shone brightly,



drawing my attention back to the present. I could not stop but smile. He was my protector, but also just another soldier never coming home.

“What are you smiling at?” said a soft voice coming up behind me. Katrina.

“You’re here,” I said, not sure whether I was relieved or surprised.

“I knew you’d be here,” Katrina replied, tightening her dark green coat around her thin waist. “You always are, when there is something going on.”

“Something going on? That’s a way to call it,” I said, flicking a pebble off the rooftop into the dark abyss.

Gracefully, she stepped over the frosty tiles and sat down next to me. An innocent loving smile crossed her lips. “You didn’t show up to work today.”

“I had other things on my mind,” I said.

“You need to keep busy. Thinking day and night about the Guard won’t help.”

“I just hate the unknown,” I said, “I don’t know what will happen once I leave those gates.”

She pushed a strand of her auburn hair behind her ear. “But, there’s still plenty of time for you here. And for us...”

“Please don’t make this any harder,” I said, looking into her hazel eyes, which were just as lost as mine. “Everything I have will be nothing but a memory a year from now.”

She was tense. With crossed arms she looked away.

“Let’s not fight. Not tonight,” I asked, and pulled her in closer, letting the tranquility of the quiet city absorb us.

For a moment, I observed my breath as it hit the cold air and turned into fog. I noticed her shaking hands and took off my leather jacket. Carefully I put it over her slender shoulders.

She pressed closer against me for warmth, “You didn’t answer me,” she said. “What were you staring at when I came up? The bell tower?”

“The stars,” I answered, and pointed to the skies. “See the ones that

look like a soldier? The three in a row make the belt, the shoulders are above. That is Orion.”

“I know my stars,” she said teasingly.

“My brother taught me to chart the night sky.”

“Elias?” she asked.

I nodded, “The night before his summoning to join the Grey Guard we were sitting right here. He said to me, *‘Whenever you feel alone, Orion will be watching over you. I told him to keep an eye on you.’*” I smiled, knowing how silly it sounded, yet how true it was to me. I could feel his presence, although he was far away. “I was just a little boy at the time, running to his room every morning to see if he was back. I had no idea of what he had to face, nor could I have possibly imagined how long ten years would last.”

“Adam,” Katrina said softly, “The valley... not everyone gets to come back.”

“He will come back,” I hissed. Taking her hand, I dropped my voice, “And so will I, no matter how many of those demons I have to kill.”

An uncomfortable smile crossed her lips. Squeezing my hand tighter, she reached into her pocket. “I got something for you.” Carefully she pulled out a silver chain. A little wooden eagle, with spread wings, hung in the middle of it.

“It’s beautiful. This must have taken you ages to make,” I ran my finger over the fine details, from the beak to the feathers. “I wish eagles were still around.”

“Kings of the skies, and symbol of many nations long gone... I doubt they were ever any more real than dragons,” she said.

“Still...,” I looked at the small eagle in the palm of my hand, “there’s got to be more out there than just cattle. Some creatures that serve a purpose of their own”

“Mhm.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I just...,” her voice broke off.

“What?”

“I just wanted to give you something to remember me by when you are out there,” she said softly.

I pulled her closer into my arms. “I could never forget you. You know that.”

She smiled at me with unease, and then looked away. There was an awful quiet. We both must have thought of things that we could not put into words.

The silence was broken when she grabbed my arm and pointed at the bell tower – it was a minute to midnight. The minute hand stood still, just inches from the center of the clock, uncertain to proceed to the next day, as if hoping it could still turn back. Then, it lashed to the right, setting off the bells.

Katrina put her arms around me, pressing her head against my chest. With her touch, a warm feeling of comfort surged into my heart, taunting me, as I knew I would not be able to experience it again a year from this day. I already missed her, even though she was right there with me.

“Happy Birthday, Adam,” she whispered and leaned in, while the loud brass bell struck for the fifth time, announcing the end of the day.



## Chapter 2



SUN STRUCK MY eyes through the curtain, jolting me out of bed. It was late – almost too late. The light was blinding yet illuminating, wiping away the remnants of my dreams, and showing me the grey reality of my barren room. Quickly, I washed myself with a bucket of water that stood ready on my nightstand. To my good fortune, everything lay prepared on the empty bed above mine: A fresh white shirt, dark pants with a belt, and a green vest with a matching beret. The buckle of my belt was shaped as an anvil. No matter how much carpentry work I did for Katrina's father, I was a blacksmith by birth.

I glanced into the old rectangular mirror in the corner of my room. A disgusted grimace crossed my face. I looked more like a snobby merchant child than a blacksmith. It was the finest set of clothes we owned. I recalled mocking Elias, Benet, and Colin, my older brothers, when they wore this same outfit to their celebrations. Now it was my turn.

Before I left my room, I remembered the eagle. I put on the necklace Katrina gave me, and with it, a smile returned onto my lips.

My parents sat in the kitchen, picking at a loaf of bread. They talked in

hushed voices, drowned out by a pot of boiling water. The second they saw me, they got up onto their feet. My mother's eyes fixated on me for several moments. A smile crossed her lips, but silent tears ran down her face.

"Look at you," she said. "My darling boy, all grown up. I hardly recognize you. You look just like your father did, a long time ago." She put her arm around his side. "He was quite a looker back then."

"Let's not get nostalgic," Father said, interjecting.

She ignored him. "I remember him standing in the square surrounded by all those boys. But he was a man – a head taller than all the rest, and composed like he knew it was his time." She smiled at him, then at me. "And now it's your turn. It's going to be a big year for you."

A quick one, anyway, I thought.

"Are you ready?" my father asked. He towered over me, a huge man carved from brawn and sinew. His full beard and iron expression made him difficult to read. Most people felt uneasy around him, as if a mountain were going to crash down on them.

I nodded. "I'll make it through. Unseen is unscathed, right?"

He chuckled softly. "Unseen, huh? Sounds like something the old carpenter would say. Us blacksmiths don't hide. We fight." He pressed his finger into my chest, "You may be doing his work... and daughter, but you are a blacksmith, forged in fire. Remember that son. Now go get them."

I pushed my shoulders back and repeated our motto, "Forged in fire." With a satisfied nod, he let me go, and I was off to my ceremony.

The streets were busy with traffic heading in the same direction. Generally the people moved quietly along their paths, like cattle, going from station to station, but today was different. Today bright smiles, light skips within their steps, and eased composes marked all citizens; except the veterans, who knew what lay ahead of those *lucky* boys turning seventeen. The first would greet me with excitement while the latter only gave me solemn nods.

For most it was a time to rejoice. These celebrations were a tradition as old as the city itself and occurred only once every full moon. It was a rite of

passage into adulthood, ridden by political and religious agendas, yet fancied up as a populist spectacle. No one was allowed to work on celebration days, making it the only day in the month where the entire city would come together and almost unite on the square. It was something unique, because we did not often mingle with the others. We were too different to mix as you could tell a man's origin by his looks, clothing, walk, and sometimes even smell.

The city split into three main districts. To the West lay the temple district, perfectly manicured and tranquil, ruled by the priests. While spacious, it was dominated by the monumental cathedral, whose spire rose as high as the heavens. The beautiful gothic monastery and convent stood apart from each other, deeper in the district. A lush garden, the only one in the entire city, was in between, only accessible to those of religious rank. At its southern edge was the Inquisitor's mansion, a colossal structure taking up the entire length of the square, and reaching far behind, all the way into the mountains to which it was connected. When he stood at his balcony, the Inquisitor could survey the entire square... but even when he wasn't there, his presence loomed.

My family lived in the Works, the northern district, which made up the vast majority of the city's population. But even in the Works we had a class system, differentiating another as craftsman and industrials, which sometimes were considered districts in their own. While we craftsmen had decent houses close to the square, the industrials lived in the outskirts of town. Be it as a result or by design, the living conditions fell as the distance to the city center rose. Those in the far end of the northern district lived in ramshackle huts, children appearing like rats in corners and darkened holes, parents hoping to hold on long enough to get another pair of hands on the production line. More hands meant more wages, meant more food. God be praised, even the worst of us had hope.

It only took me a few minutes to get to the square as we lived in the better part of the Works. Usually I could hear the ringing sound of iron on steel several blocks down, like a ticking clock reminding me of home. I had

the urge to slip away right now, sick of all the false attention, but with everyone's eyes glued to me, there was nowhere to go. Instead I merged into the sea of humanity pouring towards the square.

The square itself was the heart of the city, literally and otherwise. It connected all the districts, forming the city's single thoroughfare. In the square the residents of each district would congregate, interact, and almost unite. On regular days, the square served as a place for markets and public addresses. At this time it would already be bustling. Merchants operated their stalls, while countless workers spent their breaks to look around and meet friends. Various artists used the crowds to earn a few extra coins, thereby creating the entertainment that made it such a lively place.

Today, its vast space was decorated with flags and banners, giving a sparkle of color to the grey expanse. With only a few stands operating in the back, thousands formed a seemingly impenetrable crowd. A thin path was kept clear by a group of city guards in full armor.

Almost naturally, the districts segregated. At the very front sat the leaders of the Temple District. Priests, monks, and the Mother Superior sat comfortably on hand-carved benches, while everyone else stood. God bless the other nuns, who were never even allowed to see the daylight beyond their convent and gardens. Only the helplessly poor and lost souls of the city chose such a life to escape their misery. Female criminals were often offered to join the convent over execution. Some found the latter to be the lesser evil.

Behind the Temple District's rows stood the families of the Works, with the properly dressed craftsmen in the front and the rather unwashed industrials in the back. We craftsmen were well off compared to those unlucky many, making it to adulthood while they often died young. But even we were poor compared to the merchants.

The Merchant district was conspicuously different from the rest of the city. It sat secluded behind its own gated walls. Besides residents, only invited guests and priests were allowed inside the district walls. Their families were small with two children at most, just enough to bring forth

one male heir. Those children left the district sparingly, preferring the rarified company of their peers. I made sure to spit in their general direction whenever our paths would cross.

There was a saying amongst the craftsmen: the gold flows uphill. I stared up the hill to my left, watching the main boulevard rise away from the square. At its far end, glorious mansions towered above their neighbors.

If the Inquisitor was the voice of God, the merchants were God's dirty fingers. They paid the Inquisition well, and in turn owned most of the Works. While they provided protection and materials to the craftsmen in their employ, the proceeds from the exchange left us barely holding on. Still, as much as I'd have liked to, it's hard to bite the hand that feeds you.

Off to my left, atop their wall they stood now, gazing down as I approached the front of the square. Stares from all sides pierced through me. Some saw Adam. Some saw the blacksmith's boy. Some saw a dead boy.

"My blessings to you, son." An old priest pulled me by the sleeve as I passed him. "You are the only Celebratorio this moon! I have never witnessed such a thing in my long life."

"What do you mean, father," I asked the high temple-man.

With a tranquil nod he pointed towards a single, high-backed wooden throne that stood by itself between the people and the Inquisitor's mansion. It was blackened by age, but hints of the inlaid gold still glinted in the sunlight. Typically, there were a score of thrones set up in the expanse. Sometimes as few as half a dozen. But not today. Today there was only one, and it was for me. Every eye in the entire city would be on me.

"The plague," another said. "I remember countless mothers and newborn children dying many years ago around this time of year. You must have been the only one that made it."

It was odd news to congratulate someone for, I thought, but thanked them for their attention. I stepped towards the throne and let my fingers run over the century old mahogany. Following tradition it was placed in the very front with no one in between the Inquisitor and the boys. No one was



there to hide behind. Growing increasingly nervous under the notion of being the only Celebratorio, and with that, the center of attention, I immediately sat down.

I tilted my head slightly and enjoyed an unhindered view onto the Inquisitor's grand balcony. Impressive ornaments of pure gold decorated both corners. I had seen them so many times before, but now they meant something. Today they were dedicated to me.

While the crowd was busy chattering, the Inquisitor's council quietly came through a side door and took seat on the right of the balcony. The Inquisitor's ward, a girl of maybe sixteen, followed closely and took a seat on the left. Blankly, she stared off into the distance, bored and bothered at once.

When they were all settled, the trumpets sounded. The crowd quit their talk and applauded on cue. Upon this signal, the Inquisitor's herald knocked on the marble ground thrice with a big wooden stick. With a booming voice he exclaimed, "Citizens! The Inquisitor!" Upon his name, the crowd turned their applause into a roar. It had begun.

The red curtains behind the balcony flushed to the sides. With arms spread as if embracing us all, the Inquisitor stepped onto the balcony towards the banister. His burgundy robe dragged over the smooth marble surface, while his slow steps rang in beat with the noise of the crowd. His face looked determined, stern almost, radiating both terror and power. But those were mostly the same.

For how long could he hold this power? I wondered. The golden miter covered his grey locks, while the holy scepter in his hand only distracted from his bony fingers. I was not the only one whose clock had started ticking.

The swelling elation was soaked into silence the second he lifted his pale left hand. A collective hush fell over the crowd, with none of the multitude daring to breathe. I sunk deeper into the throne in anticipation. He looked at me sitting there for a moment's length. One could hear the drop of a pin. In a calculated pace, he lifted his face to address the crowd,

“Greetings children of God! It is my pleasure once again to rejoice with you all, and to celebrate what this city stands for - faith, duty, and honor. To celebrate the young men who serve their God, their city, and every single one of you outside these gates. Only the strongest spirits, the firmest believers, withstand the pains and evils that linger in the outside world. Their valor and strength fend off all the demons that haunt our city.” The crowd went into ecstasy with shouts of approval until the Inquisitor once again raised his hand, and this time pointed towards me, “You, son, were blessed to be born of the valiant kind, to protect everything that is dear to our hearts. God has chosen you to be this moon’s only Celebratorio, a rare occasion that speaks in lengths about God’s faith in you. Like all men, you will start your journey one year from this day. Ages ago, even I served the Grey Guard. The Guard is more than just duty. It is opportunity. It is honor. It is everything we stand for. And you, son, are fortunate to receive this blessing.”

His speech continued, diving into the history of the city. Every month we were told the same story, and every month the same promise was made: For the horrors to end, for our men to stop dying, and for peace to finally break in... the end of the *Dark Age*, and the coming of the next golden age. And every month the young were said to be the missing puzzle pieces for that long sought escape from dystopia.

“It is time that you join the ranks of those that came before you, into the brotherhood of men that love and protect this city with all they have,” he spoke as a priest came up beside me with a knife and chalice in his hands. The row of temple-men sang a Latin chant in canon that dug deep into my ears. Their voices mingled into one long swinging sound.

The crowd hushed. Only the deep voices of the priests filled the square now. My eyes marked the old man in front of me. Carefully I took the knife from his hand. Slow in my actions, a thousand thoughts ran through my mind. I was a clean throw from killing the false-messiah himself. But what if I missed? The priest’s eyes narrowed in on me sternly, holding the chalice underneath my left hand. Or what if I did not miss? An even more

outrageous scenario, it seemed. With clenched teeth, I put the blade into my left palm and made a fist. Quickly I pulled it out and watched the crimson drops fall into the old chalice, whose walls had been darkened by blood older than even my father's.

Before I could comprehend what had happened, the priest grabbed my bloody hand and lifted it to the heavens along with the chalice. The crowd roared ecstatically. I was their new hope, like every seventeen year old. I could see my parent's faces in the crowd, my father stoically embracing my sobbing mother. Katrina stood quietly beside them, smiling, but by no means celebrating.

The applause died down as the Inquisitor moved his lips again, "We embrace you in our brotherhood, son. Come nightfall I shall break bread with you in my humble home, as tradition requests. Farewell my children and rejoice in the splendor of the day." He bowed, an inch at most, and turned, disappearing behind the red curtains.

I fell back into the throne and wrapped a piece of cloth around my palm. The trumpets sounded in the background, drowning out the noise of the moving crowd. The real celebration was about to begin.

While the guards escorted the priests out of the square, I was still frozen in my chair. It was one of those moments, when one realizes that times change. Seventeen years had been nearly identical, and I thought they would always be. Now everything was going to change. I would have to leave all this behind for ten years, and possibly never return. Like a well-oiled machine, the Guard took in recruits in the scores and spit out a few emotionally dead survivors ten years later. A new perspective of future filtered my eyes, and I was both frightened and excited.

A warm hand seized mine. Katrina pulled me out of the throne and out of my thoughts with a tug. With delicate fingers she fixed my vest. Her auburn hair was in an artful ponytail, contrasting the rather simple, yet beautiful white dress. "You look different," she said observing me carefully, "but impressive". My parents stood a few yards behind her, and were of no

help to calm me. My mother was affected by it more than I was, while my father tried to comfort her.

A few friends and strangers came up to congratulate me. Some even presented me with gifts that came out of their profession: A pair of sandals, a leather pouch, and a loaf of warm bread. While I thanked them, Katrina was pulled away from me into a circle of friends.

“Tonight?” I called after her. She looked back and smiled.

Around us, much was happening. The tailor took out his guitar and struck a few chords that rang across the square. Shortly after, one of his sons joined in on the flute. In harmony, the song filled the air, completed by the soft strings of his daughter’s harp. With the help of a few kegs of beer, the festivity was well on its way. Men and women were sitting in their groups eating and drinking, discussing the latest gossip. Children chased another across the square, often running into the few brave dancers that moved to the tailor’s melodies.

After a while I sought quiet. I preferred watching the others since I had been the center of attention for the entire day. My eyes drifted to the clock tower above the Mount. In little more than an hour, I would be escorted to the Inquisitor’s mansion.

“It’s a lot to take in,” said a voice from behind me. I turned around and saw Peter, the barber’s boy. “Mind if I join?”

“Please,” I pointed at the block of wood next to mine. “When will you be summoned? Your celebration was just a few moons ago, am I right?”

“In 273 days,” he responded. There was no dread in his voice, but he wasn’t joking with me either. “I’m running out of time,” he said, stretching his long legs, “and so are you. We all are.”

There was a unique realness to him. He didn’t seem to buy into the spectacle like all the others. “Tell me,” I asked, “how much do you know about the Guard?”

“Only a little, what do you want to know?” He took a sip from a flask and handed it to me.

“Anything, really,” I took a sip. The repelling smell was indicative of

the strong taste. “I know nothing at all. My dad doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” he took the flask back and downed a big gulp. “Anyway... in a year you will leave the city, go through training, and then join a camp in the woods, mines, or fields, based on your profession.” He brushed through his curly dark-blond hair, “That way we can draw on our existing knowledge and expand our skills for when we return.”

“So what exactly does a barber do in the Guard? Cut grass?” I asked with a smirk.

“Good one,” he said with a chuckle. “My father ended up in the woods, so you are not too far off.”

“And I’ll serve in the mines,” I realized.

“From there on, you work day in day out, and try your best to not get eaten alive by those demons. You count your days, and before you know it, you are either dead or back home.”

“Lovely...” I said reaching for the flask again at the thought of my rosy future. “Is that all you got?”

“You are a curious one, eh? There isn’t much else I know either. You see, when you spend ten years fighting for your life and watch many of your friends die, the last thing you want to do is talk about it. So the old guys generally don’t give away too much.”

“I know. My father has not said a word, but ‘I will see for myself soon enough’.” I put down the drink, “I just wish there were another option.”

Peter looked around with focus in his eyes, “We all wish that.”

“So why don’t we do something about it.”

“Like what? Kill the old bastard?” he laughed. It was frightening that he dared to say it out loud, “Then what?”

“I don’t know... leave this valley?” I said, “Perhaps find a place where we are neither getting slaughtered on the outside nor starved from the inside.”

“You have a point, brother,” he said. “But the time to make secret revolutionary ploys was three gulps ago.”

“I would have challenged your mortality if all that shine didn’t make you woozy,” I laughed. Part of me was glad that the conversation lit up, part of me wished he had said more.

“What I know though are three things. First,” he raised his index finger, “you only have little time before your dinner with the Inquisitor. Second,” he pointed at Katrina, “that girl over there has been eyeing us this whole conversation. Either you or me, hard to be sure. And third,” he stood up holding out his hand, “if you are not going to dance with her, I surely will.”

“She’s with me,” I said with a grin, “But I am sure Katrina has some friends that would be to your liking”. He was right. I was going to spend ten years out there in the cold pondering about ways to get back in the city. Now was the time to live. “Let’s go Peter.”

Approaching the group my eyes immediately met hers. We both smiled. “The man of the hour decides to join us,” she teased. “What an honor.”

“Let’s dance. I only have a few minutes left.”

She grabbed my hand and ran through the crowd, away from our friends. In the middle of the square she took my other hand and started to spin. It felt different having her near me. It felt as if my mind was filing away every smile and every word she said to me, like a historian afraid of losing access to a revered piece forever. Boldly I took her face in between my palms and pulled her close to me. I escaped my fate, even if it was just for the elusive moment of a kiss.

Slowly she ran her fingers up my neck, letting chills run down my spine. Her lips softly touched my ear, “You should come over after your dinner.” She pushed me away just enough to look back into my eyes.

I stood there looking at her, twisting the eagle necklace between my fingers. I had to make a choice. If I wanted to stay with her and end the broken system, I had to take things into my own hands.

I had to find a way to kill him.

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### Chapter 3



“ADAM BLACKSMITH?” A man called after me as I left the square. He had an odd accent, a genuine noble sound, unlike some of the pretentious merchants I had met.

I turned and found a middle aged man surrounded by four guards in full armor.

“I am Anthony, the Inquisitor’s chief servant. Follow us please,” he instructed without further ado and showed me the way. The guards took a diamond formation around the two of us and marched in unison. We approached the gate to the Merchant District at the western end of the square. Like statues, two district-guards stood to each side of the gate — unmoving yet menacing.

I often spent time in the Merchant District, as they were our most frequent and best paying customers. Any other day I was treated like the lesser, yet something was different. Their generally stuck up expressions had vanished. They stood at the side of the boulevard, watching me with eyes that reflected nostalgia, bitterness, and respect. It was a short moment later that one of the merchants started clapping, quickly joined by all the



other men. At first I thought it was mockery, but looking along the path I saw some of them saluting me the way a soldier salutes another soldier.

This gesture — touching and troubling indistinctively — made me think. Walls and fortune might have separated us. But deep down we were all the same. Too often our perceptions of another were based on idle appearance and status, but we forgot that under every cover lies a human heart and soul. Tonight this cover was lifted, and we were one. No matter how deep class warfare would run among us another day, there would always be the essence of humanity in the end, reaching surface, binding us together with an unbreakable thread. Sometimes it took war to make us realize our brotherhood.

With every step I grew fonder of the Guard, driven by the dark mysteriousness that came along with it. There was a look in their eyes, a look that said they knew something I didn't, or saw something perhaps. Whatever it was, I would find it, and I would learn why we were forsaken in this castle...

Once we reached the southern end of the Merchant District, Anthony led me onto a path further up the hill. The mansion loomed high above, making even the merchant villas look tiny in comparison. At last a rounded, bolted door awaited us at the foot of the palace. Two torches hooked into the wall to the right and left, illuminated the pitch black darkness. Anthony knocked in a rhythmic pattern on the door. A second later another servant opened up.

Ahead lay a long corridor trenched in the color red. The walls were painted in a terrifying crimson, while the carpet was lighter yet fuller in color. It felt as if I was walking through a sea of blood. Left and right, the walls were covered with paintings; Antiques and contemporaries alike. I had only seen a few antique paintings in the Temple District in the various churches and monasteries. But none like these. We now dated the year 2154, and some of the drawings ranged as far back as the 15th century. In class I once learned that this era was called the Renaissance. The Renaissance, like the epoch of ancient Rome and Greece was an age of

light. An age of harmony. A golden age. After any golden age followed a dark age that was filled with evil, sin and pain. But darkness was not exclusively known for evil, but also for the oblivion it created. Our priests could not teach us of the events of the dark ages, as the knowledge of the dark ages had been forever lost. All that remained were the loose memories of our fathers. The Inquisitor however has promised the coming of the third golden age to arrive soon, wherefore our existence, like Julius Caesar's or Leonardo da Vinci's, shall be carried into eternity.

"You like art, son?" the dominating voice of the Inquisitor asked. A sudden shiver ran down my spine as I turned to face him. He must have come down the stairs while I was observing the paintings. The guards left us without a sound. It was just me and the Inquisitor.

Shaking from his presence I quickly took off my hat and knelt before him. "Yes father, excuse my curiosity," I said obediently as if my body forced me to show respect. The Inquisitor wearing the same robe, with a small cap instead of the miter, extended his hand toward my face. Without hesitation I kissed the holy signet ring to demonstrate my subordination to God and the church.

"Good," he said in a slow approving manner, "come on and follow me to the dining hall." After the long corridor, many great halls followed. Having walked up a flight of stairs, I stood in a room half the size of our house and workshop. A gigantic table covered with steaming greasy foods, delicate fresh vegetables and colorful fruits, stood in the center of the elegant dining hall. Clear marble decorated not only the floor but also the walls, which were hung with more paintings and crimson curtains. More intimidating than all the decoration however was the vast amount of space. In the Works, space was so scarce that most homes were crammed. Unused space was unimaginable.

I stood in the entrance of the hall, waiting for the Inquisitor to make a move. His back was facing me, unafraid of anything. My hand slowly slid down to my leg, approaching the boot in which I hid my stiletto. Suddenly a door to my left flung open, and out rushed two servants. Simultaneously

they pulled back two chairs on the opposing ends of the table. The Inquisitor took a seat at the end closer to the door, while I uncomfortably walked around the long table, realizing that I had wasted my few minutes alone with him. More than a dozen chairs remained empty in between us. “What an unusual sight,” he remarked, “It has been decades since a Celebratorio had the honor of dining with me alone.” A servant came and poured a thick red soup into his bowl, “Tell me, what is your name, son?” It was hard to distinguish his questions from orders.

“Blacksmith. Adam Blacksmith, son of Edward,” I responded automatically, staring with sharp hunger at the hot soup I was about to shovel down the moment the conversation stopped.

“Blacksmith... Blacksmith... I think I have had the pleasure to dine with some of your older brothers before. As a matter of fact, now that I think of it I still remember your great-grandfather sitting right where you are. It must have been the late 70’s. He was one great young man. It was quite unfortunate that he never returned from the Guard to meet your grandfather,” The Inquisitor stated clearly delighted by his accurate memory. “How are your brothers and father doing?”

“Two of my brothers died in service, and Elias has been serving for seven years now. My father is alright,” I responded coldly at the ignorant nature of his question.

“What a shame,” he sighed, “but I suppose you will be seeing your brother Elias again in the Guard.”

Surprised I lowered my spoon. The thought that our service overlapped by two years had never crossed my mind. I would be seeing him again after all. Somewhat relieved my body relaxed and the numbing tensions were gone.

Before I could even finish my bowl of sweet and salty tomato soup, a servant came and took it away, just to replace it with a big covered plate. Underneath the cover, lamb cutlets were staggered, mingling with spicy sauces and herbs. All the dishes that I had seen at first waiting on the table were just sides to be eaten with the main menu. I could have complained

about the injustice of having such a meal while whole families in the Industrial District shared half a loaf of bread for a night, but I just ate as much as I could.

“Please excuse my tardiness uncle,” the ward said, entering through one of the many side doors. She spoke in a high pitch at first, as if to make her seem younger and more innocent. Her midnight blue dress shimmered in the candlelight, while she graciously approached one of the chairs halfway down the table. Once she sat down she started eating without even acknowledging my existence.

“Cecilia this is Adam,” he introduced.

“Oh, what a pleasure,” she said without looking up.

“Adam as you must know, this is Cecilia, my ward; my brother’s daughter to be exact.”

I nodded in reciprocation, lacking the words following her terse introduction. The little conversation we had faded into silence. Quietly nibbling on my last lamb cutlet, I watched the two shift out of their public roles little by little. After a while I turned to the girl in an attempt to break the awful quiet, “I never see you outside in the Temple District. Do you go to class with the merchants?”

“Oh no, I haven’t been outside in a while,” she responded, slightly shaking her head as if my question was unimaginable. “I have private teachers,” she said briefly and put down her silverware. She looked up at me for the first time with her ocean blue eyes, “Tell me Adam, how is life outside? I just get a glimpse of it through my window.”

I was startled by the basic nature of her question, “Well, I attend scripture study six times a week in the Temple District. Afterwards I work for the carpenter, whose business I will inherit as he has no sons. At nights, after I am done with work in the carpentry, I have to help my father in his blacksmith shop. I am the only son inside the city gates, so a lot of the responsibility falls on me.”

“How dull. Literature makes the proletarian life sound so much more promising: Excitement, adventure, promiscuity...”

“Cecilia!” the Inquisitor exclaimed with a growl.

“Most fiction is just a rosy vision of history, my dear,” I said, “And history is nothing but a huddle of facts soaked in perspective, personal interest, and bias. I admire books, but truth can often only be perceived with our senses.”

The Inquisitor chuckled while Cecilia looked at me with sharp eyes. The things she said disgusted me. She was spoiled, ignorant... and yet different. Without a doubt she had the most beautiful features, from the gold-blond locks to the flawless skin. But most intriguing of all was her personality - revolting and attractive at the same time.

The servants returned. We appeared to be back at the soups as they presented us with bowls of beef stew. The food never seemed to cease as if they prepared me for ten years of starvation. After a longer silence the Inquisitor spoke to me again, “This stew is outstanding, don’t you think?”

I nodded briefly in between two spoonfuls.

“I have been wondering, Adam. You seem like a bright boy, what is your favorite discipline in school?” he asked me.

“Without a doubt, father, the history of our world,” I answered, enthusiastic to encounter the first topic of the night that was not offensive.

“What a turn of events,” Cecilia interrupted pleasantly surprised, “you are not as lackluster as I presumed after all. History is our key to the future. You rarely see peasants interested in such sophisticated matters.” She added in a dreamy tone, “Only if we can understand and see the puzzle pieces of the past, we can see the whole picture – reality.”

For a moment I looked at Cecilia. Her thoughts resembled mine, and so I voiced them, “Unless we learn of the dark ages we will never learn from our mistakes, wherefore we shall be doomed in this vicious cycle of golden and dark ages forever.”

“You seem to be thirsting for knowledge,” the Inquisitor noted. “Many ambitious men have been. And many fell. Think about this: Is knowledge any more than a mere confirmation of our doubts? Does knowledge bring you any more happiness than that brief intriguing moment of realization?”

Or does it make life sober and bitter? Ignorance is bliss, Adam. Certain things you must know, but some ought to be forgotten. All you will find is shame and fear, and once you know too much, your world collapses – your paradise – and there will be no way back.”

I let the words sink in and considered them for a moment. “You speak truth, knowledge is bittersweet,” I said, “but in order to achieve true happiness one must suffer, for when one does not know the bad, how can one experience and recognize the good? Our lives are based on comparison, nothing more. However it may be, the knowledge of the dark ages is long lost, wherefore this hypothetical carries little relevance.”

The Inquisitor nodded quietly, sipping from a mug. Putting it down he added, “That is why you should let the past rest. There is no honor in hunting a ghost. All, if anything, you will find is disappointment.”

“Truth is often a disappointment, yet we seek it. An odd nature, but a virtuous one,” I remarked.

I could sense his body tense. He wanted me to let the topic rest, but I kept trying to have the last word. His eyes glistened, “You can call foolery virtuous all you want. You should have learned from your history books that the ignorant man lives longer than those that see something where there is nothing. The men history declares heroes are merely heroes because they failed to survive their benevolent acts.”

“The only question that remains then is, what do we live for? Do we just live to survive? We hide like animals inside city walls. If benevolent acts are not worth dying for, then what separates us from the cattle that make this stew?” I responded consumed by passion.

“We live. The cattle don’t,” were the final words on the topic by the Inquisitor.

The room had heated up by at least a few degrees. The servants had stayed away, scared to fall victim to the Inquisitor’s anger. All the while Cecilia had followed the back and forth carefully, observing me intensely, “You have an interesting mind. I like the way you think Adam,” she said.

Biting on her finger, thinking, she turned to the Inquisitor, "Uncle, may Adam come to join my classes some time?"

He shot her a bitter look, clearly disapproving of her request. After a moment he succumbed to her pleading face, "Only if your teachers agree."

Once again our conversation faded. The servants presented the last and final dish of the evening. It was called sorbet, a food I had never seen or tasted before. I took a spoonful of the fluffy substance into my mouth, and felt a sudden cold running across my teeth. Despite the short shock, a delicious taste began to unfold. Within a moment the milky substance turned liquid on my tongue and gave off a sweet taste of orange.

"Well, well, well. It has been a pleasure, Adam," the Inquisitor said solemnly as he got up from the table. "It is getting late and time for you to depart. I wish you the best of luck in your future with the Guard."

Putting all my animosity aside for a few more minutes, I bowed in front of the Inquisitor and thanked him for his generous hospitality. Turning over to Cecilia, I bowed down as well and kissed her hand as a formal farewell.

"I shall send a servant to notify you of my classes, Adam," she said loudly as I was guided out of the hall. Down the stairwell and through the corridor with the red carpet and paintings, I made it back to the door through which I had entered.

"Now take good care of yourself," the servant said with a sorrowful voice.

"Are you alright... Anthony?" I asked trying to remember his name.

"Yes, thank you for asking," he said, opening the door. "It breaks my heart to see young fellows like you leave for the Guard. I made it out of the Guard alive just two years ago. But the things I saw, I don't wish anyone else to see. In the Guard you will live like an old man, watching your friends die off like flies, hoping and praying every night that you won't be the next."

"Why do you serve the Inquisitor then?" I asked.

"I was one of many children in the Industrial District. There was no

future for me there. I hoped to find answers to all my questions in the Inquisitor's mansion, but I am no step closer," he responded with a forlorn face. "I have to go. He will be expecting my return. Take care, Adam."

Anthony vanished inside, leaving me alone in the cold night air with the only light coming from the two torches at my side. As I trailed back, the square had emptied out. Only a few drunks were still there, but most had passed out on the ground.

I went to check on Katrina. Peacefully she lay on top of her sheets, still wearing the white dress. There was an innocence to her that could not be disturbed. My fingers brushed over her hair, like a fragile piece of art. I would not let him take me away from her. Not until I knew why we were not allowed to leave the valley. I needed to find the truth.

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## Chapter 4

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AT EIGHT O'CLOCK the next morning, I walked with Katrina to the Temple District for morning mass. We cut through the Works and across the square, which had yet to be cleaned from the prior day's festivities. With light steps we approached the big cathedral – whose all too familiar roof was the Mount. The northern end of the colossal church was surrounded by marble stairs, leading up to the great wooden door marking its entrance. On the archway above the threshold the words '*Pax Dei et Lux Dei Vobiscum*' were carved— 'the peace of God and the light of God be with you'. This was the first line they taught any seven-year old in his first class.

Entering through the great door, all sounds were absorbed into a vacuum. Despite the loud echo inside the church's thick stone walls, the assembling masses were quieted by the pressing silence that lay in the air. Colorful light beams brightened up the grey church as the rising sun hit the stained glass windows. Yesterday's fame was short lived. Rudely a man pushed me aside snatching the empty seats I just spotted. Few recognized that I was the boy on the wooden throne, the one for whom they were meant to celebrate.

By the time we found a seat on the overcrowded wooden benches, the preacher, Father Riordan, was amidst his introduction, informing us of the news beyond the wall, “The battle against the demons outside the gates is growing graver by the day. The guards are valiant, but they need your support to fulfill God’s quest.” On cue, the aides handed out baskets that made their way around.

It humored me to see people reach for their pouches. As if a dime went a feet further than the Inquisitor’s dining table.

“The Lord sees us,” Father Riordan shouted. His eyes were turned towards me. “And he sees our struggle to survive. How long, oh children of the city, will your wickedness cause our future to die? The Voice of God tells us that our sin draws the demons to us. You know this to be true. How many days has your sin outweighed the love you ought to feel for another? How many times have you done wrong, and justified it, thinking to yourself that ‘No one sees me’? Your sin is paid for in the blood of those holy warriors sent out to keep the city safe. And yet, you continue in your ways. Why? What can be gained that is more valuable than life? *These men turn night into day; In the face of darkness they say, ‘Light is near.’* This siege will be broken, but who will be victorious: those in the light, or those in the darkness that surrounds us? Do not abet the darkness, children. Do not join the side of the destroyers. Flee from sin and save your life.”

“Save me!” A woman shouted a few seats down, cowering with her head bowed. The masses clamored in pain.

“Only you can save yourselves, my children,” Father Riordan insisted, “The Inquisitor and his rightly guided troops protect you in sunlight and by moonshine. His wisdom and their faith is what stop the terrors that haunt the valley from breaking into our beloved city.” He walked through the aisle, making intense eye contact with every person he passed, “Men, you have seen what the outside holds, and it is nothing I wish any of you to see,” he put his hand on the shoulder of a veteran. “Honorable men, with wives and children waiting for them to come home, fight day in and day

out... only to be torn to pieces by these monsters, severing arms and legs from our heroes' bodies and eating their flesh that was born to be holy."

Children shrieked in fear. That was all it took for them to forget about the hunger, inequality, and secrecy. The thought of rebellion certainly crossed some people's minds, but the unknown alternative was just too terrifying to risk.

After the sermon, those of pre-service years remained in the Temple District. While the veterans and women returned to their work, any child ages seven to eighteen had to attend scripture study for another hour. I dropped Katrina off at the convent and headed for the monastery. They kept us separated, for the boys' teachings were meant to inspire while girls learned to obey.

At the entrance of the monastery I crossed paths with Peter again. He leaned against the archway, waiting for me.

"How was the feast?" he asked as I walked towards him.

"Let's just say the food made up for the company," we passed through the archway to the inner courtyard. "What do you think about the Inquisitor's ward, Cecilia?"

"The pretty little witch has a name?" he asked. "I did not hear much of her. She didn't exactly talk to us at our feast..."

"She definitely has a tough shell," I remarked walking up the monastery steps. "But I want to get to know her better. She must know more about the Inquisitor and this city than anyone aside the council and eldest temple-men."

"Good luck with that, peasant," he said trying to mock her tone.

"She asked me to see her again."

"What?" Peter cocked his head.

"I will be joining her private lessons... she asked for it."

"Oh, I'd give her private lessons," he laughed. Observing no shift in my countenance he stopped walking, "In all seriousness Adam, are you telling me that you will be in the Inquisitor's mansion again?"

I nodded, standing straight under his intensive stare.

“I may have been drunk yesterday and proposed this as a joking matter, but you mark my words right now.” He stepped closer to me, “No one sets foot in that mansion after their seventeenth birthday. You have been given a chance you cannot ignore. Fate has given it to you, of all people, for a reason. I don’t say this often, but forget the damn girl. Do you know the power this gives you? Are you aware of what you could do?”

The implications of his words were so close to my deepest desires, yet the fact that they came out of his mouth frightened me. “Do you suggest that I...”

He glanced around and lowered the volume of his voice, “Yes Adam. That you slit his bloody throat, and put an end to it all. Remember how you asked me yesterday if there was another option? Well here it is.” His right hand clenched my shoulder increasing the intensity of his words, “Imagine your life without the Inquisition. Imagine all the things you could do and all the things you would not have to do. Think about your girl.”

The bells of the monastery rang, signifying the beginning of class. “Adam, don’t mess this one up. It is your last chance.” The pressure of his fingers vanished and we rushed inside to take seat on the old creaking benches.

“Barber, Blacksmith, you are late,” Father Bartholomew said sternly. “Today we are reading ancient scriptures again. We shall start where we left off in the *Old Testament*. I believe it was *Job 17*. Barber you read.”

Almost every other day we read old scriptures. Those were the holy books of religions long gone. We studied them to learn from their mistakes, to see why they fell and why we persevered. Our holy book was called the *Final Testament*, which according to our priests was the final and only true interpretation of God’s will.

The Final Testament took place around the year 2050 which was the oldest account of a time after the Renaissance. It told the story of the Inquisitor who was raised in an age of sin and destruction. One day, God contacted the Inquisitor, telling him that he is planning to once again eradicate mankind. Being one of the few pure beings left in this world, God

chose the Inquisitor as his prophet, and renewed his covenant with man. He gave him the mission to travel through various lands, to select other pure families that would join him on his journey. Heroic deeds glorified this epic journey over hundreds of pages. Before Judgment Day, God led the Inquisitor into a valley, in which he found a vacant castle resting upon a mountain.

There, man was able to live in peace and harmony until the day he fell for his same old weaknesses. And God in his anger cursed the castle. As a reminder of their sinfulness, he set demons around the valley, so that mankind could never leave until their spirits were pure once again. Every night the demons came into the valley to kill helpless farmers, lumbermen and miners. So it came to pass, that the men ordered the children, women, and elderly to remain inside the castle while they worked alone outside the gates. As their leader, the Inquisitor fought alongside other brave men against the demons. After years of blazing sun, blood, and dirt, their armors had lost their luster and turned into a dull grey. Ever since we called them the Grey Guard, as the ten years of service robbed the luster out of every young man's eyes.

*"...where then is my hope? Who can see any hope for me? Will it go down to the gates of death? Will we descend together into the dust?"* Peter finished reading the passage.

"Well read, Barber. Tailor you are next," Father Bartholomew said shortly while looking up from his book through his spectacles.

"I have a question, father," I interrupted. "Earlier on Peter read a line that Father Riordan used during the sermon: *These men turn night into day; In the face of darkness they say, 'Light is near.'* I understand that they talk about the cycles of dark and golden ages, but would this mean that it lies in the power of man to bring forth the day, or is it simply a matter of time?"

*"Post tenebras Lux.* I'm glad to see you paid attention." He smiled and began, "There has been much conversation among scholars about this passage. With varying translations come various interpretations." Father Bartholomew responded while getting up from the desk he sat on. His white

robe dragged over the monastery floor as he approached me with the book in his hand. “But the answer to your question is a simple counter question: What is the difference? If the time has come and God sees it fit, he will grant certain men the power to bring forth the next golden age. The real question is do we have any power? Or are we merely the chess pieces of God?”

I observed the middle aged monk move through the rows. “How can we know then,” I asked, “if our actions are led by God or cursed by sin?”

“Your heart will tell you what is right, Adam,” Father Bartholomew responded clearly. “God has his own ways of communicating with us.”

“Like the Inquisitor?”

“The Inquisitor speaks face to face with God,” He replied. “But there are ways that he speaks to us all. Softly, like a whisper.”

“What happens if you and I heard contradicting whispers from God?”

“God doesn’t contradict himself,” he answered. “One of us would be wrong.”

“So, I could do something that you thought was wrong, but actually be of God?” I asked directly.

Father Bartholomew frowned, “One could make that assertion.”

I nodded, letting quiet take over the monastery hall. He went back to his desk, but hesitated for a moment. “Often times we oversimplify the concept of good and evil. There is a natural interconnectedness between that which is dark and that which is light. They are not two ends of a spectrum, but rather a complex system flowing into one another. There cannot be one without the other, for there is no day without the night and no shadow without a light.”

When the monastery bells rang, Peter and I walked out together, but did not say a word. We were both thinking about it, but not ready to start another argument. Suddenly, the bells of the big church sounded again but thrice this time.

“Who do you think was killed?” asked Peter.

“Let’s find out,” I responded quickly as we pushed our way through the crowd towards the square. All I could think of was Elias, hoping that it was not him.

Two city guards rolled a cart with a body towards the square. The flags and decoration of the past day’s celebration were still up in the air. The people were there too. Not in dancing circles, but in a circle trying to catch a glimpse of the fallen warrior.

With my elbows I shoveled people out of my way until I reached the inner side of the circle. Bent over the wagon stood the butcher with his wife and daughter Johanna.

Within half an hour the space had cleared up again, and everyone was back at work. I walked towards the carpentry, passing by my house. My father greeted me briskly with a nod, hammering on a glowing red chunk of metal. I turned right and passed two more houses until I made it to the carpentry, which in itself was a masterpiece of the craft. The corners of the house were perfectly rounded and soft, while the walls had a wavy appearance to them, throwing ocean like shadows onto the rugged road. While small in size, it surpassed any merchant house in detail. We always practiced new styles and techniques on the shop itself, giving it a fresh look in a deteriorating district.

Eric was standing in the doorway, talking to an obese man sporting an oversized red beret with three feathers at its top. “Come here boy,” the carpenter waved me towards them, “Mr. Edelstein, this is Adam, my apprentice,” he said. “Adam, this is Jean Edelstein,” he said. “Please take measurements for the good man, so we can get him a gorgeous new drawer within a few weeks.”

The merchant looked me up and down with a distrusting glare, but then just nodded. They shook hands and the merchant walked off. “Tag along,” was all he said to me.

Eric grabbed my arm and pulled my head close, whispering in my ear, “Do your job. And do it right.” He pushed me away and raised his voice as

the merchant grew suspicious, “And if I see you with my daughter one more time after dark, I will cut more than just your pay!”

I followed the merchant without a word. With pompous steps he passed the simple wooden houses of the Works, evading the looks of the commoners. After a few minutes we reached the gate to the Merchant District. The structure was more than ten feet deep and built of fortified stone, an immense measure to keep the poor from interfering with their day to day life. The metal grate to close the gate had always been rolled up, but two guards protected the entrance at every time of day. Being Grey Guard veterans, they wore their old armors with added insignias to specify their position. As protectors of the Merchant District their armors were polished and decorated with yellow capes and pointy helmets. Upon my sight, the two bulky guards tensed and crossed their halberds mere inches from Mr. Edelstein’s face.

“Sir,” one of the guards said, “this boy is following you. Do you know him?”

“Of course I know him, you smelly industrial scum,” the merchant hissed exasperated and spit at the guard’s feet. “I am paying him, just like I am paying you. If he was following me, and you are concerned, you punch him in the gut and hold him down. But don’t you ever cross your halberds before my face again. Now keep your mouth shut unless you are talked to and do your job, or I’ll have you hung.” Without a comment they removed the halberds and stood straight like statues as if nothing had happened.

The moment we entered through the gate, the vicinity turned into a whole different world. Clean air filled my lungs and beautiful sights were all around. The long elevated boulevard lay ahead, leading all the way to the mansion. Reddish stones paved a gorgeous even street, which could not be compared to the improvised paths in the Works.

To the right of the terracotta boulevard rose the district wall as high as a house, removing the sober reality of the average life from one’s eyes. To the left of the boulevard, rows of two story houses were aligned, tended with a lot of time, care, and money. All the balconies were decorated with



colorful flowers that outshined their neighbors'. Everything and everyone in this district looked clean, affluent and healthy, and yet some of the merchants were of the driest and most sullen spirit.

Mr. Edelstein turned left towards a yellow villa with a green balcony and door. He grabbed a ring from his belt which carried half a dozen keys. They all appeared identical but as he entered the key into the lock I noticed a bit of green paint on its handle.

"Come on in," he said opening the door, and put the key ring back on his belt.

Walking in, I tripped over the carpet and bumped into him, "I'm so sorry," I exclaimed, "We just don't have those back in the Works."

"Almost knocked me off my legs you useless son of a –" he raised his hand at me.

"I'm sorry!" I backed up.

"You'll be eaten alive within a month of your service, you weakling," he lowered his hand and fixed his vest. "Now let's get to work. I would like the drawer over here," he said pointing to an empty space, "But I want you to note that the look has to match the ambiance. I was looking for something with smooth curves and a rather shiny dark colored type of wood. Something classy, but young. Antique, but modern in its own way. Do you understand what I mean?" He asked a little exasperated thinking that I did not pay attention.

I put my palm on his back for reassurance, "I understand exactly what you mean. This would take approximately four weeks."

"Two weeks," the merchant said.

"Two weeks, twice the cost."

"Excuse me?" the merchant muttered, "take those measurements and get out before I send you back to your Master without a tongue. I'm sure he would not want me to raise the rent on him."

"Two weeks it is, sir," I abided and went right to work.

The man sighed and hung his hat by the door, "I am taking my

afternoon nap, get out as soon as you are done.” Slowly he worked his way up the stairs to his chambers, leaning on the handrail with every step.

Carefully I unfolded my measurement stick and checked out the room. Just décor in the living room was worth more than what my family and Eric owned combined. Golden carpets, paintings, vases, sculptures... he had it all. I got on my knees and measured the empty space in depth and width. Even the floor was carefully crafted, and despite its beautiful tiles, was covered by rugs. As I got up from the floor to measure the height, my eyes caught sight of a glass cabinet containing a collection of three dozen golden and silver chalices. Each of them must have been worth a month’s labor. I never understood how an object that does not aid survival in any way could be worth so much. With the numbers chalked down, I folded up my stick and hurried out.

The sun was starting to sink. In the carpentry we sat around the fireplace chewing on a few dried berries while I told Eric about Edelstein’s request.

“Enough business for today,” he said, leaning back in his armchair. “What’s really been on your mind?” he asked. There was clarity in his eyes. I knew I could trust him.

“I have been thinking,” I said leaning forward, “whether we could end this all.”

“There he goes again,” Katrina said. “He won’t let it go.”

“It’s alright Adam, what do you mean?” Eric insisted with a calm tone.

“You are encouraging him?” Katrina was turning red.

“I want to find a way to end the Inquisition... even if it means killing him.”

“That’s suicide!” she insisted. “With all those guards you won’t come near him.”

“But say he does,” Eric wondered. “I have always been curious what would happen. Would the Council elect a new leader? Would the Guard

take over? Would we choose a leader amongst us, or finally disperse beyond the valley?"

"I am not staying for this," she gave me a kiss on the forehead and disappeared into her room.

"Every option sounds better than this," I said.

"Think about it carefully. Do not act rash, your life is too precious for it. Talk me through it if you ever do feel compelled to follow through. I will have your back, but I want to make sure that it is what you really want." Eric said in a warm tone.

"Why do you support my insanity?"

"Because I know you wouldn't do it unless you thought it would be the best for her," he said earnestly. "That's something we have in common. And if she knew the truth about her mother, she would feel the same."

"What happened? I thought Elena died giving birth."

Eric was quiet, staring into the fire. "Shortly after Katrina's birth, she grew sick," he said. "She had an acute fever one night, and I wanted to get help," his eyes fixated on the flames. "I ran out into the streets to wake the medic, but the night patrol grabbed me and beat me to the ground for violating curfew." He got up from his armchair, "By the time I returned she was dead. Katrina was all I had left."

"I didn't know."

He nodded in silence.

"I better get home." I said, seeing that he needed rest. Quickly I grabbed my belongings.

"It's already ten," he noted, walking me to the door. "Oh, and Adam did you get what I..."

"Yes, I did my job, and I did it right," I winked and handed him the imprint of the key to Mr. Edelstein's villa.



## Chapter 5



THE DAILY ROUTINE had kicked in again. Between studies and regular work, I was planning a break-in to take some of Mr. Edelstein's chalices. We regularly stole from the merchants and secretly sold it off, using the profits to feed the poorest of the poor, who were getting starved to death by the system. It was our way of reinstating justice, when no one else would.

But at the same time I was breaking my head over a much bigger task: Overthrowing the Inquisition.

Two weeks had passed since my Celebration, when the routine was finally broken. I lay in bed with open eyes, staring at the dark wood above me. Fine rays of light crossed over the ceiling as the sun hit the blinds. It was one of those moments I tried to hold on to: Resting in the safety and peacefulness of my room.

Suddenly there was a knock on my door, "Adam," my mother said, opening it just a crack, "there's someone here to see you." Her voice sounded distressed.

"Who is it?"

"The Inquisitor's chief servant," she said in a whisper.

I panicked and threw on clothes as quickly as I could. It was a good sign that the Inquisition didn't simply come in the night and take me away. But I wasn't going to antagonize anyone by making them wait for me.

Anthony was waiting in our small kitchen, while my mother uncomfortably tried to hold a conversation. He had adapted a true noble posture for an industrial boy, I thought. His black tunic was in sync with his dark pants and black leather boots. His hair was combed to the back.

"May I offer you a beverage?" she asked.

He smiled and shook his head. Courteously he turned his attention towards me, "Adam, it has been a while. Her ladyship requests your presence." He kept a clear expression, but I could sense he was amused by the situation.

My mother looked at me in disbelief, "What's going on, Adam?"

I shrugged. "I think I'm going to class in the Inquisitor's Mansion. History."

"We must go now," Anthony said, stepping out the door. "Her ladyship's prayer starts before mass." He turned towards my mother for a brief moment, "Thank you Mrs. Blacksmith for your kind hospitality, I promise his safe return back to you." Quickly he shut the door behind us and walked off.

Without much of an argument I followed him onto the square. The cold morning air cleared my eyes and wakened my face. At this time of day the merchants were already out preparing their stalls. Everything had to be ready once the other districts left morning mass. One of the merchants carried a large container while one of his servants pushed a cart toward his stall. Another decorated the display of a tool collection to make it look more appealing. More merchants passed us, traveling down the terracotta boulevard of the Merchant District. The carts seemed emptier than usual, and their faces more grave.

The door to the mansion looked much less intimidating now, without the flickering torches to its sides. After we walked down the red corridor we took so many turns until I forgot where I was. The mansion was nothing but

a maze, with hundreds of doors, stairs, and corridors. Some rooms were even designed identically making orientation yet so much harder. It wasn't long before I lost all sense of where I was.

At last we reached a study whose doors were left ajar. One long empty desk stood in the middle of the room opposite to a chalkboard filled with notes and scribbles. No one was there and yet the room was filled with so much authority and untouchable wisdom.

"Please, take a seat. Her Ladyship will be with you soon," Anthony said. "I will be getting back to my duties. Take care my friend."

Friend. There was an odd tone in his voice when he said it. He must not have gotten to know many people since he started working and living in the mansion.

Instead of taking a seat, I started exploring the room. Antiques, statues and inventions filled the study's walls. Objects with wings, constellations of the stars, and various maps lay across a drawer to the left of the large desk. Next to the chalkboard on the wide windowsill stood a yard high marble statue of a man sitting on a throne with his head rested in the palm of his hand. Silently I read the lines that were located at the base of the statue: "*I know one thing, that I know nothing*".

"Socrates," Cecilia said, entering the room. "He could have fled from his death but chose poison over ignorance; One of the few men that adhered to his own teachings."

Upon her presence I bowed down.

Giggling, she waved me to get up, "Please stop that, you are embarrassing me."

The priest followed behind Cecilia. To my surprise it was Father Riordan himself. While the rest of the city got ready for his sermon, the very same man held a private session with us.

He nodded graciously in my direction. "I was surprised to learn of your excellent literacy, Adam." He said. "I must admit to my anxiousness to discover if the stories my young mistress tells me is true."

"I think the stories may have been exaggerated," I said. "But I'm

grateful for the opportunity to learn more. I have listened to all your sermons in the district.”

“I am sure you have,” the priest said. “Take a seat and bow your heads.”

It was just Cecilia, the priest, and me. The experience was entirely different. We were not sitting on the rock-hard benches but comfortable armchairs, and the pressing silence and impersonal rhetoric of the big church was gone.

While the priest cited a long prayer in Latin, I could not help but peer over at Cecilia every other moment. Everything about being in the mansion seemed so surreal that I constantly needed to make sure I was not dreaming. Looking over, her eyes caught mine. For a moment we just observed another, until she smiled and looked down again.

A book smashed loudly onto the table in front of me. “Eyes down and pay attention,” the priest said. I heard a subdued giggle next to me but kept my head bowed.

The hour went by and the priest left the room. Anthony came in offering us something to drink while we waited for her literature teacher. My eyes drifted around the room observing the many things that were kept in the study.

“Is that a telescope?” I asked.

“Yes, but don’t look into it now, or you will go blind,” she said. “Come by at night sometime and I can teach you about the stars.”

I ignored her subliminal arrogance and agreed to meet her one night when I was off work. The Inquisitor had to be busy that night, so Anthony could let me in unnoticed. It would be a good time with a friend, but an even greater time to kill a monster.

Through the door came a rather old man with long hair that was fading grey. His beard was just as long and wild as his hair and yet overall the man maintained certain composure. He put a stack of books onto the desk from

underneath his arm and placed his spectacles on his nose. "Greetings," he said briskly while flipping through some papers. "There you are," he pulled out a sheet which he scanned with his eyes. "Today we will start reading *The Tragedy of Julius Caesar* by William Shakespeare." He handed out two slim booklets and noted, "How wonderful that you are joining us today Adam. We will be splitting roles then. You are Brutus."

For the rest of the morning we read literature, discussed various philosophies, and analyzed social hierarchies. I was captivated by the vast amount of knowledge Cecilia's teachers had. Being exposed to these ideas and concepts opened my mind, and now I craved more.

After class, Cecilia walked me to the door.

"Today was incredible," I said, taking note of every turn I took.

"It is a lot less engaging when you sit there by yourself," she commented.

"Is that an invitation?"

"Maybe," she teased. "If I feel like seeing you again, I'll just send Anthony to get you out of bed."

"So you can request me whenever you want, how do I reach you?" I asked.

"You don't."

"That's not fair."

"Life isn't fair," she said, "Unless you are a princess."

As we walked down the red corridor, her steps slowed.

"Want to walk with me a bit?" I asked. "Don't worry you can leave before we get to the Works, I don't want you to have a heart attack."

"Not today," she said, shying away from the door. "I've never really been out there."

I was no longer surprised to hear her say that. Gently I took her by the wrist, "Come, Let me show you a few things around the city."

"No," she said sharply, before catching herself and forcing a smile.

"No, that wouldn't be a good idea. Goodbye, Adam."

"As you say, milady," I curtsied. "I hope to join you again." I looked at



her for a moment and walked out the door. I was beginning to feel the layout of the Mansion. With a few more visits I would be able to find my way through the maze on my own.

Back at the carpentry Katrina waited outside the house with her arms crossed. The moment I was within arm's reach, she slapped me across the face. "You have never missed a morning mass without telling me! I thought something had happened!" she said. "But I see you prefer spending your time with the Inquisitor's ward."

I wasn't interested in arguing, "I am sorry."

She turned away sharply and walked to a basket sitting on the table. "My father wants us to get materials and then stop by Robert's house." She handed it to me and said, "It's a present; he had a son born today."

We left the carpentry and headed north. Soon, the Craftsmen houses turned into the dilapidated barracks inhabited by the industrials. A foul smell of unwashed bodies and dirt lay in the air, almost strong enough to be tasted. The shouting, tools, and moving feet, created a cloud of noise in this part of town that only ceased hours after the sun set.

In front of us loomed the lumber mill, seemingly on the verge of collapse. Windows were broken and the walls were crumbling, yet it had stood for years. Katrina banged on the door loud enough to be heard through the deafening noises from within. A bald man, old yet strong, stepped out of the door and greeted us. With little words he led us inside. Many of his sons and even daughters prepared the wood in an assembly line. One son, judging from his age had already returned from the Guard, held a big saw in his hand with which he cut whole tree branches into various lengths. Another, just my age with brown curly hair carried them to the storage room. The girls on the other hand sat hunched over at a table. Two were removing the bark from fresh wood while the others rasped the swarf off the cut wood. They stopped for a second as we entered and observed us. Somewhat ashamed they looked down avoiding eye contact.

“Well ya need somethin dark ya said. I only got walnut here for ya but that stuff ain’t easy to work with lemme tell ya. And it ain’t cheap either. Only got a little left for ya,” the man said. “But I can sell ya some white oak. It’s much cheaper and ya can paint it. It’s even easier to work with, and I swear the guy ain’t gonna notice.”

“Thank you for the suggestion,” Katrina said, “We will take the oak then, how much would that be?”

“Ah, lemme think. Let’s say 50, ya can pick it up tomorrow” the man responded.

“Let’s make it 75,” Katrina said. “Get those girls a nice dinner tonight.”

The man was baffled and uncertain what to say. The sudden smile that crept onto his face was a good enough response for us. In the Merchant District we were the uneducated malnourished worker children. But here we were nobility. Everything was relative.

They wished us farewell and we departed for Robert’s home, deep in the industrial district. Passing the flour mill, the miller greeted us friendly; even him we had to help get through the winter last year.

The air around the smelter was hot, thick and full of smoke. Robert and his wife stood in the doorway with the baby in her arms. Robert was rather intimidating by nature. His large muscular body could scare anyone off, which allowed him to make some extra money as a Merchant District night guard. He was the one that let us in and out during our heists for a share of the profit. Seeing us now, his whole complexion lit up, turning the intimidating warrior into a welcoming friend.

“He is beautiful,” Katrina said with gleaming eyes upon seeing the newborn. “What is his name?”

“Seth,” Robert said proudly. “I am so glad to see you two.”

“It is a pleasure. Eric prepared this for you,” I said handing him the basket. I waved to his other sons who were inside, not daring to catch a break from work.

“When are you two going to try it?” His wife asked.

“I want to wait till after the Guard,” I said caressing the few hairs on Seth’s head. I could sense Katrina’s disappointment. “I don’t want to miss ten years of my child’s life.”

“I don’t know my friend, you better lock this beauty down,” Robert poked at me. “A kid will keep her busy while you’re gone.”

Seth clutched my index finger with his hands and looked at me. His eyes, colored in such an innocent deep blue, had not yet seen much of the world. He was pure, and yet born into a corrupted world filled with pain. His path didn’t offer him any options, and yet he shone with optimism. I saw hope in him.

“I guess we’ll see. But there is something I need to do first.”

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## Chapter 6



IT WAS THE night of the break-in. Nearly three months had passed since Robert's son Seth was born. I visited Cecilia more often, to join her classes and get to know her and the Inquisitor better. Other than that my life had been routine.

"I want you two to be careful, you understand," Eric said while I pulled a black sweater over my head. "If anything goes wrong, you always abort. Your safety comes first, are we clear?"

"Yes, Eric crystal clear, now hand me the charcoal please," I responded bothered by his pep talk.

"Get in, get out. Unseen is unscathed." Eric stood above us wringing his hands. Katrina and I busily darkened our skin with charcoal. In the shadows we'd be invisible, and so long as we didn't touch anything, we'd leave no trace. There was no real danger in it. After all, most of the merchants had never even noticed that their things were gone.

I carefully rubbed my hands with the charcoal and darkened my face. Looking in a mirror I made certain that no skin was left visible. Our light

skins were too easily spotted in the darkness without any cover. If we failed to hide our identities, we would be hung the next day.

Eric and I used to do the break-ins, when Katrina was younger. As both aged, Katrina became the more agile one, taking Eric's spot. Despite his consent, I could see the terror in his eyes every time we left. It was no different that time.

While I fixed Katrina's jacket, Eric gave us our last instructions. Every full hour past ten o'clock, night patrols walked through the streets to make sure that everyone was in their homes. We left shortly after midnight and planned to make it back before one o'clock, avoiding both patrol shifts.

Following my lead we sneaked down the road to the Merchant District. Tiny snowflakes trickled from the sky and filled the streets that had been cleared that very morning. I stopped in the shadow of the masonry, a safe distance from the gate where Robert and his partner stood unchanged, blocking the entrance.

"You think the midnight patrol is gone?" asked the other guard.

"By now they should, the streets are clear," Robert said glancing over to both sides. "Seems like no one was out, we can lean back now."

The other guard removed a flask from his belt and popped the lid open. Holding it close to his nose he inhaled the stinging scent of alcohol with a relieved face. Suspiciously he peered over at Robert.

"No worries old friend, we all need a good drink once in a while," Robert reassured. "Here, try this," he unbuckled his own flask handing it over to the other guard, "it's some heavy liquor, don't drink it all at once."

"I am sure I have had stronger," he said before taking a large gulp. With a wimpy cough he remarked, "Damn, not bad that stuff. It's sweet and burns right in your throat." He handed the half empty container back to Robert, and luxuriously leaned back against the gate's walls. Smacking his lips, he caught a few droplets of the liquor with his tongue.

Katrina got anxious, "Why is Robert taking so long? We have less than fifty minutes to get in and out."

"Watch," I said pointing at his partner, who had dozed off. Quickly I

peered down the vacant street and rushed over into the gate.

“What did you do to him?” Katrina asked.

“One of my sons helps out in the hospital, I told him to get me some of their tranquilizers. Those herbs work wonders,” he said with a chuckle. “Now go! Try to be back here in half an hour. I don’t want you to run into the one o’clock guard, and this one isn’t going to sleep forever.”

“Thank you Robert,” I said observing his passed out partner. “Remember to sound the signal whistle if anything happens.”

Carefully we moved on with our heels in the air, leaving no tracks and yet advancing in a brisk pace. At one point we seemingly levitated over the boulevard. At this hour the streets were vacant and most of the torches had burned down or been extinguished by the snow.

We were enclosed in complete darkness, which was a blessing and a curse. No one could see us, even if they were standing just a few feet away. Yet it slowed us at a time where every minute counted.

Once we located the house of the merchant, I retrieved the key from my belt. Cautiously I looked around. The exuberant silence of the sleeping district made me nervous. Some people were deep sleepers; others could be awoken by any sound. When taking measurements months ago, I was able to understand the location but I never got to know the people and their habits. I waited, unsure if the clicking of the turning key would disturb anyone in the merchant’s family.

“Let’s go Adam, we cannot take forever,” Katrina said.

I inserted the untested key and hoped for the best. With closed eyes and a slightly trembling hand I turned until the lock jumped open. From now on there had to be dead silence.

Entering the house, every sound, creak, and breath seemed like a violent explosion of noise in the innocently silent house. Now and then I froze, listening for movement upstairs. It seemed like I had stopped breathing as the only thing that reached my ears was my own heartbeat.

I spotted the glass cabinet in the living room immediately. The faint moonlight reflected in its surface through the window with a bluish tint.

Lifting the bolt, I opened the front of the cabinet and gave Katrina directions. I decided that we could take four chalices at most, yet should not leave any gaping holes in the arrangement. Decisively I pointed at the corners in the very back and showed her the number two.

It was a dauntingly slow yet nerve wracking task. Our arms extended into the cabinet with only the sense of touch to guide them. If a single chalice were to tip over, a chain reaction would ensue, waking the entire house. As I secured my second chalice in the bag, I waited on Katrina to retrieve the last.

That moment my ears recognized something else. Besides our breaths and our heartbeats another set of noises had risen. Footsteps. Katrina had not noticed them yet, still focusing on the chalice. I tried to gesticulate a warning but all she took it for was to make her hurry up. I wanted to tell her but I could not. They would have heard me. Why was she taking so long? My heartbeat was racing louder and louder. There was no way of controlling it now. So many thoughts passed through my mind and yet I was standing idly at her side.

The footsteps closed in on us. Blood shot up into my head and I could feel the veins in my temples throb. I should not, and I could not, but I did. My right hand grabbed the stiletto that was secured underneath my right pant leg above my ankle. It was illegal for a commoner to carry or own weapons, but being the son of the blacksmith had its advantages.

My hands were shaking more and more with every heartbeat, as the footsteps descended the stairs that led into the entrance hall adjacent to the living room. With my back against the wall and the steel clung in my palm I waited for the merchant. Katrina finally pulled the chalice out of the cabinet and placed it into the bag beside her. Quickly she closed and bolted the glass door. Turning around her face filled with terror as she saw me holding the dagger. The moment she recognized the footsteps, she grabbed the bag and hid behind a bookshelf across from me. The spot allowed her to peak at the entrance of the living room next to me and yet kept her concealed in darkness.

The feet of the stranger had hit the ground. So often had I challenged the existence of God, and yet I found myself praying; praying that they would not find us; Praying that the person would leave; Praying that I did not have to kill whoever came down the stairs. My eyes sought guidance in Katrina's but they were covered by the cloak of night.

I was on my own. My left index finger went up and down the blade of the stiletto hoping that it would lead to a quick death.

The steps were not moving towards the kitchen as I had hoped, but were approaching the living room. Katrina became uneasy. In five seconds I would need to make a decision. I took one last deep breath and aimed for his heart.

Now. I lunged around the corner ramming my dagger into the unknown darkness. Faintly Katrina cried out to stop me, but it was too late.

The blade was clean and struck nothing but air. Below it stood a little boy gazing up into my darkened face.

My throat tightened. He saw me, I thought, or did he? Uncertainty pushed its own dagger through my heart. I could not kill the boy. I was no murderer, nor could I harm an innocent child. My whole body started shaking while I carefully stepped away from the boy. Even if he did not recognize my face, he could start screaming any second.

Katrina grabbed my hand and put the bag in it. She shot me an intense look before she knelt down in front of the boy. "You are dreaming little one," she said in a soft voice, "go back to sleep."

This might have worked if her face was not colored like the skin of a monster by the charcoal. The boy's eyes squinted and his cheeks started to tense. He was going to scream any second. Against my will, my hands clenched the stiletto again, ready to pierce the boy's heart.

Upon the first sound Katrina grabbed the boy's neck and pressed into its side. Drowned in silence the child fell forward into her arms with his legs twitching. Carefully she laid the small body onto the floor.

The image sickened me to the stomach. I should have killed him in her



place. Forcefully I grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her upright, “We can’t just leave him here! What have you done?”

“Adam there is no time for this,” she said as our faces almost touched. “Run!”

I hesitated for a moment but then followed her lead, bolting to the entrance. We silently shut the door and sprinted down the boulevard. It did not matter if anybody heard us now. By the time they would rise from their beds and walk to their windows we would be back in the Craftsman District.

With short painful breaths we passed Robert and his drunken friend. He knew there was danger, and idly stood there without moving or asking any questions.

The bell of the big church rung once, signifying the passing of an hour. One o’clock. Within seconds the patrols would be all over the streets.

The carpentry was in sight. The first footsteps emerged down another alley. My hand reached for the doorknob and turned, hoping it to be unlocked. I ripped open the door and pushed Katrina in. My house was just a minute sprint away.

“Stay here,” she said holding me by the arm. “They will be here any second”

Torches lit up down the street accompanied by the dark voices of men.

“Just for tonight, please,” she begged, pulling me inside her house.

Once the door shut we fell into each other’s arms, with sighs of relieve. We stood there for eternity it seemed before I pulled her face close to mine and stared into her hazel eyes, “Why did you kill that boy?” I asked. “I am leaving for the Guard, I have nothing to lose. You should have let me do it.”

“If I had waited for you, he would have woken up the entire district,” she said. “It had to be done.”

Bitterly I looked down. It was my fault. I should have done it the first time without hesitation.

“On a side note,” she said, “who said I killed the boy?”

I took a step back and looked at her incredulously, “But...”

“I stunned him. Eric taught me how to use pressure points to disable an attacker,” she said enjoying the perplexed look on my face. “I am a girl, I need to be able to protect myself, silly.”

My heart stopped pounding rapidly for the first time since we had left. Relieved I closed my eyes and relished the moment. Gently Katrina put a kiss on my lips, took me by the hand and led me into her room.

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## Chapter 7



“STAND STILL,” MY father said, measuring my shoulders. A month had passed since the break-in, and the time had come for the blacksmith to make the armor I would wear in the Guard. In my case, my own father had to fulfill this task. It was a rather strange occasion. We passed very few words, and yet it had to be done.

Once the measurements were taken, we went through each piece of the armor one after the other. The shoulder protectors alone had to be reshaped seven times for maximum mobility and protection. The plating was done so intricately that it would still fit even if my body were trained to twice the size. My forearm protectors were next.

Night had already approached, while the blazing fire of the furnace kept the entire workshop as bright as day. The hammers, knives, and swords across the wall shimmered peacefully in its light while the wooden tables and cupboards were greyed from years of smoke.

“I can finish the rest alone,” he said after taking the final measurements.

I nodded thankfully. “I will go out for a walk.”

“Just don’t run into the guards.”

“I won’t,” I said and left the workshop.

The night sky was perfectly clear, revealing many constellations like bright images. With fast steps I passed the Works and approached the Merchant District. The guards merely nodded and let me walk right through the gate. Ever since it became known in the Merchant District that I was close with the Inquisitor’s family, they no longer gave me a hard time.

Only few merchants were out, sitting on the dimly lit benches, talking about business. I left the boulevard and followed the small path to the mansion. The rounded door shone from the distance, illuminated by the torches at its sides. For a moment I felt like I was back at my celebration. Except this time I came alone, and knew what I had to do.

The door was unlocked as planned. Cecilia had agreed to distract the guards so I could meet with her late at night and watch the stars.

It was a strange feeling standing in the red corridor by myself. It felt like walking across the stage of a play, demystifying it, yet becoming part of it at the same time. Slowly I dragged my feet over the rug, realizing that this may be the last time I would walk in here. I mustered all my strength and made my way up to the study.

“You took some time,” she said in her usual taunting tone.

“Me and my father were preparing my armor for the Guard,” I responded angered by the circumstance. She always acted as if the Guard was my choice, yet her mere relation with the Inquisitor put her more at fault than anyone else.

“It’s mid-March, Adam. You have more than half a year left before the Guard,” she said. “Stop grieving me with your worries. I will ask my uncle to free you from service.”

“Don’t waste your time,” I said. “The last thing your uncle is interested in is setting bad precedents.” I approached the telescope and carefully looked through the eyepiece. For a moment I escaped the city and was lost in the vast nothingness, miles above and beyond the gates.

“Maybe I can ask him to place you in a safe position outside the

gates,” she suggested. “A daytime watch perhaps.”

Irritated by her insistence I gasped and turned away from the telescope to face her, “Listen, I am not some important merchant boy whose parents can afford such favors. Nor do I want to be treated like one. If I have to serve, I will,” I snapped at her. “Trust me I will do everything in my power to not go,” I said. “Of course I am afraid! Ever since my celebration I have seen more body carts than I can count. But having to talk about the Guard every day of my last few months does not improve my situation.”

Cecilia laid her hand upon my shoulder, “You might not be some merchant boy, but you are important nonetheless.” Her eyes sought mine, but I avoided her look. “Ever since I grew up I wished for a friend. I might be the arrogant ward on the balcony, but on the inside I am alone. I finally found that friend in you, Adam. I do not want to lose you just yet.”

“There is something I have not told you,” I began. I needed to tell her of my plot to kill her uncle.

“I know Adam, I know,” she said with a faint smile, caressing my face. “The girl. I watch the districts from my window sometimes. Ever since I met you I have seen the two of you together a lot. She must be very special to you.”

“I am sorry, I did not mean to hide her from you,” I assured her, caught by surprise. A glimpse of sadness tainted her face. “Look at me,” I said, “you are very important to me too. I just can’t be what you want me to be.”

“I am happy for you; both of you,” she said. “I have been alone my whole life. All I ask for is a friend. Promise me that you will come back and won’t forget about me.” An uncertain smile crossed her lips.

I felt so close to her and yet I could never betray Katrina. “I will always be your friend,” I said and took her in my arms.

That moment my emotions began to blur my plans. I withdrew myself from her quickly. “I have to go,” I said, “I am very sorry.” Without any further words I ran out of the room. Her misery, as well as mine, was caused by him. I had to kill him. I made my way up two flights of stairs and went

down a side hall. By now I had known the maze of stairs and doors in and out.

Cecilia had told me the day before that the Inquisitor would hold a meeting with his high council in the library, a hall two stories high. He and his council had assembled around a long table on the bottom floor as I waited at the door to the upper level, which was comprised of an interior balcony that went around the sides of the hall. Two round stairs connected the levels at the end of the hall, facing the back of the Inquisitor's armchair. All I had to do was surprise him from behind with my dagger. Then it would all be over.

Hunched, I sneaked onto the balcony when nobody was looking up. One of the marble pillars that rose from the first through the second floor gave me cover. I knelt down and sat silent for a moment.

"Father, we have received new reports from the mines. One of my contacts in the Guard has found evidence of the Gate Watchers," said an old man with grey beard and grey braided hair.

"Tell them to destroy everything upon sight," the Inquisitor remarked. "Their remains seem to be endless."

"What about the finder?" another man in a black robe asked.

"Give your contact a reward for reporting to you and keeping quiet, but if he knows too much, do what you have to," the Inquisitor said quietly.

"We also have more pressing issues, father," said another, who was far younger than all the others, yet radiated sophistication, bravery and authority. These values bundled with his unflinching presence reminded of the eagles I so admired. Even now he was wearing heavy armor that seemed to have originated from the Grey Guard, covered in extra protections and ornaments.

"Spit it out Terric, what happened?" the Inquisitor asked.

"I would never leave the wall myself, if it was not important," he began. "The raids have steadily increased. Our men cannot keep up with production while fending for their lives. We only made it through the winter

because we cut into our reserves. Next time we won't be as lucky. I have three proposals for you."

"Go on," the Inquisitor said. His face showed more concern than he ever dared to show in public. Every time I peeked through the banister from behind the pillar, he grew more distressed and let his composure falter. Leaning on the table, he rested his head on his palm and listened.

"My first proposal would be to extend the age range of service," Terric said.

The Inquisitor chuckled, and looked at Terric with disbelief, "I need some men inside the gates too. The people would go mad over such news. Go on."

"We need better weapons and better protection. I know that we retrieved heavy weaponry from the Gate Watchers. We could use it to our advantage," Terric proposed.

"Do you hear yourself talk? Your men will not use these weapons, nor even touch them. By the time they know how to handle them, you will be out of bullets," the Inquisitor said. His tone became somewhat aggravated yet helpless, "Train your men to be stronger, tell the blacksmith to add some extra padding, and improve the outer wall. That is all."

"You leave me no other choice than my final proposal," Terric said.

The Inquisitor looked up at him waiting for something reasonable.

"Open the gates," he said with a stern face.

"I have heard enough of you. Get back to your post and do not bother me again until you can come up with something rational," the Inquisitor said.

There was a daunting silence at the table. Everyone avoided the glance of the Inquisitor, hoping to come up with brighter news to adjourn the meeting with. The man with the grey braided hair rose and gave a formal farewell. The other eleven council members quickly joined him and left.

Quietly he sat there by himself and spun his ring on the table. A rather strange rhythm began to set. Every few moments I would hear the light gold clash against the dark wooden table.

Quickly I inched my way towards the staircase to get closer to him, while he was lost somewhere in his thoughts. For too long he hid the truth from us. What weapons? What Gate Watchers? What raids? It had to end. He was the sole reason my life had collapsed into such chaos.

My hand clutched the stiletto at my waist and slowly drew it from the belt. The last pillar of the staircase gave me cover, as the ring stopped spinning. My heart beat faster and faster, yet I had to keep my breath under control. Slowly I stepped away from the pillar and approached him from behind. Just a few feet separated the blade from his heart. It was so graspable, so real. With every step I could taste victory and freedom as memories of old pains, and dreams of futures lost, flashed before my eyes.

Images of everybody I knew, whose lives had been ruined by the Inquisitor, appeared before me. Elias was still out there. Bennet and Colin were dead. Mother and Father had to watch it all. Peter was about to be sent off too. Robert and Seth barely hung on from day to day to survive. Eric lost his wife, and Katrina was about to lose me.

Cecilia...*“I have been alone my whole life. All I ask for is a friend.”* I froze, reflecting on our earlier conversation. The tip of the dagger almost touched the Inquisitor’s neck. He had caused her so much trouble, yet was her only family. As much as I wanted to push that dagger through his back into his black heart, I could not have ripped him away from her. My hand trembled, pushed forward by my mind but held back by my heart.





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## Chapter 8

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I FELT DEAD inside, but he was still alive. Come sun rise, I would leave this city and maybe never return. Much had happened since I had the chance to kill him.

I had fled the mansion, without him ever knowing that his life lay at my mercy that night. I never told Cecilia. In fact I never told anyone but Peter. He was upset, hating me for a day or two, but finally forgave me. “You are no murderer Adam,” he had said. “But now we both have to learn to become one.”

His time came by very quickly. Four months had passed and he was absorbed into the outside world as if he had never existed. I stood with his family at the gate that day, bidding him goodbye until we would meet again. Already back then, I saw myself in his shoes, approaching the gigantic gate. Since that day it seemed as if the life had been sucked out of his father. The old barber barely spoke to his customers anymore.

The last time I saw Cecilia was mere two weeks later. We sat in her study, learning about the inventions of Leonardo da Vinci. His flying machines amazed me more than anything I could imagine; they gave men the power of an eagle. As we read about them, the bells rang. I dismissed them thinking it was noon. But then it rang again. And it rang a third time.

“Oh what a shame,” the teacher said, “poor young soul.”

I ignored it, focusing on the lesson. Ever since I overheard the council’s warnings at the secret meeting, a guard died every few weeks. Nothing could have happened to Peter, since he just started training.

It must have been ten minutes later, when Anthony ripped open the door without being asked to enter. His face was distraught, his eyes fixated on mine, “Adam,” he said, “come with me.”

Elias. For just a moment I forgot about him, just so that I would never be able to forget him again. The next moments ran by so fast, leaving nothing but a blur. All I recall are images: Anthony telling me to follow him; Charging down the staircase towards the red corridor; Fighting my way through the crowd of curious spectators. Elias lying on the body cart.

Mother and father had already been there. I fell into their arms before I could form any sentence. My mother’s sobs and my father’s strong embrace gave me support, both emotionally and physically. Their skin brushed against mine, and for a moment it felt like we were one body. I felt so close to them. Yet I knew I would lose them too... or they would lose me.

Removing myself from the huddled masses of my mother and father I turned towards my dead brother. At first sight he seemed estranged. It took me a while to recognize him as my own brother. Nearly eight years had passed since I had seen him. The boy had turned into a man.

His death came not in battle; No blade or bolt had pierced his skin. It was the damned gift of the gods that took his life. His entire body had been destroyed by a fire. Deep red discolored the darkened skin at his limbs where the flames had eaten through his flesh. His clothes and armor were ragged, his body violated, and his face forever left in pain. My hand softly brushed through his ash-blond hair that had mostly been spared by the flames. I tried to hold on to him in that moment, but there was nothing I could have done to bring him back. With tears rushing down my face, my throat was still blocked by a lump of pain, and yet screams emerged from deep within my soul.



My final hours passed by, as the rain trickled down on me. It was the last thing I

was worried about. I sat on the Mount, maybe for the last time. Katrina held me tight, tears running down her face uncontrollably, while I numbly gazed into the horizon. A chapter in my life was about to close, and yet I seemed to be stuck on the first few pages. I was not ready to leave this all behind. My eyes caught Orion once again. He did not make it, but hell I would.

We were still sitting atop the roof, when the sun began to rise in the distance. I closed my eyes and cherished the warm rays. I wanted to focus on the moment, but all I could think of were the things I didn't do and may never get a chance of doing. At seven o'clock they would make me leave this city behind; before morning mass, before almost anybody had left their house. Opening my eyes, I hoped to wake up from a dream, but everything was still the same.

I slowly climbed down the Mount and made my way back home. My parents were already packing together anything that they thought I should carry with myself: Souvenirs as memories and clothing to get me through the winter. At last my room seemed vacant, almost dead, with nothing but a few books on my desk. My hand glided over the wall and the furniture as if to say goodbye.

With my parents at each side, I passed through the Works, heading towards the gate.

A band of familiar faces and friends already awaited me. Robert embraced me with his strong arms and fought the tears, "Be careful out there boy," he said. "Whatever will happen, I only hope that Seth will one day be as great of a young man as you are. Take care Adam."

Anthony came next, and overcame formalities to embrace me as well, "I will miss you my friend," he said. "But even more so will the ward. She sends you the warmest farewell and wishes you the best of luck on your ventures outside the gate. Please stay safe."

I thanked Anthony and turned toward the mansion that loomed over the city from the South. A faint smile crossed my lips and I waved into the empty air. I knew that she was watching.

Eric came next, followed by my mother who wept as if she had just seen my face on a cart. She would not let go, until the guards told me to move on.

At last it was Katrina's turn. I gazed into her hazel eyes for what felt like a

lifetime and more. Then I closed my eyes and gave her what might have been my last kiss. She tried to fight them, but the tears kept returning. I knelt down at the city wall and plucked a purple flower out of the ground, “Remember me,” I said as our foreheads brushed against another.

My father handed me my bundle, “Stay strong son, whatever happens.”

“Forged in fire,” I said, giving him a final embrace.

The house-high gate doors opened slowly. I threw a last glance behind me, catching the eyes of the loved ones that were so close to me. The gates were almost fully ajar. Firmly I faced ahead, striding into the unknown.



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## The Grey Guard

*Blame, what fallible weakness.  
Too often I have used you unwise,  
Unknowing of the truth among the lies,  
Unknowing that black and white  
Bear grey in spite.*





## Chapter 9



THE CREAKING GATE doors fell shut, leaving me in a new kind of silence I had never experienced before. No shouts from the homes, no chatter from the market, no sounding of steel disrupted the utter tranquility of nature, as the soft wind brushed over the grass and my skin. The sweaty and hot stench from the Industrial District was gone and I inhaled a cool breeze of fresh air.

The view was what took that same breath away again. Large golden fields that had been harvested not long ago expanded towards the West. Far in the Northwest I spotted big farms, with livestock moving about the lucid grass. The new light of the rising November sun gently stroked their fur, announcing the new day. Just a little ahead of me rushed a vivid river from the mountains in the West, through the fields, to the East. Much of my view, however, had been cut off. The outer wall, a fortified palisade in the shape of a new moon, stretched from fields in the West to the far East of the valley. The palisade appeared to be the last line of defense. Under its protection lay a settlement of a few houses.

I walked down the only trail that led away from the city gate. Soon, I

faced a fork in the road. *'Farms and Fields'* pointed to the left, *'Forest'* led north-east, and *'Mines'* directed south-east to the right of the city. *'Training - New Recruits'* pointed straight ahead towards the North. I shouldered my bundle and followed the path. A wooden bridge with a slight arch covered the river, allowing me to cross. The settlement came closer and I found various buildings sprinkled over the plain at the foot of the palisade. By now I had counted at least ten wooden watchtowers spread throughout the valley, rising two houses high above the ground.

Approaching the training complex an arched entrance stood before me. At the top, bold letters read: *'Welcome New Recruits – May your Arms be Strong, and your Spirits be Stronger'*.

"Look who it is!" yelled a familiar voice. "Happy eighteenth birthday!"

In the shade of the closest building stood Peter. His appearance had changed unbelievably over the past three months. His boyish features had been replaced by strong arms and a sharper face.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said throwing my arm around him. "You look good. What did they feed you here to make a soldier out of a scrawny boy like you?"

"It's good to see you too," he said with a big smile. "The food can hardly be called food here. The training is rougher and more painful than anything I have ever done, but once I get back the ladies will be at my feet," he added with his usual grin.

"I am impressed. Then you won't mind carrying this," I said, throwing my bundle at him.

We laughed together for a moment before catching up on what had happened in the past three months. I told him about Elias, which he had known nothing about. The new recruits were rarely talked to by any of the initiated guards, and did not get in on much of the news.

"Training does not start until eight. Mind me showing you around?" he asked.

Upon my nod, we entered the large cottage where Peter had been

standing. Personal belongings and blankets had been dispersed all across the floor in straight ranks and files. Walking in between the improvised beds he said, "I claimed you a spot close to mine. Make sure to grab some hay later, the nights get bitterly cold." He placed my bundle on the floor and turned to leave.

"Can I just leave it here?" I asked out of precaution. "People don't steal while you're gone?"

"Material things are worthless out here. We are all equally poor and equally hungry. Even the finest piece of gold is not worth a fist sized steak," Peter responded, smiling at my naïve question. "Let's meet some of the others, you can get settled later."

The cottage we left was the place where all the recruits slept. Two bigger ones were designated for the Grey Guard; anyone that had completed training. A common-hall, the most dignified of all buildings, was where the men ate, spend an hour or two at night, and celebrated completions of service or training. Two wooden statues of men in armor stood at each side of the door. Their faces were undefined, standing for the egalitarian nature of the Guard. Outside the city was the only place where rich and poor came together to fight alongside, letting status lose all its significance. One of the soldiers held his sword facing up while the other kept it facing the ground. Peter told me that it symbolized the virtue of self control, to know when to fight and when to avoid conflict.

We entered the common-hall briefly. Most of the men sat at long tables, eating their breakfast while exchanging a few words. With numb expressions they ate what seemed to be their everyday cuisine, a bowlful of a white viscous grit-like substance and a cup of water. Approaching a table occupied by three other recruits, I felt how little everyone cared to see a new face. Part of me had expected the excitement of the celebration to be matched by the guards, but all I received were bored testing looks. One of them looked at us, lowered his spoon and nodded at his companions. Synchronous they turned their heads and marked me like a stranger intruding on their turf.



“It’s alright comrades, this is Adam,” Peter said, dropping onto the bench next to one of the others. “I’ve told you about him, he just arrived.”

“Happy birthday, and welcome to hell,” a man from another table said in between two spoons of his breakfast.

“Don’t ya mind him, he’s a grumpy fella,” one of Peter’s friends said. His brown curly hair was all over the place like a wild mane, while the first stubbles grew forming an irregular beard on his boyish face. He looked somewhat familiar, and judging by his dialect was from the Industrial District, “I remember ya! Ya’r the guy that always brought us food at the lumber mill. Ma name is Nigel, glad to meet ya in person.”

Images flashed back in my mind to the days Katrina and I went around the Industrial District to help families through the winter. I nodded to acknowledge him, just when the next one introduced himself, “I am Stephan. I don’t think we’ve met, but I have certainly seen you around. My parents run the masonry.” I had skipped his celebration with Katrina to sneak around the city. That was all I remembered about him. He looked the oldest and most mature of them all. His eyes were almost as dark as his coal colored hair, yet radiated a warmth and friendliness that was rather reminiscent of the sun.

“James, pleased to meet you,” the third said. “It is of my understanding that you traded with my father. He is the merchant for miniature sculptures and other decoration.” His composure was that of a merchant indeed. With a straight back and both hands on the table he looked the most proper of the three. His dark brown hair was cut cleanly and combed to the side. Be it because of care or genes, he was the only one that kept a spotless clean shave.

Peter grabbed James’ water cup and took a gulp, “Let’s go boys, training’s up.”

Without any breakfast or time to sit down, we left the common-hall, turned right and walked towards the training ground. Artillery stations, sparring grounds, and parkour areas stretched all over the west side of the camp. At the center of it all the recruits assembled in straight lines. Four

team leaders, recruits close to completing their one year training, led a warm-up lap around the complex. Despite all my climbing up the Mount and running off from thief jobs, I turned out to be in much worse shape than I had expected. I reached the halfway point of the warm up panting, begging for air. Falling behind Peter and the others, I had to get myself together to not lose the group. Gasping for a break, I made it back only to be met with more preliminary routines and workouts.

The sweat rolled into my eyes causing a light burning sensation. Training had been going on for less than an hour and yet I already strained my body to the maximum.

I was on the floor, barely finishing my thirtieth push-up when everything turned silent. The recruits rose to their feet quietly. Perplexed I sat on the floor hidden behind a rank of other recruits, observing the scene.

A slight rattling of heavy armor approached the ranks. “Salute soldiers!” yelled a voice I had heard before. Rising to my feet I looked into the eyes of a man I had seen just months ago.

The group answered in unison, “Hail Master Terric!”

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## Chapter 10

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TERRIC WALKED THE ranks up and down in slow controlled steps. He was the man that had stood up to the Inquisitor at the council meeting I had overheard. His long black hair fell down his bearish shoulders and blew in the morning breeze. “Third trimester recruits practice what you need to. Try to work on ambush scenarios,” he said. To my left, Stephan took a step forward and left with the others. “Second trimester recruits see Yorick at the shooting range,” Terric continued. Without a word James stepped forward and joined his group. “First trimester recruits you are with me today.”

Peter, Nigel, and I followed Terric to the sparring grounds. Swiftly he pushed open the gate of the small fence surrounding the arena. Walking inside, the recruits immediately formed a semicircle and waited for orders.

“Let’s see what you got,” Terric said passing down the ranks. “I need two volunteers.”

Peter grabbed my arm raising both our hands before I could resist, “Master Terric we have a new recruit. It would be an honor to get the first fight with him.”

Terric stepped before us examining me from head to toe, “You look

strong and healthy for a new recruit, what is your profession?”

“Blacksmith, Master,” I responded looking him straight in the eyes.

“Let’s see how you do with a sword. After all, you make them,” he said walking towards the fence, against which all different sorts of training utensils rested. He drew two simple wooden swords out of a barrel. Without a warning he turned around and threw them at us. Unaware it caught my head and fell to the ground. A sudden pain rushed towards my temples while I scanned the ground for the sword. Reaching for the shaft, a kick from behind put me to the ground. A second later I felt the wooden tip of Peter’s sword pressed against my neck.

“Beginner mistake,” he said relishing the laughs of the group. “Always be attentive. Now pick up your sword Adam, don’t just lie there.”

I collected my thoughts, quickly glancing at our surroundings. There was barely anything to use to my advantage. All I saw was the fence, people, and nothing but sand.

Sand. Grabbing my sword with my right hand, I pushed myself up from the ground with my left. Quickly I clawed into the ground and yanked a handful of sand into Peter’s face. He flinched, trying to avoid the blinding and burning sensation in his eyes. It bought me a few seconds at most. I jumped to my feet and pressed my sword against his throat, “I could say the same”. My mockery earned me a few laughs and supporting shouts from the group.

“Nice move, recruit,” Terric said. “Now enough of the talk, I want to see a fight!”

With small sidesteps we walked in a circle, hoping for the other to make the first move. My hands tingled, feeling the immediate rush of adrenaline pump through my veins. If I waited too long he might have figure out a way to trick me. I used the benefit of surprise and lunged at him. The wooden blade slammed against his, barely blocking my attack in the last moment. With another attempt I spun around as fast as I could, only to strike the side of his sword again. My breath got shorter and my biceps tensed. Quickly I withdrew just in time to dodge his blow. I used the

moment to strike at him again, but in vain. In full swing his sword had returned and hit me in the side.

A throbbing pain spread throughout my chest as the watching crowd of recruits applauded Peter. I could barely hold up the sword to block his next slash. My left hand pressed against the bruise, in the hope to make the pain go away.

Our wooden blades crossed. Both of us pushed as hard as we could to gain the upper hand. All my muscles tensed, yet Peter kept pushing my sword farther and farther down. Once my sword would be too low, my whole upper body would be left vulnerable to an attack. Ignoring the pain I grabbed the sword with my left to support my right arm that began to weaken. With clenched teeth I pushed Peter's sword back up in between our faces where our eyes met in fierce competition. We had reached a stalemate. Neither of us wanted to give up. Mustering all my remaining strength I rammed my shoulder into him.

Tumbling backwards he tried not to fall. I too had lost my balance for a moment, and staggered closer to Peter. With both hands I slammed my sword into him. Cringing in pain he flinched. I struck him a second time before he could even lift his sword. Whimpering he fell to the ground and lay there immobile. Triumphant I raised my sword and faced the others who cheered for me. Nigel started yelling my name. The others quickly joined the chant. I could not stop a bright smile from crossing my face. Who would have thought that my first day in the Guard would give me happiness?

Suddenly my feet lost ground and I fell face down into the sand. I flipped over and looked at Peter standing over me, holding both our swords in his hands.

"Lesson number two: Never turn your back on a knocked out enemy," Terric said, slowly approaching us. He took the swords from Peter, "You two had enough. Well done, even though you two fight like fourteen year old girls."

Peter reached out his hand and helped me up. Giving each other a

brotherly handshake he twitched and touched his side, “You better get used to living in a beaten up body. It’s all part of the drill.”

We joined the ranks again as Terric selected the next two recruits to fight. After a few fights he gave us critiques. In his opinion none of us would survive a day beyond the outer wall.

After a day of sparring the sun began to set. When we were finally dismissed, Peter, Nigel and I headed back to the common-hall. Stephan and James already sat at the same table I had met them at that morning.

“So, did Adam get his welcome present yet?” Stephan joked seeing my bruised forehead where the sword had hit me.

“Nah, he kicked Peter’s ass. Ya should have seen it,” Nigel responded smirking at Peter.

“He did well,” Peter said shortly, ignoring the laughs. We walked to the back of the food line and waited to be served. With a plate in my hands I was eager to see what they would serve for dinner. To my surprise the food looked much better than the tasteless grits we had for breakfast. A recruit wearing an apron behind the counter handed me a bowl of vegetable broth accompanied by a fist sized piece of meat. Despite the simple nature of the dinner, it tasted better than anything I could have wished for. After a hard day of training, the food not only filled my stomach but relaxed my nerves. It was nice having company too. I could just sit and listen or let my mind drift. In the city I had so many responsibilities, but out here my only responsibility was staying alive. I had never imagined the Guard to be like this. For once my fear was gone.

“Let’s go,” James said, grabbing his plate and bowl. His whole face turned hard and frightened, “Constantine and his friends are coming.”

“What’s going on?” I asked. “Who is Constantine?”

Everyone got up, ready to leave. I had been too busy talking with the others about this whole new world I had just entered and barely started my dinner.

“Move,” said a harsh voice.

“There are some empty tables over there,” I said. “Me and my friends

are still eating.”

“No, you are done eating,” Constantine said, “this is my table.” I turned around and faced a tall blond man in full armor with weapons casually hanging from his belt. Behind him stood three more guards, looking at me like I was vermin.

Angered I got up and stared him straight in the eye, “I was having a nice time with my friends. You, sir, sit down somewhere else and shut your mouth or...”

The guards started laughing. “Or what?” Constantine interrupted.

Any answer would have been foolish. It was clear that he was stronger than me. “This is a mistake,” I said. “It’s my first day. I am not looking for a fight.” I grabbed my bowl and downed the rest of my broth. With the sleeve of my shirt I wiped my mouth and passed them without looking back.

“Your first day, is that so?” Constantine asked, grabbing me by the shoulder, “Where do you think you’re going? You know the rules. The new guy has to give me something I like.”

I hit his hand trying to escape his grip, “Leave me alone.”

“That’s a nice necklace you got there. The eagle would suit me perfectly,” he grabbed the eagle trying to rip the string off my neck.

It was the only physical memory of Katrina I brought with me. I could not allow him to take that away from me. My right hand formed a fist while my left hand ripped his hand off the necklace, “I would not do that if I were you.”

“More of those threats,” he laughed. “Boy you entertain me! Now give me the damn necklace.”

My fist bolted out into his face, knocking Constantine off the ground. His pals quickly caught him and helped him stand.

“Get off me you tools!” he yelled at them while wiping the blood off his bleeding nose. “Take him outside, I am not done with him.”



## Chapter 11



“CONSTANTINE, FORGIVE HIM,” Peter said in an attempt to protect me.

“The boy needs a beating,” Constantine hissed.

The common-hall turned silent. Everyone followed us outside, eager to watch a fight. Constantine’s friends finally released me as we exited the hall, violently pushing me to the ground. When I tried to get back up, Constantine kicked me in the side. My stomach contracted, while a soundless cry shot up my throat. A second kick hit me straight into my stomach, forcing part of my dinner back up.

“Leave him alone!” Peter said in a determined voice. He stepped in between my twisted body and Constantine, “You will not hurt him anymore on my watch.”

“Get out of the way kid or I have to beat your vigilance out of you,” he responded.

“Then you need to take me up too,” Stephan said stepping next to Peter. James and Nigel joined the two and helped me up to my feet.

“How heartwarming,” Constantine looked around and nodded to his friends, “Let’s get them all then.” Without a warning our three opponents



jumped Peter and Stephan. With a loud thud Peter landed on the ground, barely keeping his attacker from beating his face to mush. Nigel stepped behind Peter's attacker, and clawed his hands into his throat. The veins started to throb at his temples. Seconds before he passed out Nigel released and left him on the floor ringing for air.

At the same time, Stephan and I fought with Constantine and one of his friends. With forceful jabs they went straight for our heads. Every time Constantine aimed for me with his fist, I ducked and hit him back in the stomach. To my miscalculation it hurt me more than him. Hitting the sharp edges of his chainmail cut open my knuckles more and more after every hit.

From all sides the recruits and guards cheered both parties on. The constant shouting of the bystanders strained my nerves, costing my focus. Distracted for just a second, I found his fist right in my face. Tumbling backwards, I watched Stephan nail Constantine's friend to the ground with a powerful blow to the chin.

The sound of steel put the whole group to silence. Constantine had drawn his sword. Our friends stepped back with their hands in the air. With slow movements and sword extended in front of him, he approached me until the steel poked my chest. In panic my eyes scanned the ground, catching glimpse of the knocked out guard at my side. Rapidly I knelt down and drew his sword, crossing it with Constantine's.

"This is going too far," exclaimed Peter, "stop it now!"

Before his friends could hold him, Constantine slashed out at me with an immense speed. I could see and feel the steel racing my way. My throat contracted, not letting any air in or out. I jumped back barely escaping my execution. There was no emotion in his eyes when he struck out at me again and again. With every dodge my legs got weaker. I could only evade a few more strikes before I would be too slow and lose a limb. The crowd was lined up behind me and left nowhere to back up to. Seeing no other option, I raised my weapon, blocked his attack, and interlocked our swords. Like in practice that morning, our swords crossed. With clenched teeth and blood oozing from my bleeding knuckles I tried to push against it, but was

immediately out powered. Every second my sword was pushed lower and my hands started losing their grip. Suddenly the angle twisted my arms, sending a flaming pain down my biceps. My hands could no longer hold against his pressure and dropped the sword.

Frantically, I stumbled backwards avoiding his next attack. My heart beat so fast that I lost focus. After one wrong step, I lost balance and fell on my back. With cold, violent eyes he stepped over me and pressed the tip of his sword against my throat. There was no way out this time. Helplessly I closed my eyes.

“Enough,” ordered Terric approaching the group. “Everyone, go to sleep. You fools should use your energy for something better than mindless brawls. If this happens again, both of you will face consequences.”

Constantine growled and quickly disappeared with his friends, as Peter helped me get back on my feet. I wanted to thank Terric, but he left as fast as he had appeared. Bruised but relieved we returned to the cottage with the other recruits. I laid out a thin cushioning layer of hay over the hard ground and rolled myself into two of the blankets my parents had given me. All this preparation barely fought the bitter cold that ran down my spine and bit my skin.

It was utterly uncomfortable but wonderful at the same time. After a day of getting beaten up, I relished the luxury of just lying down and stretching my muscles. In no time I had dozed off to sleep.

*A sudden whisper in my ear awakened me.  
Katrina’s soft sweet voice repeated my name over  
and over. I got up from my bed and opened the  
door of the blacksmith shop. Blazing lights  
blinded my eyes. As the image adjusted to the  
light, horror became clear. The whole town was in*

*flames. Men and women lay dead in the streets. There was nobody but me.*

*The voice came again, “Adam.”*

*I turned around. Katrina stood in the middle of the street. She was bleeding, her body tortured, and her wrists roughed up from the chains that dangled down her sides. Her hair was messy and caught up in the blood that stained her beautiful face.*

*The cries grew more painful, “Adam!” Tears rolled down her face as they did on mine.*

*I ran towards her, with every step seemingly distancing myself more from her. Her screams grew more vehement. I had almost reached her and was ready to wrap her in my arms.*

*Her body lit up in flames. Her screams deafened my ears and the visual blinded my eyes. The buildings around us began falling apart. The world crumbled to pieces. I knelt on the vacant street watching with tears in my eyes as everything vanished into plain nothingness.*

*At last it was all gone, and I sat in what appeared to be a white room. A white door with a silver knob was the only thing that stood out. As my eyes fixed on the door, the room turned into a cave.*

*The door was still there but a new texture covered my surroundings. With careful steps I approached the door. Collecting all my strength I lifted a heavy blockade that protected its lock, and unbolted the door. It was the only way I could go, yet I was not sure if going forward was any better than staying. I looked around. A trail of blood marked what lay behind me, yet uncertainty awaited me behind the door. With trembling hands I twisted the knob. Bright lights escaped the cracks of the slowly opening door. The cave illuminated for a moment with a fascinating sparkle, before turning even darker than before. A black substance like the darkest smog, rushed towards—even through—me. With every second a bit of the light vanished. The dark force pushed me to the ground and drowned me in weakness. Fatigue spread throughout my body, making it hard for me to keep my eyes open. A faint light appeared in the far distance beyond the door. I tried to reach for it but passed out into the oppressing darkness.*

I begged for air. My heart was racing. Sitting upright I found myself in the midst of the cottage surrounded by sleeping recruits. It was all a dream. My heart began to beat in its regular rhythm but my mind was still caught in the

distressful images of my nightmare. I clenched the eagle necklace in my right fist and laid back down.

The air and the ground were freezing, forbidding me to close my eyes. Beyond the physical hardships, my senses were troubled by what I had just seen. While it appeared to be a dream it was more real than most of the things I had experienced this past year.

After a sleepless hour, I went out for a walk. Leaving the cottage I found only the night-watch up and awake. One of them advised me to stay close to the outer wall in sight of the guards, just to be safe.

I climbed up the ladder of the palisade—the feared and praised outer wall that separated our sleeping refuge from the outside world. The view was rather underwhelming as the vast darkness consumed everything but the few campfires lit by guards that decided to stay outside. The bitter cold that reigned already now in November was bound to grow worse once the snow would break out.

“Can’t sleep?” asked Terric who stood just a few yards away gazing into the night sky.

“Nightmares,” I answered, “I saw the city and my girlfriend going up in flames.”

“Not the worst I’ve seen,” he commented with a dark chuckle, “You and that girl have a kid?”

“No, unlike most I wanted to wait,” I said. “I want to raise my son, and not return to see an estranged ten year old.”

“Well, you don’t always have the choice of returning. Life sometimes takes unsuspected turns and nothing goes as planned. Should have done it while you could,” he said. “Well, I’m not going to make you feel any worse. I saw you were in a fight today, almost got yourself killed there.”

I could feel myself turn red at the possibly worst first impression I had made that day on the commander. “I never thanked you for stepping in.”

“There is nothing to thank me for. I was just enforcing the rules.” He added with a grin, “But let me tell you, getting into a fight the first day

takes a hell of a big mouth. I am surprised you made it eighteen years with that attitude.”

Even at this time he wore his full armor. A pelt of what looked like a wolf covered his bulky shoulders, and a broad long two hand sword was placed on his back. His eyes were alert and yet an absent glimmer was in them as he observed the stars in such a tranquil manner. “I never caught your name,” he said.

“I am Adam.”

“Tell me Adam,” he looked at me, “what do we live for?”

“To live,” I said surprised by the need for a purpose.

“Why? Are our breaths, our survival, and our mere reproduction all that we are good for? What makes us different from the animals that graze on the lawn? How can such an animalistic purpose give us the right to conquer and control the world? We live and we die, just like the paling star that disappears in the sky.”

I thought about his words for a while until I broke the silence, “I once asked the Inquisitor a similar question. Now thinking about it I believe that the purpose of our lives is to find a purpose.”

Terric made a grunt and tensed his face as if he were physically thinking about what I just said.

“There isn’t one purpose, one measure, for us all to live by. The only purpose we share is that we all seek a purpose within our life,” my glance caught Orion, “some find it young, some find it in their dying moments. For some it might be both. It all goes back to how we impact the world around us: Our loved ones, the stranger on the street, and the child of the future that opens a history book to our decade. The star only pales if you let it. My brother died not long ago, but his story lives on. When I was a little boy he would point to the stars, show me Orion, and tell me that he will protect me even when he is no longer around. Every time I see the stars I think of him. He never had children, he never reached his 30th birthday, yet his existence affects my very nature and my every move. Through me he lives on.”

Terric sighed and bowed his head, “You seem to have it all figured out

for such a young man like yourself. Don't tell anyone this, but as a military man I believe leadership should be based on skill, strength and wisdom, not on some antique form of tradition. We could don't have faith in the Inquisitor?" I use a bright young mind like yours to lead us."

Surprised and amazed I glanced over at Terric. "You asked him. I wanted to agree with him, yet was afraid that this was all a test of my loyalty and allegiance. "How do you know that your words do not offend me? My creed would oblige me to accuse you of sacrilege."

"If you still had faith in the Inquisitor or God, you would not be up here pondering about life. You would have stayed in the cottage and prayed for the demons to stop taunting your soul," he said.

"It appears to me that you are not praying either," I remarked.

"To answer your question, I have faith in the Inquisitor to please a crowd and enchant them with illusions. However I don't have faith in him aiding our survival any longer. People worship the Inquisition yet abhor the Guard. Resources enter gates under the flag of the Inquisition while the dead bodies of the sons of the city wear the armor and insignia of the Grey Guard. If it weren't for his poisonous manipulation, the Guard would long be in control." As he continued, his words filled with passion like the crescendo of a bard's song, "We are the invisible hands that sow the seeds that make your daily bread. We chop the wood that forms the bed on which you sleep at night. We defend those walls that protect you as you stroll across the marketplace. But people will never see us for what we truly are. Every young man fears to join us, and every twenty-eight year old is ready to forget the past ten years of his life. What we need is not antipathy, but support to form a stronger Guard. I see the bitter truth every day, and it is not getting any rosier. Quite contrary, unless things out here start to calm down, our productions won't be able to support the city much longer."

I was absorbed by Terric's words. Despite being afraid of asking for any more than he already opened up to me, my curiosity pushed me further, "What... what are these things out there?"

"Some of them look like brutes, sheer monsters. Others look

unmistakably like you and me. What some have in power, the others have in cunning. Many of my men have been tempted and tricked by the latter. There is just one thing I can tell you,” Terric slowed his speech and looked me in the eyes, “they might look like us, but their souls are possessed by hatred. The most deceptive things in this world are what our eyes entrust us with.”

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## Chapter 12

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“TAKE A SEAT everyone, and don’t touch the leaves,” Terric ordered as we entered the common-hall. Nigel, Peter, James and I hid in the last row behind the other first and second trimester students. Terric took his position in the front of the common-hall where usually the food was given out, “Today as part of your survival training, I will introduce you to some plants that can either save or kill you, so pay close attention.”

Nigel stretched his lanky arms and yawned luxuriously. “Boring,” he whispered, extending his vowels as if he were physically bored by the lecture.

“See, in the city I would find a nice girl and skip classes like these,” Peter said with a bragging grin.

“I loved taking out ya mother during class, ya’r completely right,” Nigel said with an even more triumphant smile.

Peter punched Nigel in the side, who then bumped into James. “Gentlemen, calm down,” James said furiously, shaking his head from annoyance, “some of us are trying to pay attention.”

Peter and Nigel mocked James and continued with their games. After

listening to Peter rant about his girl adventures for ten minutes I jumped in, “Peter has one big mouth, but he never actually touched a girl.”

“Oh really?” said Peter tilting his head. “At your celebration while you were feasting with the Inquisitor I was feasting on the butcher’s daughter.”

“The butcher’s daughter, Johanna? What a whore! I had her before too,” Nigel yelled baffled.

“Quiet down and pay attention you idiots!” said Terric, whom we had already forgotten in the midst of our conversation.

“My parents always said: ‘Sharing is caring’,” whispered Peter patting Nigel on the back, “Adam on the other hand doesn’t like to share. Did you know he met with the Inquisitor’s ward at night sometimes?”

Nigel looked at me in disbelief. “We looked through her telescope and talked, that is all,” I said defensively.

“Looked through her telescope, I am sure,” Peter laughed.

“Shut up, we were just friends,” I said getting progressively louder.

“That’s enough! Blacksmith, come up here,” Terric yelled angrily.

I hesitated for a moment. After he insisted, I got up and walked to the front of the room. Everyone’s eyes were glued on me as I faced Terric in the front of the hall. He turned to me with two leaves in his hand. They were seemingly identical, with the same light green and slim shape. One of the two had pointy edges, while the other was smooth. That was their only difference.

“You are alone in a cave, starving, and can find absolutely no game,” he said. “Which of the two would you eat?”

“That’s simple,” I said pretending to know. I did not want Terric to think any less of me. Over the past weeks I had talked with him almost every night and looked up to him more and more by the day. Observing the leaves I thought carefully. The rough edges appeared less edible than the soft ones, so I grabbed the latter from his hand ready to put it in my mouth.

His hand shot out and stopped my arm. “Foolish naïve kids. That’s what all of you still are. It’s time to separate the men from the boys,” he looked at me and ripped the leaf from my hand. “You my friend might

have just died. In a matter of three minutes the poison would have paralyzed your nerves, leaving you immobile and permanently disabled.” Terric tossed the leaves back on the table, turning towards the other observers, “All of you can keep talking and dreaming about life in the city, or you can pay attention and actually make it back. The choice is yours. Just don’t let me be the one that has to pick up your dead bodies from the forest floor when you chose the wrong berries to eat.” He paused, “I am done here. I will see you all tomorrow.” Without another word Terric walked out of the common-hall, leaving me in front of the crowd ashamed.

The sun had reached its peak. It was the only time when the sun’s rays eliminated the sickening cold of winter. Inside the city it was cold too, but we hardly spent half as much time outside as in the Guard. Peter, Nigel, and I briskly made our way to the shooting range located in the training complex facing the outer wall. Around thirty bales of straw were lined up along the wall, which was covered with arrow marks. Each bale was decorated by a red circle with a black dot at its center. As we picked up our bows some thirty to forty yards from the targets, the recruits went quiet.

Master Yorick entered the range behind us with his powerful dark presence. He was a man as agile as a snake and yet as strong as a dragon. It was hard to tell his age as his white head was shaved bald with nothing but a scar above his right eye. The only indicator was a short dark beard at the chin that had begun to grey.

“Raise and aim!” he ordered without any introduction. With my left arm stretched, I held the bow out in front of me, aiming the arrow an inch above the target.

“Draw!” Yorick yelled, passing the ranks to check for proper form.

“Fire!” In almost perfect unison, the score of arrows flew off like the sound of a straw catching fire.

“That was awful, let’s try that again,” Yorick said glancing at the arrow spiked wall, “Raise!”

It was a tiring yet meditative routine. Both focus and strength had to be intertwined. There was no space for frustration because any negative emotion guaranteed one to miss the next arrow as well. In order to hit I had to visualize the arrow striking its target before it was even released. To complete the day's training we had to pierce three consecutive arrows into the black center.

After hours of practice I came to understand that using a bow was both an art and a science. A lot of it was just talent and feeling. Whenever we all missed our targets, Yorick would pull out a bow and spike a target with three arrows, dead center, in less than five seconds. He didn't aim, he didn't measure, he didn't wait. He just knew his bow and had an unparalleled control over it.

I on the other hand, who lacked any sort of talent at this point, had to compensate with science. After every shot I remembered the location of the arrow tip and noted how far I drew the bowstring. Once I had hit the target it was a mere labor of exact repetition. Certainly, if an enemy had been there I would not have stood a chance, but at the very least it helped me gain a feeling for the distance.

After around ten rotations of three shots, I finally nailed all three into the red center. Yorick glanced over to check for completions and lifted his thumb, "Well done, Blacksmith."

Nigel was still trying when I joined a group of recruits that had completed the task. Peter was among them. He had been done after only two rotations. The work in the blacksmith shop had given me strong arms at most; he on the other hand had the steady precision of a barber.

Yorick was leaning back on a high chair, overseeing the entire range. The recruits that were done had assembled on the floor around him, listening to him speak.

"That's a good question," he said. "Recruits always ask me what to do when your group is ambushed and someone gets wounded. It's simple. When you see blood or hear a scream, run as fast as you can to the outer wall," he looked around with a vivid yet cold gaze. Some of us were in

protest about this cowardly advice. If a friend of mine were hurt, I would never run, I thought. “I don’t care if it is your best friend, brother, heck even if your own mother finds a way out there. There is no place for being a hero outside the wall. Many have tried and got rolled into the city on a cart alongside the friends they tried to save. Terric will try to teach you valor, comradeship, and all that nonsense. I will teach you survival. Here in the Guard it is just you, and only you. The moment you start thinking about someone else, you are one step closer to your own death. Call me an egoist, a cold bastard or whatever you want, but deep inside you know I am right. And when something happens, you will thank me.”

No one responded. A few nodded, wherefore he continued his little monologue while more and more recruits joined us, “Terric is an idealist and will one day get himself killed. I am sure you have wondered why all the men that have made it back inside the gates are so somber and silent. They have seen the things you are bound to see. But more importantly, they remember the price they had to pay to belong to the survivors. One of these days within the next ten years some of you will make a deal with the devil to belong to those few that live.”

A long silence took over. No one knew what to say. With his big hands Yorick suddenly clapped in a slow rhythm, “Thank God, Nigel! I thought I would have to sit here all night. Well, enough for now, you are dismissed. Go grab some lunch.”

The three of us immediately raced to the common-hall. With growling stomachs we were lucky to be the first ones there. As we waited for our food, Peter incessantly poked fun at Nigel for his horrendous arching skills, “If we are zoned together outside the wall, I will break your bow with my own hands. You are like a child. If I don’t keep it out of your reach you might hurt yourself.”

“I think he’s trying to overcompensate for something with his ego,” I laughed.

“Adam, didn’t you see him? He hit the wrong target. Twice.”

“That’s enough, Peter,” James said, sitting down next to me, “go enjoy your...,” he paused for a moment, poking the brown mass on his plate with a fork, “beef, or whatever that is.”

“Let’s hope it’s beef,” I said. “Where is Stephan? I haven’t seen him or the other third trimester recruits all day.”

“Since they are almost done with their training, the commanders decided to take them out for an excursion,” James said. “When we took herbal lessons with Terric, Yorick led them out to the woods. I assume he left them there.”

“A bunch of recruits out there alone?” asked Peter confused, “They don’t even get to wear their armor yet.”

A gauntlet as dark as burnt ashes hit the table from the far end. We all looked up and found Yorick who had passed by to pick up his lunch. “Better they get the experience now, than when they are out there in even smaller groups,” he said. “The outer wall will not always be there to protect you.”

Talking to Yorick gave me a sense of inferiority. I would not have dared to speak out against him, knowing that he could crack my skull with his mere hands. Judging by the looks on the other’s faces, they felt the same.

“When will they be back?” I finally managed to get out.

Yorick waved me off as if talking to a concerned mother, “The worst that could happen is that spiders crawl on them while they sleep. We set their camp up in a location where we have never been attacked.” Leaving us, he turned around for a short moment, “You four seem to have too much time. Idleness allows our minds to drift and worry. Finish up and repair the stables, they need some fortification before the snow hits us.”

The day slowly faded as the sun spread its golden-purple light across the horizon. The warmth of its rays steadily seeped away, while the first few snowflakes began to trickle from the evening sky. After three hours we had

covered all the holes in the horse stable and doubled the wall on the lower half of the livestock stable.

“When can we leave?” Nigel asked for the seventh time while hammering a nail into yet another plank.

“I’m sure Yorick will dismiss us, I don’t want any more trouble with that man,” James responded in a rushed voice while handing him the next plank.

A horn sounded beyond the outer wall. Silence took over the settlement. We stopped for a moment and looked around. The guards on the wall pointed wildly to the Northeast. A scream pierced through the air. Within seconds the bell on top of the outer wall rang wildly.

Immediately we dropped all our tools and ran to the common-hall. By the time we reached its entrance, the gate of the outer wall opened. Three recruits ran inside, as if chased by the devil. Their uniforms were ragged, and some of their faces were spattered with blood. One of them had a broken arrow sticking out of his side. Stephan to our despair was not among them.

Terric and Yorick came charging from the officer house. Yorick fastened a mounted crossbow to his right arm while Terric attached two extra one handed swords to his belt. Like war machines they walked up to the wounded recruits and asked for their target.

“How many of them are there and how many of you were still there when you left?” Terric asked straightforward without wasting seconds.

“I don’t know. They ambushed us. We were getting ready for the night. Some of us might have taken a swig or two. It just happened so fast.” The recruit was still shaking and barely listened to Terric’s words. Over and over he repeated how fast everything happened.

Yorick looked around and glared at me, “Blacksmith, stop standing around, go get my horse ready!”

I ran back to the stables I had just repaired. The black stallion bristled with anger with every step I took towards him. He did not listen to anyone but Yorick. When I dragged him outside into the cold snowing air, the entire

party had arrived. Terric mounted his horse alongside Yorick and two veteran guards.

“Can I come with you?” I pleaded to Terric. “My friend is out there.”

“First you need to prove yourself,” he said in an uncommonly harsh manner. “Someone who can’t separate poison from food shouldn’t be trusted with a sword. I don’t want to babysit you out there,”

“Let’s hunt these sons of bitches down,” growled Yorick.

I wanted to wish them good luck but they already bolted towards the opening gate. Their grey cloaks danced in the wind as the four horsemen rode into the woods.

We waited. Every minute felt endless, and every second raised the tensions in and around us. If Terric and Yorick did not succeed, almost twenty wagons would enter the city come dawn.

Peter, Nigel, James and I waited at our table in the common-hall. Restless and pensive we sat there, feeling that almost any topic would be inappropriate to discuss in our current situation. The weather reflected our sentiments. The light snow had turned into a dirty mix of heavy cold rain and hail.

It was hard to stay awake in this all-consuming silence. Midnight had already passed. My head grew heavier and heavier by the second. I tried to shake it off and force myself to stay awake, only to find myself minutes later awaking from another temporary nap.

“Adam!” someone yelled at me. Loud voices were all around me. For a moment I could not separate my dreams from reality, until Nigel pulled me to my feet, and dragged me into the ice cold rain. The moment the drops touched my neck, I was wide awake. We climbed up the outer wall to see what happened. In the far distance torches approached the settlement. One by one, they were extinguished by the rain.



Ecstatically we applauded, clapped and screamed. We had no idea how many were saved, but at this hour we had lost any expectation of even Terric or Yorick returning.

The gates slowly opened as survivors poured in. Terric led them with a blank expression on his face. Guards tried to pull him into the common-hall to celebrate his triumph but he walked off towards the officer house.

Yorick on the other hand, entering the gate at the end of the line, wore a bright smile on his face and immediately asked for a drink. Around fourteen recruits had survived, carrying the bodies of their dead brethren. Seven recruits had been slain in the ambush. Stephan was in complete shock the moment I found him. Master Yorick approached him before I could. He dug his metal covered fingers into Stephan's shoulder. With a smile he embraced him, and unmistakably whispered into his ear. There was a cold look in his eyes now. Something seemed off about it.

As soon as the master left, the four of us surrounded him. I tried to put my arm around Stephan, to comfort him. He immediately shrugged it off, like a scared animal. He didn't say a single word that night.

We brought him into the common-hall to sit down and warm up. He was shaking incessantly. Whether from the cold or his experiences, I could not tell. A guard gave out hot soup for all the recruits that just came in. Stephan would not even touch it. With chattering teeth he stared blankly at a dark spot on the table.

Quietly I sat next to him, trying to console him the best I could, when suddenly a hand grabbed my shoulder. Looking up, I found Constantine standing behind me. Before I could curse him out, he held up his hand signaling me to stop.

With an understanding and warm tone Constantine said, "I just came to check up on you and your friend. I hope he is well, take care of him. I will be sitting somewhere else tonight."



## Chapter 13

THE DISASTER IN the forest had changed us all. I realized that it was time to put to rest my childish mentalities, and mark survival as the highest priority. We all had known the dangers of the Guard before, but these bloody events had put them into perspective—turned the tales into reality. No longer was I joking around in lectures, no longer did I allow my mind to drift, and no longer did comfort matter to me. Even the once rebellious notions I had held of overthrowing the Inquisition had been put on hold. For a while at least. I was fixed on making it through those ten years as quickly and painlessly as possible. I had given up on much of what I once had been and embraced a new self. A stronger self. Every day I smiled because I was thankful to be able to wake up again, in the bitter awareness of my brothers' sporadic passing away.

Even Peter and Nigel, despite their lively personalities, had turned quieter and harder. Every now and then I saw their old selves, their innocent funny sides, shine through the rough shells that now covered them.

Over the past months I had conditioned myself to wake up at the brink of dawn. Before anyone else was up I walked across the training grounds and made my way to the river. I washed myself in the cool morning water and meditated as the sun's first rays gently warmed the droplets of water that rolled

down my body. With tranquil joy I observed the many beauties that the Guard-life hid. In the past I always yearned for the city, but I learned to enjoy the simplicity of the Guard. The fresh air, the vivacious colors, and the peaceful wildlife were a paradise in itself.

It was easy to be preoccupied by death, but it was a risk not worth taking. Call it devilish or divine, but once a man lets a thought become prevalent, it turns into reality.

Only at nights my mind drifted back to the past. I thought of Katrina, my parents, and sometimes even Cecilia and the Inquisitor. The city had turned into an untouchable parallel world that was so plausible yet surreal. To my knowledge they could either be dead or alive. Sometimes they appeared in my dreams living and well but other times as mere spirits.



Just a month ago Peter had completed his training, and last week Nigel joined him in the woods. It was just me with other recruits, who I could have called acquaintances at best. If I were attacked by the beasts that roamed out in the wild I knew that only my four friends would stay to save me. The others would run off just like Yorick taught them to.

I myself had about seventy days of training left. My third trimester was well on its way. The workouts had become harder, the competition steeper and the training more real. When most left for dinner, I stayed out on the training ground and sparred with Terric, who was more than happy to teach me the tricks and techniques he had acquired over years of battle. He had no time to teach groups of thirty or more all he knew in just a year. In little time, the other recruits looked up to me as the most experienced swordsman among them and asked me for advice on a daily basis. And so I became Terric's right hand. His protégé they called me. Even outside of training I helped him organize the troops and made sure that productions were up and running.

Together we leaned over a big map of the city and the land surrounding it. Twelve red pillars marked the watch towers that spread across the plain. A miniature rounded fence represented the outer wall, separating the Guard's

settlement from the wild. For every camp of six to ten guards a little knight figure stood on its relative location.

“The food production is higher than ever, but all other resources are dragging,” Terric complained. “The forest’s high casualty rate and the mine’s frequent accidents have cost us many men. Not to mention the disaster in the forest. It wiped out an entire camp-full of potential new miners and foresters. We might have to relocate some men from the grain farms,” Terric said, moving two of the little knights from the farms to the forest and mines, “that might improve our situation.”

“It is worth a try,” I responded to his suggestion. “I will find volunteers in the morning, or if nobody comes forward choose them if you allow.”

“You can take care of it,” Terric said while twisting the little knight between his fingers. “I trust you.”

A guard knocked on the open door to Terric’s study and stepped in. Approaching us he opened his pouch and pulled out a sealed letter. He handed it over with just three words, “From the Inquisitor.”

Terric’s look was both surprised and terrified at the same time. He broke the seal and moved to the corner of the room where he read the letter once, and then a second and third time. At last he turned to me with a grave expression, “I have to leave for the city tomorrow. There are some issues which the council needs to address. I don’t know how long it will take, but if there are disagreements, it may take a week. I want you to make sure that things run as smoothly as possible while I am gone. Officially, Yorick will be in charge, but if you leave things up to him nothing will get done.”

The thought of leading the Guard struck me by surprise, “It would be an honor, Master. But are you sure Yorick will listen to me?”

“He will most likely hand things over to you voluntarily unless they interfere with his shady businesses. Nonetheless, I cannot declare you a temporary officer since you have not even finished training. I just need you to ensure that things run well.”

“I will do my best,” I responded briefly, wanting to do him the favor, yet afraid of making a promise. Suddenly a thought crossed my mind, “Is there any chance you could deliver a letter to someone within the walls?”

“That would be the least I could do for you,” he responded as a matter of course. “Grab some scroll paper and ink from the box on my desk. I’m going to head to my room, just leave it on the table.”

“Don’t you want to know where you have to deliver it?” I asked as he left the room.

He spun around at the door, “You always talk about her, come on Adam.” With a grin he disappeared onto the hallway.

As I sat down at the table the words flowed onto the parchment:

Beloved Katrina,

Too many words I want to say to you, yet too few will fit on this page. I hope all is well. I miss you beyond believe, and everyone and everything...my parents, Eric, the workshop, the Mount... my old life. There has not passed a night that I did not think of you, nor gone by a day where the eagle around my chest has not kept my heart warm. I just want you to know one thing. I will return. For you. For us. And nothing in this godforsaken world will stop me from that. But promise me, that on the day on which I enter the city to the threefold strike of the bell, you shall think of me no more, but live a happy life with a husband and child. Farewell my love, and let my parents know that I am well and love them,

Adam

I read the letter over and over again. For an hour I must have sat there improving words, correcting spelling and rewriting the entire letter with a neater handwriting. After a while I accepted that what I had was as close to perfect as it could be. I folded the letter and pressed my family’s ring into the hot wax creating a seal with an anvil at its center. In big calligraphic letters I spelt out “*Katrina Carpenter*” on the outside. Carefully I weighed the letter in my hand imagining the look on her face when she would receive it. Smiling I put it down in the center of the table, and headed back to the cottage.

The next morning Terric was already gone by the time training had begun. If it were not for me, Yorick would have canceled training all together for the day. By late afternoon I made my way to the stables to ride out to the fields.

In the corner of the stable I noticed a young but fit mare. Compared to the hot blooded beasts Yorick and Terric rode, she was a friendly cold blood. Since

I had little riding experience, I needed a horse like her that would cooperate with me. Gently I brushed through her dark grey mane and led her outside. Playfully she raised her neck and exhaled excitedly through her nostrils. After I had tied her to a pole I went back inside to get the saddle. With the heavy leather seat over my shoulder I returned to the horse which was no longer alone. With a straw of wheat dangling from his mouth, Yorick leaned against the stable's wall.

"Where are you going Blacksmith?" he asked casually as if he had run into me by chance.

"I'm heading out to the fields. Terric told me to relocate a camp of farmers to the woods," I said passively, setting the saddle up on the horse's back.

"Did he?" Yorick said exaggeratedly dumbfounded. "He didn't mention that to me."

"He must have forgotten, he was in a rush this morning," I explained with a slight annoyance rising within my voice.

"Well that is too bad," Yorick said, pacing towards me, "I don't think I can allow you to go out there."

"And why is that?" I hissed at him.

Yorick's dark eyes came closer to mine until our faces almost touched. I could sense the violence that ran through his veins by the mere proximity of his body. "First of all, recruit, you will show more respect or I will punish you with kitchen duties for the rest of the year. Unpaid." He took a few steps back and grabbed the horse by its mane, "To avoid that, you better watch your tone and insert 'Master Yorick' in all your sentences towards me." He led the horse back inside the stable while I motionlessly stood there, watching him walk all over me, "Why I am not letting you out is simple," he continued. "Not only are recruits not allowed to use the stables, but you also disrespected the chain of command by not running the task by me. When Terric is not here, I and only I make the calls, not some third trimester recruit."

"I am just doing what Terric told me," I responded defensively, "Master Yorick. I apologize for not asking you first. It was a mere misunderstanding," I said heading back to take the horse out again. "Let's forget about this, and I will finish the job Terric gave me."

“You misunderstood me, recruit,” he yelled at me. “You are not going anywhere and I am not arguing about this any longer. Have a good day.” He turned away and walked off.

I grabbed the horse’s leash and jumped on. Glancing at Yorick who spun around at the sound of the horse’s hooves I hissed furiously, “Stop wasting my time. Write Terric a letter and take it up with him. I can’t let your apathy and idleness ruin the Guard. A good day to you too.”

I rode off triumphantly, feeling stronger than ever. I finally had stepped up to Yorick, the antagonist to my idealistic world of goodness. I heard the horse’s hoofs bang across the plain, feeling the vibration in my bones, while the fresh air filled my lungs.

Suddenly the horse collapsed with a violent scream. Catapulted to the ground, a feeling of a thousand broken bones spread through my entire arms, legs, and back. My hands, knees, and elbows were cut up from the sudden fall.

The body of the horse was twitching next to me as a thick bolt as long as my upper arm stuck out of its side. With slow but threatening steps Yorick approached me from far. My vision was still blurred. Before I could get to my feet, he pulled me up by my neck and hissed at me in a fiery tone, “I am sick and tired of you Blacksmith. I warned you! There is no Terric to save you now. Oh, I have more than unpaid kitchen duty in store for you. You will spend your night in the mines.”



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## Chapter 14

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“YOU CANNOT DO this,” I said as Yorick forced me toward the common-hall, “You know that you will face consequences the moment Terric gets back.”

“Shut up,” he said angrily, “I won’t face anything. A conflict between a big mouthed recruit and officer happens all the time. Nobody will take the recruit’s word over the second-in-command. Not even Terric.”

He waved two guards towards him, “Detain this recruit and bring him to the mines at sunset. Stay outside during the night and make sure he doesn’t run anywhere,” leaving us, he was almost out of reach when he turned around, “Feel free to take horses, but make him walk. Oh, and send a recruit to the stables to clean up the... eh... well it got a little messy.”

With a salute they confirmed his request and dragged me into the common-hall. Once they sat me down, I was not allowed to move.

For three hours I waited, watching them fill their stomachs with pork and beer. The two must have been Yorick’s personal henchmen. It has always been the talk among the recruits that one can work for him and get special rights or earn big sums of money. It was not easy getting in



however. Whenever a recruit asked him openly about it in training he acted confused. Once, he claimed that they were all just stories that originated as a prank on him a couple years back. Observing the two guards, nothing else seemed plausible. They consumed rich foods casually like merchant sons, yet had the table manners and looks of industrial borns. As a member of the Guard, one earned a laughable single coin a day. Back when I worked for Eric, we made six hundred coins in less than two months. No Guard in their right mind would waste the little they had so meaninglessly.

At first I could not follow their conversation. I assumed it was the talk of two drunkards. But after a while I recognized patterns and meaning in the seemingly nonsensical mess. It was a simple code-language. Their talk, filled with jargon, was supposed to be for their ears only.

They discussed transporting rare resources like minerals, fruits, and medical herbs into the city. The merchants apparently paid them extra to get around the Inquisition's taxation.

"Jeff's been sticking his nose in the black zone. I think the lamb ought to know," the skinnier one with salt and pepper locks said. "The harvest would be great."

He suggested selling out a fellow guard that must have been snooping around in their shady businesses too much. 'The lamb' seemed to represent Yorick. What Terric gained in honest loyalty, Yorick made up through economic relations. Sadly, too often money trumped honesty. On the face we were all brothers and Grey Guardsmen. But some of us truly were just Yorick's men, and it poisoned the very fabric that held us together. Much of the trust I held with the average man got lost in an ocean of caution and suspicion.

Despite my distaste for Yorick, something within me was intrigued by the whole enterprise. It radiated with rebellion which was still a fire that burned vividly in my heart. Especially the jobs reminded me of the thief jobs, my old life. In contrast however, I had always considered my work as acts of altruism. When I put my life at risk it was not for enrichment. It was to help the people from the Industrial District survive. This scheme however

was driven by greed. And judging by the speed in which Yorick had killed the horse I had ridden, I felt certain that the savages and horses were not the only living things he had slain.

“Let’s go boy, we got a ride ahead of us,” said the bigger one with a flat nose. Like a prisoner they escorted me back to the stables. The dead horse had already disappeared and the blood stains vanished from the earth. Before mounting their horses they tied up my wrists to hold me by a leash.

What followed was one tedious journey. Yorick’s men took pleasure in leading me cross-country. The direct path to the mines would have taken half an hour at most. Even when the sun was already fading they still laughed at the whole enterprise. Every time I tripped they would pull on the leash, forcing me to the ground with bloody wrists. Whenever I complained, they rode faster, giving me the option of running or being dragged over the ground in excruciating pain.

When the darkness almost completely consumed me, a few lights illuminated the far distance. The soft flames of what appeared to be campfires highlighted the rough surface of the mountainside. The closer we came, the more defined the scene grew.

The still image turned into a lucid film of ancient nostalgia. Flames danced around in circles and shone brightly, throwing long and thick shadows behind the guards around it. One standing guard threw a shadow like that of a giant onto the face of the mountain. With every step it became more vivid. The men were singing songs, while two jumped joyfully to the quick and lively tunes of another’s flute.

From a safe distance they got off the horses. Carefully the skinny guard tied them to a lonely tree, while Flatnose cut me loose, revealing the many burn marks on my wrists. Each grabbed me by a shoulder and pushed me towards the mine.

The camp grew cautious the moment they caught a glimpse of our shapes. The music stopped and the men slowly put their hands on the grips of their swords as they rose to their feet.

“Show yourself,” growled a familiar voice. From within the group

appeared Constantine who had pulled his sword halfway out of the sheath, to caution whoever was approaching.

“Put the sword back, we are delivering this recruit. Direct order from Master Yorick,” responded Flatnose.

When the light of the campfire illuminated us, another guard came forth, “Did Master Terric approve this order?” asked Stephan, “You know as well as me that Adam Blacksmith is Master Terric’s protégé. I would not mess around with him if I were you.”

“Master Terric is not here. As of now, Master Yorick is first-in-command and his orders are the law of the Guard. Now step aside, or we will have to use force,” responded my captor harshly while Flatnose pulled his sword out.

“Very well,” Constantine said and stepped aside. Stephan looked at me visibly concerned as I was pushed past him. We left the guards behind us, and delved into the dark abyss of the mines.

The air thickened, taking up a violently sharp stench. The gases, I thought, could be incensed at any moment by the flickering torches along the walls. An uncomfortable heat spread among the three of us. Flatnose kept moving his collar to let some air dry off the sweat that formed on his back. It seemed so implausible that men like my father worked here for nine years and made it out alive. The heat and suffocating air were unbearable, but the narrowness frightened me the most. The deeper we delved into the cave, the closer the walls moved in on us.

After taking several turns I had lost my orientation.

The guards stopped and looked at one another. Flatnose turned towards me, “When you find your way out, you are free to go. If you aren’t out by the time Terric gets back, we’ll come looking for you. Good luck, and wash yourself when you get back.”

“But we can’t make it that easy for you,” the other said as his fist flew out at me.

I awoke in the middle of the maze. The faint memories of the turns we took had vanished with the hard blow to my head. My fingers investigated the throbbing bruise above my left temple.

I sat on the floor for a moment, clearing my head and waiting for the pain to go away. As the minutes passed I pushed myself onto my feet and started walking. I had no idea where I was going, but I knew I had to go somewhere to get out of this hole. At the end of the hallway a fork opened up three new hallways. Arbitrarily I picked the left hall and ran down its full length, until it offered me a new set of choices.

Every hall had at least one torch to illuminate it. Without their light one would be lost in dead space. Sometimes a torch had burned down and I began to crawl on my knees to make sure that I would not bump my head against the low ceiling. At last I found a burning torch and grabbed it from the wall to guide my way out of the tunnel system. I must have been close to the exit.

It felt as if hours had passed, yet I had no way of telling what time of day it was. It could have been the same night, but it might as well have been the next day already.

After a while my lungs began to fight me. The running forced me to breathe heavily, bringing more and more of the toxins that rested in the air into my system. I collapsed onto my back, holding the torch just far enough away from me to not set my clothes on fire. The flame flickered scarily and created a constant cycle of light and darkness. The moment it cast its light upon the cave it was immediately swallowed by the vast darkness surrounding it. This almost theatrical back and forth made the room seem even smaller than it had been.

A sudden panic ceased me. I feared that if I would not leave right then, the walls of the cave would consume me. I jumped onto my legs and began to run. My lungs were pumping and my heart was beating to the rhythm of my feet. Haphazardly I made turns at every fork obliterating any possibility of orientation. The torches got fewer and fewer, yet I kept running.

Something told me to turn around, but I just kept running into the dark abyss, hoping for a light at the end of the tunnel.

I turned left with my legs extending like those of a deer fleeing from its predator, when I suddenly tripped over something on the floor. With all my left-over speed I tumbled against the wall of a dead end tunnel.

Struck by pain, I cringed. My knee was cut open and began to bleed. The torch had fallen out of my hand during the collision and rolled across the cold floor. Lifting my eyes towards it, I saw what had laid in my way. A skeleton in full armor rested against the wall. The armor was not one of the Grey Guard. Much of the fabric had been consumed by time, but I could still make out a symbol that had been untouched. In the center of the chest was a closed gate with an open eye across it. Emerging from the top of the gate stood a cross and at the bottom hung a pickaxe.

I picked up the torch and began to explore the dead end room. A small chest rested to his side, closed shut with a thick iron lock that looked unbreakable. On the ground I could still see the black markings of where the stranger must have once had his fire every night. Across from him was an old wooden chair. The way his skeleton lay there it seemed as if he had been sitting on the throne until he collapsed onto the floor in his dying moments.

In amazement I sat down on his former throne and examined the room. Before my eyes I could see it all flashing. Light, life and sound. The mysterious stranger that once lived here. Roasting his dinner over the fire, singing songs, reading a book, dreaming of what life would be like in a hundred years. Now all was dark, dead and silent.

Suddenly my eyes caught an irregularity in the wall. I rose from the throne and brushed my fingers over a crack. The dead end was man made. Across the whole width of the tunnel spanned one gigantic gate that was made of stone, iron and wood. A thick wooden blockade kept the door shut, fortified by a lock and iron knob beneath it. Curiosity drove me forward yet fear held me back. I looked around me. Ahead lay the door, but behind me was nothing but the skeleton and my own trail of blood.

For all I knew monsters, demons, or nothing at all could have awaited me beyond the door, so I turned back to the unknown stranger that had been waiting for me for decades perhaps. My eyes drifted over every inch of his body. His left hand clasped something. Carefully without breaking off his bones I pulled a small paper from his hand. What I found on its back was the smallest and most detailed painting I had ever seen. In the torchlight I saw the image of a woman with her arms around what seemed to be her daughter. They were smiling so purely, that the love was radiating from their eyes through the paper onto me. It must have been his wife and child, I thought. Something about the picture put me off however. Their clothes, perfectly fitted and symmetrical, as well as the room they were in made it look like they were from another world. The kitchen that was visible behind them was not made of wood or stone like ours. Most things were made of metal, and tiny lights shone from many objects, that I had no knowledge of naming. The only familiar thing I noticed was a golden cross dangling around the wife's neck. I tried to find answers, explanations, anything useful, but it was all just strange and inexplicable.

Carefully I stowed the picture into my pouch. By the mere movement of putting it away, one last hope was sparked within me. My hands touched the sides of the skeleton's armor. On the right side I found a pouch similar to mine. Opening it quickly, I searched within it blindly until my fingertips got hold of something solid. With curious ecstasy I pulled out a hand-sized book.

The hard cover was colored in blood red and barely aged compared to its owner. I flipped back the cover and read the big black calligraphic letters "*Winston Smith, Diary,*" and a few lines beneath, "2025-2095". In awe I brushed my fingers over the page. My hands were holding the key to the past and with that maybe the answers to the many questions that plagued my mind. I felt as if it could slip away at any moment; vanish like all the rest of history, turn to ashes in between my fingers. The urge within me to know what really happened grew stronger and stronger, until I flipped to the next page and began to read what would change my world forever.

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## Chapter 15

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*“February 14th 2049,*

*My name is Winston Smith, born on January 11th 2025. This journal is part of my doctoral political science dissertation, to track the societal, cultural, and personal changes that current medical breakthroughs will bring onto the country. Today, scientific magazines across the world released that the ‘immortality revolution’, which had been talked about for years is finally beginning. Various companies are peaking in their endeavors and have stated that their products would finally be available in the coming week. Much excitement, both positive and negative, is present in all communities. While medical experts celebrate it, many critics fear the*



*consequences of widespread immortality. Religious groups believe it to be a satanic tool aimed at entrapping mankind on earth and keep them from heaven.”*

*“February 19th 2049,*

*Everything everyone is talking about now is immortality. Various companies have offered different solutions. Some go by replacing organs with more effective machinery, while others strive to modify genetic coding. Conservatives wish to illegalize immortalization, while liberals see it as the ultimate freedom and right to life.”*

*“February 22nd 2049,*

*Upon the media release that the genetic modification would have a multi-million dollar price tag, radical groups rioted and bombed local government and pharmaceutical buildings. The tensions are growing as our current staggering income inequality is transcending into a right to life debate... Is it murder if a person is denied immortality?”*

*“April 2nd 2049,*

*Things have been getting worse. Over a thousand individuals have undergone genetic modifications that supposedly ended aging and natural deaths. The masses are now on the streets, violently protesting for*

*equality. Death tolls vary. Conservative estimates count over a thousand dead. The war has begun.”*

*“May 4th 2049,*

*Classes have been canceled, and the restaurant my wife Amber waits at is closed as well. My baby daughter Lizzy seems unaffected, unable to understand what is happening. The government is evacuating civilians, while driving the rebels into combat zones. They seem willing and ready to use all means necessary to bring the riots to a stop.*

*It does not seem like I will get my PhD anytime soon, but I will maintain this journal for future’s sake.”*

*“June 4th 2049,*

*A month has passed since the evacuation. Every few days care packages drop in our neighborhoods, while every few seconds bombs fall in the city square. The government is splintering. It has already lost many of its lower tier supporters and is now down to the hard core of powerful rich men and women that benefit from the recent breakthrough. This core has now united with the rest of the upper class and formed a coalition known as the Aristocrats.”*

*“July 15th 2049,*

*The former competing company that planned to release mechanical organs for the common man was*

*bought by the Aristocrats, and now supplies them with android soldiers. This rescued the Aristocrats, as over 99% of the army had been reported to have deserted the government. The fight for the resistance is futile once again, as the Aristocrats can buy any man with their leverage of immortality and riches.”*

*“August 3rd, 2049,*

*The care packages have stopped, and the Aristocrats have no more interest in appeasing the ones that had not yet joined the resistance. I want to leave this city as soon as possible, but Amber wants us to wait another month, and hope for the best.”*

*“August 15th, 2049,*

*The Aristocrats made one mistake. They had power, but they used us, the common men, as a conduit to receive that power. Now with almost everyone against them, much of their authority is fading. The only reason they have not collapsed is because their android armies make up for their low numbers.”*

*“September 9th, 2049,*

*The resistance took down the entire energy grid of the country. With all the engineers, electricians, and reactor workers on our end, we have been able to put to halt their domination. In a few days their robot armies will be useless.”*

*“September 10th, 2049,*

*Taking out the energy grid was a two sided sword. It gave us military advantages, but life is no longer the same. Communication, knowledge, and comfort disappeared at the blink of an eye. Until it's gone you don't realize how dependent you are.”*

*“September 21st, 2049,*

*The last batteries are empty and all gas and electricity stations have been drained for generators and cars. We now live by candle light and the little food we can loot from the stores.”*

*“October 1st, 2049,*

*We were able to build a kinetic energy driven satellite radio. It turned out that similar events were happening all around the world. In several countries the Aristocrats had already obliterated the resistance or enslaved them. These countries promised to send nuclear missiles to destroy us before we could win the fight. The resistance's warfare generals consider a pre-emptive strike.”*

*“October 3rd, 2049,*

*I just don't know what to do. It has not been a year yet I cannot recognize my life. What has happened? Today I was at the resistance headquarters to pick up goods. That's when the bombs struck. I ran home as fast as I could, but all I found was a pile of rubble*

*with the remains of my loved ones. Rest in Peace  
Amber and Lizzy, I will love you forever, and will join  
you very soon.”*

*“October 5th, 2049,*

*Through the radio we received news that the  
Aristocrats designed a new genetic modification that  
makes man resistant to radiation. Upon this news we  
fired our first score of uranium rockets. It has to end.  
Now.”*

*“October 6th, 2049,*

*Surprisingly they haven’t fired back, but they will any  
day now. And when they do, there will be nowhere to  
run. A few of us have decided to leave the continent  
and head east across the Atlantic to destabilize the  
headquarters of the European Aristocrats. We packed  
all we could, but history, knowledge and most of the  
progress mankind had made was bound to get lost  
with this endeavor. The ships were ready the same  
day. Boarding, I knew that I would never see those  
that stayed behind ever again.”*

*“October 15th, 2049,*

*In any other circumstance being in the middle of  
nowhere surrounded by miles of water would have  
been terrifying, but right now it was the most  
peaceful place I have been at in almost a year. Every*

*day I see rockets in the sky, like shooting stars filled with the hatred of spiteful wishes. The fact that they were still flying meant that neither side had won, but it also meant that more of us had been turned to ashes along with our history and the monuments we have kept alive for thousands of years.”*

*“November 1st, 2049,*

*Our ship arrived at the coast of what once had been Portugal. The great port cities are beyond recognition. Among the rubble and rotten corpses, memories of a civilization lie like dirt, soon to be consumed by the earth. We got off the boats and started traveling by foot. Our goal is to make it to central Europe, and find refuge in the countryside of Germany or France.”*

*“November 3rd, 2049,*

*Our radiation indicators reveal that our journey will be harder than we thought. Avoiding all formerly populated landscapes we have to travel through woods and mountains to escape extended exposure.”*

*“December 10th, 2049,*

*We made it. On our way to Central Europe, our group grew. Along the way we picked up thousands of men and women that wanted to join the resistance. We now call ourselves the Global Resistance. In all*

*the countries we traveled through, we destroyed the power grid taking away the Aristocrats means of surveillance and control. Now it was time to set up a new headquarters in a small town. Maybe we could finally establish a new life again.”*

*“December 24th, 2049,*

*It was Christmas time, and despite what has happened many have not lost their faith. I enjoyed the food and the company, but there is no god for me in this lost world.”*

*“December 30th, 2049,*

*Tonight we infiltrated the Aristocrats European headquarters and destroyed their power supply. Now they had lost everything. Their money had no worth in a world of survival, their positions of power had lost their roots, and their technological superiority had vanished into oblivion. Now they were nothing but common men, with indefinite lives, long enough to repent their mistakes.”*

*“December 31st, 2049,*

*We achieved what we wanted but our generals want more. For New Year’s they are planning to annihilate all that is left of the Aristocrats and anyone else, so that once 2050 begins we could live in peace. They talk about ‘cleansing’ the world, but all I see is*

*madness. Men that rebelled against oppression are becoming the oppressors. For every god there is a Satan, and because God made all of us godly, there is a Satan in us all. Give a leader some power and he will do what is best for people. Give a leader absolute power and he will still do what is best for his people. Power does not corrupt; it merely elevates the degree in which something is done that has already been pursued.*

*While the generals prepared the nuclear warheads they had collected from across the world, two brothers of mere eighteen years spoke to the people, urging to follow them into a new life separate from violence. Charles and Alexander had disempowered the Global Resistance by over a million that now followed their lead. I was among them. Together we headed east into the countryside of Central Europe.”*

*“January 1st, 2050 or 0,*

*It was a new beginning. In a small valley hidden from the rest of the world we found an old castle dating back to the Middle Ages. The walls are thick and tall, and the land beyond is vast and fertile. The valley is remote enough from any nuclear blast of the past year, avoiding radiation, and is locked in by the mountains, allowing no telecommunication or*



tracking signals to go in or out. Charles fell in love with the castle, and claimed it for himself the moment we arrived. Alexander however thought it too limited and small, seeking greater possibilities for expansion in something nobody had thought off: The Underground Empire. It was on this first day that the deserters of the Global Resistance had split. Charles' followers became known as the Traditionalists, following old doctrines and living a sedentary life in the castle away from any modern technologies, the root to all the evil that had arisen over the past year. They swore to not speak of it again, to ensure that man would never repeat the same mistakes.

Alexander's followers became known as the Escapists, trying to escape into their old lives by creating a vast Underground Empire. With their many engineers they aimed to recreate the technologies of the past, while living far enough underneath the earth to avoid the radiation.

It was this day the men entered the castle, and it was this day the first pickaxe hit the ground. In the center of the valley with their followers behind them, they stood and shook hands creating the Treaty of Nusquam, swearing that the two states would stay out of contact unless for diplomatic or trade relations. And even such contact will be indirect. All of it is to

*be conducted through intermediaries, called ‘the Gate Watchers’, an elite group of men that belonged to both, and yet neither state, overlooking the various gates in the mountains that separated the two states. I was chosen to be one of these men.”*

*“January 11th, 2050 or 0,*

*Today was my twenty-fifth birthday. But no one knew. None of my friends from last year lived. Every night, no every second, I miss Amber and Lizzy. My life seems like one horrid nightmare. Just last year at this time some of my political science classmates and I went to Central Park and celebrated my birthday with a few beers. Now they were all dead, the city was nothing but rubble and corpses, and I was in some fucked up fantasy world where I am trained to use a sword to become a ‘Gate Watcher’ between a medieval city and an Underground Empire. I want to leave this world but I don’t think I have the strength to do it.”*

*...*

*“January 11th 2060 or 10,*

*Thirty-five. I cannot believe it has been ten years since I touched this little book. I stopped writing for a day, the day turned into a week, and the week into a month, and soon every time I lifted the pen, I felt as if*

whatever I would be writing was not equivalent to the magnitude of the events depicted till now. Much has happened, yet little has changed. The city has been refurbished and renovated. Most men lived in decent homes and had jobs that made the city self-sufficient. It took less than a week for the city to divide into factions. The educated made themselves merchants, and claimed that they should receive the secluded part of the city as they had expensive goods that could be stolen. The poor and dumb were pushed into the ruins close to the wall as the middle class men argued that no one wanted the smell from the factories and burning of wood and coal in the middle of the city. Not even Charles is who he once was. The people loved him and he used that love to create one of the most powerful tales. A tale of God. He told the people that God had talked to him and sent him to this castle. He had already been the leader, but what this tale had done for him was to make him a leader for a lifetime, as he was the right hand of God. No longer was he seen flirting with the girls in the city, no longer was he conversing with the commoners, and no longer was Charles his name. From that day on he had been only known as 'the Inquisitor'. The Underground Empire had been flourishing even more. In just ten years they had built their first

*underground metropolis which they called Atlantis. Through innovation and new forms of energy, their lifestyle was back to the standard of the 1920's, which was astonishing compared to the 8th to 13th century standards of the Traditionalists. For the next years the Escapists had planned to spread their empire down to the Mediterranean Sea, and soon create an entire network throughout Europe. Alexander was determined to surpass his namesake in greatness, and become the greatest conqueror of all times. But their strength was limited. They still partially depended on the Inquisitor and his city to supply them with fresh foods, unable to find a way to replicate the sun and create life on their own.”*

*“September 9th, 2063 or 13,*

*Alexander has reached the Mediterranean Sea. I still cannot believe the reports.”*

*“September 10th, 2063 or 13,*

*The conquest had its toll. Just a day later the coastal tunnels began to disintegrate, causing a mass collapse that spread many miles up north. Luckily the region had not been populated, but a few hundred miners are reported dead.”*

*“December 13th, 2063 or 13,*

*The tunnels have become less safe. Every month*

*some tunnels collapse. The expansion has simply been too rapid. But even worse are the raids. Reports from the South state that former Aristocrats have formed tribes that attack small underground villages.”*

*“October 7th, 2066 or 16,*

*Alexander has gone too far. The consequences of his acts finally begin to show. The radiation safety procedures that were applied to Atlantis had been ignored in many outer regions for the sake of quicker expansion. As a result most of the newborns close to collapsed regions were born with birth defects: an extra extremity or a missing one, deformed body parts, or mental retardation. We, the Gate Watchers, were bribed to keep this news secret from the Inquisitor. I decided to not tell anyone. Not for the money, but out of fear of the Inquisitor’s possible response.”*

*“January 11th, 2070 or 20,*

*For forty-five years I have lived, and much I have seen. Birthdays have turned into mere reminders on how much time has passed. It has been 20 years now since we have found this valley. The tensions between the brothers have been rising steeply. The Inquisitor is closer than ever from shutting off all trade with the Empire and starting his own earth metal mining.”*

*“February 19th, 2071 or 21,*

*A plague has erupted in the outer regions of the Empire, and is beginning to spread fast.”*

*“February 22nd 2071 or 21,*

*The plague has hit Atlantis, and is now closer than ever to reaching the Gate Watchers and me. If one of the Inquisitor’s new miners catches the plague, I fear a complete destruction of the city. The medical standards inside the city are not just subpar, but rather dangerously low, just like they were in the dark ages.”*

*“February 23rd 2071 or 21,*

*The Aristocrat tribes have heard the news of the plague, and began raiding their way to Atlantis. A siege is lying ahead of us.”*

*“February 24th 2071 or 21,*

*Alexander walked past me today for the first time in 21 years. He came to visit his brother in the city to ask for military support. I had almost thought him to be a god or some divine creature, but he really was just a man. When he came back at night, his face was dark and filled with trouble. We talked shortly. He told me that once they obliterated the Aristocrat offensive on Atlantis, he would take his men down to the Mediterranean and travel by ship to Central Africa, a place that had been untouched by the War*

*of 2049, and bid farewell to the violence once and for all. As I talked to him something struck me. For a man reaching forty, he still looked no older than his mid-twenties.”*

*“February 25th 2071 or 21,*

*Today the Inquisitor, or Charles as whom I remembered him, walked towards me. He gave me the one order only he could give me. To close the gates, and kill anyone who tries to open them.*

*... That is no coincidence. When I saw the Inquisitor, he looked almost like he did the day he shook hands with his brother to form the Treaty of Nusquam. Could it be? Are they immortals? Could it be that they were part of the original Aristocrats? They seemed to be aging, but half as fast as the common man. They must have been someone else than they said they were 21 years ago.”*

*“February 27th 2071 or 21,*

*Every day I hear their screams, the scared, the sick, the hungry. Wildly they pound against the gate crying to be let in. Next to me rests a little chest in which I store some of the hand grenades I had brought with me from the Global Resistance HQ. If anyone breaches the gate I will blow them away with*

*something they have not seen in years. It should do the job.”*

*“December 2nd, 2076 or 26,*

*Today was the first time I have heard from the Aristocrats and Escapists in years. It appears that the two interbred and found shelter as a tribe in the woods within the valley. In a large raid they attacked the families that lived on the farms, and took some of their livestock. Some say they have even eaten the bodies of the farmers.”*

*“December 6th, 2076 or 26,*

*The raids continue. The Inquisitor decided to shut the city gates and make the families stay inside. From what I have heard he is beginning to raise an army.”*

*“January 11th, 2077 or 27,*

*Fifty-two years. What are these numbers anyway? What does age signify? We try to quantify life as if it were a measurement or good. Since early December I have not received any news. Life has become much lonelier recently. With the Escapists shut off, the other Gate Watchers miles apart, and the Traditionalists being locked up behind the city gates, I have not had any human contact in over a month. I think it is eating at me again. I miss her. I miss her so much. The only physical memory I have left is this*



*photograph. Oh the hours I have spent staring at it. Her smile... oh, her smile. If no one comes within the next month to refresh my rations I will be with you soon Amber.”*

*“January 28th, 2077 or 27,*

*They made it. Today I was awoken from my sleep by the clanging sound of armor. A band of men led by the Inquisitor with blood smeared chest plates approached me, announcing that the war was won. “From now on however”, the Inquisitor continued “women, children and the elderly are not allowed to step outside the gates. Their safety shall not be risked. Every boy at the age of eighteen has to leave the city to join the Guard until he served for ten years. That is the new law. And it is God’s law.” I simply nodded when I heard those news. It seemed like an emergency law, but I can sense that it will turn into a new tradition. He will have an army, when all he ever talked about was peace... but who will question ‘tradition’?*

*The Inquisitor had no use for me anymore, but kept me updated through his messengers, or sometimes even himself. It was too dangerous bringing me back to the city with all I knew, yet he seemed to respect me for my services too much to have me killed.”*

...

*“January 1st, 2090 or 40,*

*Forty years have passed since we received our new beginning, our clean slate. Sadly I look back and see that we have not changed. Driven by greed, selfishness and hatred, we still fight one another instead of bringing us towards a world without violence. I just wish that one day we can leave our human weaknesses behind and be as godly as we were meant to be. I wonder if Alexander ever made it to Africa, but I fear they got massacred in the siege on Atlantis.*

*As for the Inquisitor, he has become darker and sterner by the year. His rule has become stricter, and the people just live to serve God. The excitement and luster of our new golden age has faded. This story is finished. The years are bleaker and bleaker, and my commentary can add little of substance.”*

*“January 10th, 2095 or 45,*

*I have come to my end. Blood has been exiting my lungs, and I can feel that I won't be there to see my seventieth birthday. To whomever finds this book, and I pray it enters the right hands, promise me to learn from the mistakes of our fathers. Promise me to end this bloody violence. Promise me you will be*

*different. A man should not embrace death, with the sole wish to exit this forsaken world and return to his loved ones that have been ripped from his arms too soon. The clock is about to strike midnight. What follows is uncertainty and a whole lot of darkness. But be assured that once the day breaks, light will reign... till that late hour rises again.”*

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## Chapter 16

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MY EYES WERE rushing over the pages, reading them again and again, trying to soak up the very last bits of information I could have missed. As much as everything made sense, I was more confused than ever before. This might as well have been a fantasy tale made up from the imagination of the wildest madman.

Before I could sort my thoughts, the angry voices of Flatnose and his companion called my name. Quickly I stowed the book into my pouch next to the picture of Amber and Lizzy that Winston had held in his dying moments. I looked around, wondering if I would ever find this room again. Often I thought about how life would have been if I had opened the gate and drifted into the abyss of the past, but too much had been holding me back at that moment.

I ran towards their voices so that they would not find the possibly last remains of the Gate Watchers. When I made a turn I bumped into them, and was greeted with surprising relief.

“Thank God you are alive. Terric is back and we are in big enough

trouble already,” he said out of breath as he pulled me by the sleeve. “Let’s go.”

For at least ten minutes they guided me through the tunnels, until I was perplexed at the fact that they had not lost orientation, “How do you find your way around the mines?”

“It’s simple. You enter the mine through one of the many entrances. This is entrance 1. The first turn you take leads you into tunnel 10, 11, or 12. Then from 10 you turn into 100, 101, or 102 and so on. You can find the number of the tunnel on the top of each entrance. It’s hard to see sometimes because its small, but they have to be small since the numbers can get quite large.”

Terric must have been really upset. They were uncomfortably friendly all the sudden compared to the dirt-like treatment I received last time I saw them. When we exited the mine I was welcomed by the rising sun. “How long was I in there?” I asked.

“We brought you in Tuesday night... now it is Thursday morning,” the skinny one responded.

“What did you do in there all that time?” asked Flatnose. “That was plenty of time to find your way out.”

I did not want to tell them about the book, “I was knocked out for quite a while and then got lost in the tunnels. Eventually I gave up on trying to find an exit.”

Interestingly enough, three horses awaited us at the exit of the mine this time. No longer was I forced to run besides them, but was treated as if they were trying to regain my favors. The clean air filled my lungs and slowly removed the burning sensations that had plagued me ever since entering the mines. Through the morning light we rode across the plains, over the river, towards the settlement. As our horses strutted onto the platform before the officer house, a dozen guards had assembled around Yorick and Terric who were having a wild argument.

“These men reported that you unilaterally sent a recruit into the mines. Are you out of your mind!” yelled Terric at Yorick.

“You will not talk to me like that in front of my men,” Yorick hissed at Terric, “I have told you before, it was a mere misunderstanding. I had nothing to do with this,” Yorick added defensively. “Ah, look here they are.”

Terric was visibly relieved upon seeing me. His composure relaxed, and he turned towards the door, “Let’s take this inside. Yorick, Adam, and you two good-for-nothings follow me.”

Entering the house I could feel the tension in the air, like the poisonous gas in the mines. We walked up the stairs towards the officer living spaces. Terric waited for all of us to enter, and shut the door behind us.

“Now Adam, tell me what happened,” he asked.

My glance passed between him and Yorick, the latter of which looked at me like he would kill me the moment I left Terric’s sight. Despite this game of fear, I told him everything, how he stopped me, how I responded, how he killed the horse and banned me to the mines.

Terric called in a guard that was waiting at the door, “Go check the stables and tell me how many horses we have,” he ordered. “In a few minutes we will know the truth. Yorick I give you one last chance to confess.”

“I told you before, none of which the boy says is true. Ask those two idiots themselves! Did I ever give you the order to escort Mr. Blacksmith to the mines?” Yorick asked Flatnose and his companion.

They looked at one another for a moment and then at me, “No it was our doing, Master Terric. It was just a prank among friends.”

“We are not friends you dirty liars. Why then did you tell the miners that you received direct orders from Master Yorick?” I asked angered.

“We felt threatened by them as they had drawn their swords. It was just one big mistake. We are deeply sorry,” Flatnose said apologetically with his eyes facing the floor.

The door opened up. The guard had returned from the stables, “33 horses, Master,” he reported briefly before disappearing behind the door again.

“Then we are done here,” Terric said.

“So how are you going to punish them,” I asked with triumphant zeal.

“They will receive service-long stable duties, for impersonating orders, and entrapping a fellow guard. Yorick will face no punishment however, as he spoke truth. The number of horses has not changed since I had left,” he was quiet for a moment, “which means that you will receive one year of unpaid kitchen duty for lying to an officer in an attempt to incriminate another officer. I apologize, Yorick.”

Shaking his head, Yorick walked out, closely followed by the two others. I still stood there baffled by what had just happened. The door fell shut and I was alone with Terric.

“Is there anything else, Adam?” he asked coldly.

“You know as well as me that Yorick was lying. Why would I make up such an elaborate story? I would never lie to you,” I said filled with indignation.

Terric was silent and looked through a book. After a moment he looked up at me and responded, “What I believe matters little. I can feel that Yorick was lying. But in a fair society, I cannot make judgments based on a hunch or a ‘feeling’ I have. That would not be justice. We looked for the facts, and unfortunately the facts were on his side. I am sorry Adam.”

“You are just afraid of him, like everyone else,” I growled at him.

“I am not afraid of anyone, boy. But when I am dealing with Yorick I have to use correct judgment or I am risking my entire authority. Thanks to Yorick and his dirty games I am already walking on thin ice. I might be first-in-command, but I know that when it comes down to it many of the men would stab me in the back upon his order.”

“I am sorry Terric,” I said after a long pause. “There is something else I have to show you.” I pulled out the diary from within my pouch, “I found this in the mine. It’s the diary of one of the Gate Watchers.”

“Lower your voice you fool,” Terric said seizing the book from my grasp. “You should not have found this, and even less kept it. Every second you carry this on you, you are one step closer to your own grave. I have

known boys like you that found things that were not meant for their eyes, and they began telling people. Before you knew it they died in an 'accident' or were found in a ditch the next morning."

"But we have to let everyone know about the truth!" I prayed to Terric. "What about Africa, maybe we can still escape this doomed valley."

"Africa, Asia, Australia, I have heard it all. They came to Central Europe thinking that things were better than America. It's all a lie. And even if it isn't, there is nothing we can do. The moment you open your mouth, you are a dead man. Just promise me, that you won't talk about the past with anyone. I've thought about mending the future with the past. But as we try it, we lose the present. Do it for the girl, she misses you dearly," he said handing over a letter. "Sometimes we hold the world in our hands, but in our greed for more let it fall, losing everything that we once had."

I let his words sink in and opened the letter that Katrina had written me:

My dearest Adam,

My words cannot match yours in their beauty, but I reflect all which you have said. Your parents, Eric, and everyone else are off just fine. Not much has happened since you have left, yet it seems like one eternal blank in my life. I miss you. Nothing has been the same without you. Sometimes I go back up on the Mount. I sit there alone, waiting for your hands to emerge onto the rooftop. At every celebration on the city square I sit on the sidelines looking for you in the crowd, waiting for our dance to be repeated, ending in that long passionate kiss I live to feel again. I pray for you every day, and await your return.

Farewell my love,

Katrina



I folded the small piece of paper together and stared at it gravely. “I will stop thinking about it; for her,” I told him. “For now.”

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## Chapter 17

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THE FINAL MONTHS of my training passed like the leaves that began falling from the trees. By now the Guard was both my new family and home. Like a natural cycle, old faces disappeared upon finishing training, only to be replaced by new recruits that filled the cottage. This change was so constant, that on its face my environment was unchanging.

My newly received kitchen duties forced me to get up even earlier, to have breakfast ready before any of the Guards were up. At the very least it helped me bear with the growing loneliness I felt. Handing out the bowls, I got the little social interaction I needed. Most of the recruits knew and greeted me, yet I knew few of them. I had lost enough in my young life to realize that every face I risked befriending set me up for more pain in the future.

The common-hall vacated as I finished cleaning the last dishes. In the back room I changed and headed outside to the training grounds, where the recruits were readily lined up, waiting for their team leaders to start the warm ups. They were waiting for me.

“Let’s go,” I yelled at them angrily. “Start moving, and for the next

hour don't stop!" I had never been a loud person, nor an angry one, but when it came to waking the inner beast in a group of young men, force and dominance was necessary. Only when I pushed them to their limits, they realized that they could do so much more than they had imagined.

After the warm up I took the third trimester students to the training grounds. We no longer practiced regular sparring, but instead prepared for extreme situations. In case of an ambush we were advised to return to the outer wall as quickly as possible to gain more support. To practice this, a recruit was surrounded by five other hostile recruits, and had to fend against the attackers while making his way to the other end of the training grounds safely.

Many were beaten in the first moments, unable to defend themselves against the enemies striking from all sides. Others tried to run and almost made it, but were stopped by a faster enemy that caught them off guard.

Entering the center, I looked into the eyes of each of my foes. My sword, real with blunt edges, lay softly in my grip as I walked in a circle.

No one had moved. They expected me to take the run. To their surprise, I rammed my sword into the ground and looked at them with a blank expression. Confused the five looked at another, but none let their guard down.

From behind, a recruit charged at me. As his sword slashed out for my chest, I dodged and disarmed him in a matter of seconds. I pushed him to the ground, holding the blade to his neck. He yielded and exited the training ground. With my right hand I pulled my own sword from the ground, extending each blade into an opposite direction.

The remaining four nodded at one another and attacked. With the twists and turns of a dancer I fended off their blows, waiting for them to make mistakes. A bulky recruit over six and a half feet tall was the first to make one. His sword loomed above his head, ready to strike me down. With a rapid thrust, the tip of my blade dug into his chest protector. Angered, he lowered his weapon and yielded.

The other three would not yield. I would have to beat them till they

could no longer walk.

A slight dizziness began to cloud my sight. All the twisting, turning and dodging had taken the air out of me. While I knew I could keep fighting after being hit, I could not allow it. I had to know that I could fight without getting slashed into two pieces, because out there the swords would not be blunt.

My two weapons began to weigh me down. With fully tensed biceps I struck out left and right, bringing two of my opponents to the ground. The third one ahead of me was ready to lunge at my unprotected body. But before he could do anything I dropped my swords and jumped him, smashing his body to the floor. Pressing my knees into his chest, I flung my fists out at him until he yielded.

Slowly I got up from his shaking body and tensed my hands to crack the knuckles. With calm and controlled steps I walked across the training ground. Nobody was chasing me, so there was no need to run anymore. The other recruits started applauding me, but I did not look back.

My feet carried me off the training ground toward the river I had once crossed when I left the city. I knelt down and washed the sweat and blood from my hands. The different colors rushed away down the stream and left me with a clear reflection. The thin layer of fat that separated a healthy child from a starving one was gone. My jaw and cheek bones had become more prevalent, giving me an older and colder look while my entire body had transformed into a fighting machine of nothing but raw muscle covered by skin. I had not yet given up shaving, but the stubbles alone changed my appearance. The boy that once roamed the city streets was gone.

The gates were mere fifty feet away. If Katrina were to sit on the Mount, which we never dared during day time, she would have been able to see me. And if we both were to stand at the gate, I could have heard her voice. Many people are separated by distance, but all that separated us was time. A few feet that could not be crossed in nine years.

As afternoon drew closer I headed back to the training fields where I would complete a physical fitness test with Terric and Yorick. I was challenged on speed, condition, and strength. Once I had completed all tasks, the two came together and whispered each other a few words, before announcing to me that I had passed them all with excellence. Terric grabbed my shoulder with a smile, “You’ve done well Adam. I am proud to have seen you grow so tremendously over the past year. Since you are a Blacksmith, you are zoned for the mines.”

Images of Elias flashed before my eyes. I saw the cart carrying the boy with the burned skin. Under no circumstance would I go back underground for the next nine years to suffer a fate like my brothers. The feeling of suffocation from my night in the mine returned to my lungs. Sickness filled my stomach. I wanted to throw up.

“Are you alright, Adam?” asked Terric with the voice of both a soldier and father.

I took a breath, “I was the apprentice for the carpenter. I would like to work in the woods. If possible in the same camp as Peter and Nigel.”

Yorick glanced at Terric with questioning eyes, outraged that I dared to make requests, but the latter affirmed my wish with a smile, “the fresh air will be better for you.”

Later that day, when the sun was about to set, I left for the cottage to get cleaned and dressed for my celebration. Unlike the aristocratic outfit of my summoning, I wore a simple white shirt with the eagle around my neck.

Entering the common-hall I was tackled by Peter and the others who had already been waiting for me. He put his arm tightly around me and held a mug of beer high in the air with his other hand. “I have a toast for this young man,” the room hushed as Peter began to speak aloud. “For all of you that don’t know, Adam completed his Training today! He’s a man with the attitude of a wolf, the mind of an owl, and the character of an eagle. A true fighter, that has not lost his reason. There are so many things I could say

about him, but it would be rude to keep him waiting so long for his well-deserved drink. Today Adam we celebrate you! Raise your glasses with me!” Peter lifted his mug and hit it against the others’, while whispering, “Good luck out there brother.”

We were the last party to leave, and stayed until the kitchen aids stopped serving us any beer. After months of being the last remaining recruit from my group of friends, it was good breaking the loneliness with such company. Peter, Stephan, Nigel and James, all of them certainly had their odd quirks but I knew that it would break my heart if any of them died out there. But death was the last thing on my mind. That night I rejoiced; I rejoiced in life and I rejoiced in my friends.

Like in the first night and the many thereafter, I could not sleep in the last either. When the images became too grueling, I made my way out into the cold and climbed up the ladder to the palisade.

Terric welcomed me with a nod, “Smells like your friends treated you to more than one drink. Try not to fall off the wall. You wouldn’t be the first man to reenter the city on a cart because of stupidity.”

We both started laughing. Nothing was particularly funny, but we both could not help ourselves. “You know,” I said, “I always used to climb on top of a roof with my girlfriend and watch the stars.”

“Oh boy, just don’t make any moves on me now,” Terric joked around.

“While you are not quite her, in more than one way, I appreciate the many conversations we had the past year,” I said. “Thank you for all that you have taught me.”

He nodded in reciprocation, adding, “Sometimes the master learns more from his student than the student from his master.”



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## Chapter 18

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THE WOODS WERE magical. Never in my life had I witnessed nature so wild and living as I had during my years in the Guard. Small animals rushed through the thicket and birds sang lighthearted songs into the midday. A certain duality captured the forest as the sun began to fall. The joyous tranquility slowly seeped away and was replaced by an ominous darkness that held so many dangers and mysteries.

With quiet feet I stalked a small rabbit that was napping in the day's last sunrays. With the bow tight in my hand, I slowly extended the string just far enough to kill the creature, without waking it from its slumber. My eyes focused and my breath came to a complete halt until the arrow was in line with the animal's neck. I released the string, provoking a frightful squeak that was quickly drowned in the silence of death.

Excitedly I grabbed my dinner, cleaned off the arrow and headed back towards the camp. While our camps were spread throughout the woods to cover different zones, we all reported back to the central warehouse that was located just off the road to the Guard settlement. There we could grab new seeds and store our chopped wood.

By the time I returned to the circular campsite, most of my group had already arrived and was relaxing on the forest floor. Nigel was dangling from a tree with his feet locked around a branch, “Even upside down that snack looks delicious. Ya got yaself a nice dinner there,” he said swinging from side to side. With a quick spin he pulled himself up and sat upright on the branch.

Peter sat below him with his back against the tree trunk, sharpening his blade, “Don’t give that bum any more food. He’s been scrounging off my breakfast anytime I don’t look.”

“Survival of the fittest my friend,” I said with a chuckle as I climbed up the tree and dropped down next to Nigel. “Catch,” I ordered, letting the rabbit fall into Peter’s lap.

“What a beautiful little thing”, he commented quietly, taking out his small knife. With the dexterity of a barber, Peter skinned the rabbit without letting a piece of meat go to waste. “I can make a fine set of gloves out of these,” he said looking at the bloody skin of the rabbit.

“Listen up Guardsmen,” announced Jacob our camp leader. “Let’s see if we finished today’s tasks. Marc, John, Nigel, how many trees did you cut?”

“One big ol’ one,” replied Nigel instantly. “Stole all the light from the others. Makes plenty of tough wood though.”

“Igor and Peter, what did you collect?” continued the leader.

“We got two baskets of berries, sir. Edible,” Peter ensured, “and four bundles of dead wood, good for fire. We also got a handful of these tasty mushrooms.”

“Alright, alright, good work. Adam and I sowed the new seeds at the eastern end, and set up this month’s plan. Well done comrades. Let’s head back to the settlement.”

With a playful shove in the back Nigel pushed me off the branch. Falling face down I barely caught myself on my hands, while he jumped with ease onto his feet.

Traveling through the woods, over the plain, to the settlement, we



made it back in time to devour our nightly supper in the common-hall. Most of the time we sat with our camp, but sometimes the old group reunited when Stephan and James joined us at our former table, where we used to sit every morning and every night.

“Have you heard, some of those bastards ripped up the Northeastern camp,” reported Jacob excitedly. “Apparently the guards went too deep into the woods and harassed some of their savage children. Supposedly they even killed one of those monsters. Few days later they got ambushed on their regular tracks.”

“What’d they look like?” I asked curiously, trying to find some validation of the information I read in Smith’s diary.

“It’s hard to pinpoint actually,” said Jacob, “I’ve seen really ugly ones; huge statures with misshaped features. Just like the Final Testament describes the demons. Others look relatively normal, but those are the real devils. They try to trick you into trusting them by looking like us. But it is simple to avoid. When you see one, kill it,” he told us as if he were the most experienced Guardsman to ever walk this settlement, “Cheers!”

He bumped his mug of stimulant herbal tea against John’s who had been sitting there nodding his head in silent confirmation like one of the bobble head figures I had made in the past and sold to James’ father. “Kill first, ask questions later,” John said with a big smile on his lips.

I knew of the savage nature of the ‘monsters’, as they had called them, but the unknown fact that they were former Aristocrats and Escapists, fellow human beings, turned the tables and made Jacob and the guards look like the real monsters. Most guards felt excited, even refreshed by the thought of getting to slay a few of the cripples. They tried to make the act seem more heroic by calling them ‘demons’, but all I felt was pity. Pity for their ignorance, and pity for those poor creatures that were doomed by their ancestors’ choices.

But doomed we all were... doomed we were.

Passively my hands reached for the eagle necklace to fiddle around

with, except it was not there. Immediately I began searching my pockets and shirt, but it was nowhere to be found.

“Have you seen my necklace?” I whispered to Peter who had been sitting next to me.

Surprised he looked around, “No, why?”

“It’s gone. I think I dropped it when Nigel pushed me off the tree,” I said worriedly. “I’m going to head back there and pick it up,”

“I’m coming with you, I can’t let you go out there alone,” Peter insisted.

“No, I will be fine. I need you here. If anyone asks just make up some story... tell them my stomach hurt and I decided to go for a walk.”

Slowly I rose from the table with my palm holding my stomach. Everyone looked up at me expecting an explanation why I was already leaving their company. With a painful grimace I told them that I did not feel well. They wished me a good night, and I left the common-hall. The moment I was out of their sight I charged towards the outer wall gate. I made it outside just in time before they would not let anybody leave for the night without proper reason.

The sun had begun to set on the horizon, as I walked across the wide shining green plains that separated the settlement from the forest. The grasses grew taller and the bushes thicker the closer I came to the woods, until the smooth natural transition left me surrounded by trees taller than most houses in the city. From there on I knew my track towards the camp by following the flat trail that was created by our daily footprints.

I knelt down in front of the tree, putting my head on the ground to see anything lying in the grass. Carefully I brushed my fingers through the soft blades. Moving my head I saw the silver chain reflect in the moonlight. Relieved, my breath slowed as I put it safely around my neck.

A rustling sound caught my ears. My head darted towards its origin, finding nothing but the bushes and vast darkness.

There it was again, this time a few feet to the right. I spun around, catching a pair of innocent eyes. “Come and show yourself,” I shouted to

the creature, which shrugged at the sound of my voice, “I won’t hurt you. I promise,” I added with a softer tone.

I expected an ambush. I expected a monster. Oh, even a demon. But that moment a fine hand pushed aside the leaves, and the elegant head of a young woman popped out of the bushes.

With careful steps the girl came out of the thicket onto the clearing. Her silky black hair framed her light brown skin that stood out distinctly like no other with its fine and clear lineament. She appeared so tall yet stood one head short of me. One step at a time she came closer.

Her clothes were ragged and mostly improvised. A skirt sewn together from different dark fabrics was fit tightly around her thin waist and hung just a little below her knees, while her chest was wrapped up by a piece of cloth. In the cooling night she appeared so vulnerable and yet so strong with all her skin, while I was hiding behind my thick armor.

She had not said a word yet, nor was I certain whether she even spoke my language, but some curiosity within me drove me closer to her. The moment I stepped towards her she took a step back like a timid deer. I stood still and dropped my sword in its sheath from my belt to the floor. She observed me for a moment, and finally stepped closer, no longer fearing my presence. Our steps shortened when we were at arm’s length. Her gleaming eyes looked up and down, as if she had never seen something like me this close. It seemed odd to think that I was a strange appearance... that maybe I was the savage in her mind.

To me however she looked nothing like a savage, monster, or demon. And if she were, she must have been the devil’s magnum opus. Quite contrary she reminded me of an angel.

When our toes almost touched, both of us suddenly stood still, observing one another with big eyes. She lifted her hand, and softly touched my cheek; and with that touch, all the tales of fear and slaughter had been dispelled.

Carefully I raised my hand and copied her behavior. Her light brown skin was tender like a newborn’s, yet thin and defined by her high

cheekbones. She grabbed my hand and pressed it against her chest. With a strange soft accent, and light voice, she uttered what I perceived as her name, “Janari.”

I repeated the ritual and took her small hand, pressing it against my chest which was covered in metal.

“Adam,” she said trying to imitate my voice and subsequently started laughing. For a moment she tilted her head and looked at me with a crooked smile as if a million thoughts were running through her mind. Her big dark eyes focused on mine, searching for answers or mere words to say.

My hand was still holding hers on my chest. She pulled it back and laid it with spread fingers upon mine. I interlocked my fingers with hers and pointed upwards, “Sky.”

She repeated after me with her odd but sweet accent. As I looked up at the stars I saw Orion, the knight that had accompanied me ever since my early childhood. “Orion,” I said next and wished I could have told her the story about Elias. For a while this game of ours continued and through learning the words I felt as if I got to know her better.

The perfect silence of the lonely forest was broken when some crackling sounds came from within the trees. “Adam!” screamed Peter worriedly from deeper within the woods.

Janari grew alarmed like a scared deer again. She shrugged together and frantically looked around. I held her by the shoulders to calm her down, upon which she pressed her head against my chest, hiding from whatever was coming. For a second I cherished the embrace, as a warm feeling emerged in my heart. When Peter came closer I had to push her off. She gave me a sad confused look. I signaled her to run back into the bushes, so that Peter would not mistake her for a brute.

Understanding, she ran off. As she reached the end of the clearing, she slowed a last time. She turned around and looked longingly after me, uncertain whether we would ever meet again, or be tossed at one another in a moment of enmity.

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## Chapter 19

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“I WAS WORRIED,” Peter said as he stepped onto the clearing, “what have you been doing all this time?”

“Oh nothing, I was just watching the night sky.”

“Are you mad? Those monsters could be out here,” he said walking around the clearing with his sword drawn. At every sound he threw suspicious glances into the bushes.

“You have never even seen one of them.”

“I’m glad I haven’t. Many of our brothers have been slaughtered by those beasts.”

“You are right,” I said. “Sometimes I just wonder if they are not as bad as we portray them to be. What if we started this century old vendetta? What if they are creatures that feel love and pain like we do?”

“You know that they started it. You’ve read the Final Testament. They are demons Adam,” he said, putting his sword away.

“That’s what the Inquisition tells you,” I said slowly shaking my head. “I think we will never really know the truth. I just wish we could end this violence. That is all I want.”

“That is what we all want,” Peter said. “But I don’t think it ever came to actual diplomacy. Every time I hear of encounters it ends with the city bell striking thrice. Talking to them would be a good start.”

“Maybe we could. I think the real problem is that we never tried,” I wanted to tell him about her, feeling the unbearable secret weigh down on me, just like the diary I had found. But it was too premature. I could not risk putting her in danger. I trusted Peter with my life, but only few of the other guards. The more people knew about her, the more likely it became that something would happen. “Let’s save this talk for another night. It’s late and not safe here.”

Leaving the clearing I heard rustling. She had waited in the bushes the entire time.

The following night I returned to the clearing. By the time I arrived she had already been waiting for me. It became our nightly ritual to meet up and teach each other our language, culture and history. The daytime seemed too dangerous to see one another, until one morning...

After breakfast in the common-hall Peter, Nigel and I headed out for the woods. A cool breeze refreshed the hot summer air, creating a lively dance among the trees, whose branches were moving from side to side like arms. Once we reached the camp, Jacob assigned us our daily duties. “Adam, you and Peter will go out and collect firewood from the forest floor for the first half of the day. In the afternoon I want you to mark dead and sick trees. Take blue chalk for the sick and red for the dead.”

Picking up wood was the easiest of all duties. Usually we were able to talk the whole time and still collect enough wood. We always finished quickly, allowing us to take luxuriously long naps in the shade.

“I have only been out here for a year,” remarked Peter, “but it is already boring the sanity out of me.” He picked up a dead branch and put it on a pile under his left arm, “If I would run things, I would save money on

those silly celebrations and install a brothel and a tavern next to the cottages. That, my friend, would instill real spirit in this lonely bunch.”

“It would also distract us so much, that we would be overrun on opening night. Do you ever not think of girls?” I asked, bowing down to pick up a branch.

“No, not really,” he answered with a laugh.

As I looked across the floor for more wood, something rushed behind a tree. Slowly I walked towards it. “I think we should split, I can hardly find any more here,” I told Peter.

“Eh, alright, I think we got enough anyway. You can find me under the big ash tree,” he said, slowly walking off. “This summer heat is making me more tired than I usually am.”

When Peter was out of sight, I quickly looked behind the tree and found Janari standing there with a big grin. She waved at me excitedly.

“What are you doing here?” I said, pronouncing my words slowly with supporting gestures. “It is not safe.”

“I wanted to see you,” she said excitedly as if she had been planning to say it for a few hours. She seized my hand, “Look, I listened to you.” She put my hand on the tree and named it. Then she picked up a piece of wood and said, “Branch.”

“Well done!” I said happily. It was so simple, yet so impressive.

She tilted her head, “What is ‘brothel’?”

I could hardly keep myself from laughing and just shook my head, ensuring her that she misheard.

“Come,” she said and thought about her next words, “I want to show you my home.”

I was hesitant. I tried to describe my concern with the few words she knew. ‘Not safe’ was becoming repetitive. Before I could say anything she ran off. All I could do was follow her.

With quick and skilled feet she seemed to float in between the trees without tripping a single time. Janari was surprisingly fast for a girl that



even I had trouble keeping up. For at least half an hour we ran northeast, slowed by the many Guard camps we had to avoid on our way.

Finally she slowed and signaled me to stop. Taking me by the hand she knelt down behind a bush. She pushed the leaves out of our sight, putting into view a small rural village that was integrated into the forest.

“Home,” she said.

The stories and Winston’s diary were right. Some of the people like Janari, looked exactly like us. Usually they were even more beautiful than the people that lived in the city. It must have been the superior genetic coding of the Aristocrats that granted them such perfection. Others however were the polar opposite. Cripples and maimed men and women, could not be held apart from the monsters that legendary heroes would slay in the stories we were told as children. Their arms were gigantic or missing, their faces deformed, and their statures hunched, evoking in me both disgust and pity. It was impressive that these creatures of perfection and imperfection lived side by side, like equals.

Some of their faces looked dreary, plagued by loss even more than the people of the city. You could see in their eyes that they saw little to no purpose in their existence, moving idly about uncertain of what to do with themselves. Others were radiating joviality and warmth. A little boy with shoulder long hair had been running in circles, wearing a smile as big as the forest itself. It looked as if it had been the best day of his life. Spinning out of his circles he ran towards his father, who picked him up and held him high in the air like a trophy he could not be prouder of.

Their houses were simple, even simpler than the houses in the settlement or the shabbiest barracks in the Industrial District. Everything was based on wood; no monuments of stone, no marble mansion, no vast space like the city square. Janari seemed like a rose misplaced in a bucket of charcoal.

She pointed towards a bulky, aged man with short grey hair and beard, “Father,” she said. The man was sharpening his blade as he stood leaning against the entrance of one of the houses. Two of the monsters came

stepping out. They were one or even two heads taller than him. One of them had a mere lump of flesh for a hand, while the other only had one eye.

“Little brothers,” she said quietly. It was hard keeping an unaffected expression. I thought that it must have been a practical joke, since those demonic creatures shared not a single feature with the angelic appearance of Janari. But then her father put his hand on one of their shoulders. From his behavior you could see that he was their father; a true father, loving his sons despite their abominable appearance.

The more I observed the more validation I found for Winston’s story. I had always taken for granted that people looked different with white, brown, black or other shades of skin color. But the fact that Janari’s people spoke a different tongue, seemed nonsensical to me at first since their physical location was so close to ours. I soon came to realize that many men and women from all over the world had followed Charles and Alexander into this valley, creating a wild mix of language, culture and skin-color. The mere difference in distribution of backgrounds severely impacted how the new cultures of Traditionalists and Escapists eventually developed.

Another thing that caught my attention was the ironic change in social class. The men and women of the city had mostly been middle class citizens. They were not interested in change as they were content with their lives. For them, not much has changed except that a new social hierarchy had been created. The Aristocrats, after rising to the apex of their power in ’49, dropped into the gutters right thereafter. They were leaders, businessman and thinkers; All occupations that were of little use, when one had to start from scratch. The only viable explanation I found to answer why they were now living in small poorly constructed shags was that their standard of living dropped so rapidly that they had little knowledge on how to accommodate without the technology they had grown so dependent on.

Ironically enough, if it had not been for the greed of the lower classes, that used their technical skills and physical strength to create the Underground Empire, they could have been the new rulers of the world. For many years, the poor became the new rich and advanced, transmuting their

faith, skills and desires into a massive scheme for power. But nature, with its uncontrollable superior power, kept man in check and made sure that he would never rise again.

I wanted to take Janari's hand and walk into her village. Meet her parents. Talk to her relatives. Get to know her brothers. But I knew I could not. The moment any of them would have seen us together, I would have died in an instant, spiked by arrows and spears, or slashed to pieces by their giant axes. She on the other hand might have been banished, as aiding the enemy was treason. I could not risk it.

Clasping her small hand, I looked at her and whispered in simplified sentences, gesticulating to each word, "Not safe. We leave now. You tell me about your family in the future."

A frown crossed her lips as she lowered her head.

I lifted her chin, "You have a nice family. And I want to meet them. I really do, but I doubt they will embrace a man of the Guard."

She smiled slightly even though she did not understand all the things I had said. For a moment she was deep in thought. "You are different," she said. "You have a kind heart, Adam."



## Chapter 20



A YEAR HAD passed since the day she showed me her village. We were lying together in the colorful leaves of fall under the clear sky, watching the stars till late at night.

When I heard the faint fifth ring of the city bell, announcing midnight and the break of the new day, I sat up, getting ready to leave. She grabbed my arm and whispered into my ear, “Please don’t go yet.”

“I have to. Everybody is growing more suspicious about my nightly disappearances; Peter, the others, and even Terric. He noticed that I come to the wall on fewer and fewer occasions.”

“When is the hiding going to end?” she asked quietly, playing with my hair.

With a grave expression I stared straight into the dark woods. I loved Janari, but I loved Katrina as well. Love was such a simple word, and used as if it held a universal meaning, yet meant something completely different for the two of them.

“You know it is not that easy,” I said slightly bothered by the continual reappearance of the same topic.

She sat up and refrained from touching me. Like me, she stared off into the woods from the center of the clearing, and tried to contain an outburst. With closed eyes she breathed in and out, “Of course, I know it is not easy, Adam. But what happened to our vision to bring an end to this bloodshed and to reunite the human race?”

We had always talked about the future; a future in which we broke the barriers of our cultures. Only through us, or complete extermination of one side, could the ceaseless fighting end. But if things did not work out..., “I just cannot put you in such danger. They would kill you, or use you for the entertainment of the soldiers.”

“What are our lives worth if we don’t affect the lives of the many. Our little secret will vanish into oblivion the moment you finish service or die by one of my clansmen. I am ready to take this risk. We will write history together. We will bring light to the darkness and turn the night into the day. Light is near, Adam.”

Her optimism and idealism not just matched but even surpassed my own. What she said was true. It was the right, responsible and rational thing to do. But my feelings brought forth nothing but irrationality. “I don’t trust most of the guards,” I said briskly. Her body tensed as if she were ready to get up and leave. “But,” I added, “I want to meet your family. Do you think they will receive me?”

Her eyes shimmered, as if I had said what she wanted me to say for so long. “I do not know. But whatever happens I will put myself in between any harm that comes your way if things go wrong,” she said in a serious tone. While she tried to reason with me and make me feel better about my offer, the fact that she might be harmed even in this scenario made me uneasy.

The beauty about our friendship was how it had originated. Before learning to understand my voice, she had learned to understand my behaviors. She quickly caught on to my inner feelings which I tried to hide so well. “It will be alright, I promise,” she assured me and rested her head on my shoulder. “One day we will flee from this place and go to Africa,”

she said, “like you described it. Away from everything, just you and me; maybe even take our families and friends.”

“One day,” I repeated, visualizing the old dream that had been appearing in my mind ever since I read Winston’s diary.

“And the first step to that is to bring our families together. Can we see my family tomorrow?” she asked.

I sighed, as the timing seemed unexpectedly early. Originally I had planned on putting it off as long as possible. At last I gave in to her, “But first,” I said, “I need to know more about them.”

The night grew darker as Janari told me her family history. The time seemed to freeze as the night covered every living creature with a mollifying coat that absorbed all sound and fury and left us in utter silence.

Her father, born in the forgotten ages, had been part of a long lasting noble lineage. Thanks to his name he had been among the first to receive immortality. The divine gift fell short of its claim many years later when his hair began to grey. It turned out that the first to receive treatments did not gain complete immortality, as the discovery had not been ripened. The reason no one noticed was simple, as it took years to prove long term aging. Despite this, her father was almost one and a half centuries old. And aside from his grey hair, he was still as strong and fierce a fighter as a wolf. If he continued to age at this rate, he could have easily outlived me.

A bit of the gift however seemed to be passed on to Janari. She was a few years older than me, yet looked no year older than eighteen, as she peaked in her youthfulness and beauty day after day.

Janari’s mother was of a much simpler breeding than her father. However she was the one, from whom Janari inherited her inert curiosity. From what she was told, her mother had been a journalist for the Escapists. She had met Janari’s father on a job as she was collecting news from the different states, tribes, and governing forms that had accumulated in the valley and beyond. She had visited an old Aristocrat settlement up north that had claimed a palace for itself. Her stay was of short time, yet long enough to fall in love with the then ageless man that would soon be the

father of her child. As she became pregnant with Janari, she had to marry him or be cast out by her family. For an Aristocrat however, who had declared themselves gods, it was an abomination to marry a mortal. It was thus that they had to leave their former life behind, never to be heard of again.

Soon, they joined a tribe of peaceful renegades of both Aristocrats and Escapists that had settled in the woods far off from the city. Through ignorance and mere mistake the Guards shed the first blood in a hunting accident, leading the renegades to join other tribes, creating a longwinded vendetta with the Traditionalists. Despite all this excitement, Janari was born safely, and her parents finally were able to get married.

A few years later when Janari was still young, her mother was pregnant again, with twins. The ill equipped tribe would not have been able to safely remove them from her womb. The shaman, who was the settlement's doctor, offered her herbs that would bring forth the quick death of her children. Her husband would not agree to such a heinous act and urged her to return to the palace of his people to seek professional help.

It was through this tidings that they had moved back to the palace. But to their dismay they found nothing but vacated space, with no sign of any current inhabitant. Before they had a chance to return to their village, Janari's mother grew sick. She knew that her twins' birth would be imminent. Due to her sickness and the days of travel, she was too weak to bear them regularly, and needed a caesarian. With her own hands she cut her stomach open so that when she lay dead, her husband could ensure that the twins would live.

But the final hardships had not passed with her death. Through her many travels into the places beyond the valley, she had been exposed to radiation, leaving her newborns crippled and deformed. Nevertheless, Janari's father accepted them and loved them, because they were his wife's last wish.

"Your parents seem stronger than anyone I have ever met," I said in awe.

“Their strength is fueled by their love,” she said. “You are strong too, Adam. Who is she? I know there is someone you are fighting for.”

I blushed, taken by surprise by her observation of my feelings for Katrina, “How did you know?”

“I see the longing look in your eyes as you stare off into the night, even though I am right next to you. You are loving and caring towards me, but I can sense how much she means to you. Tell me about her.” Janari was more than understanding; she was mature and wise unlike most of my peers. She was not offended, but merely wanted to learn more about me.

“Her name is Katrina,” I began...

With the first light rising in the distance, I woke up on the hard forest floor. She had managed to keep me there for the night, it appeared, as her head rested on my chest. Carefully I woke her up and rushed through the woods to the common-hall, just in time to arrive before Peter and the others.

“Ya’ve been gone all night mate,” Nigel said, sitting down with his tray at our table.

“I’ve been having trouble sleeping,” I said casually.

“He’s been an insomniac ever since he joined the Guard,” Peter explained. “If it isn’t the beasts that kill you, the lack of sleep sure will.”

I played along, “You are right. Jacob, is there any chance I can pick up wood today for my duty?”

“Trying to cut time and take a nap? That’s fine with me,” he said. “But tomorrow you will have to be on the cutting squad.”

The excuse to leave with Janari for her village came easier than expected. It took something off my mind as I had been troubled the whole morning, thinking of what lay ahead.

As I walked to the woods someone hissed, trying to get my attention. “Blacksmith, come here for a moment.” With contempt I recognized Yorick’s voice and turned around. Standing in the shade of the outer wall, he pulled me aside, “I have a little job for you—”



I cut him off, “Is this Master Yorick talking, or Yorick ‘the lamb’, as you are referred to by your men?”

He was baffled and surprised that I had the audacity to cut him off and question his authority. “Oh, it is nothing much. Look at it as a favor for a friend. If I am happy with your work, maybe we can start working together more regularly, and get over our old feud.”

“I am not interested, and I have to get to work,” I said dryly and turned to leave.

“Blacksmith,” he called after me. His face was as cold as ice, “You better watch your back.”

By his look alone I genuinely feared for my life. I should have taken his offer, at that moment unknowing and ignorant of what a powerful enemy Yorick made. Instead I fled, hoping to never run into him again. His snakelike eyes haunted me up until the moment I met Janari.

“Are you ready?” she asked expecting me to get cold feet.

“As ready as I could be,” I responded almost confidently.

“Then let’s go.” With clear determination she led the way. The path seemed more familiar than last time, yet as perilously cluttered with Guard camps as ever.

The settlement emerged behind the thickets, like a parallel world that had been hiding from everyone’s sight. Without a moment of caution we penetrated through the invisible barrier and stood in between a row of huts.

I awaited a score of arrows to pierce through me right there, but it took a moment for them to even notice me. Once an elderly woman looked towards us, my presence was quickly the focus of the settlement. From that moment on everything went unperceivably fast. Some cried out, some hushed away, and yet others flexed their muscles and pointed their weapons as to scare me away from their territory. A wild sea of sounds and movements consumed me, freezing my muscles to ice and my bones to stone. My head began to spin, and all I sensed was Janari’s warm hand pressing my wrist. For a moment I felt like I did on the day of my celebration.

From the waves of noise emerged Janari's voice. She yelled something in her language. From the little I had learned I could judge that it was a disclaimer that I was a friend. As a result some calmed, and turned their hostility into curiosity. Others took much longer to be convinced.

At last her father, wearing a cloak made of a bear's pelt, strut out of the crowd like a lion from his pack. Carefully he examined me from head to toe, with piercing eyes that went through me like an arrow. To him I was the monster. To him I was the savage to be weary of. To him I was the demon that haunted the valley.

His eyes reflected spite from the core of his heart that was much older than me or my parents. There were no words that could reason or appease this pain, and so he sought redemption. With a cry filled of revenge he drew a broad blade, shaped like a butcher's knife. He turned towards the crowd and spoke in a slow thundering tone. They nodded with approval, and stomped on the ground to every syllable that left his lips. He spoke too expressively for me to understand what he said, but I could sense that it was not in my favor. Janari grew not only alarmed, but tense, and slowly began to shake.

It was obvious that she had imagined things differently. By now the crowd was chanting passionately, as if they were thirsty for my blood. Janari's father spun around and laid the blade against my neck. His tone grew into a crescendo, saturating in power, motivation, and leadership.

All my training flashed before my eyes, in the vain attempt to find an exit to my peril. No scenario ended without bloodshed or the possibility of my own death.

When all ideas had passed me and faith had long been lost, Janari pushed the blade off my neck and stepped in front of me. With a commanding tone she spoke to her father whose momentum was suddenly dispelled. It was something powerful she said, something that seemed unperceivable to be associated with a monster; Love.

The people were perplexed by what appeared to be received as an obscenity. In a low voice her father hissed, "How dare you?"

“He is different,” she said loud enough for the others to hear it. “He wants to bring peace. He sees us for who we are and I see him for what he is. There are no monsters or demons in this valley; just regular men driven by vengeance and hate. We are all the same and you know that!”

Shouts seemed to challenge her words. Some sounded like insults that cut into her confidence like knives. At last the final remnants of rebellion died down.

Her father walked in semicircles, between me and the crowd. “Tell me,” he said, “why should I trust him?”

“Because I understand you,” I responded in their tongue.

A lot of the people were shocked to see a stranger know their language. For some, these few words had changed their entire perception of me. “I do not want to fight you, and I am not interested in your lands,” I continued, “if I were to offer peace, what would you ask of me?”

“You know where we live,” the chief bristled with anger, “and you know our language. If you are a spy you can seal our fates the moment I let you go. I should kill you here and now.”

“If I were a spy, I would have had guards follow me here. But I came alone. I gambled with my life to gain your trust,” I raised my voice. “I ask you again, if I were to offer peace, what would you ask of me?”

Her father’s look had changed from violent opposition to curious uncertainty. I could see that he did not trust me yet, but I could sense that an offer of peace intrigued him. “I do not ask for much, but for what I ask, I ask with conviction,” he began, “We will keep our village, and we want rights to the woods surrounding us. No, not just rights,” he said. “We want separation. We don’t want any of your men even close to our turf. Borders must be established. Additionally you will need to provide us with livestock and grain. Many years in the past, your men have slaughtered our livestock and burned our fields, forcing us to resort to stealing your rations and eating the corpses of your men. If you want our assaults to end, you must first provide us with an alternative. And that is what I ask for, no more and no less.”

“Then you shall have that,” I said with steady determination. “I will talk to my commander upon return. Until then avoid any conflict with the guards. I will do my best, you have my word.”

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## Chapter 21

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THE NIGHT GREW darker and I knew there was only one place I could find Terric. I climbed up the ladder to the outer wall and caught sight of him in an instant. Before I had even stepped into his field of vision or made a sound he had felt my presence. “It’s been a while since you were up here,” he said.

“It has. You know that there must be a reason for my change in behavior,” I remarked.

“Yes. I have been trying to figure it out. If we were still inside the city I would have said that a girl is at fault for your sudden disappearances.”

“Maybe there is such a girl,” I said in a serious tone, using the opportunity to lead into what I had planned to tell him.

He looked at me in an odd way, trying to find out if I had intended humor.

“Over the past years I have gained much respect for you,” I said. “I trust in you, knowing that if I tell you something, it will be received with the greatest discretion and be acted upon with unmatched goodwill.” By his look I could tell that he knew that I was getting at something, “And because

of this, I feel confident sharing with you something that could be consequential to be told anybody else.” I quickly glanced to my sides to ensure that no one was in hearing distance.

“Over a year ago, I met a girl,” I started only to be interrupted.

“But how? Is Yorick now trafficking humans in and out of the city too?” he asked confused.

“No, no, nothing of that sort. Just listen,” I said shaking my head vehemently, “The girl I am talking about is one of the villagers, or savages as most of you would call them. We ran into one another at night by accident. But how we met does not matter,” I tried to get to the point. “We taught one another our languages and shared our history and culture. They are no demons, Terric. They are human beings that feel just like we do. Just this afternoon I visited their village for the first time and talked to the tribe.”

Terric was speechless. He examined me carefully as if he yet needed to tell apart whether I was telling him about another nightmare of mine or an actual experience.

“They want peace, Terric. They are tired of the fighting just like we are. I offered them peace and promised to speak to you. All they ask for is some land and resources.”

“I don’t know what to say Adam,” he said. “As much as I have faith in you, I have trouble believing such a wild story.”

“I knew you would say that,” I noted. “Janari, the girl, is hiding out in the forest. If you have any doubts, let us eliminate them right away. Just follow me and you can meet her.”

He considered for a moment and looked at me carefully, “In that case, I don’t need to. They would never risk revealing their location to us, unless they meant it. And more importantly, you would not lie to me,” he said, calming down from his excitement, “I have been waiting for this moment for a long time, and not rarely dreamed about it. Now that the opportunity to bring peace has arisen I will not let it pass. Tomorrow the two of us shall go to the village and change history.”

“What about the Inquisitor? Will you notify him or await his

approval?" I asked.

"Damn that devil, he can go to hell. Once there is no more enemy from whom the city needs protection, there won't be a need for an Inquisitor at all," he hissed enthusiastically. "This is not just our chance to end the bloodshed, Adam; this is our chance to bring an end to the Inquisition. If not a single death occurs in months, the people will begin to wonder why they are being secluded when there is nothing to fear. Soon after, the masses will want the gates to be opened."

As the words left his lips we looked at one another in marvel. Never had the dream been so real, so graspable; we had been chasing it for so long and finally it was our time.

"Do not tell anyone, do you hear me. I will come to your camp tomorrow and release you from your duties. Then you will lead me to the village, and we shall talk to the sav...", he corrected himself, "people. Now go to bed, tomorrow is a big day."

After a quick glance at Orion who loomed above me as my protector, I nodded and made my way towards the ladder. I climbed down the wall with a bright smile of accomplishment. It was finally happening.

Ice cold fingers brushed over my neck and dug into my shoulder as I reached the ground, "Oh how unexpected to see you at this late hour, Adam," Yorick said.

He must have been able to see the fear radiate through my eyes. It was unexpected indeed, and shocking. I could not stop thinking whether he had been able to overhear my conversation with Terric.

In my perplexed state he continued, "Tonight you will do me a favor. It's a simple task. All you have to do is deliver something for me."

I freed my shoulder from his hard grip and started walking away without looking back.

"Just delivering something," he said. "It is much easier than stealing, Adam. I heard you are quite good at that."

I froze. But before I could question he continued, "And your lady friend seems lonely nowadays. The carpenter girl, what was her name

again? Katrina? You never know, maybe one night she will receive a visit from one of my men that just finished service. Let me tell you, they get quite hungry after ten years of solitude.”

I twisted around, aiming with my fist for his face. His hand caught my arm in midair, “You do not want me to be your enemy, Adam. From now on be wary of your actions, and maybe we can work something out. There are two things you must know about me. First, I am everywhere. I hear everything, I see everything and I have influences that you cannot even imagine.” He let go of my hand and said as a matter of fact, “Second, I always win.”

No form of rebellion was either useful or proper at this point. In obvious subordination I apologized and stood straight, listening to what he had to say. My behavior disgusted me, but my feud with Yorick was not worth risking Katrina’s safety for.

A slight triumphant smile spread over his lips, “That’s the spirit, very well. I told you, working with me is not as hard as you might think. Now,” he said, “you will take this flask of fine liquor and bring it to a friend and fellow lumberman of yours. I believe he is your camp leader, Jacob. That’s all you have to do, but you have to bring it to him tonight.”

My mind was racing searching for a possible catch. After a moment I grabbed the flask from his hand and inspected it closely. “We are not bad people,” Yorick said. “It is just less suspicious for a friend like you to talk to him and present him with something.” His composure relaxed, “Well that is it for now. I shall see you tomorrow and give you your reward.”

I nodded and waited for him to leave. Slowed by doubt but ridden by fear I went into the common-hall where Jacob was still vividly spreading his tales and adventures of the woods. His listeners were enchanted by his mollifying deep voice as he described a fight he once had with one of the savages. Proudly he pushed down the armor at his shoulder to show the battle scar the monster had given him.

At last he noticed me, “Surprised to find you here so late, Adam. Grab a seat and listen. The story is just getting better.”



I shook my head with a yawn, "It's alright my friend, I'm going back to the cottage any moment. I just wanted to give you this," I said, pulling out the flask from my coat.

His eyes widened in alarm. With a quick snap of his hand he took the flask out of my hand and hid it in his coat. He leaned forward and whispered in my ear, "I am glad you joined us, Adam. But be more careful, there are many eyes around us that we need to be wary of. Otherwise they will start asking questions. For example, how do you get your hands on liquor like this? And every time people ask questions, bad things happen."

The next morning when Jacob assigned tasks for the day, Terric entered the clearing of the camp. All looked towards him and hailed the master.

"Jacob, I will be borrowing Mr. Blacksmith for today. He might be back by this afternoon," Terric said as a statement rather than request.

"You are free to leave," remarked Jacob and nodded at Terric.

We remained silent until we were out of the camp's hearing distance. With no one around we stopped to discuss what we were about to do. I explained all the relevant information about the village and her family, "If something goes wrong or if you lose me for some reason, run southwest. The village is directly in the Northeast of the Guard settlement. You will not be able to speak to them, so all they will see is your expression. Do not show disgust, no matter how grotesque or pitiful some of their children might look. Janari's father seems to be the chief of the village. We shall address him first. You will recognize him immediately."

Without delay we delved deeper into the woods. Every now and then we had to wait out in the bushes for moments that ranged from seconds to a quarter of an hour, to ensure that the guards passed by without noticing us.

At last we made it. The final line of thickets separated us from the world that we were about to pacify with ours. Terric held my upper arm to stop me from passing through, "It's all or nothing now," he said. "We cannot let this chance pass. There will not be another."

I could sense the pressure he put on us. I swallowed the lump in my throat and entered the village. The elders stood in a semicircle in front of a poorly constructed town-hall, already awaiting us. Among them was Janari, wearing a long green gown. The corners of her lips and the shimmer of her eyes transformed a worried glance into a radiant smile the moment she saw me. To her side stood her father, wearing the same bear pelt around his shoulders. They had recognized us all now and began to approach us. From a safe distance they stopped. Her father spoke up, "Good morrow Guardsmen. Lay down your weapons."

I translated for Terric and without hesitation he unbuckled all his swords, knives and axes. My sword and bow looked pathetic next to his arsenal of killing tools as I waited for him to finish his disarmament. In his eagerness to hand over his weapons, I could see that he was willing to die for this cause. At last we stepped forward to the row of elders that made up the governing body of the village.

The chief's attitude had changed from my last encounter with him. No longer was he spitting fiery rhetoric with his hands clenching steel, but boasted of the special nature of this occasion. "Together we can change history," he said. "Even over my long life I had not often had the chance to speak to my enemies. Maybe," he thought for a moment and continued, "if we had been able to talk all along, we never would have been enemies."

As I translated everything Terric kept nodding. For the first time I had seen him smile; a real untainted smile from his heart.

"In the name of the Guard and the city, I apologize for all the wrongs we have done you," Terric said earnestly. "Tell me what you want, and I shall grant you your wish. It is time that our people cease the fight and live in harmony."

"We need cattle, and lands for them to graze," one of the elders said.

"You shall give us some of your fields," another added.

"Grant our people the choice to live in the city," the chief requested.

"Sacrifice one of your men to ask our gods for forgiveness," the shaman urged.

“That is not what you told me!” I hissed at them before translating to Terric. “You said lands and resources would be all you ask for.”

Terric looked at me with glaring uneasiness. The old shaman pointed his cane at me, “We only speak to your commander, boy. What does he have to say?”

As I translated for him he maintained composure. “Tell them this,” he said. “I will create a borderline throughout the woods that neither party shall cross. Additionally they shall be given a proportional part of our fields and livestock. We will help them breed the animals and cultivate the farms if they wish so. Unfortunately, the city will not be an option for them as I have no control over it.” His voice intensified as he glared at the shaman, “And no man shall die for peace, for a peace based on blood is bound to fail. Too many men have died, and I will not sell a single soul to any god, be it theirs or ours.”

As Janari translated, the elders nodded quietly. Some lit up with radiant smiles, yet others appeared offended at Terric denying some of their requests. They huddled together arguing fiercely back and forth. When the shaman dominated the discussion, Janari stepped in.

“Remember why they are here,” she said. “They are more powerful than us, yet they come here, unarmed offering to give away their goods. And you still debate over some human sacrifice? Enough children have been sacrificed for this mindless war.”

The chief looked at his daughter for a moment and nodded. The elders formed a line again facing us. “We shall leave you in peace. I accept your offer,” the chief said and held his hand out. But before Terric could take it, an arrow pierced the heart of the chief.



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## Chapter 22

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A SECOND ARROW struck his stomach, and a third delved into his shoulder. For a moment everything turned quiet before the world was lost in tumult. The villagers cried out and ran to their huts, while Guardsmen jumped out of the thicket surrounding the village with slashing blades and lit torches.

In the midst of the madness, the chief and Terric still stood in front of the town-hall facing another. Blood ran from the chief's shoulder down his arms. His immortal blood dripped from his hands onto the ground. Their expressions were frozen, caged in their minds. They had come so close to their dream that fate had lain at their fingertips... so close to be grasped. In his mind Terric must have taken the chiefs hand wishing that all this was not real. It could not be real, I thought to myself.

In frantic confusion my glance drifted over to Janari who looked at me with bitter disappointment and disbelieve. "Why?" her lips spelled. By her mere expression I could feel what she saw in me; I was the monster. At last her disappointment turned into resentment. Furiously she jumped on me thrusting my whole body to the ground. Her hands clasped my throat,

digging her fingers into my skin. Pain shot up into my chest as I fought for every breath of air.

“Why did you lead them here Adam? Why!” she cried. “I had trusted you. I had faith in you. You killed me. You killed us. You killed our dream.” As her fingers dug deeper into my flesh, a tear fell from her eyes onto my cheek. I wanted to say something but I couldn’t bring a syllable out.

I did not want to fight her until my love almost killed me. With all my remaining strength I pushed her from my body. “Go!” I incoherently cried ringing for air, “Not safe here.” She jumped at me again, but I stopped her when she was just inches apart from me. This time the tears came from my eyes and burned into the bloody flesh on my throat, “We don’t have time for explanations. Run Janari! Just run and don’t turn around. Take your brothers with you. Your revenge on me will be wasted, because I never did anything to hurt you,” I rambled hastily pushing her off me towards the northern end of the village. I wanted to say it, tell her that I loved her, but there was no purpose in it now. She ran off and looked at me one more time with the same longing and uncertain gaze she wore when we first met. At last fate had tossed us at another in enmity.

Half the village was blazing in fire. Women and children were slaughtered like pigs, while their men fought the best they could. Unarmed and outnumbered they stood no chance. Two guards teamed up on a young lad with nothing but his fists to protect him. They taunted him, until he struck first. With a quick strike, they cut off his right hand, and watched him go to the ground bleeding and whimpering. Bored of him, they cut his throat and went on.

One of the two raised his finger and pointed at Janari fleeing. With a loathsome smile the other nodded and started running her direction.

My blood was boiling. These men were not my brothers. They were monsters. With all my strength I sprinted towards them. What I would do with them I did not know, they just needed to pay, and stay as far away from Janari as possible. With a powerful jump I body checked them, ramming them to the ground.

The one I tackled was immediately unconscious.

“What are you doing you idiot?” the other yelled at me.

“All of you made a grave mistake,” I said and punched him in the face, till his dirty grin was covered in blood. When he was begging for mercy, I took his sword and left him on the floor.

Terric and the chief had not moved from their spot. While men were running around them, fighting and dying, they had only sunken to their knees. I needed him now more than ever. He had to pick himself up. Vehemently I shook him by his shoulder trying to wake him from his hypnotic state.

“Terric!” I yelled at him, “Get up and fight! You said yourself that this is our only and last chance. Don’t let it pass. We must help the villagers,” I rambled incoherently trying to get some sign of life out of him.

“It’s over Adam,” he said lowly, staring off at the bleeding chief. “It will take centuries to restore the trust we gained and lost. We won’t see peace, Adam. Your children and their children won’t see peace. We are doomed to kill and be killed in a cycle of hatred. Our cure for pain is the very root of it: Revenge.”

As the resistance shrunk, the sounds of death grew fewer. A laugh rang further down by the huts. I looked over and found Yorick facing an old man holding a cane. The man struck out. Yorick caught the cane with his hand and ripped it from his assailant’s hands. With a delicate smile he broke it over his knee. The old man was terrified, awaiting what came next. Before he could raise his fists, Yorick’s face turned hard. With a cut throat the old man collapsed to the ground.

By the time I looked back at Terric, he was already gone. He retrieved his weapons and approached his second-in-command.

“Look at what you have done,” Terric hissed throwing out his arm to the side as if needing to pinpoint the destruction that had been evident all around.

“I successfully destroyed the enemy,” Yorick responded with an air of

superiority. “I did what you have not been able to accomplish in years. Instead you betrayed the Guard by working with the enemy.”

Terric unleashed his two handed sword from his back and spun around at Yorick. Like a snake Yorick dodged with lightning fast speed and stood unharmed next to Terric. With all the pain that filled his heart, Terric kept slashing out for Yorick. The death of the chief and the loss of the chance to peace distracted him too much to beat Yorick, whose focus was never better than in battle.

“I always knew that you should not be first-in-command,” growled Yorick who drew two battleaxes from his belt and spun them in his hands. The guards had finished the villagers off and set the last houses on fire. At last they formed a circle around their two leaders. Sparks flew into the air when the axes clashed against Terric’s sword in full swing. As the axes’ edges interlocked with the sword, Yorick ripped the sword from Terric’s grasp with a tug.

Without wasting a second he let the sword go and pulled two one handed swords from his belt. For a few seconds they walked in circles waiting for the other to attack. Yorick insulted Terric with every step they took, yet the latter kept composure. Once the first swing landed, chaos erupted in a quick and wild exchange of blows.

Blades clashed, weapons were dropped, and quickly replaced by others found on the ground. The fight was long, yet rushed by so quickly. No one had seen a fight this flawless in performance, yet filled with such emotional intensity. Their swords crossed up close and a battle for the upper hand began. Both colossal men pushed with all their might against the blade of the other. With an outcry Terric pushed Yorick’s weapon to the ground and rammed him with his shoulder. Yorick staggered backwards, almost losing balance, while Terric clenched his teeth, and stabbed his blade at his opponent’s throat. His arm was fully extended, yet the tip failed to pierce his enemy’s neck. Inches lay in between.

With utter control Yorick pushed the tip of the blade to the side and ordered his men loudly, “Detain them.” From all sides guards swarmed onto

me and Terric. He tried to fight them but was knocked to the ground. From all around they kicked and hit his defenseless body. Resistance was only an excuse for them to kill us. I wanted to help him and pushed through their blocking bodies, but was immediately knocked unconscious.

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## Chapter 23

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I AWOKE IN a dim lit prison cell. A shiver ran down my spine, cold touching me all around. My clothes were moist from the wet stone floor, amplifying the freezing feeling even more. Except for the lampion that stood outside my cell, complete darkness consumed the room. For a moment I thought I was alone until I found Terric, beaten and bloody, on the floor next to me. I whispered to him but received no answer.

I could not tell what time or even day it was. The cell must have been somewhere beneath the ground offering not a single ray of light. My near naked body screamed for warmth. They had stripped me off everything: Armor, weapons, tools... even the eagle necklace, my last memory of her. The only thing they had left me was a shirt, now covered in dirt and blood.

Terric never said a word, lost in a state of muteness. He did not even look at me until the day they took him away. I was awoken from my sleep to the creaking of the cell door. Five guards pulled Terric out of the cell, and dragged him up a flight of stairs. For but a brief moment he glanced back. He did not say a word or signal me anything. He just left the prison as a broken man. The eagle had lost his wings.

There was nothing to do and nothing to say. I was lost in that prison cell thinking and thinking until I wished I could just stop thinking for once. I started resorting to sleep; long forced sleep, where I would close my eyes, whenever awake, until I fell asleep. After a while the concept of time had been lost, as it felt like one endless painful day that never ended.

Every now and then a rat scurried through my cell. In my delusion I tried to befriend it, seeing it as the only living thing around me. My wish for friendship was only broken when I found my tray of food havocked by the little creature while I was sleeping. My delusion turned into rage. I chased it down the cell with the burning desire to eat it; dead or alive, I just needed to fight my horrid hunger.

When I noticed myself slimming, I began to work out again. My hunger barely allowed me a complete set of exercises, but it was better than letting my physique entirely crumble. After I broke down in exhaustion, I stared at the dark dungeon ceiling and was carried back to the many times I watched the night sky with Katrina and Janari. It was almost the same, but Orion was no longer watching over me.

The more I delved into my past the more I began to question the turns my life had taken. "What if?" I asked myself. What if I had killed the Inquisitor that one night? What if I had run off with Janari? What if I had just worked with Yorick? What if I had never dropped my necklace and never went back to find it and meet Janari? With my current situation all scenarios seemed to lead me somewhere better than I was at right now.

When the dreams became too painful I forced myself to stay awake entirely. I decided to count seconds to regain my sense of time. My goal was to count through a whole day. It was a difficult task to stay focused for so long, but it helped me to think less of all that had happened. Every now and then I drifted off, but my mouth kept counting. I found that three hours had gone by when it felt like just fifteen minutes had passed. Other times the reverse was true. The only useful observation from the counting was that I received one tray of food a day and many hours later a bowl of stew

with a piece of bread. I figured that the two signified breakfast and dinner, thereby giving me an idea of when it was morning and when it was evening.

My beard and hair had already grown out. For all I knew I was locked up for ages.

When I was ready to receive my supper one night I was surprised by familiar voices I had not heard in a long time, “Adam!” it whispered commandingly, “Wake up!”

Peter and Nigel stood outside the cell with their fingers wrapped around the bars, “We don’t have much time. We didn’t know you were being held here. When we found out we tried to break in multiple times, but couldn’t get passed the guards. We bribed them to let us in for a few minutes.”

“What happened?” I asked.

“That was what I was going to ask you,” he said with a frown. “Well, Yorick and his men successfully destroyed a savage camp. Rumor has it that you and Terric were there, but that makes little sense. Anyhow, when the Inquisition learned from Yorick’s achievement, they put him first-in-command. After Terric had healed, he left the hospital and rode into the woods with a few men. The men returned and said he disappeared. Nobody has seen him since,” explained Peter.

“Terric wasn’t in the hospital, he was right here next to me. This all doesn’t add up. Why am I here? How long have I been here?” I asked hurriedly trying to understand the blanks in my memory.

Nigel looked at Peter worriedly, “Ya have been in here for a year now,” he said. “But look at the bright side. One year less where ya could have been killed out there.”

“Don’t you remember Adam?” asked Peter interrupting Nigel. “You were convicted and detained for poisoning Jacob. He nearly died after drinking from that flask you gave him. He was in the hospital for weeks, nobody saw him. I knew you wouldn’t have done it, but there were so many witnesses attesting that you gave him that flask.”

“It was all Yorick!” I protested intending to explain myself.

“Listen, Adam. We don’t have time for explanations. You can tell me all about it when you are out.”

“But how?” I asked, still trying to comprehend all that had happened.

“We will get you out of here. I wrote an anonymous letter to the Inquisitor and put it in one of the carts of a recently deceased guard. If everything works out they will find the letter and deliver it to the Inquisitor. I heard that was one of the many ways Yorick communicated and traded with the city,” explained Peter with a calming voice.

“Why would the Inquisitor do anything?” I asked.

“Yorick had created this prison beneath the officer building without the knowledge of Terric or the Inquisitor. You have not seen the worst parts. When Yorick took over command he changed the rules on discipline and authority. Men that do not subordinate themselves to Yorick or disrespect him are tortured in public. A whole set of tools only the devil could have invented stand in front of the common-hall. Just being here could earn us a flogging,” he said with a worried glance to the stairs. “I wrote the Inquisitor that we have a shortage of men, and pointed out that some were being detained, which appeared rather wasteful. Knowing the man, he won’t send us any resources to help, so requesting the prisoners’ release will be an easy way out for him.”

A sound came from upstairs. Nigel tugged Peter by the sleeve, who let go of the bars and took a few steps back, “Our time is running out, stay strong Adam. We have to leave.”

Before I could say any more they were running up the stairs and I was once again consumed by the darkness of my prison cell. One thing was for sure. When, or better if, I got out of this cell, I needed to control my spite for Yorick. I had to act my part, and make him believe that I was one of his men.

The next few days I resumed my training in the prison cell and used every minute to get back in shape and focus my mind on the task at hand: Survival. I had to make it through less than six more years to return to the city.

Within that same week, a group of guards led by Yorick came down the stairs and unbolted the prison cell.

“I don’t know how you did it, but you are free to leave,” Yorick said slightly bothered.

“Thank you, Master,” I responded obediently.

He nodded pleased, “Seems like sitting down here has given you some sense. For your information it is January 7th, 2160 and it is Monday. It is fairly late, so you are free for the day. Go wash and shave, I don’t want any more letters to the Inquisitor about prisoner treatment. Tomorrow your camp is expecting you.”

I nodded thankfully and added, “One last thing Master, where can I find my armor, weapons and other things I was carrying when I was detained?”

“Your armor and weapons lie ready in the cottage at your new spot. As for the other things,” Yorick looked towards his men, “they must have gotten lost over the year.”

As much as I wanted to give him a feisty response, I contained my anger, remembering my plan to befriend Yorick. At last I had made my deal with the devil and as we ascended the stairs finally returned from hell back to the land of the living.



## Chapter 24

“ALMOST DONE,” SAID Peter as he finished cutting my hair.

“It’s useful to have a barber for a friend,” I remarked, looking at my reflection in the mirror. My hair was wavy and almost down to my shoulders, while my beard was cleanly trimmed with only a light shade remaining all around.

“That’s it,” he exclaimed triumphantly, energized by practicing his profession. “Now you no longer look like a drunken homeless man. Go and get ready, the others are eager to see you. You deserve a nice dinner and drink after that pit you have been rotting in.”

“Oh, and one more thing,” he said pulling something from his pocket. With a wink, he tossed my eagle necklace into my open palm, “I found it around the neck of one of the guards whose hair I cut. I knew it belonged to you, so I snatched it.”

In times of peril, having good friends was invaluable. Peter and I had been close friends already in the city, but after getting me out of that prison and even looking after my memory of Katrina, he had proven to be far more than just a friend. He was a brother to me.

“He has returned!” exclaimed Stephan upon seeing me enter the common-hall. They all huddled around me, greeting and embracing me one after the other. Some of them had changed over the past year but most looked nearly identical as the day I was taken.

It seemed as if the whole Guard had known about my incarceration. Word must have spread quickly. Except for the men I deemed friends most other Guardsmen looked at me with suspicion and distrust. I could sense the people at the other tables spreading rumors about me. It was then when I recognized the totality of facts surrounding me. Not only had I supposedly attempted to kill Jacob by poison, but many saw me nearly beat a handful of fellow guards to death in order to protect Janari.

“It’s been almost five years now,” announced Peter. “I want to give this toast to us all. The five of us have been strong throughout and not allowed any of the others to fall behind. Many of the men we trained with have passed away, but thanks to each and every one of you, we are still right here. To you James, who always holds us back from doing too many stupid things. To you Nigel, who makes sure we still do enough stupid things to enjoy the Guard. To you Stephan, who always steps up and has my back when things go wrong. To you Adam, who always tries to find ways to die by doing what most are not man enough to do. To us, and to immortality.”

“To immortality,” I repeated, thinking of the doom that wish had brought upon mankind a century ago. Our mortality gave this moment value. As we bumped our mugs together in the center of our circle, I looked at each and every one of my friends. I cherished the moment because I knew that our luck would not last forever. I never would have thought that the day I went out to bring peace could have been the last time I saw Terric or Janari. Life had its unsuspecting turns. For years it does not move, almost like a still painting, and at once the whole consistency changes wildly, like a drop of blood falling into a glass of water spreading by the seconds until it discolours the entire substance.

A guard with a stern look rang a tiny bell at the entrance of the common-hall. Immediately the whole company finished their drinks and rose to leave. “Let’s go, out here!” yelled the man at the door.

I shot Peter an inquisitive look, “Yorick set up new curfews. Nobody is

allowed to walk outside the cottages after ten o'clock," he whispered.

Like a herd of sheep we were led outside the common-hall and given a glance at the row of torture instruments. Even now a man was being pulled by his limbs on the rack, filling the air with violent cries of pain. There had never been enough criminal behavior to torture at least one guard a night. It seemed rather haphazard how Yorick chose his criminals just to set examples every day. I had to make sure I did not become one of them.



Winter had come and so had the snow. With its icy claws the cold cut into our skins and stole the warmth from our core. When we could not escape the freezing pain for hours it began to meddle with our psych.

I marched down the snowy trail towards our camp with the others at my side. The sounds of our movements were muted by the thick layer of snow that crackled lightly when our soles pressed down on it. After a short time my boots were soaked by the snow and my feet began to freeze.

"Let's get out of here quickly," said Peter leading our group of six. "We cannot stay outside for too long but we have to finish our job. We need to cover at least a third of our zone. Shake the snow off the trees to make sure it does not weigh too heavily on them. But do everything quietly. You don't want to wake any of the animals in their hibernation."

"After all, we wanna eat them and their children the coming years," remarked Nigel with a grin.

"Also if you see a dead tree, cut it down. When they freeze below a certain point, they burst and potentially crush some of the younger trees."

For a few hours we delved deeper and deeper into the woods, until we grew tired. Taking a rest however was never an option. Jacob, who by now had finished his service, once told us about a Guardsman who stayed behind his group, saying he would only rest for a moment. He was convinced he would get up any moment until he couldn't. His muscles had grown too tired and weak because of the cold and so he froze to death leaning against a tree. Winter indeed was a devil in disguise. In its white crystalline beauty and silent tranquility it hid from the eye the destruction it caused. Deer were starved to the



rips or never awoke from their sleep, trees burst in their core as the cold soaked up all the liquid within them, and men got lost in the white maze after the snow covered their tracks.

“Alright, we’ll do one more hour,” Peter said unrolling a map of the woods. “We covered the southeastern and eastern quadrant, let’s finish northeast and we can go home.”

We strolled out in between the trees and drove up north. The sun had passed its highest point and had halfway set at the horizon. Up ahead bright yellow lines on a row of tree trunks marked the end of our zone.

“Let’s make it a race! We can check the trees on the way back,” said Nigel. “Whoever gets there first gets a free drink from the others.”

Before we could take the bet he bolted towards the markers. Immediately we chased after him. Peter was right next to me trying to outrun me. He bumped me in the side and laughed wholeheartedly when I fell behind for a few seconds. Nigel had almost reached the markers closely followed by John. Igor and Marc slowly trotted behind us, disinterested in our little challenge.

Peter and I slowed knowing that we had no chance of catching up to Nigel or John. With inches of separation Nigel touched the tree and spun around with a triumphant smile. John was bent over with his hands on his knees gasping for air.

Something in his expression changed. Alarm and terror spread across his face while Nigel still celebrated his victory and boasted about his speed.

John jumped up and tried to push Nigel aside. By the time his hand had reached him, an arrow flew through the air and pierced Nigel into the chest. My mind flashed back to the chief as I saw Nigel standing in the snow with all expression sucked from his face.

The moment slowed as Peter and I ran towards our friend. Nigel’s eyes glazed in pain. His skin paled. His body trembled out of fear; the fear of death. John took the bow from his shoulder. He stepped back. With shaking hands Nigel touched the spot where the arrow had hit him. The chainmail was penetrated with the tip inches deep in his flesh. Frightened he lifted his hand and collapsed. It was covered in blood.

Igor and Marc saw the red pool on the white snow and ran off. Trying to

fetch an arrow John reached for the quiver. His hands trembled, breaking an arrow by accident.

Peter and I were almost there. He looked at me with a mortified glance. I knew he saw the fear in my eyes. The shot seemed fatal but I could still hear Nigel cough.

I turned to see the archer.

It was Janari aiming for my head.

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## Chapter 25

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MY FEET FROZE in the middle of my sprint. The adrenaline that had pumped through my veins moments ago vanished into nothingness and left my body motionless. The moment our eyes met, her arrow left the string. It was in that moment that she recognized me, and it was that moment, that the dark gloom in her eyes disappeared.

Numbed by the unexpected encounter I did not even notice the dripping wound in my left shoulder until the warm blood touched my hands. Janari let her bow sink as the two of us gazed into each other's familiar yet estranged faces. With clenched teeth I broke the arrow off and started running towards her. She dropped her bow and rushed down the forest floor. Her face was pained. It was not until now that she saw the monster she had let herself turn into because of the pain she had suffered from the Guard.

My feet carried me like the wind toward her. Her eyes were fixed on me.

"I'll get that witch for you, Adam," John yelled.

Mere feet from Janari, I turned my head toward him. His left arm was

extended clasping his bow. His right hand had already released death.

I screamed for it to stop. Unknowing of what was coming her way Janari jumped towards me.

The moment I caught her all noise ceased, leaving nothing but the muffled voices of the others. Our warm bodies were like one entity in a sea of cold.

A snowflake fell on her forehead. Gently I brushed it away.

"I..., am sorry Adam," she whispered, her angelic voice consumed by pain. Her hands pressed on her stomach, where the arrow had entered her flesh. "I always wanted to be different and bring change," she said slowly with tears running down her cheeks, "but we are all the same."

"Shut up," I said with a lump forming in my throat. "Don't go. Fight it Janari. We can run off to Africa."

"We will meet again, Adam. I just hope it will be in a world brighter than this one."

"Please," I begged her to live.

With a smile she closed her eyes, and left me behind. I bowed down and gave her paling lips a kiss. She had killed Nigel, but she was no murderer. In the end she was the victim. A victim of timeless hatred.

"I shall see you again," I whispered, "when this never-ending night passes and the day breaks." I lowered her still body into the soft snow. "Go gently my love," I said, and let her go.

A violent scream emerged from behind me. Her brothers had come to revenge their sister. John lay dead in the snow, his eyes wide open, filled with the terror of surprise. They cut us off from the direct route back to the settlement, driving us deeper into the woods. Perhaps more of them awaited us there. Peter pulled me by the arm onto my feet. I grabbed his shoulder and ordered him, "Go! Warn the others, I will hold them off while you make a run for it!"

"I am not leaving you here!" he yelled back at me with the same commanding tone.

I wanted to slap him and give him a beating so he would go. The fool

had risked his life too many times for me. But in his eyes I saw that no word or act could make him leave. The twins were almost in front of us, giving us just enough time to draw our swords and stand shoulder to shoulder.

I did not want to fight them. After all they were Janari's brothers. I pleaded them to hear me out. But as much as I tried to appease them in their language, they would not listen. It was them or us. And I knew it had to be us.

The ground underneath our feet shuddered to every step they took. Each stomp sent a shiver down my spine, as the two monstrosities approached us. Once their grotesque heads loomed above ours, I found their bodies more disturbing than I had observed from far. Despite all I had learned about them, it seemed difficult to accept them as humans, yet so easy to mark them as monsters. Their statures were hunched yet enormous; their movements were jerky yet powerful; their expressions were empty yet cold. If I wanted to beat them, I could not think of them as humans.

An axe, as big as our heads, greeted us, slashing down with immense speed.

The imminent threat wakened me from the pain of my wounded shoulder. My teeth clenched, my hands formed fists, my eyes focused in on the enemy. When both prepared to strike out at us, I jumped through the void in between them. Peter distracted the two leaving their backs vulnerable to my blade.

I lunged at the one with the missing eye. My sword cut across his back, evoking a painful cry. I expected the birds to flee at this noise but all the wildlife had long ago deserted us.

My benefit of surprise did not last long. Right after I attacked the cripple, it spun around, viciously hitting with its club into empty air. It had neither the instinct of an animal nor the intelligence of a regular human. With inches separating me from death, it missed my head just a second before Peter rammed his sword through the monster's back.

It cried out into the forest sky so loud that I almost went deaf. The

scream alone was a powerful weapon. The distraction made it harder to dodge their blows. To our despair the one eyed cripple kept fighting.

All my muscles tensed and I could feel the sweat soak my clothes and armor from underneath. But compared to those creatures I still smelled like heaven.

Peter and I stood back to back, as the monsters walked in a circle around us. The stab began to take its toll on the cripple. More and more blood left its body. When it was ready to lunge and strike me, my arm shot out and slit its throat. Like dead weight, the large body collapsed in my direction. I jumped aside, but it was too late for Peter. With his back towards me it had caught him unaware and knocked him to the ground. The remaining brother of Janari, the one with the deformed hand, lifted up his axe to give Peter the final blow.

My bleeding body raised itself from the ground. With all the strength I could muster I slashed my sword against the descending axe, cutting off the blades from the shaft. In its anger the monster growled at me and dropped the stick. With an immense blow using the crippled hand, it struck me so powerfully that I lost hold of my sword.

The game had changed. The sharpness of our weapons and our skill in wielding them no longer mattered. It was down to raw power.

Walking in circles around the cripple, my fists danced in front of my face. Its punches went straight for my head. Sweat dripped down my entire body, mixing with the blood that oozed out of various bruises and cuts. In disgust I spit the blood that filled my mouth at the monster. A few more punches and it would have cracked open my skull. With all I had left in me, I charged at it and grabbed it by its wrists, while ramming my knee repeatedly into its stomach. Ringing for air, it collapsed to its knees. With a forceful kick I hit its head to the ground. A deep exhausted sigh resounded and the monster closed its eyes.

My thoughts raced back to Peter. I immediately returned to his weak body that had been buried under the other creature. Had he not exhausted

himself so much in the fight, he could have freed himself, but the body was just too heavy. With shared strength we rolled the cadaver off of him.

His eyes had little luster, but so had mine. We barely escaped our death, yet all that we cared about was living; standing on our own feet and still having an ounce of blood in our bodies. What I cherished more than anything in that moment was our chance to still live out our dreams and one day return to the city. It was a privilege indeed, I thought, scanning the ground that was filled with blood, corpses, and lost souls. Nigel and his happiness had left our world forever. He was never going to return to marry the girl that bore the child he never met. John as much as I hated him now, died due to a mere misunderstanding. And Janari... will never see Africa, never see peace, and never see me again.

Peter and I fell into each other's arms, thankful for another and thankful for life. He had saved my life, and I had saved his. Our friendship had made us brothers.

His grip tightened and his entire body tensed. Ruthlessly he pushed me to the ground and picked his sword up from the floor.

I turned my head in confusion as I hit the floor. The one handed monster was back on its feet. With a full thrust it rammed my lost sword into Peter's front. That same moment Peter extended his arm, letting the Monster run into his blade. The scene froze as both parties stood motionlessly there, staring into nothingness.

It wasn't real. It couldn't be. I got to my feet and grabbed Peter's sword to finish the dying Monster off, just before I caught my collapsing friend.

His breaths were slow and heavy. The sword dove into the chainmail so forcefully that the tip still severed his skin and flesh close to his heart.

"We did it, Adam," Peter said in a voice as faint as a whisper.

The wound did not appear to be fatal, letting tears of joy run down my face.

Then his shirt caught my eyes. In less than twenty seconds it had

turned from a solid grey to a dark red. The blood was leaving Peter and so were his spirits.

“Go ahead, you need to get your shoulder fixed, I’ll be right behind you,” Peter told me as if he were waiting to enjoy the sunset. He could mislead me with words, but his tone was unmistakable.

“Quit the talk and let me slow the bleeding,” I said while taking off his armor. His upper body was scarred, beaten, and weak, unlike the warrior I always knew him as. The wound had cut deep and was a few inches long. It severed a major vein, but just a little closer to the heart and it would have immediately killed him.

I had minutes at best. With a handful of pearl white snow, I cleaned his wound, and pressed it closed with pieces of John’s shirt. Once I had covered up the injury, I tied Peter’s shirt around his chest to keep the other cloth in place. It was far from ideal, but all I could do in the circumstance.

“Can you walk?” I asked.

“I’ll try,” he responded weakly with flickering eyes and put his arm around my neck for support.

We made our way back through the forest, but our steps progressively slowed. His power faded and my shoulder began to burn. To make things worse, the walking raised his heart rate and made the bleeding stronger. Either we walked slowly, risking him bleeding out, or we walked faster, causing the bleeding to speed up as well.

At one point even those two options left us. Before I could grab him tighter, his arm slipped from my shoulder and he fell onto his knees. His eyes looked down, away from mine.

“Adam, promise me one thing,” he began.

With sharpened ears I waited, resentful for what was about to come.

“When you return to the city, tell all the pretty girls how heroically I died, so that when they go to heaven, they come searching for me,” he chuckled painfully in a bittersweet tone. He slowly lifted his face, and I saw tears rolling down his cheeks, “I’m scared... brother.”

I had a million things to say to him. Goodbyes, wise words, apologies.



All that I brought forth was, “It’s not your time yet.”

I knelt down next to him, grabbed his legs and head under my arms, and pushed myself to my feet. The pain in my shoulder exploded, causing me to fall back down to my knees. I wanted to pull the rest of the bolt out, but while it was my curse it was the one thing that kept me from bleeding out.

All the pain shot an urge to vomit through my body, but I had to keep composure. I could not tell which pain was the worst. While the bolt burned in my shoulder, the fear of Peter’s death, after losing Janari and Nigel, torched my soul.

With powers unbeknown to me I picked him up and set him on my healthy shoulder. Without delay I ran as fast as I could. Body and mind were strained to the fullest, as my calves tensed at every step and my brain fought the idea of losing Peter.

His body turned limp as no muscles seemed to hold it together. With vigor I pushed through the thicket and entered the plain. The outer wall was in sight, promisingly outlined by the colorful fading sunset.

“Help!” I cried. With tears in my eyes I screamed it over and over. Every second I did not see a guard rushing my way, feelings of loneliness and helplessness consumed me.

Finally, in the distance, guards exited the outer gate in quickening steps.

As they closed in, my power faded. I broke down into my knees and Peter rolled off my back. Gasping for air I lay in the snow facing him. His eyelids had halfway covered his emerald green eyes. Dizziness multiplied the pain all over my body. My sight became blurry and the running feet of the Guards approached me like thunder. With my last word I cried out his name.



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## Chapter 26

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A SHUDDER AS cold as ice shot across my skin. With wide eyes I sat up and found myself in a dark room. Just a faint square of light shone through a tiny window above my head, giving outlines to everything around me. As my senses returned, so did the pain. A bloody bandage covered my burning shoulder, while the rest of my upper body lay bare.

Someone had already taken out the arrowhead and the wooden splinters to clean the wound and prevent infection. Luckily no bone felt broken.

I pushed myself onto the corner of the bed and collected my thoughts. The images of Nigel, John, and Janari's death passed in front of my eyes. They were still fresh and so incomprehensible. It stung thinking of them. Their memory burned so much harsher in my heart than any arrow could have.

Rising from the bed I walked over to the door. An instant dizziness clouded my head, like a million needles pricking my forehead. My hand found support at the wall as I opened the door to the floor.

An absent minded looking old man, wearing a white cloak, walked

through the corridor with a book in his hands, while Yorick descended the stairs from the officer quarters with loud steps.

“Doctor, why is the guard on his feet, shouldn’t he be resting,” he asked angrily.

“Where is Peter?” I demanded before the doctor could respond.

Yorick gave the doctor a harsh glance and then focused back on me. He looked me straight in the eye, “By the time the guards picked the two of you up, Peter had already been dead. There was nothing we could do, I am sorry Adam.”

My eyes scanned the many doors, expecting Peter to pop out as a surprise. But no such thing happened. Unlike anyone else, Yorick gave me the news cold, hard, and fast. It took a minute until the reality registered in my mind.

As the first tear rolled down my cheek I kicked the door slam shut. In all my anger I punched the wall so forcefully that my knuckles bled. I was never a loud person but I needed to release my anger. Ignoring the damaged shoulder I knocked over the chair, and flipped over the second bed in the room.

It all just did not make sense... all of them dead. Peter, Nigel, Janari. The little stability, the few friends I had, wiped out from one day to the next.

Yorick entered and observed me carefully, “The best thing to do now is to get rest. We need you back out there as soon as possible. If the doctor allows it, you can bring him to the city tomorrow.” He paused for a moment, receiving no reaction but my slowed breathing. “Who were friends close to Peter that we should notify?” Yorick asked.

“Nig...,” instinctively I wanted to say Nigel, but recalled the arrow darting through his chest. “Stephan and James were his closest friends,” I corrected myself. “Stephan works in the mines and James on the fields.” Before I turned away I swallowed the lump in my throat, and added with some composure, “Thank you, Yorick. If there is nothing else I am going to go back to my bed. I think I need some quiet.”

Throughout the night, haunting images of Peter, Janari, and Nigel kept me awake. Some showed me their dying moments, others were completely harmless. But the innocent dreams hurt the most. Seeing myself with Peter and Nigel talking around the campfire or teaching Janari words while watching the stars, was just another reminder of the moments I would never be able to relive again.

The morning drew closer as I lay in bed with open eyes. A fly entered the room and joyfully buzzed through the air. With nothing better to do, I observed the little creature in the hope to fall back asleep. Its relaxed flight was many times suddenly interrupted by frantic fear. With a touch of madness it flew against the window repeatedly in the attempt to get out. Eventually it resigned, only to try again a few minutes later.

When the doctor came in, the little creature escaped the room through the door. From one of the shelves he fetched a large roll of bandages and took a seat next to my bed. Carefully he tied them around my arm and shoulder, forming a sling.

“The arrow pierced into muscle tissue,” he said knotting the bandage at my back. “You will have to wear this restraint day and night from now on. Otherwise your shoulder will be damaged permanently. It needs to grow back together, and that may take a few months.”

It was time to bring them to the city. Peter lay peacefully and undisturbed in one of the body carts in front of the officer-building. Dressed in full armor, his hands joined at his chest holding a sword facing down. His rested face morphed in my mind back to the boy that had talked to me at my celebration. Looking at him, our many memories flashed before me from our days in the city to our years in the Guard. From our first fight in training to that final fight.

The wagon beside him carried Nigel, whose sun tanned skin had

turned pallid. His mischievous smile was wiped away by a frozen look of anguish.

By the time they had found John's body, it had been mutilated by the beasts so much that Yorick decided to just bury him and send in a stone. The third wagon therefore held a tombstone with John's name, birth and death date.

Igor, who had abandoned us along with Marc the moment we were ambushed, reported that the bodies of the savages had vanished by the time he returned to recover Nigel and John. Somewhere in the woods, Janari too would be buried and disappear from the surface of the earth forever.

Stephan and James stood at my side with pained but compassionate faces. Without words we hugged another, barely able to suppress our tears. We all had seen death, yet it had never been so real and close to us.

Stephan, James, Igor and Marc pulled the three wagons down the narrow road to the city gates. Our grave expressions gave away that none of us were in the mood to talk. The constant scratching and squeaking sound of the wheels mixed with the light trotting of our feet created a somber song that accompanied us down the path, over the bridge and towards the gate. Unable to help due to my damaged shoulder I walked besides Stephan who drew Peter's cart behind him. A city guard on top of the walls spotted us and gave orders to open the gates.

Slowly the gigantic gate opened itself up to us. With the first crack in between the gate doors, I felt as if I was dreaming. In front of me lay my childhood and my uncertain future. As the gate opened further and further, my misery turned into a slight hope that I could catch a glimpse of Katrina or my parents. But all I found was vacancy; Most prominently the vacancy that sat in my heart.

We brought the carts all the way to the gate, until the city guards stopped us, "We will take it from here. No Grey Guardsmen are allowed inside the city."

After a moment of contempt, the others let go of the cart handles and

sat them down. One last time I reached out and squeezed Peter's hand. It was a strange feeling knowing that I would never see him again.

All these years I had challenged God, heaven and the afterlife. For the first time I prayed that it was all true. I could not accept the thought of his inanimate body slowly being eaten by the insects in the ground. I kept telling myself that as we walked towards the city gates, he was approaching the gates of heaven.

His fingers slipped from my grip as the city guards pulled the wagons inside. Once they were out of our reach the gates closed again. The five of us stood there, left behind, staring after our friends and into our long-lost home.

"May all the girls that died young chase you down the streets of heaven, brother," I whispered as the gates shut.

Cold crept down my back in gruesome anticipation of the all too familiar sound that was about to follow.

With its ominous rhythm, the city bell rang thrice.

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## Chapter 27

I COULD NOT recall what date it was. Ever since they had released me from the hospital a day might have passed; or it could have been a month... or perhaps a year. Time was of no relevance anymore. Every day in my life I had taken the friends and family around me for granted. Now that Peter, Janari, and Nigel were dead, and Terric had vanished from the face of the earth, I felt like a ghost trapped inside my body, trying to escape.

I continued to do my duties in the woods, but was so absentminded that I often did not notice the passing of time. Every now and then a guard would snap in front of my face to bring me back to the present or ask if I was alright, which I would shrug off with a smile.

What few knew was that I still saw them. One day I walked in the woods to fetch wood from the ground, when all of the sudden something pushed me. Peter had surprised me from behind. Scared I started to run away from him. When I thought I had left his specter behind, he suddenly stood right in front of me.

“What is wrong, Adam?” he said to me, “Don’t you recognize me? It’s me, Peter, your best friend.”

I shoved him off, “You are not real! And you are not Peter.”

“If I weren’t real, why are you talking to me?” he asked.

I spun around to escape his sight.

“I have missed you, Adam,” said Janari stepping from behind a tree. She came closer to me and brushed my hair playfully back.

I pushed her off my body, and tried to run. That instant, I tripped, “Got ya there ma friend,” Nigel said with his leg extended to trip me.

I pinched myself, trying to prove that I did not feel anything. I needed to wake up from this nightmare. But I felt everything.

“Why don’t you talk to me Adam,” Janari asked with teary eyes, “I have missed you. Talk to me, my love.”

“Get away demon,” I hissed at her, and pulled myself up.

“You are not leaving me,” she cried with a sudden stern tone.

The moment I turned to run away from her, Terric stood in my way. His face was pale as ice, “You abandoned me!”

“I never abandoned you! What happened to you?”

“I cannot tell you,” he said.

They surrounded me and stepped closer and closer.

“Get off me!” I screamed and pushed Nigel away.

The light dimmed around us. Nigel looked up at me with possessed eyes. Blood began to emerge from his chest at the spot where the arrow had killed him. “You murdered me,” he said in a low voice and reached for me with his hand.

Peter’s skin had paled. His chest was blood smeared, and his body rawboned. He raised his bony finger towards me, “You let me die!”

Terric grabbed me by the shoulder, whispering in my ear with a faint dying voice, “You betrayed me!”

Janari at last dug her fingers into my sides as the blood began to flow from her stomach, “You left me behind!”

With hands covering my eyes I sunk to the ground screaming. I wanted to drown their voices with my scream. Cowered in a ball I angrily chanted for them to go away. The darkness of closed eyes seemed so welcoming that I just wanted to leave this place behind and never return.

“Adam,” voices said, “Adam!” over and over.



A hand shook me violently by the shoulder until I stopped the chanting.

I lifted my eyes and found Igor and Marc standing over me. The others had gone.

“Are you alright?” Marc asked.

“Are you crazy? Clearly he is not alright. What is going on Adam?” Igor interrupted.

“Didn’t you see them?” I asked.

“See who?” asked Igor lifting his shoulders in confusion.

“They are real. They even touched me. Nigel tripped me. That’s why I fell,” I said defensively.

“We watched you, Adam. Nobody was there. Nigel is dead. You were talking to trees and tripped over a root,” he said pointing to a root sticking out of the ground down below my feet.

“Go see the doctor,” Marc hissed. “You are a danger to yourself and us all.”

When I went to see the doctor he made me drink a sweet liquid. The visions ceased, but made my senses foggy and my mind drowsy. Despite the tiredness, I could not fall asleep. I decided to get off the medication and told the doctor that the hallucinations had passed. But they only grew stronger.

After a while I became friends with them. No longer was I lonely, because wherever I went they always accompanied me. They were as real as everything else.

The closer I grew to them the farther I was pushed away by the other guards. When I walked by I saw them make faces, ridiculing me behind my back. At supper, when James and Stephan were not around, I sat with Peter, Janari, Nigel and Terric at a separate table. Often times when I talked to them the room grew silent, with eyes inconspicuously pointed at me.

It was such a moment, when from the far end of the common-hall Stephan emerged. “What are you looking at,” he hissed at the men staring at me. He sat down where I had seen Nigel sit. “Hello Adam,” he said.

“Good evening, Stephan, nice of you to join us,” I reciprocated.

Uncomfortably he looked around seeing only me at the table, “Listen,

Adam. Do you know what day is today?"

"Wednesday," I answered.

"It is Monday. And it is also your twenty-fifth birthday."

"That can't be," I waved off, looking towards Terric as if Stephan were an idiot.

"Focus on me, Adam. Yes, it is November 11th, 2162. Over two years have passed since the ambush happened. I was not there, and I was not nearly as close to Peter as you were, but it is time to move on. The men ridicule you and if this continues they will execute you believing that you are possessed by a demon."

He took my hands in the middle of the table, "You have friends, right here, made of flesh and blood. James and I will always be here for you. The three of us have to stick together to make it to the end. But you need to stop seeing whatever you are seeing."

"I can't," I stuttered. "They are always there."

"You have to focus on the present, while always keeping the goal—the future—in mind. So first, you need to forget the past. Convince yourself that the people you see in your hallucinations are dead. Don't acknowledge them, and do not talk to them," he explained. "Then start connecting with real people, look at the beautiful landscapes, watch the stars... enjoy the present. At last remind yourself of what you are fighting for."

"What am I fighting for?" I asked uncertain of everything.

Stephan reached for my neck and pulled on the eagle necklace, "That is what you are fighting for."

The moment I began to focus on the eagle, the visions around me began to fade one by one. I looked at each for a moment, wishing them farewell for good. At last it was just me and Stephan.

"Thank you, Stephan. Most friends would have abandoned me after such a long time."

"Those that abandon you are not your friends. Listen, I think we should spend more time together so I can keep an eye on you. I talked to Yorick, to whom you have become quite a pain in the butt. He allowed you to be

transferred to the mines where I work. It would be a nice opportunity to spend our last years in the Guard together. After all you are a blacksmith.”

Next to the haunting images of the woods, the memory of my burned brother seemed little of a scare. Maybe he was right. Maybe it would help me to change scenery for once, I thought.

The coming week I joined Stephan’s camp at the mines. Despite our unpleasant first meeting I was pleased to meet another familiar face there: Constantine. He had less than two years left of service and it was evident that the past eight years had beaten the haughtiness out of him.

We were driven deep into the mines to extend the current network. With little to no fresh air, I felt almost compelled to hold my breath despite the heavy labor. Whenever we hit a metal vein, Constantine serving as the team leader called us towards it. Standing in a semi-circle, we slashed out our pickaxes back-to-back until the ore was exhausted or our shift was over.

Once night had come, we sat around the camp fire talking, singing, dancing, and even occasionally drinking. A guard to my right was smoking on a set of rolled leaves. After observing him for a moment, he handed it to me with an inviting nod. I inspected it closely, but before I could take a puff, Stephan ripped it from my grasp.

“You’ve got plenty of hallucinations already,” he said with a chuckle, trying it himself. After a series of coughs he handed it back to the man.

In the past they would camp out for the night most days. But after a few hours, Yorick’s men showed up and made us return to the cottage.



Life for once had taken order again. But as I came to see, the gods never meant for me to live in order. And so that one fateful summer day of 2163 approached. I wish I could tell of the pleasant things that happened in the Guard. But the things I remember—the moments that stand out the most—are the darkest days; the days that shaped my future, and thereby the future of the world.

Like any regular morning, Stephan and I headed out for the mines after a

rather sobering breakfast. The day was brutally hot, so we tried to find shade wherever we could. Just on our short walk I could feel my skin burning. We left our heavy armor at the entrance of the mine to avoid the biting heat that already trenched us in sweat.

Entering the mine, we made our way towards the iron vein we had been working on for the past days.

Without a warning we were ambushed. The savages came storming out of different hallways with knives and axes clenched in fists. They must have hidden during the night past curfew when no one was around.

With bare upper bodies we were left defenseless. Constantine slammed his pickaxe into the side of one of them and ordered us to run. I hesitated. This was what I had trained for. But their sheer numbers made this nothing like practice.

The rest of the camp aside from me and Constantine had departed. “Go already you fool!” he yelled at me, while breaking the jaw of one of his enemies with his bare fists.

A man blocked my way, trying to stab me with a knife. With wild eyes he kept leashing forward, taunting me to make a mistake. Before he could think twice about my response, I hacked my pickaxe into his head and ran as fast as I could.

The second I ran past them, one began to follow me. He was close on my heels as I could hear his every step ring after mine. I ran faster, and so did he. The blood shot through my veins pumping and pulsing every time my feet hit the ground. He drew dangerously close to me.

The soft sound of steel reached my ears. My chaser must have drawn a small blade. I had long left my weapons behind and had nothing to protect myself. With my calves falling weak, I grabbed the next torch from the wall and yanked it at the man following me. His tunic went up in blazing lights, illuminating the dark halls like a small sun.

The madman was on fire but had not given up. He continued to run after me, down the halls, while the flames licked the skin off his flesh.

Finally, I reached a fork and dove to the left. The savage kept running and clashed full speed against a wall. With a loud thud he collapsed.

I gasped for air, rejoicing in the safety I had found. When I lifted my head,

I looked at the remains of an old acquaintance: Winston Smith.

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## Chapter 28

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I HAD RETURNED by mere chance. To my left lay the gate to the Underground Empire: The path to Africa. In awe I walked closer to the wooden barricade in front of the fortified doors. My fingertips brushed over the thick material like it was a valued relic of ancient time.

After all I had suffered... after all I had to go through because I did not leave the last time, I realized that it was time to take my chances. As my fingers slid over the barricade, my mind traveled back to the uncertainty of what could await me beyond. I needed a friend at my side. One that would help me fight whatever last trials were in my way to freedom. After all that Stephan had done for me, I owed him the truth. He deserved the choice to freedom, and he needed to know that I did not just vanish or die in the ambush.

I decided to return with him at nightfall. Unknowing of whether the ambush was over, I sat down in the middle of the hallway reading and memorizing the tunnel number over and over until I knew it like my name.

An hour might have passed until I headed back to the camp outside the

mine. The moment the others saw me emerge from within the mines, they embraced me with wide smiles.

“Listen up everyone!” Constantine called out. His face and shirt were smeared with blood, but none of it seemed to be his own. He singlehandedly killed the invading enemy and made it out alive. “Two guards are confirmed dead, but we are still missing a few men. Swarm out in groups of two or three and go through the channels to see if you find someone along the way. Be back in an hour. Keep your swords drawn and armor on; you never know if one of those beasts got away.”

I grabbed Stephan by the shoulder, “Follow me and don’t let anyone join us. I need to show you something.”

With a confused look he nodded and followed me into the mine. Repeating the hall number over and over in my mind I turned right and left exactly knowing where to go.

“We can’t go here. This is an abandoned tunnel segment, entry is strictly prohibited,” he said pointing towards a red cross at the ceiling of the hall.

Never having seen that sign before, I shrugged my shoulders, “It means that they are hiding something from us. Just trust me this one time.” I strode past the sign leaving Stephan behind. After a moment of waiting he decided to follow.

“We are almost there,” I said and grabbed his arm. Turning left into the dead end tunnel, I had returned to the gate; a gate which I was yet uncertain was either a gate to heaven or hell.

“What is this Adam?” he asked frightened the moment he caught a glimpse of the remains of Winston Smith.

“It is the key to the past,” I said marveling at the throne and the other remainders of an age long gone. “Tell me, when did the Inquisition start?”

“We both know that, 2050, the year the Inquisitor found this valley. It’s in the Final Testament.”

“But what happened before?” I insisted.

“Well there was the Renaissance followed by a dark age. The

Inquisition probably even existed long before that. It has always been around. But why does it matter?" he responded promptly. "And where are we?"

"They always tell us half-truths, real enough to go along with the bits and pieces of the past. The Inquisition is only a little over a hundred years old. You might think it is all that has ever been, but great empires and great liberties have preceded us. Life used to be better than this Stephan. The 'things' we are fighting were and still are human beings like you and me. Some of them might be deformed but that is due to a history that is much longer than I can explain now."

His eyes were glued to the ground. For a moment he thought about what I had just said, "Even if what you are saying is true, there is no way of bringing the past back, Adam."

I grew furious and passionate at once, "Don't you see Stephan? This gate will give us access to this long lost world. A land called Africa is said to be unaffected by the destruction of the past hundred years. If we can escape there, maybe we can finally live in harmony and lay our swords to rest."

"I have only two years left to serve Adam. Peace will come soon enough for us," he responded with similar passion, "We have fought so long and survived every day of the journey. Both of us have been entangled in countless fights, yet we persisted."

"That is exactly what Peter said the night before he died. We assume ourselves safe to the point where we think we conquered death, yet on the day we believe we won we stare him right in the eye. This is our chance to escape this inevitable fate, Stephan. This is our chance to make a difference. Once we find that there is an alternative, we can return and take our people with us. There will be no more Inquisition, there will be no more Grey Guard, there will be no more killing. Are you ready to pass an opportunity like this when it lies at the tips of our fingers?"

He breathed deeply, looking around the room trying to sort his



thoughts. Biting his lip he said half angered yet half relieved, "Alright, I am in."

After all I would not take my journey alone. For the first time since the death of my friends I smiled. I was ready. Walking over to the gate I was about to take a step into my dreams.

"Hold up Adam," Stephan said. "We can't just leave now. What about James, he will go mad if he thinks all four of his friends have perished. You out of all know how it feels."

"James will be alright, he is living a safe life on the farms. The savages rarely get there," I said unconcerned after having it thought through many times. "We can't involve him. You know as well as I do that he would be too scared of punishments to come with us."

"We can tell him at least," Stephan suggested.

"We shouldn't. He will be the first to be interrogated by Yorick upon our disappearance. The less he knows, the safer he is." I grabbed Stephan by the shoulders and stared him straight in the eyes, "Stephan, no one can know of this, do you understand me?"

He nodded, "Alright, alright. But at the very least we need to prepare. We might be up for a week long journey, if not longer. There will be no going back. I still have some things in the cottage, and we need to find a way to get our hands on lots of food that won't spoil."

Once again my dream was delayed. "You are right. But where can we get that much food from. We can eat less and bag the rest."

"People will get suspicious if we suddenly eat less. More importantly we need the little we get to sustain our bodies. You won't be able to finish a day of mine work without a full meal."

"We could buy food with all the earnings we have made over the last eight years," I suggested.

"Who buys that much food? And for what? I'm sure they will ask questions."

"Then we will have to steal it. Don't you still work in the kitchen at times?"

“Yes, Tuesday and Thursday nights. But it won’t be easy.”

“I have faith in you,” I reassured him. “We will have to wait a few days then. Tuesday night I will wait inside the mines before the guards arrive to call for curfew. The moment your shift is over you need to run here. The kitchen closes a good half an hour before curfew...,”

“And then I have cleaning duty for another ten minutes or so,” he said.

“You have twenty minutes for a thirty minute walk, so you need to be in form that day, both body and mind.” I put my hand on his shoulder, “Don’t fail this one. It must be done right, or we will lose everything.”

“I got it,” he said trying to level down the pressure I put on him. “Let’s go back before they come searching for us.”

The plan was set. In four days we would leave, once and for all.

The moment we exited the restricted tunnels, Constantine walked into us, “Are you two alright? You look troubled. Have you found any of the others? We are still one man short.”

We shook our heads, frightened that he might have followed us all along.

“Where are you coming from anyway?” he asked.

I looked at Stephan who immediately took charge, “We checked route one, since two is restricted. We found nothing.”

He looked at us for an extended moment, testing our sincerity, “Good work. I checked route three, we are done here.”

That night we sat around the campfire rather quietly. Nobody danced, nobody sung, and nobody said more than was necessary. We all were shaken by the day’s events. When Yorick’s men arrived, most were relieved to go back to the cottage.

Constantine rose to talk to them. Getting up to leave, I slowed to listen. “I have something important to tell Master Yorick. It is urgent,” he said in a fierce whisper.

The days went by swiftly in my growing anticipation for my final escape. After my shift on that tuesday, I headed to the cottage and stowed blankets and the few belongings I owned underneath my armor.

I sat around the campfire and went over my plans. Over and over I visualized us chasing through the tunnels, lifting the barricades of the gate, and finally exiting into what had become my life's enigma.

As curfew drew closer, I inched my way to the tunnel entrance. For half an hour I leaned against the tunnel wall, until slipping inside when no one was watching.

I raced to the next intersection without looking back. My heart was pounding like the hooves of a running horse. Even after I ducked into safety, my breath was still short. I did not dare look around the corner for many minutes, fearing one of them to catch sight of me. After a while, I checked the hallway for Stephan but there was no sign of him.

Time went by slowly as I waited with my back leaned against the wall. With no clock tower nearby, I grew uneasy. In my heart I prayed that everything went over safely. I could not stop the terrifying thought of him getting caught from entering my mind. When I heard Yorick's men approach, I rose to my feet, ready to leave for the camp. Maybe he got caught; maybe he simply could not make the run in time.

I turned to leave the hallway as Stephan ran into the mine with a large bag in his hand. Drowned in exhaustion, he lifted it, showing that he got what we needed. I led the way and chased down the tunnels, feeling as if I could run at the speed of light.

People always described the moment of death like seeing light at the end of the tunnel. I was running into that light only to be born again. We entered the restricted area and strode into the final hall leading to the room of Winston Smith, the last of the Gate Watchers.

Jumping for joy I turned around and threw myself at Stephan, almost pressing the air out of him in my happiness. "We made it!" I said gasping for air. "We finally made it. Let's lift that barricade and leave."

Before he could respond, a loud explosion shook my entire body.

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## Chapter 29

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FRIGHTENED TO THE marrow of my bones I ran to the entrance of the hall. All torches had been extinguished leaving nothing but an undefined darkness. Down the hall I could hear footsteps.

“They found us Stephan!” I cried returning to the room, “We need to leave, now!”

Stephan seemed hesitant, as if he was waiting for what was about to come. “They will catch up to us, or spike our backs with arrows,” he drew his sword. “Let us make a stand, together.”

Carefully, I leaned around the corner and saw a dark outline approaching through the hallway.

“Who is there?” a voice yelled.

“You shouldn’t have followed us,” I responded. “Leave now!”

“I would, if I could. But we are locked in. Something or someone caused the tunnel to collapse.” Out of the dark stepped Constantine with his sword drawn. “What is this place,” he asked with a puzzled face. “I knew you two were up to something. The day I ran into you at the restricted area I found our missing man dead in the route you claimed to have checked.”

Stephan looked at me. I sensed that he did not trust Constantine. Before I could say anything he slashed his blade at our intruder. Without effort, Constantine stepped aside avoiding the blow, letting Stephan charge past him. With a powerful kick in the back, he put Stephan to the ground.

“Stop!” I ordered them, “I will not watch one more person dying. Put your swords away or I will kill you both.”

Constantine put his sword away and reached out his hand to help Stephan back to his feet, “Tell me, what is this room, and why are you here?”

I hesitated for a moment before I shared my secret. “Take a seat,” I said at last, “this will take a while.” The more I told Constantine, the more suspicious he grew. By the time I finished telling him about everything, from 2049 up until my newest discoveries with Janari, he sat there baffled, with his jaw slightly dropped. To him it seemed to mean a lot more than it did to Stephan, who never showed the excitement I had hoped for.

“There is the catch,” Constantine finally said. “We know too much. The Inquisitor must have paid a nice sum for your head to whoever made the tunnel collapse.”

“But he couldn’t know,” I said, “I did not tell anyone.”

Constantine looked towards Stephan, who tensed under his gaze.

“Do you see what he is doing?” Stephan said furiously. “He is trying to turn us against another. If we start pointing fingers and asking questions, then tell me: why are you here? Bumping into us the second the tunnel collapses?”

“If I wanted to kill you I would have stayed at the other end of the tunnel before I made it collapse. I am your camp leader, and I was curious why you two sneaked back inside the mountain.”

“The tunnel is blocked,” I noted once the realization struck me. “We would not be able to return, even if we were to find Africa. They want the truth to die with us.”

Constantine observed Winston’s skeleton for a moment, “Africa sounds wonderful, it really does. But what is it worth without the ones we

love? Leaving would mean leaving our families and friends behind. Wasn't a girl the reason you did not give me that necklace the day we met? What about her? Adam we can achieve far greater things if we share our knowledge with the other guards. We can finally change the city and this valley into something we feel comfortable calling home. Africa might be free soil, but soil is all it really is."

Stephan rose and walked up close to me, whispering in my ear, "Don't listen to him. He is trying to prevent us from leaving, Adam. I cannot say it any clearer: We must kill him."

I ignored him. "How would you tell the guards? Did you not just warn me that I might have told one too many?"

"I am not talking about telling a few of your friends. I am talking about revealing the truth to the entire Guard all at once. If we make it back during the night, we might surprise them, thinking that they effectively locked us in," Constantine suggested. "All we have to do is make enough noise in the cottage, to wake the sleeping guards and tell them what you just told me."

"We are locked in. How will we get back?" I asked still uncertain of whether he had lost all his reason.

"Grab a torch and give me a hand," he responded briskly leaving for the tunnel. We lit up the torches that had been extinguished by the massive explosion. Once the flickering lights illuminated the hall, we saw what we were up against. A large portion of the ceiling was broken off, forming a steep wall of boulders.

"It will take a while," he said. "Some of those rocks are heavier than all three of us combined. We will need to dig around them. Let's get to it."

We started with the smallest rocks and tossed them behind us, since there was no other place to put them. At first I was optimistic. Within an hour we had made enormous progress, yet with every minute we grew more tired and the stones heavier.

It must have been the middle of the night when Constantine pulled out a rock that caused a group of other stones to collapse onto us. There was no sign of light, yet we almost died in the process.

“We won’t get through tonight,” he said, “let’s call it a day and rest a little. If we make it out, we want to make sure that we come out at night.”

Welcoming the rest I returned to the room. With my back against the wall and my eyes on the gate I drifted off. Even when I dreamt the gate was still there. Constantine’s reason had appealed to me, but I still wanted to see what lay behind that door, and an even bigger part of me wanted to proceed with my original plan and find Africa, the place of mystery and answers.

I awoke to a gurgling sound. My eyes flew open to see where the noise came from. Stephan was kneeling over Constantine, his fingers around the camp leader’s neck. With a hand-sized knife he cut his throat, drowning the choking in silence.

Woken by terror I pressed my back against the wall, trying to escape the image I had just seen. The blood began to spread over the entire floor as Stephan rose with satisfaction.

“Why did you kill him?” I asked in contempt clawing a knife behind my back.

“Because he was poisoning your mind Adam. He is the one that set you up. It all makes sense! Think about it,” Stephan said passionately, “he still had a score to settle with you since the day you met. Even more conveniently, he is the one in control of the mines and could easily have caused the collapse. Remember the day the savages attacked the mines? He pretended to have run into us, and shortly after requested a meeting with Yorick. You yourself told me that. Now let’s get back to sleep and forget about the stones. We must leave through the gate tomorrow.”

Maybe he was right. Maybe Constantine betrayed us. Something must have gone wrong in his plan, so he used us to help him free the way to the outside. Once we cleared the tunnel he may have killed us. Despite my repulsion by murder, I thanked Stephan and laid back down. Nevertheless it was hard to sleep because my eyes stayed focused on Stephan. Every few seconds I awoke to check he did not move.



The next time I awoke I was ready to leave. The gruesome look of Constantine's body frightened me. Every dead person reminded me of Peter and the many friends I had lost.

With a growling stomach I grabbed the bag Stephan had stolen and untied the knot. Ecstatically I reached inside and took the first thing my hands could find.

It was a stone. Confused my fingers kept searching the bag, only to find more rocks and blankets. I shoved them to the side in the hope to find something edible, until in my rage I turned the bag upside down only to watch a pile of stones fall onto the ground.

"Stephan! Wake up! Where is the food?" I yelled.

"You shouldn't have touched that bag," he whispered from behind me. I spun around. He stood in front of me with his blade drawn.

"What are you doing?" I asked grabbing for my sword, only to find an empty sheath.

"I am sorry, Adam," he said and rammed his sword into me. Piercing me at the side, the sword went through my body. He shoved it deeper until his face was inches from mine.

The pain flushed all air out of my lungs. A burning sensation rose within me. Whether my body or heart hurt more, I could not tell. I stared at him questioningly, "Why?"

"It does not matter," he said with a lump in his throat.

"Why!" I yelled at him with the little voice I had left.

"Because I owed it to Yorick," he said bitterly, "that day during my first year, the day we called the disaster in the forest, you never found out what really happened to me. Me and the other recruits were ambushed and entrapped by the savages. I was scared for my life Adam. I did not know what to do. Me and a friend escaped and were being chased down by one of those monsters. It had almost caught up to us, and I needed to distract it. It was do or die. So I took the only choice that came to my mind. I ran my blade through my friend so that the savage could have him while I escaped." He paused. There was a bitter sparkle in his eyes, filled with

regret and helplessness. “That moment, Yorick arrived on horseback. He ordered me to keep running as if nothing had happened. Yet later that night, he told me that what I did was murder and punishable by death, followed by an afterlife in hell. He promised me to keep quiet if I did him a favor whenever he asked for it.”

“So you would kill your best friend and an innocent man to redeem another act of murder,” I asked with tears in my eyes.

“Constantine was in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was collateral. Yorick gave me far more than just keeping me out of prison,” he said self-righteously.

“Money, riches? Is that what you wanted?” I yelled and spit at him.

He shook his head with a painful chuckle as the first tears started to roll down his cheeks, “No Adam, not money. He gave me absolution. He promised to free me from all my sins so that I may go to heaven.”

Stephan began to shake. He withdrew the blade from my body, letting it fall to the ground as he stepped back.

In pain I dropped down to the floor, covering my wound with my hands.

Stephan grabbed a dagger from his belt and whispered to me with a bittersweet smile, “I am free now.” Without a second thought he rammed the iron through his heart.

When he collapsed to the floor my senses began to fade. I grew weaker and weaker due to the wound and the shock, until at last I lost consciousness.

Cold sweat sat in my neck and on my forehead as my vision slowly returned. The blood had clogged and dried. I would not die today, I thought, but if I could not find a way out of this cave I would die tomorrow. Crawling towards the wall of stones, I screamed for help. When no one answered, I started punching against the rocks furiously. Crying, screaming,

hoping, it all did not help. It was down to me and my actions. Nothing else could get me out of this prison.

I forced myself up. Under pain I made it back to the room, step by step. There was no way back to my old life, and dying was never an option. So I was left with one choice.

I stepped closer to the barricade and lifted it with all my power. Long ago, the doctor said that my shoulder had healed from Janari's arrow, but now more than ever ate the permanent damage my strength away.

With every inch, my side burned harsher. Blood began to trickle from the wound again. When I lifted the large barricade about a foot into the air, a small key dropped to the ground. With a violent scream I pushed the barricade a few more feet up and tossed it to the side.

Exhausted, I bowed down and picked up the key. It was a small key with the sign of the Gate Watchers engraved in its top.

The chest. I turned around and found the little box at the side of Winston's skeleton. I inserted the key into the iron lock and turned it. Carefully I opened the top and found two small round devices. A little note was pinned to the inside of the chest.

To whoever finds this *note*,

You may take everything you find when I am dead. In my pocket lies a book detailing my life and the events that led up to the world you are living in now. Take everything, but leave me the picture of my wife and daughter. That is my only wish. Find the truth and spread it, if you think it wise.

Do not touch the hand grenades, for when you pull the metal pin, an explosion will take you straight to hell. If you choose to use them, be weary, keep distance and cover your ears.

I wish you the best,

Winston Smith, 2095

I inspected the objects closely. Remembering the unspoken promise, my hand reached into my pocket and pulled out the picture of his wife and daughter. Lifting his fingers I plugged it right back to where I had first found it. Once again he rested against the wall looking into the faces of his loved ones.

“Thank you Winston,” I said, “for everything.”

I attached the two ‘hand grenades’ to my belt and strode towards the gate. Carefully I put my hand on the knob that would open it to the Underground Empire. I twisted.

Images flashed before my eyes. *Katrina, the kiss, an eagle.* I paused. *Father, mother, Eric.* I twisted the knob further. *The square, my home, the Mount.* I had turned it to the full extend. “*Africa sounds wonderful, it really does. But what is it worth without the ones we love? Leaving would mean leaving our families and friends behind.*” I stopped.

I wanted to go, but I could not leave it all behind. I could not abandon them. My hand was glued to the knob as my inner spirits fought for a decision.

I let go.

I dragged myself towards the hall. Resolute I took the hand grenades from my belt, pulled the pins and threw them against the wall of stones. With covered ears I ran back inside the room.

An explosion more powerful than the loudest thunder broke out and echoed through the endless halls. Pieces of rock flew all across the tunnel like arrows. Cowered into a ball I felt how dust and small stones began to fall from the ceiling. When it was quiet I approached the corridor.

It was clear.

I ran into freedom, as fast as my wounds allowed. I would return to Katrina and my family after all. The entrance of the mine was close. Liberty was near.

“I knew I could not trust that fool Stephan,” said Yorick entering the

mine with a large sword clenched in his palm. “Why don’t you just mind your own business Blacksmith? Life could be so easy if you would just follow and listen for once, instead of always swimming against the stream.”

“I don’t want to fight you Yorick,” I said. “Too many men have died already.”

“And we both know I will not be the man to die in this fight,” he responded with a grin.

“Why do you go to all these lengths to kill me?”

“Because you are a threat,” he bristled with anger. “Why do you think I stayed in the Guard past service? I was a poor industrial born with no future. If I had returned, I would have looked forward to being my older brother’s second assistant. I would not just have been unsuccessful, but with nothing to inherit no pretty girl in this world would have married me.” He stepped closer to me, “But here I had opportunity. I could become the most powerful man next to the Inquisitor. So I stayed. And after fighting and surviving for years, when I was so close to being on top, you were about to end the Guard by making peace with these things. With no enemy there is no Guard, Adam! You were so close to ripping apart all I had built... because of you and your ideals. But at last you helped me remove the final obstacle: Terric.” He turned the blade in his hands, “I can’t risk having you around anymore. And given all that you know, the Inquisitor will be delighted that I took care of you.” With a leap he aimed for me.

I drew my sword and blocked his blow. All I could do was defend myself. Once or twice I had the chance to strike out at him, but only hit his blade. I was too weak already, while his speed outmatched mine in any state of health.

With a full body turn he slammed his blade against mine, forcing me to lose grip. He laughed like I was a joke to him... ready to rejoice in my demise.

He extended his arm behind his shoulder. His glistening eyes stared down at me, fueled by my fear. With no more patience, my executioner let his blade race down upon me. There was no time to dodge. Like a scythe

cuts corn, his blade went right through my left leg, severing it below the knee.

A pain indescribable to most men shot through my body. I wanted to vomit, or even die rather than experiencing this torment. I cried out, seeing my body fall apart. I screamed at him, but that was all I could do. Losing my leg was only the beginning. He stepped closer to my bleeding body, ready to give me the final blow.

The sun began to rise at the end of the tunnel. I finally saw the light. When I was ready to embrace it, a silhouette stepped in between it and me.

A loud shot resounded through the hall. Drained of life, my tormentor fell to the ground.



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## The Inquisitor

*Darkness reveals truths that no sun can bring to  
light,  
For inside the heart of man resides a beast,  
Only tamed by the shackles of the day.*





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## Chapter 30

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“HE MOVED HIS fingers,” a faint voice said. My senses were numb as if I were drowning. First I regained my hearing, and was overwhelmed by the countless voices around me. Everything went from repressed to deafening, as whispers turned into hysterical yelling.

Slowly visuals returned. Everything was blurry and fast. I could not make out faces, nor could I tell where I was. A tingling feeling rushed all over my body from the toes of my right foot up to my face. The image of my cut off leg flashed before my eyes. I wanted to reach for it and see what happened, but could not move.

As my sight and hearing became clearer, I recognized some of the faces around me. To my right sat Cecilia, older and more mature than I had remembered her, yet peaking in her beauty. At the foot of my bed stood Anthony, the Inquisitor’s chief servant whose hair showed the first signs of greying.

I was in the Inquisitor’s mansion. To my left sat a doctor, inspecting my leg closely; my left leg. With a burning sensation I sat up, feeling the



bandages rub over the wound Stephan had given me. Incredulously I touched the reattached part, only to find that I had lost most feeling in it.

“The muscles have been severed below the knee,” the doctor explained methodically. “You will be able to move the leg as a whole with limited movement in your lower leg. I was able to reconnect some arteries and nerves, but chances are you won’t have any feeling in your foot. A cane will be necessary to walk.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I said wholeheartedly. No feeling and a cane was a price I was willing to pay for being alive. In that moment, confusion struck me, “How did I get here? When will I have to return to the Guard?”

Cecilia took my hand with her warm fingers, “You will not have to return. You have been honorably discharged from the Guard. Here is a letter from the Commander of the Guard addressed to you.”

She handed me a letter with a red seal in its center, “Did Master Yorick send me this?”

“Oh you did not know?” she said putting on a sad, compassionate tone. “Commander Yorick died in the ambush. You two must have been close.”

“What ambush?”

“Did you lose your memory too? You and the Commander were out in the mines when you were attacked by those monsters. You bravely fought them, but lost your leg in the process. Yorick unfortunately did not survive an arrow he took to the head. It supposedly went right through his brains. Commander Terric found you bleeding out in the mines, and brought you to the city immediately, signing your release.”

“Terric is alive?” I asked in disbelief.

“Why, yes of course! He is fit and as handsome as always. He wanted to see you, but had to return to the outside to take command. Hence he left you the letter.”

I broke the seal and opened it.

*Dear Adam,*

*Much has happened since we departed in the prison cell. You must have many questions, and we shall address them when the time comes. For now find the answers you seek in the information I lay before you.*

*When I was taken from the prison cell, Yorick's men took me to the woods with the intention to execute me. I managed to outwit them, and escaped. The following years I lived with some of the villagers that accepted me into their rows as an outcast. Every now and then I met with trusted men that served at the border area to relay new information on Yorick's moves, and how you were. When I heard the explosion I knew you were in trouble. Only weapons of the Gate Watchers could create such destruction. At the mountain side I retrieved a gun, another weapon of the Gate Watchers I had long ago hidden in a box in a crevice between the mines. I stepped in just before Yorick could give you the death blow.*

*I shot him, and retrieved your unconscious body. Every few years, a Commander has the power to grant an honorable discharge to a member of the Guard. I gave you this freedom, and asked for the best help immediately. I knew that the doctor in the settlement could not have helped you, and any more time wasted would have risked you losing your leg permanently. It was the least I could do for you. I wish you the best Adam. Enjoy the freedom you always sought, but remain true to yourself.*

*Once you finish reading this letter, you must destroy it. The truth may never reach surface. For both our safety. I told the guards and the city herald that you were out with Stephan and Constantine to track down a pack of the monsters. After a heroic battle you were the only one to survive. After you and the others had been declared dead, Yorick took the job a few days later in his own hands. He ran into you, when a part of the cave exploded, releasing another pack of demons. Yorick died by a magical arrow that pierced his head, and you fought bravely but lost your leg in the process.*

*I wish you a safe recovery. In the meantime, I will continue to strive for peace with the villagers, and ensure a return of stability in the Guard.*

*Farewell,*

*Master Terric*

All the information soaked into my brain. I re-read the letter to see if I had missed anything. Suddenly something caught my eye, “I was declared dead?”

Cecilia looked uncomfortable, “Yes, about three days ago.”

“How long have I been here?”

“You came in last night. It’s afternoon now.”

“But they did not have my body, how could they declare me dead? And under what reasoning?”

“Adam I was shocked when I heard the news too. I locked myself in my room and would not leave it, because I was crying all day long. They said you had died in a mine explosion, similar to the one your brother died in.”

My mind raced to my family, “How did my parents take the shock?”

“They did not take it well,” she said quietly, looking at Anthony with unease in her eyes.

“Are they alright?” I asked. “When can I see them.”

Anthony spoke up for the first time, “I am sorry to tell you, Adam, but an hour after you had been declared dead a neighbor wanting to give his condolences found them hanging in the workshop. They took their lives, thinking they had lost their last child.”

I yanked back the blanket and tried to get up. “No! That’s impossible,” I screamed. They could not be dead. Not now that I had returned. I wanted to stand up but the doctor held me down. Violently I hit around myself, scratching Cecilia in the face by accident. Her cheek began to bleed and she let me go.

“Hold him down Anthony,” ordered the doctor, pulling a syringe from his bag. Anthony put his forearms on my chest, pressing me down to the bed. The doctor jammed the needle into my leg and gave me the injection. My senses faded again, the way they first came just a few minutes before, and I returned to the darkness of my subconscious.

My head buzzed. Slowly I pulled myself up right, seeing no one in the room but Cecilia, who wore a red line on her cheek where I had hit her. “I am sorry for that,” I said. “I did not mean to hurt you.”

“It is okay,” she responded softly, “after all that you went through...”

One of the side doors flew wide open, drawing my attention away from Cecilia. “Adam!” an all too familiar voice called.

The girl I had so often dreamed about was a grown woman. Her auburn hair fell long and elegant down her right side, gently brushing her cheek and touching her chest. Her face had taken more definition as her jawline was finer and her cheeks were slightly blushed. She was beautiful. More beautiful than anyone I had ever seen. And even though she looked like a princess, she was still the same carpenter girl I fell in love with years ago.

As I was consumed by Katrina’s entrance, Cecilia left the room unnoticed.

With her soft palms she held my face, like a jewel she had long lost. Her eyes brightened up even more the second she noticed the eagle that still hung around my neck.

“I promised you I would,” I began to say before she could comment on my return.

She cut me off with a kiss. It was that kiss I had longed for these past years. So slow, so passionate, so long anticipated. A warm feeling spread through my chest and for the first time in years I felt true happiness. Certainly I had smiled from time to time, but now I knew that what I felt

was real and lasting. The worry that some unexpected conflict could rip her from my arms vanished. She was mine, and I was hers.

Katrina's nose gently brushed against mine as her hazel eyes focused on me. I felt as if I could gaze into her soul, with every moment realizing that my journey had reached its end. At last I was holding her, and I knew I would not let her go.

Standing up she reached for my hand, "Let's go, Eric is preparing dinner for us. The doctor said that you are allowed to go home today."

With her help, I slowly pushed myself to the edge of the bed. She handed me a slim dark cane made of durable wood that would support my left leg from now on. I stood up feeling a burning pain shoot into my left knee the moment the foot reached the ground. Katrina held me at the waist while I took my first steps. When I managed to walk alone, she took my right hand and led me out of the room.

Cecilia quickly walked off when the door opened. It seemed as if she had stayed at my side since the moment I was brought into the mansion.

"Cecilia, wait," I called after her.

She promptly turned around and looked at me shortly. When her eyes dropped to the floor I could sense that the view of me and Katrina pained her. "Thank you," I said gratefully.

She curtsied and smiled almost like a servant, before vanishing behind a door.

Anthony showed us the way out and left us at the door to the Merchant District, "It is good to have you back Adam," he said. "The Inquisitor requested to hold a commendation ceremony in the square in three days, to congratulate you on your honorable discharge and hand you the brooch of excellence, for your service to the city."

Thanking him, we departed. The odor of fresh baked bread filled my nose the second we walked down the terracotta boulevard. My heart pounded faster with all the life that surrounded me. Merchant boys loaded wagons to bring more goods to their fathers on the square. A group of girls

sat on the ground in a circle and sang a popular rhyme. All the while I held in my arms the girl of my dreams.

“Greetings Mr. Blacksmith, glad to see you back in town,” an old merchant said. He bowed halfway, “I applaud and congratulate you on your stellar contributions to the Guard. Your early return has been quite the topic of conversation to say the least.”

I looked at him puzzled. Something about his face looked familiar, but after eight years in the Guard I could not recall who he was.

“You don’t remember me, do you?” he said. “You used to sell me your small wooden sculptures. No one had ever been as skilled as you when it came to detail in woodwork.”

I suddenly recalled where I had seen the face before, “You must be James’ father, isn’t that right?” I asked.

“Yes, indeed, do you know him?”

“He was one of my closest friends in the Guard. The last living one to be exact,” I said. “He is a brilliant young man. He knows how to stay alive and play by the rules.”

The father lit up and smiled broadly. His eyes grew shiny, “Thank you Adam. It gives me strength to hear that my boy is well and safe.” The merchant packed his bag and was ready to go back into the house, “I don’t want to hold you off any longer. I am sure you two have a lot of catching up to do.”

“James will be home with you soon, I know it,” I said.

We continued on our walk down to the gate of the Merchant District, listening to the tune the little girls sang with their infantile joyful voices.

*“The world it died,  
Divide by pride,  
Reborn beneath God’s hand.  
The valley he found,*

*And we him crowned,  
To lead the promised land.*

*Come ‘round, come ‘round,  
Be bound by the sound  
Come ‘round, come ‘round...”*

The clock tower above the Mount struck seven, absorbing the voices in its long resonating chimes.

Katrina held my hand tight. It felt as if I had never left. Once inside the Craftsman District, more and more men and women recognized and greeted me. Time had changed us all; on the outside at least. Most had aged, but personalities seemed untouched. A strange feeling arose in me whenever I encountered new faces. For every person that recognized me, I found a handful of citizens I had never seen before. Some of those were young men and women that had been small children when I had left; others were older than me and had finished their service during my absence. From far I caught sight of Jacob, my former camp leader in the woods that had worked with Yorick to imprison me. He was lingering on the square in between the stalls. The moment he noticed me, his eyes were locked upon me, half surprised and half resentful. I only looked away for a second, but the next he was gone.

The carpentry had not changed aside from a few added details. Captured by nostalgia, my hands wandered over the artsy walls Eric and me had redone years ago, while Katrina knocked on the door for her father to open up. Eric immediately threw open the door looking like the day I had left with his short grey hair. He glowed of happiness and welcomed us inside the house, holding me by the shoulder like a proud father.

“I’ve missed you boy,” he said and invited me to sit down. “I’ve made

a little investment and bought some fine fresh lamb meat. I remember how much you loved the lamb cutlets at the Inquisitor's feast."

"You shouldn't have," I said. "I haven't exactly been spoiled with food the last years. Anything would have been perfect. Just being with you two right now, after all that has happened, makes any dinner the best of my life."

"You've always been humble. What can I get you to drink?" he asked.

I wanted to get up to fetch the drink myself, but immediately fell back down in pain after putting too much weight on my left leg.

"Be careful," Eric said pointing at my leg, "The days of being the man for everything are over, you need to allow yourself to settle and accept other people's help. Anyhow, I think a glass of wine is just right for this occasion."

He poured an inch of red liquid from a dark bottle into my glass and served himself some. Katrina set a bowl of steaming skinned potatoes next to the lamb cutlets and sat down at my side. Eric raised his glass, "To you, Adam. Welcome back to the family."

The bittersweet drink went down my throat in sips and warmed me from the inside. I bit into a juicy cutlet, inhaling the delicious smell of roasted meat. Perfectly salted and spiced, it made my mouth water for more the moment I had finished.

Eric refilled my glass, "Before I ask you about anything you don't want to talk about, know that I have been where you have been. If you don't want to talk about what happened, don't. But if you feel comfortable, maybe you can share with us some of your experiences."

I put down my silverware and pushed the finished plate to the side. Leaning back in my chair, I looked into the air considering my answer, "Sooner or later I will have the urge to tell someone what happened. Out of all the people, I trust you two the most, so I will tell you everything. My years in the Guard have been vastly different from what most men experienced." I paused taking another sip from my wine. "I've worked with the first commander, learned about our lost past, befriended the enemy,



nearly brought peace, spent a year in prison, gone mad for two years after losing my friends, worked in the woods and the mines, and nearly escaped the valley, only to lose my leg to the new commander that wanted me dead all along. The things you have heard and will hear about how I came to reenter the city are neither the truth nor remotely close to what really happened. I will tell you about everything, but you may never tell a soul.”

They listened closely, interrupting not once as I recounted the many events that had taken place over the past eight years. Their eyes grew wider as I told them about Winston Smith’s diary. Expressions changed from disbelief, to excitement, to compassion. Only then did I realize how much I really had experienced.

As I concluded at the events in the mine few nights ago, Eric asked me slightly concerned, “What will you do with this knowledge? If played well it could topple the Inquisition.”

“I have thought a lot about that,” I said and took Katrina’s hand, “but right now it is of no importance to me. There is no need for fighting the Inquisition. I have all that I want, and for the first time I am happy right where I am.”

His smile intermingled with a frown, “While I believe that there is a need of your knowledge for the greater good, I am happy for you. You deserve a break after all this time.” He rose from his seat and removed the dishes from the table while we continued with our talk. Once the table had been cleaned he walked to the entrance of the house and retrieved his coat, “It’s a little past 9 o’clock. I am heading out for a stroll and leave you two alone. I’ll be back at curfew.”

We nodded, saying goodbye, while our eyes were glued on another.

The moment the door fell shut Katrina and I shot forward in our seats and kissed, consumed by longing passion. She held my face tight in between her hands, all the while her fingers gently brushed over my skin. With my right arm I pulled her body closer upon mine, increasing the heat that radiated from each of us. My heart pounded faster. I played and pulled on her hair, whereupon she drew closer and sat upon my lap facing me.

With cane in one hand and her in the other I pushed myself up and laid her on the table. After a few kisses, she rose and took me to her room.

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## Chapter 31

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NOON HAD COME by the time I awoke. Katrina was still at my side, peacefully sleeping with her head pressed against my chest. For a while I watched her sleep, cherishing every second. I had seen what life could be like, witnessed the darkest depths, to never again take something for granted. Gently I brushed my fingers over her forehead, waking her softly.

At first she wanted to grumble at Eric for waking her, but smiled the moment she realized it was me. “Good morning handsome,” she said sitting up.

“Did you sleep well?” I asked.

“Better than I ever have,” she responded and took my hand. We reflected upon the moment silently, while playing with another’s fingers. She looked at me at last, “I am glad I waited for you,” she said. “So much has happened, but we are still the same. Life has never really changed.”

Despite my rather overwhelming past years, I saw what she meant, “I guess you are right.” In the city, the routines never changed. Church and God were always part of one’s day, and work was the same from the moment you were born with a last name signifying your craft till the day

you died. “If you go back to work today, maybe I can come with you. There are many people I need to see and catch up with.”

After breakfast we headed out to get wood for the workshop. Like always we brought a basket of food with us to provide something to eat to any hungry children crossing our way.

The lumber mill was still the same old ruin with its top slightly tilted, as if it were to collapse any second. We knocked on the door, and out came the old man that had answered the door every time. Only this time I knew him and his family better than ever before.

“What ya need today?” he asked as he let us in, while one of his younger sons fetched some samples. He seemed to be sixteen, maybe seventeen. Even if I had not known that he was Nigel’s brother, I would have recognized him by his face in an instant.

“Thank you Todd,” I said as he handed the samples to me.

Puzzled he looked at me, “Do I know ya?”

“I’m sorry, I’ve heard a lot about you; you all to be exact,” I said. “I happened to be close friends with Nigel during the Guard.”

The moment I dropped his name, everyone turned silent and looked to the floor. A woman in the back of the room started sobbing. She appeared a few years younger than me. When I looked closer I saw a little boy holding her knee. His curly mane and mischievous look were unmistakable. He was Nigel’s son; a son he had never known about.

The air grew tense. I did not know what to say, so I kept it short, “He loved you all very much. Family was the most important thing to him.” My words only saddened the family even further. I grabbed into the basket and put a loaf of bread on a table, “I am sorry for bringing him up. Go ahead and have a good meal tonight. Remember him well.”

Once the wood was back in the workshop, we decided to pay Robert a visit

in the smelter. A little boy with deep blue eyes opened the door, welcoming us to a cloud of steam and heat.

“Can we see your father?” Katrina asked in a high pitched voice, adoring the little boy.

He nodded and ran off. “Papa,” he repeatedly yelled, “Papa!”

The noise inside the house ceased. “What is it Seth?” Robert asked.

“Katrina and a man with a stick are here,” he answered.

Before we could count to ten Robert stood in the door, cleaning his blackened hands with a towel. “That can’t be,” he said looking at me with a wide grin. “You’ve become a real man these past years. Look at that beard. Boy, you have changed since you left.” He looked me up and down, stopping at my leg, “I am sorry about what happened. But it might have saved your life. Some die just months before finishing service, you know.”

“I’ll live with it. All that matters is that I am here now. Back home,” I said. “Talking about growing up and changing, are you Seth?” I asked the boy.

Hiding behind his father’s leg he nodded, mistrusting me like a stranger.

“I’ve held you in my arms the day you were born. You weren’t even half the size you are now. I can’t believe that all this happened while I was gone.”

One of Robert’s sons called from inside for their father. “Well,” he said, “I have to go back inside, they need me. We should talk with a little more time this week.” As he turned away to leave he looked at Katrina, “Don’t forget about tonight, I am counting on you.”

After he vanished into the smelter, Seth stayed in the doorframe for a moment observing us.

“What can’t you forget” I asked suspiciously.

“Oh nothing, he just needs my help with something.”

“Don’t tell me you have been continuing the break-ins.”

“Of course we have,” Katrina said, “food does not pay for itself. Robert and many others need the money.”

“Please stop it; I don’t want to risk our safety anymore. I have earned some money over the years in the Guard. You can have it all, just don’t leave.”

“There is no risk. I have been doing this for over ten years now. I am going tonight, and will be right back with you before you know it. You know that there has to be someone to look after the poor.”

“I just have a bad feeling about tonight. I mean, I just got here,” I said becoming more flustered by the surprise.

“Nothing will happen,” she said. “Let’s go to the square and enjoy our time instead of arguing about tonight.”

I gave up the fight and went with her down to the square. The market was bustling and crowded with people and stands. Merchants were making deals with customers; Artists danced or sang songs for a few coins; kids ran through the crowds playing catch.

“Look,” Katrina said and drew me to a hat stand. She grabbed a large round pink hat and put it on. Posing like she were the wife of an important merchant she walked around the stand with her chin up high, cheeks sucked in, and eyebrows raised. I took a three cornered hat, and played along. For a while we role-played and lived in the shoes of a rich powerful couple. Strangers that did not know or recognize us eagerly listened to our made up stories.

After a while when our audience blocked the stand, the merchant chased us away. The afternoon passed aimlessly like that. Together we relived the memories of our past and entertained ourselves just like we did before I had left.

It was almost six when Katrina left me to finish up some work. Alone I continued my stroll across the square until I spotted Stephan’s parents. To my left stood the mason and his wife talking to a merchant at a stand. I tried to avoid them, but was noticed the moment I turned away.

“Adam?” the mason asked.

I put on a surprised face and approached him, “Nice to meet you, sir.”

“I am so glad you survived those horrors,” he said. “I heard that you

and Stephan became close friends in the Guard, is that true?"

I clenched my teeth and looked to the ground for a moment. When I looked back up at him my put on smile had returned.

"Stephan was a loyal friend, one of the most trustworthy men I have ever met," I responded.

"How did he die?" he asked.

The images of Stephan ramming his blade through my side flashed into my mind.

"He died heroically in battle, sir," I responded. "He had already killed many of the brutes, but there were just too many. If it were not for him, I might have died."

The parents, proud but heartbroken, smiled. "Thank you Adam," they said and walked away with teary eyes.

There was no need for the truth, I had decided. It would only create more questions and hurt the mason and his wife after already losing their son.

There was only one family I had left to meet. I approached the barbershop slowly, watching the barber at his work on a customer. The moment he caught a glimpse of me he rose, leaving his work behind to embrace me.

"I am so happy to see you well and alive," he said.

A lump formed in my throat, as I said what I had wanted to say to him for years, "I am sorry for what happened with Peter. We fought together against those Monsters. I tried to save him but..."

"It's okay Adam," Peter's father said with his hands on my shoulders. "I hold no grudge against you. I know how close you two were. He is watching us right now and smiling down upon you."

For the first time the subliminal guilt that rested on my heart from failing to save Peter was lifted and an ease overtook my mind.

"Let's go I don't have all day," the customer yelled at Peter's father.

"Thank you," I whispered as he gave me a firm handshake.

"I see part of him in you," he said with a glimmer in his eyes and

departed.

On my way back to the carpentry, I passed by a house I had nearly forgotten: my home. The blacksmith shop stood silently at the side of the street, stripped off life and sound. I looked at it from the outside, considering going in. Too many unresolved conflicts, memories, and pains still lay in there that needed to be put to rest. Since I awoke in the mansion, I had suppressed the reality of my parents' suicide. It was time to accept it.

I walked to the door and retrieved the spare key from underneath a bucket of withering flowers. Unlocking the door, I turned the knob and pushed the wooden door wide open. A prickling feeling ran over my arms, as I was welcomed to a breeze of cold air along with the bitter creaking of the door.

The living room seemed untouched. A bowl of apples still stood on the counter in the entrance. It showed how recent everything was. My parents died maybe a week ago, not even long enough for the fruits to foul.

Standing in the door I saw old events replay in my mind. Once we sat at breakfast with seven. Seven! It was right before Bennet and Collin left for the Guard. Elias sat to my right, and a younger brother to my left. He died shortly after like many others due to the seasonal flue. It was a time when my parents were still happy and proud. One after another the ghostly appearances vanished from the table until only I was seated there; the last living Blacksmith.

I left the living room behind me and entered the adjacent kitchen. Two hooks were still in the ceiling where my parents had hung themselves. With every second that I stared at the hooks, discomfort rose within me. It felt too unreal to picture, yet too frightening to stay around for too long. I did not want to see any more signs of death, for I had seen too many of them in my young life, and so I ducked into my room.

The bed had its sheets nicely tugged in at the sides. Everything seemed fairly empty and void, since I had taken the few things of meaning with me to the Guard. A few books remained on my desk. Many of them had originated from classes with Cecilia. One of the rather valuable copies was



a collection of the complete works of Shakespeare. A pencil lay inside. Carefully I opened the cover and found the place I had stopped in the middle of *Henry VI*. A passage was underlined and a large exclamation mark stood at its side.

*“Ignorance is the curse of God; knowledge is the wing wherewith we fly to heaven.”*

I immediately shut the book, noticing my wish to topple the Inquisition resurface. There was little to gain, for now I felt like I had all I ever wanted. Ironically I had less than I had throughout most of my life. Life is defined by the meaning we give to the events that surround our story, and for once my perspective began to lighten up. Before I moved to the next room I stowed the books into my pouch.

The workshop was quiet. Many tools rested on the table as if my father had left for just a minute to fetch something from the kitchen. I saw myself work with him, that night when he first opened himself up to me. When all the memories faded, I felt relieved and clear. It gave me peace to be back home and reunite with my past, but I knew that I must never return to this house.

I left the house when the sun had already set. The streetlights gave me guidance as I made my way towards the carpentry.

Katrina and Eric sat around the fireplace going through the heist step by step. I silently joined them, listening absentmindedly to their conversation.

The city bell struck ten in the evening. Curfew had begun.

“We’ve got two hours, let’s have a little dinner before you head out,”

Eric suggested and began warming up some of the remaining lamb cutlets from last night.

“How is Peter’s father?” she asked, helping me get seated. For every question she asked me about my day, the answer I gave progressively got shorter. I did not want to talk about my day but rather convince her to stay. Even when Eric served the cutlets I was too worried about her to enjoy the meal.

After dinner I wanted to hold and kiss her, but she pushed me off, “I need to focus Adam,” she said. “I leave in less than an hour, and you know my mind needs to be on task.”

I nodded and left her alone to plan with Eric. Leaning back in an armchair I watched the two. She had become so strong and independent in my absence. I never imagined her to do these jobs all by herself. There was something beautiful about her strength, the way she stood and the way she spoke. I just could not be mad at her for leaving or pushing me off.

At last I darkened her face with charcoal, questioning her about the break-in, “What are you taking?”

“Some of the wife’s jewelry.”

“Where is it located?”

“In a bowl on top of the drawer in the living room.”

“Where does the merchant sleep?”

“In a room behind the kitchen.”

“Where is the door?”

“At the entrance of the living room,” she responded. “I’ve got it Adam, thank you. Too many questions will freak me out. Let’s just have quiet for a moment.”

I faintly smiled to agree with her. A few minutes later the midnight-bell went off, striking five times. On cue the patrols scanned the streets. With my ear pressed against the door I listened to their voices pass. Eric carefully pushed the curtain aside and looked through the window to ensure the street was clear. “It’s time,” he said.

Katrina kissed me softly and whispered in my ear, “I will be back

soon. Unseen is unscathed.”

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## Chapter 32



I WATCHED HER through the window until she left my sight. Time went by slower than usual. After a while I decided to lay down on her bed. My eyes stared up at the ceiling, yet all I saw was her, tracing the steps she would take to get there and back.

Trying to get my mind off the worry, I started to explore the room. On her nightstand I found a dried purple flower. It was the one I had given her the day I had left. Carefully I picked the fragile flower up and twisted it in between my fingers. It seemed perfectly dead, but the color had not left its petals. The sweet smell was still as prevalent as the day I had picked it.

I put it back on the nightstand and closed my eyes until drowsiness took over.

The bells rang. But it was not the regular city bell. The continuous chime came from the city's alarm bells. Footsteps raced down the street, followed by angry commands that were shouted into the night.

The door flew open and Katrina stepped in. Her eyes were glassy, her

body shaking, and her teeth chattering. Tears had already removed lines of charcoal from her face. "They killed Robert," she said. "And I think they saw me."

Eric held his daughter close, trying to calm her, "Everything will be alright."

"What happened?" I asked

"The merchant had fallen asleep in the living room. He seemed drunk and soundly asleep so I decided to pull through. By the time I had retrieved the jewelry, he stood upright behind me." She began to stutter, "Everything went so fast, I pushed him aside and bolted out the door. He followed me and screamed for guards. Three came running from deeper within the Merchant District by the mansion. They chased me down the boulevard and ordered Robert to stop me. But he refused. He drew his sword and let me pass, putting himself between me and my followers. All I heard was clashing swords and angry shouts penetrate the night. When I turned to look, they had surrounded him. From all sides they stabbed him without mercy."

The street was now fairly lit up as most citizens had turned to their windows with a candle.

"The thief went this way," a neighbor shouted out the window.

Within seconds they pounded on our door. As it was unlocked, a squad of soldiers swarmed into the house.

I tried to strike out at them and keep them away from Katrina, but they had outnumbered us. Two soldiers grabbed her by the arms, while others had their swords pointed at me and Eric.

The merchant came in and pointed at Katrina, "This is her!"

"What do we do with the other two?" asked one of the men with his sword at my throat.

"Detain them, they are accomplices," said the leader of the squad.

Violently they dragged us out the door. The pace was beyond painful on my leg that had just been reattached. I clenched the cane tightly in my hand and used it for support, not even daring to let my left leg touch the

ground again. Briskly they moved us down to the square where a door led to the prison beneath the mansion. Inside the dark dusty dungeon, the prison-guards took us into custody. In every corner of the room hung a torch, giving but little light to the prisoners. Ten cells were to the left and right, leaving only a narrow pathway in between. Five had already been occupied with men and women that seemed to have lost their wits long ago. For a moment their looks reminded me of my year in prison, and made me wonder if I had become a lunatic like them.

“Inside! Now!” said the prison-guard and shoved me into the cell between Eric and Katrina.

We were not allowed to talk. Like an aggravated watchdog, the guard walked up and down the pathway, bobbing his head right and left to keep an eye on us. As his shift elapsed a more careless guard took over, resting on a stool at the entrance of the prison. Throughout the night Katrina and I leaned against another with only a set of bars separating us. We fell asleep with our fingers interlocked, determined to never let another go.

There was movement at the entrance of the prison. Waking up, I rubbed my eyes to get a better sight of what was going on.

“You idiots!” said Anthony, entering the prison. “You detained the man that is supposed to be celebrated this afternoon! The Inquisitor himself will give him the brooch of excellence.”

“I am sorry, I didn’t...”

“Just give me the goddamn keys and let me fix him up for the ceremony,” Anthony said walking in a brisk pace towards my cell. Unlocking the door, he reached out his hand to help me up, “Let’s go, we need you to learn a speech in the next few hours.”

I turned towards Katrina and whispered, “I will get you out of here, I promise.”

She looked up at me, hopeful yet uncertain.

Leaving the prison, Anthony listed the many things I had to do, all the

while I only could think about my incarcerated friends, “First you need to wash yourself; that prison cell really did you in. Also try to put on some nice clothes. These honorable discharge ceremonies are rare and highly regarded.”

“You need to help me get my friends out of prison,” I said.

“I was going to get to that,” he said, “I don’t have to ask what happened, because I did my fair share of investigating to find you in the first place. Unfortunately, there is little I can do. Certainly they will face a trial, but as of right now there is overwhelming evidence against them for not just one planned robbery, but a whole series of them. Every merchant that ever lost something is pinning it on them.”

“So what will happen to them?”

“Since they did not just break-in and enter once, but over three times, it is a capital offense. The court, which rarely gets to rule on such cases, will most likely use this case to set an example.”

“What do you mean by capital offense?” I asked stopping in the middle of the square.

Anthony clenched his teeth. Uncomfortably he looked at me. “He will face the gallows and she will burn at the stake. I am sorry Adam.”

Heat rose into my face. Burning anger, hatred, and disbelief consumed me. A slight exasperated laugh was all I brought forth. It was incomprehensible. Just now that I had her back the Inquisitor was going to take her away from me again. My entire body tensed, giving me trouble to respond. The surreality of what was occurring made my eyes teary. “I got it”, I said at last and turned to leave. “Don’t worry about the speech, I’ll make it memorable. Something the Inquisitor and the people will never forget.”

Anthony was concerned but still understanding. A faint smile lay on his lips, “Be careful Adam. If you need anything, you know where to find me. I’ll escort you to the square when the time comes.”

I nodded and slowly hobbled towards the carpentry with my cane. The hours passed as I sat motionlessly on the armchair in front of the fireplace.

As much as I tried to set my words in stone and decide upon what I wanted to say, it just would not flow. It would come to me in the moment, I thought, and so I began getting ready for the ceremony. I washed myself thoroughly and picked one of Eric's nicer shirts to wear, since I did not dare set foot into my old home again.

Anthony had not arrived, and so I sat down to skim through the book I had picked up from my old home. Maybe I would find some inspiration in there, I thought.

In less than an hour, the city had grown loud. People had finished their work and began to assemble at the square. Not much later, Anthony knocked on my door accompanied by a dozen guards, just like at my celebration. Together they led me out to the square, through the crowd onto a chair in the front row aside the other two living men that had been honorably discharged.

Upon my arrival the fanfares sounded loudly. Everyone looked towards me and got caught up in a wild applause. Friends, acquaintances, strangers looked at me as more than just 'Adam'. I represented hope. I represented freedom. I represented the exception to the rule.

As I waited, I began to examine the surroundings. We all were facing an empty platform and the balcony of the Inquisitor far above. On the grand balcony the council had already assembled. To my utter surprise the council's youngest member was among them: Terric. Our eyes met, and as if he knew that I wanted to thank him he simply nodded with a faint smile. I wanted to speak to him, but now there was no opportunity.

On the other side sat Cecilia, with concern written all over her face. Ever since I had arrived in the square she had not put her eyes off of me. Only in the moments I looked her way, she quickly turned her head. I tried to smile to calm her, but she seemed worried.

Without much delay the Inquisitor's Herald stepped out with his big wooden stick and hammered it thrice against the marble floor. "Citizens!" he proclaimed, "The Inquisitor!"

As the Herald vanished through a side door of the balcony, the crowd



rose to its feet and applauded to welcome their leader.

The red curtains flushed to the sides. In slow calculated steps he stepped from the darkness of the room into the daylight. His arms spread to the sides, fingers extended as if trying to grasp the sky, he walked towards the banister of the balcony. His unpredictable devilish eyes and face were still the same. The rest had deteriorated. The burgundy robe covered his thin bony arms, like a man's shirt looked on a child. His hair had not just greyed but partially disappeared over the past eight years. He truly was little more than a ghost.

As my glance drifted to Cecilia, I found her no longer looking at me, but at her uncle. He must have been the source of her discomfort. He was sick, and she knew it.

He lifted his pale left hand. Silence took over. With his piercing eyes he looked at me like the day of my celebration. But things had changed since then. My fear had vanished, my hate had risen.

He redirected his attention to the crowd and smiled, "Greetings, children of God!" his voice had grown fainter and weaker over the years. "It is my pleasure, once again, to rejoice with you all. To celebrate what this city stands for: Faith, duty, and honor. To celebrate the young men who serve their God, their city, and every one of you, outside these gates. Only the strongest spirits, the firmest believers, withstand the pains and evils that linger in the outside world. Their valor and strength fend off all the demons that haunt our city." The crowd went wild like the day of my celebration. Their shouts of naïve approval disgusted me, yet they were the masses, and the masses had to be pleased. If I wanted to win against the Inquisitor I had to win them first.

The Inquisitor raised his hand, and pointed towards me, "You, son, are the premier example of this valor I so fondly describe. When your brethren fell, you persisted and fought, because you knew there was a God... because you knew that God had so much more in store for you. And here you are today, reaping the fruits of your faith." The masses applauded me empathetically. "Many times the devil plays a trick on us. He murders our

friends, robs us of our senses, or takes our limbs. But it is in these moments of trial that some of us find God. And to survive what you survived, I must say, you son have found God.”

For an exceedingly long moment the Inquisitor stood motionlessly on the balcony staring off into the crowd. His body shifted. With a hunched stature he leaned on his holy scepter, while his jaw moved as if he wanted to say something. At first, his hand pressed against his heart, but then slowly rose as if he wanted to touch something in the distance. A hallucination, or maybe just a dream that was slipping from his fingers.

He collapsed onto the marble floor unleashing a sudden wild uproar. Men shot up, looking like they had just seen their own child die. Panic was written across all our faces. Cecilia ran to her uncle and shook his motionless body, while guards carried him inside. Violent shouts asked what was happening, while women cried out to God praying for help. The sheep had long been led by their shepherd every step of the way. With the shepherd gone, it was time for the wolf to chase the sheep into freedom.

Anthony had already stepped onto the platform, trying to calm down the masses. I pushed myself onto my cane and stepped to his side.

“Friends, Citizens, men of God, lend me your ears,” I shouted into the open. The crowd slowly settled. “I come to speak of the devil, not to praise him. You all have seen him, men, women and children alike. The Inquisitor had said it best: *‘Many times the devil plays a trick on us. He murders our friends, robs us of our senses, or takes our limbs.’* He makes you believe he is your friend, your guardian, your God. But all he does is poison the very fabric of our human values to gain and maintain control. The devil abuses our faith. In times of great trial we turn to God and pray, hoping for an answer. The devil with his cunning art answers, making you believe he is your savior while all along he is planning your demise. It must have been the devil that caused this, so let us find him and bring him to justice.”

The crowd was on fire. Wildly they stomped their feet on the ground and gave me their approval.

“What makes the devil?” I asked them.

“Deceit!”

“Lies!”

“Murder!”

“Who commits murder?” I asked.

“The demons!”

“The savages!”

“The monsters!”

“Men of the Guard, please rise!” I ordered. All the men rose.

“You have seen these demons, monsters, and savages. Tell me this, why did you fight them?”

“We were told to!”

“Orders!”

“They attacked us!”

“Both sides attacked another. That is fair. Their leaders must be the devil then as they were the root of murder. Who gave you orders?”

“The Commander!”

“Our Master!”

“Terric is the devil!”

“Wait! Do not pass judgment just yet. Be patient till the last,” I turned towards Terric who stood above me with his hands clenching the banister. “Who gave you orders, old friend?”

Terric gazed into my eyes. He knew what I was doing. “It was the Inquisitor.”

Wild uproar went through the crowd.

“Is he the devil?” a woman asked.

Her man slapped her, “He is our savior, do not ever question him!”

The crowd was split.

“Kill him!”

“Liar!”

Some moved onto me but others held them back.

“Hear him out, he is trying to speak!”

“Now I ask again, do not make judgment just yet. Be patient and you

shall know the truth, and nothing but the truth. Therefore let us examine the second devilish trait: Lies,” I said and waited for all the brawls to die down. “God often allows us to question the things that are not true. Let me ask you, what do you doubt when you spend your nights thinking.”

For the first time the crowd was silent.

“I doubt that my woman loves me,” a man said trying to get some laughs.

“You are afraid, all of you,” I said. “Do not fear me, for I am neither your judge nor your executioner. Open your hearts and tell me what you doubt.”

Terric said loud and slowly, “I doubt God.”

The crowd hushed in disbelief over the blasphemy that had just been spilled from the commander’s lips.

Before the crowd could turn against him, Nigel’s father said, “I doubt this system; this unfairness. God can’t want me to watch my children starve.”

“I doubt the Final Testament! They tell us of demons outside the gates, but all I saw were men and women like you and me!”

“I doubt the history I am told to believe. There must be more, something beyond this godforsaken valley!”

“God works in mysterious ways, my friends,” I said. “You all are right. Everything you doubt has been inspired by the devil. The system, the past... even our religion. It is all you know and all there ever has been... or so you are told. The root of it is the devil himself.”

The crowd grew louder and they drank my words like a glass of water in the middle of the desert. The estranged taste of a drop of truth has made them thirst for more. They were asking for it—no, demanding it—and so I was ready to give it to them. The truth, the whole truth.

“Many of you can now see the devil. In your hearts you know who he is. But to dispel the last bits of uncertainty let us finish what we started: Deception, the last of the devilish traits. Who has deceived you in your life? Who has made you believe something your soul never wanted you to

believe? Who has forced a reality upon you that was not meant to be your reality?"

A moment of silence followed the first time his name was pronounced. That second all the information I had laid upon them began to take shape and reconfirm their discovery. The self-declared heir of God was not just a fraud. He now was the epitome of all that was evil.

The crowd was alive. The mob was born. No further word of motivation was needed. Wildly they struck out at guards that were trying to regain control. Men fought men, separated in their beliefs. Women ran for their houses with their children by the hand. Chaos had taken over.

Far above, Terric was surrounded by a dozen guards that had been ordered by the council to detain him. To the East I could hear the Merchant District destabilizing as well. At first it was all pushing and shoving, but when the citizens grew more violent and started throwing stones at the guards a boundary had been pushed. Menacingly they drew their swords. Just few feet ahead of me a man pulled out a small knife and made a jab for the captain of the city guard. Without much mercy the captain moved aside and hacked his sword right into the back of the citizen. A violent scream penetrated the tension filled air. Silence took over the crowd and put them to a halt with their eyes fixed on the man. Trying to get up with the monstrous wound on his back, the citizen pushed his right arm from the ground. The moment he looked up at his foe, the captain struck him again and again and again, until the body ceased to move.

"Detain anyone that shows signs of rebellion!" he ordered. "Kill anyone that resists being detained!"

Upon his words only a handful of men kept fighting. Five guards approached me and stepped onto the platform. I had no weapon and lacked the agility I once possessed before my leg had been lost. Resistance was useless.

Down in the square the last few men fought it out to the bitter end. The guards slaughtered half a dozen men like pigs, rejoicing in finally getting to kill something.

I stepped back slowly, trying to find a way to escape my five persecutors. More guards joined in and soon I was surrounded by ten. The captain extended his sword to my throat.

“Your head will give me a fine prize,” he said licking a blood splatter from his lips.

“Henry, stop!” Anthony said pushing the blade aside, “we need him alive.”

“Fine,” the captain said and knocked me unconscious with a punch to the face.

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## Chapter 33

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MY VISION WAS shaky. I could feel my feet dragging over the hard ground. Stress and tension lay in the air. Everything went fast as shapes strode past me, then everything went black. Every few seconds my vision returned, and every time we came closer to the mansion. The boulevard gave away that they took me through the Merchant District.

The sound of steel caught my ears. A scream. Silence. The door opened and with force they pushed me down the red corridor. They tried to shove me up the stairs, but my damaged leg and unconscious mind did not allow me to make it a single step. Soon they lifted and carried me up. After a few seconds I had passed out again under the pain.

My senses returned as a bucketful of ice cold water hit my face. I brushed my dripping hair to the side, and observed with sharpened sight the throne room I had been brought to. I was on my knees while a score of soldiers stood at both sides of the spacious hall. Like statues they held their weapons

tightly without moving an inch. Few feet ahead of me sat the fragile Inquisitor in noble composure on a golden gothic throne.

“You have no idea what you created,” the Inquisitor said in a slow furious hiss.

“I gave them freedom,” I said, “freedom from the lies they have been fed all their lives.”

The Inquisitor chuckled, “Eight men have died today; seven civilians, and one guard. Many more are wounded. Their blood is on your hands.”

“They died for freedom,” I said, “it’s a price worth paying.”

“The ends justify the means,” he said. “Even the noble Blacksmith son believes that death is an acceptable loss at times. Maybe we are not so different after all.”

“We are not the same,” I said and spit at his feet.

A guard stepped forward and pulled his sword halfway out, but the Inquisitor raised his hand in the air, “No need for that,” he said. “My friend over here will cooperate sooner or later.”

“Why would I work with you?”

“Oh it is not a question. You are already a part of my plan,” he said. “You see, your little stunt out there did exactly what I have been keeping the people from doing. It made them think. You have gained their trust, and now they look towards you for guidance. But where are my manners,” he interjected. “Please get up, there is no need to kneel in front of me. After all we are friends.”

For a moment he watched me struggle, secretly rejoicing in my excruciating weakness. When my appearance became pitiful, he ordered the men to help me up and give me my cane back.

“Wonderful, that is much better,” he said while the throne lifted his eyes still above mine. “I think we got off on the wrong foot Adam. We can achieve much together.”

I stepped onto the first marble stair that led to the throne, lifting my head above his, “I am not working with you.”

He straightened his back, putting our eyes at level, “Oh Adam,” he



said with a melancholic chuckle, “you still don’t understand. There are no more questions, and there are no more options. There is my way, and whether you want it or not, you will take it.”

“Go ahead,” I said, “Take my life, burn my house, steal my possessions... But you will never own my soul.”

“Moving, truly,” the Inquisitor said. “I know men like you; I have seen them countless times in my life. Unbreakable, driven, and loyal. And there lies your very weakness.” He snapped his fingers, “Bring them in.”

The door to the throne room opened and Katrina, Eric and Terric were led in, each with a knife to the back of their neck.

“Don’t you dare hurt them!” I said taking another step towards the Inquisitor.

With a signal to his guards they forced me several steps back. “Nobody will get hurt,” he said, “if you do what I ask for.”

“Spit it out,” I hissed.

“You have to marry my ward Cecilia,” he said plainly. “Before you ask why, as your expression suggests, I will explain. It is rather obvious.” He lifted his hand slightly and looked at his nails, “The people are more aggressive and rebellious than they ever were. They need to be distracted and regain faith in their leader. A celebration of a size never experienced before will do well in getting their minds off of some ungodly thoughts. Seeing you wed the closest relative of the man you just declared to be the devil will ensure them that you have been wrong with your mindless accusations. On top I will pardon the carpenter and his daughter for the crimes they have committed, proving my good and pure heart.”

“You will let them free?” I asked.

“The father may resume his work after we are done here, so that he may pay back his debts to the merchants. The girl will become a nun so that you are not tempted to break your vows to my niece.”

“What makes you so certain that I will not kill you in your sleep the day I start living in this mansion,” I asked.

“I knew you would ask that,” he said. “Everyone of your three friends

here will have a personal assassin at their side at all times. They will not know who it is, but one of their closest friends will make sure that they die in an ‘accident’ the second you even consider hurting me in the slightest bit.”

“You are bluffing,” I hissed.

He raised his voice, “Am I Adam? Are you really willing to risk their lives? Have you already forgotten about Stephan?”

Pain shot into my heart. I looked into their faces. Katrina was shaking, Terric was solemn, and Eric had fear in his eyes.

“I know you do not care about your own life,” the Inquisitor said. “But you would never want any of them to get hurt.” Slowly he extended his hand towards me.

It was the only choice I could have made. I had lost too many loved ones already. With clenched teeth I took his hand.

The Inquisitor held my hand tightly, laughing quietly. He looked at me, “And so man had sold his soul to the devil.”

I freed my hand from his grasp and walked towards my friends, “So what happens next?”

“For now we will let the people sleep in peace and let them forget about today. Come morning we will prepare the stake for the girl. Before the executioner sets her on fire, I shall be there in person and let her ask the Lord for forgiveness. She will join the convent and by the end of the week you shall be married to Cecilia. Then, finally, everything will be back to normal.”

I turned to face the Inquisitor, “Is there anything else you need?”

He looked around, “No, we are done here. Guards, let the carpenter go, bring the commander to the gate, and lock the other two back in the dungeon. I don’t want those two going anywhere till tomorrow.”

They tried to grab me forcefully by the arms but I pushed them off. “Are you so slow that you need to detain a cripple?” I hissed at them, and slowly made my way down the stairs. Terric supported my shoulder to take a bit of the burden off my leg.

“Stay strong my friend,” he whispered. “Don’t give up hope. The fight is not lost yet.”

“You’ve heard him,” I responded so the guards would not hear, “he has us all at knife point. I am done fighting Terric. Every time I try to resist him, I receive an even more powerful reaction. This cycle of vengeance needs to stop.”

“Move faster,” a guard growled from behind us.

As we reached the bottom of the stairs I said my last words to Terric, knowing that things would never be the same, when or if we ever saw another again. “For once I will do what he says. It will not give me freedom. Nay, it will cage me in a reality that lay far outside my imagination. But it will give me peace; peace of mind and heart. As long as I live he has a reason to keep you all alive. That is all I can really ask for.”

They tugged on Terric’s arm to which he responded with a frightening glare. Slowly the guards stepped back and gave us space. He laid his hand on my shoulder and smiled faintly, “Whatever happens, Adam, do what your heart tells you. It’s a rare and noble one. Stay true and never betray it.” He embraced me and left.

Eric bid us farewell before we were driven back down into the dungeon. A last time he held his daughter, his jewel, tightly in his arms knowing that come morning she would be locked inside the convent, never to see him again.

Back in the prison cell we cowered closely together. My arms were wrapped around her thin waist, holding her cold shaking hands in the center. For a while we just sat there in silence, with no sound but the occasional coughs and whimpers from the other prison cells. My cheek was pressed against the side of her head, and with deep breaths I inhaled the sweet rose scent of her auburn hair.

“I can feel your heartbeat,” she whispered and huddled closer.

I twisted my head and kissed her cheek. I always thought that if I survived the Guard, we would have a prosperous future ahead of us. But all we had was the night. There was no tomorrow.

“I want to die like this,” she said. “Right here, with you close to me.”

“Don’t say that,” I hissed. “You will live and I will get you out of that convent.”

“No, Adam. I rather die with the sound of your heartbeat, and the warmth and protection of your arms, than in the solitude of a cold temple.”

“You will not die. I will come for you,” I said. “We’ve made it so far, and overcome so many obstacles.”

“You won’t be able to this time; the Inquisitor will keep his eye on you,” she said. “We have come so far you say, yet we sit here in a dark and dirty prison cell. We have fought enough in this life. I don’t want to spend the rest of my days in the convent, Adam. I am happy just to be here with you. Just promise me to find happiness, no matter what might happen in the future.” She turned her head and came close with her nose touching mine, “Now stop worrying, silly. This might be our last night.”

Morning came and we were ripped from our slumber by the creaking of the prison door. As we lay wrapped in each other’s arms, my first impulse was to hold and protect her from the coming guards. Ruthlessly they pulled us out of the cell and drove us in two opposite directions without the chance for another word.

“Where are you taking her,” I asked the guard that led me outside to the square.

“A priest will hold a final confession with her, so that her suffering in hell may be shorter.”

Of all the people, she was the last to go to hell. Of that I was certain.

The square was quickly crowded. Events like these were rare; few dared to break the law of God. I made my way through the masses and heard them whisper: Talk of rebellion, notions of fear, and just a bit of hope. Most saw the execution as a response to yesterday’s uprising, and immediately returned to their old loyalty towards the Inquisition. They were just too afraid of the unfettered power of the Inquisitor.

Others saw it as unjust and were sparked even further in their hate against the regime. I heard them whisper about plans and plots. But my mind had little space for the citizens' talk. I was just waiting for the girl of my dreams to once again be just a dream.

The fanfares sounded, and outside they led her. Her eyes were frightened but her composure was calm. She seemed determined, yet sad. The executioner followed her closely. His body was big and bulky while his face and identity remained unknown to God under a black bag.

Screams of applause and opposition mingled in one loud chaotic cloud of noise. With my cane I pushed the spectators aside and reached almost the front. The executioner wrapped her hands behind the stake. She inhaled deeply and smiled towards the sky.

The torch lit up in the hand of the executioner. And the act began.

"Wait!" ordered an old powerful voice.

The executioner turned, and met the Inquisitor in surprise.

"I will spare this girl's life!" he announced stepping next to Katrina. In a loud booming voice he spoke, "Some of you say I am ambitious. Some of you say I take your freedoms. Some of you say I am a murderer. Would an ambitious man not seek to extend his rule? I've never ventured to leave this valley, for I am not ambitious. Would a man that takes freedoms not lock up any criminal in a prison? I let the carpenter go so he can pursue a lawful life, for I do not take freedoms. Would a murderer spare a life? I will spare this girl's life, for I am no murderer."

The crowd went quiet.

"He is right," they whispered. "He is no evil man," they said. "How could we ever have doubted him?" one said. "Shame on us all," another responded.

"Girl, I spare your life in the name of the Inquisition. To cleanse your soul you shall join the convent and live a sedentary life away from sin," he raised his hand for her to kiss the holy signet ring.

Quietly she muttered something. Everyone hushed to hear her.

"What did you say?" the Inquisitor asked.

“Go to hell,” she said and spit on his ring.

Consumed by anger, he turned around, grabbed the torch from the executioner’s hand and dropped it on the dry hay at the foot of the stake. In a blaze the stake lit up and her screams filled the air.

I punched my way to the front. There was pain in my leg, but it was nothing compared to what my eyes saw. I was mere feet from her. My hands clenched the fence, ready to jump over onto her side. Forcefully a guard pushed me into the crowd. Another held me back. I struggled against their power.

There was no control, for I had lost it. My body shook and as much as I wanted to scream the air just would not fill my lungs. Her eyes met mine in between the shimmering flames that so ruthlessly licked on her soft skin. Fire, the damned gift of the gods.

Her screams burned as harshly in my ears as the flames on her skin. With hands covering my ears, I tried to block out the violent noise that dug into my heart like a dagger. As much as it muffled the sound I could not help but realize that her screams formed my name.

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## Chapter 34

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THE DRUNKEN SCREAMS of the people rang through the air as my eyes fixated on the flickering flame of a candle. Around me the richest men of the city celebrated my impending wedding in a festive hall inside the mansion. I gave them my physical attendance, but my mind was somewhere else. Every time I saw a fire or flame, my body froze and once again presented me with the image and pain of the execution. It did not feel real. Reality itself seemed farfetched. I did not know whether it was losing my love or the fact that I was becoming a part of the Inquisitor's family, but everything withing me repulsed the idea that I was not dreaming.

Cecilia sat at my side at the end of the long table. Lightly she squeezed my hand helping me return to the present. I looked at her and smiled faintly.

"Adam?" asked a man at my side.

Confused I shook my head and asked what he wanted.

"I was asking if you could tell me about that eventful adventure in the mines, I've heard so much about your bravery."

With subliminal disdain I recounted the lies we had agreed upon to be

the truth. It had turned into a routine, as I not only knew the storyline, but already anticipated the questions they would ask.

The night carried on, and the men got more drunk and jolly by the hour. In contrast I grew more sober and pensive by the minute.

Cecilia must have noticed and leaned in close to my ear, "I hate this festival. Let's get out of here."

"Can we just leave?" I asked.

"We are getting married tomorrow. They expect us to disappear together."

With a quick glance around the room, I got up and followed her closely. Her hand gently supported my back, making my way up the stairs easier. It was a foreign touch, and while I appreciated her kindness and devotion she simply was not the person I wanted to hold in my arms.

"Here we are," she said opening the door to her chambers. A fine rose scent lay in the candle lit room, reminding me even more of the girl I had lost. Outside, the rain was pouring like hail against the stone. Lightning struck across the horizon momentarily and vanished to the booming noise of thunder.

"I know you do not want this wedding," she said. "And I know you do not want me."

I opened my mouth wanting to comfort her and tell her that she was wrong but she raised her hand.

"I know I am not her, and never will be. She was good with the common people, while I have never even left this mansion. She was driven by goodwill, while I am driven by knowledge which causes my own arrogance. Just know that I am truly sorry for all that has happened. All I ask for is that you do not hate me."

I stepped forward and took her in my arms. She deserved better, I thought. As I held her I could feel her body both tensing and relaxing at the same time. Her face pressed against the side of my neck. Warmth emerged in her until she almost felt hot.

Slowly she took a step back with her hands still grasping my sides. Her



eyes had a glossy taint. The corners of her mouth slowly lifted. It caught me by surprise to see her so overwhelmed by my little gesture. I realized that nobody had ever held her.

The spark that already existed inside her had turned into a wild fire. I had given her far more than comfort.

Slowly she stepped closer to me. I knew what she was about to do. But had I pushed her away at this point I would have broken her heart. It was obvious that she had not lived outside the mansion. Her approach was packed with uncertainty. With delicate care she laid her hand on my cheek, all the while her eyes almost seemed to flicker. Observing her was magical. She looked at me with such devotion and tenderness. To her I was not just a commoner. To her I was a king.

My empathy was short lived. The moment her lips touched mine, the fire inside me began to burn again. With a small but powerful shove I pushed her away from me.

I wanted to explain myself but all I felt was disgust. Quickly I opened the door and hobbled down the stairs. With every step I could hear her sobs grow louder, until she slammed the door shut.

I pushed myself through the red corridor with closed eyes, as the torches and the color reminded me of my darkest day with every step. Without a word to the guards I rushed outside into the pouring rain.

The cold wet drops encompassed me like a coat. My hair was soaked, my clothes were drenched, and my boots filled with water. The rain was so cold that it felt like needles of ice dropping onto my skin. By the time I left the terracotta boulevard behind me my teeth chattered violently. There was no one out. I did not care if the night guards were to catch me. All I cared for was to once more relive my own past and find shelter in my memories.

Through the square I cut straight from the Merchant District to the Temple District. With every step the big church loomed higher above, giving the impression that the Mount distanced itself further from me the closer I came. I tried to find foothold on the slippery ground. The mud around the fundament of the church had turned into pools of dirt. With a

deep breath I put my hands on the ledge I had always used to start my climb up the Mount. My muscles contracted. All power ran into my legs as I jumped onto the ledge. A strain in my shoulder spread like wildfire originating at the point the bolt had hit me. My feet landed, and a shockwave of pain ran through my injured leg. Too much weight pressed down upon it at once. Before I could grab a gargoyle's head for support I lost my balance. With my back first I fell down to the ground, seeing nothing but the stars. Orion was nowhere to be found.

With a loud thud and splash I crashed into the pool of mud. The dirt covered me from head to toe, all the while my muscles felt unresponsive. I screamed so loud that I could not make out what I said myself. And with that scream I let go of the past, the future, and the dream that had still resided within me.

Wounded I found my cane in the mud and pushed myself onto my feet. Without looking back I strode to the mansion, while the rain washed off the dirt. I no longer felt wounded, but vulnerable, with no perception but the biting cold.

The moment I entered the red corridor Cecilia awaited me with a large towel. Despite my earlier behavior she took care of me immediately. It was apparent that she was more worried about my wellbeing than her own feelings. With a supportive hand she led me back up the stairs, all the while drying me off. We passed the level of the festival hall, in which the men were still celebrating. After a short break we continued upstairs towards her chambers.

"Take off your clothes," she said, "or you'll be sick tomorrow."

Uncomfortably I took off my shirt dripping water all over the wooden floor.

"You can sleep in the bed," she said grabbing a pillow, "I'll sleep on the floor."

"Don't be silly, the bed is large enough for the two of us. I used to share a bed not even half the size with my brother when I was younger." I added, "After all we will be married tomorrow."

She seemed anxious at the idea, “If you say so.”

With nothing but the towel wrapped around me I climbed into the bed. It must have been the most comfortable experience of my life. My limbs sunk lightly into what she called a mattress, a large whole body cushion. Never before had I had the opportunity to sleep on one of these. Compared to the cottage in the Guard, my wooden bed had always seemed luxurious.

Cecilia sat on the side of the bed and blew out her night candle. With no more than the moonlight, I could see just her outlines as she changed from her silver dress into her night gown. Quietly she climbed into the bed leaving half an arm’s length of space in between us.

I realized that my earlier behavior had scarred her. She kept a safe distance, just so she would not be misled again, and would not have to feel the pain of rejection. Despite her harsh opinions on much of the population, and general naivety, she always treated me well, no matter what I did to her. She seemed so preoccupied with my approval that I could no longer stand torturing her with my distance.

“I am sorry for my reaction earlier,” I said. “It’s just that things have happened so fast. Give me some time, and don’t be too hard on yourself. After all that has happened in my last ten years, maybe there is some hope for us. Maybe together we can finally find peace and bring some light into this dark hole.”

She inched her way closer to me and rested her head on my chest. “Thank you,” she whispered and fell asleep shortly after.

Dawn drew close. Cecilia and I sat upright in her bed. It seemed quite surreal that we were to get married that afternoon. We could already hear the servants decorate and set up the square for a celebration unprecedented in size and grandeur.

“What exactly do we do when we are married,” she asked.

“Take walks, read books and grow old. I think that’s what old married couples do,” I said.

“I’ve never been outside the mansion,” she said looking at me with a hint of unease. “I am scared of the wedding; I’ve never been this close to the commoners.”

Part of me was surprised; part of me expected those words to come out of her mouth. “Let’s go then,” I said taking her by the hand. “We will picnic out there.”

As I moved to get up, she pulled me back, “I can’t just leave!”

“I’ll be right at your side,” I said standing up with the help of my cane. “You can’t stay in here forever.”

She gave in and disappeared into the bathroom to get ready. I put on my clothes, and told Anthony to prepare some fresh groceries in a basket. Even after I had gathered everything, Cecilia was still getting ready. Her dress was borderline pretentious. I still needed to get used to the fact that we were expected to look pompous. After all we were part of the Inquisitor’s family, the chosen ones.

We headed down the stairs toward the corridor with the basket in her right hand. Our arms were interlocked, presenting ourselves like the couple we were supposed to be. The closer we drew to the door the slower her feet moved. A guard opened the door for us and with a firm tug I pulled her outside. For part of a second she looked frightened until she realized that absolutely nothing would happen to her. With a new pride and self-confidence she strut down the terracotta boulevard at my side. Many merchants greeted us, bowing down the moment they caught glimpse of the ward. Our presence did not escape anyone’s eyes.

“Where are we going?” she asked the moment we left the Merchant District. “I liked it here, everything was so pretty and the people were so proper and well-mannered.”

“It’s a surprise. I want to show you something,” I said and led her through the outskirts of the Craftsman District.

With every step the road grew dirtier and the buildings were more rundown. At last we reached the Industrial District. Tense, Cecilia lifted her dress so the hem would not drag on the ground. She pressed her body closer

against me, frightened by the simple people in their rags that roamed the streets.

The smelter loomed ahead of us with its radiating heat.

"This must be the worst picnic ever," she murmured.

"We were never going to eat it ourselves," I said.

Confused she looked at me as I knocked on the door. It opened slightly but no one was there. After a moment I realized that the little boy, Seth, stood below our sight.

I got on my knees, and looked at him. His deep blue eyes were reflecting the rising sun. The distrust I had faced before still remained.

"Give the little boy the basket," I said.

"I'm not little," he objected.

"But what about breakfast," Cecilia joined in objecting.

"He needs it more than us."

"I can't take things from strangers," he mumbled and started closing the door. His mother came and pushed the boy aside. Tears were running down her face the moment she saw me.

"I am sorry about Robert," I whispered as she fell into my arms.

"I am sorry about Katrina," she said. "With all that has happened to you, I'd bet the lives of my children that you are cursed. The best always have to suffer the most." She looked at Cecilia and said in a low voice, "the greatest curse still awaits you."

Carefully I removed myself from her and placed my hand on Cecilia's back. "Sometimes we mistake the good for the bad. We project so much evil onto them, that they have no chance but to become what we think of them. It takes acceptance despite all prior judgments to see a person's true character."

With an uncertain smile Cecilia held the basket out to Robert's widow. She hesitated for a moment and looked back and forth between Cecilia and the food. Seth looked up at his mother who was deciding between pride and survival. Just before Cecilia was about to resign and take her offer back, the mother grabbed the food. Despite her innermost protest she thanked Cecilia.

A new smile shot across Cecilia's face. It was a smile of warmth, just like the one Katrina would always wear.

"I wish you two the best of luck today," the woman said and pushed her son back into the house.

We left the smelter and strolled through the Industrial District. About almost every house I was able to tell a story. When we passed the lumber mill I told her of Nigel and our years in the Guard. Fascinated she listened closely with her eyes glued to my lips.

In a small side alley a band of five men stood in a circle. Their postures were hunched and their faces shot back and forth from their comrades to the opening of the alley. One of them kept his eyes on me for an extended period.

Suddenly he turned to point me out to his friends. "Something's not right," I said and pushed Cecilia and myself against the wall of a building out of his sight.

"We should not be here," Cecilia urged.

A ray of sun hit the alley and something reflected from one man's belt. "They are armed," I said in disbelief. "No one but the blacksmith should have access to weapons. How did they get their hands on them?" There was one logical explanation: Yorick's former deals.

A passing-by city guard noticed us hiding in the shadow of the building at the entrance of the alley and drew closer. His hand was on the knob of his sword.

The moment he recognized the ward he bowed down. We motioned him to get up and pointed to the group with our eyes. He understood and approached them with confidence.

"What are you doing here? There is no idling around during work hours!"

Carefully we sneaked out of our cover and observed the scene. The men regrouped and faced the guard.

"I am sorry sir," one of them said, slowly stepping forward with his

head bowed. "I have an important message. We were just discussing something of relevance to the Inquisitor's safety."

The guard relaxed, "Come on. Out with it."

"Nobody may hear it," the man said approaching the guard, "come closer."

"You better not play games with me, I'll have you hanged...What is..."

In a quick move the man pulled a dagger from his boot and slashed the guard's throat. With nothing but a gurgling sound our protector fell over. The man took the guard's weapons and tossed them to his comrades.

Cecilia shrieked at the bloody sight. I covered her mouth immediately, hiding our bodies in the shade.

"Did you hear that?" the man asked his comrades.

With some noises of affirmation I heard their steps draw closer. Exit plans shot through my mind. I could not outrun them with my injured leg. They were bound to catch up with me. Climbing and taking the roofs for escape was out of the question as well. Screaming for help would make it even easier for them to find us.

Slowly I inched my way back through the shade. A doorframe gave us a little niche to hide in.

The man was already in sight. Cecilia squeaked through my hand in fear. His eyes darted towards us. With a satisfied grin he advanced.

A band of city guards entered the alley. The man quickly hid his dagger and stepped back.

"Stay where you are," ordered Henry, the captain of the city guard, "Someone heard a woman scream, what are you men up to?"

Cecilia freed herself from my grasp and ran towards the captain. I joined her and stepped out of the shade. The guards bowed down upon seeing the ward, baffled to find her out here.

"They killed a guard and were about to murder us," she uttered frightened.

Henry looked at the man carefully. He scanned the ground and saw

blood stains where the body had lain. With clenched teeth he drew his sword, “My friend was on watch for this part of the district. The Inquisitor might be generous these days, but I will make sure you bastards won’t get a trial.” He turned to his men, “Kill them all.”

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## Chapter 35

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THE GUARDS SWARMED out with their blades drawn. Immediately the men rushed down the alley, running into the dead end. Before they could draw their weapons the guards slaughtered them like animals. With merciless blows they cut down one after the other. Only a minute had passed when the last one stopped shaking.

Henry, the captain of the city guard had been a savior to Cecilia a minute ago, but now she saw him for the brutish swine he was. “Why did you kill those men?” she shouted.

“I’m just doing my job girl,” he said. “We can’t have any insurgents in the city.”

“I will tell my uncle of this,” she hissed returning to my side.

“I’d hope so; It will get me a nice reward,” he said and smeared the blood from his blade onto a piece of cloth. “Let’s go. The Inquisitor had sent us out to look for you. We are here to bring you back to the mansion. A wedding awaits you two an hour before sunset.”

Back in the mansion we were escorted to the throne room where the Inquisitor had been waiting. His appearance was paler than ever, contrasted by the blood red apple in his hand.

“These guards killed five men,” Cecilia said approaching her uncle.

“They did whatever was necessary to ensure your safe return home,” the Inquisitor said calmly and waved the guards out of the room. The door fell shut and we were left alone with him. The silence was broken when he took a large bite from the apple.

“This can’t go on forever,” I said from the back of the room.

“And it won’t,” the Inquisitor noted, “because your wedding will win back their hearts. Maybe now you recognize the importance of this little act. You are not doing it for me. You are doing it for them. Their lives are in your hands. Don’t waste any more or this whole city will cease to function and collapse.”

The Inquisitor pointed his finger to the door, “Cecilia, sweetheart, go see your maids. You need to wash, prepare, and dress.”

She nodded and left obediently. “Adam,” his raspy voice called before I could leave, “It’s all on you. One more act like last time, and the city’s fate shall be sealed forever.”

I bowed my head accepting his words without comment. The moment would have been suitable to attack and kill him to bring an end to the madness, but I had been too deep in the mud already. Any protest would make me sink even deeper. At least that was what the past twenty-six years had taught me.

The afternoon passed swiftly as a flock of maids prepared and dressed me for the wedding. My old Grey Guard armor had been refurbished, polished, and decorated for the occasion. The Brooch of Excellence was fixed over my heart.

Counting the remaining minutes to the wedding, I sat in a purple dressing room with Anthony at my side. Quietly we stared out the window, watching the crowds assemble. “You know,” I said, “sometimes I think how easy life could have been if I had just played along; followed all the rules,

kept quiet. I was unwilling to see my brothers die in service, but I have seen so many die in the name of freedom. I just no longer see the difference. Tyrant or rebel, we all have blood on our hands.”

“We all live in our own worlds, Adam; You, me, the Inquisitor... everyone. We all have our own realities. Until man manages to look past his own, and accept each other’s for the simple facts, we will always live unhappy. Wars, murder, betrayal, it all roots back to perception. Like a pack of wolves in sheepskins we hide our evil beneath deceptions of peace.” He scratched the back of his head and continued, “Certainly you could have accepted all you were told, but progress and change require conflict. Most of us just don’t know how to handle conflict properly, always thinking in terms of right or wrong; the ones that live and the ones that die.”

“And so it goes,” I said watching a man being dragged off by guards in the distance. “Maybe one day when all this has settled we can find peace.”

A servant knocked on the door and entered, “It’s time,” he said, and vanished as fast as he came in.

Anthony put his hand on my shoulder. I looked at him and I could feel that we both were anxious about what was about to come. It was not unlikely that some insurgents had already planned my assassination. All I knew was that I could not show weakness.

I met Cecilia in the throne room. The double door to the grand balcony was prompt open with only the red curtains keeping us from the sight of the people. Outside, the Inquisitor held a passionate speech. For the first time in my memory, he did not recycle his stock speech about God and duty. His words touched the hearts of the people at the very core. He named citizens by name, told them about their struggles and how they were able to make it through. After every example he found a way to connect their recovery to the unity of the city, and the establishment of the Inquisition. Effectively he transitioned the long introduction into a praise of the new found love that was to represent the renewal of God’s blessing upon the city. He asked them to draw hope and faith from this beautiful occasion, and rejoice with their loved ones again in the splendor of the city.

A maid fixed up Cecilia's elegant bun, which was artfully decorated with white flowers. A single strand of her blond hair fell to the side of her eye. Her white dress was made of smooth silk, and took up much of the floor with its incredible length. While the body of the dress had various touches of rose, the seam and hem were grey to match my armor.

Anthony stepped up to me, "The Inquisitor is about to announce you two. But before you go out I have one more thing for you." He handed me a new dark grey cane, fine and fresh in color. At the top sat an eagle with spread wings.

While my eyes inspected the delicate present, the fanfares resounded through the air. I put aside the old cane, clasped the new one tightly in my right and took Cecilia's hand in the other. With a sudden move the curtains flushed to the sides, revealing us to the masses.

My whole body trembled. The fanfares still sounded. Cecilia's hand pressed mine tighter. Thousands of eyes were pointed at me. With painfully slow grace we walked towards the banister where the Inquisitor had awaited us with open arms. Many times I felt close to losing my consciousness. The noise emerging from the crowd combined with the deafening sound of the fanfares drowned my senses in a sea of tumult.

It all was topped when my mortal enemy embraced me like a son. He held me close for a few seconds. "Don't forget to smile," he whispered in my ear.

The crowd calmed down at his signal. The fanfares were replaced by a set of violins.

In a loud booming voice he addressed us for the crowd to hear, "I am here to bestow upon you the sacred vow of marriage. The vow by and for God, to live by the ideals and virtues set forth in the Final Testament. It is this vow that shall tie your bodies together in this world, and make your souls one for eternity. A vow to dispel all doubt. A vow to reinstate faith. A vow to love forever. Till death and beyond... this world and the next." He extended his hand to Cecilia, "I now ask you Cecilia, will you take Adam to

be your husband by the laws of God so your souls may be joined for eternity and beyond?"

Her hand pressed mine tighter, and I felt the heat radiating from her. With sparkling eyes she affirmed loudly, her lips never losing the smile.

The Inquisitor nodded and looked at me. No one but Cecilia and I could see the commanding glare he gave me. His eyes shone of control, death, and eagerness as he asked me the same question, "I now ask you Adam, will you take Cecilia to be your wife by the laws of God so your souls may be joined for eternity and beyond?"

His lips slowed as the words left his mouth. My mind was racing, drowning all the sound around me in static as images of Katrina and Janari flashed before my eyes: the Mount, the thief jobs, the stars, the meetings in the woods, the tribe, the ambush, the bolt that killed Janari, my hopeful return, and at last the fire that consumed Katrina. It all boiled down to this moment. I had to make a choice. Cherish the past and reminisce or toss it all away to create a new future.

The Inquisitor looked at me full of expectation. I looked at her. A smile like a faint laugh was on her lips. Pure and real. The Greeks had words to describe what dawned on me that moment. What I had felt for Katrina was a romantic love, while Janari and I had held a love reflected in our friendship. But what Cecilia and I shared was unconditional. A love of the soul. It was her that reflected them all.

"Yes, I do."

The crowd burst into applause, but all I saw was her, in a way I had never seen her before. With a triumphant smile the Inquisitor tied a white ribbon around our interlocked hands, signifying the completion of the vow.

Pleased with his success he turned around, "Let the celebrations begin!"

A large decorated staircase was rolled towards the balcony by a group of servants. On cue musicians emerged onto the rooftops surrounding the entire square. At once they played joyous tunes creating a surrounding sound. We used a small step to walk over the banister onto the gigantic

staircase while a platform was pushed towards the bottom of the staircase. The men and women of the city pushed forward wanting to come closer to us as we descended from the balcony down to the square. Cecilia waved into the masses and smiled at the many children that called out her name. At last the ‘commoners’ had won her heart, and she theirs. Our hands were still tied by the ribbon when we had reached the platform. Approaching the center, the tune changed into a slow romantic song with violins and flutes taking over once again. In the far distance the sun began to set with its orange-red light warming the whole horizon while the rest of the sky darkened. Cecilia put her right hand on my shoulder and moved closer. Slowly I redirected my weight onto my right foot and let go of the cane. With my hand on her waist we began to move to the rhythm of the music. In awe they watched, adoring us for the symbol we had become. Soon some brave couples climbed onto the platform and joined us in the dance that started off a long, unforgettable, festive night.

The light in the horizon began to fade. Cecilia was in my arms, and together we shone. We gave light to the people, and light to ourselves. Peace filled my heart at last. I closed my eyes, and for once did not feel pain. All I felt was warmth and safety—a safety that could not and would not be taken— this time not even by the Inquisitor.



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## Chapter 36

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A YEAR HAD passed since Cecilia and I danced into the sunset. Much had changed at first, but quickly life took its rhythm. With her I learned to leave behind the past and focus on the future; a future we were yet shaping. The Inquisitor's plan had worked after all. Cecilia and I had become a symbol of perfection. The common boy, that rose to godlike respect, and the girl that won the hearts and minds of the people through her kindness. As much as we loved our new roles, we were the living puppets of the Inquisitor. Every wrongdoing of his was undone by our appearance. We walked the thin line of inspiration and manipulation.

The rebellion had calmed over the months following the wedding. Every now and then another set of men were sparked by the words I had laid on them a year ago. As if awoken from a century long slumber, some of them could no longer live under the lies of the Inquisition. But the worst was their volatility and unpredictability. Like an insect waiting for the right moment to bite, a subliminal urge to rebellion lingered in them forever, until it snapped.

It was this pattern the Inquisitor had not calculated in his plan. Nor did

he consider the fact of his own demise.

“Tell them to call it off,” the Inquisitor said to Anthony. His voice was weak and so were his bones. Thin like a stick and white like a ghost he lay in his bed.

“It’s the third ceremony you are calling off,” I said, “You can’t suddenly change a century old tradition.”

“Look at me,” he said. “They can’t see me like this. I rather have them fear a powerful man that has turned their back on them, than watch them laugh at me as I try to win their favors with kindness. Times have changed and I must adjust to keep this city alive.”

“How long do you think they will play along? Don’t you think they want to see what happened with their leader?” Cecilia asked.

“The doctor will fix me up,” the Inquisitor insisted. “There have been darker times I have faced over the last one and a half centuries. Everything will be back to normal in a few weeks.”

“You can be their friend. It takes strength to show weakness,” I suggested not believing in his recovery.

“I can never be their friend,” he hissed. “A leader can’t confuse friendliness with strength. They are two exclusive properties. A soft heart poisons fear, and fear breeds respect.”

Cecilia grabbed me by the arm, and whispered in my ear, “We can’t help him. Let him be.”

I left the room without another word. Cecilia followed me closely.

“Let’s go to the square and get your mind off him. Maybe we can personally congratulate the seventeen year old, so his family will not feel excluded.”

She was right. She always was. The bigger the tensions between me and her uncle grew, the more reasonable she appeared.

Down the stairs, through the corridor and over the terracotta boulevard, we made it to the square. A slight tension lay in the air. Some greeted us,



some looked the other way. In hushed voices they whispered, stopping whenever we came too close. The word of the canceled celebration quickly made its rounds. A month ago the first had been canceled. It was met by shock, yet understanding. The second time, two weeks ago, was accepted suspiciously. But the third time was taken with unmistakable hostility.

Even our names and faces had been tainted by the Inquisitor. Their eyes pierced through us like two walking lies. When our presence caused nothing but more angry looks, we decided to leave the market and seek the boy. He was one of the miller's many sons, most likely stuck at work even on this day. We drove deep into the Industrial District past the smelter and lumber mill. The house was a shabby old construction. The thought that all flour came from there was a scary thought. Unsure of what to say we waited hesitant in front of the door. After a moment I knocked with my cane.

Silence reigned. A moment later footsteps approached the door. Through the peephole an eye glanced at us, but the door remained closed. Then the eye disappeared.

"Hello," called Cecilia as the footsteps distanced themselves.

"Jason's not home. Please leave," the woman inside responded harshly.

Disappointed Cecilia placed a basket of fresh fruits at the foot of the door.

"Do you smell that?" I asked her.

"Is that smoke?" Her eyes shot from side to side, "Look!"

In the distance of the Industrial District a large cloud of smoke rose into the sky. It was not the kind of smoke that came from a chimney. It was the smoke of a burning house.

"Let's go! Maybe someone is hurt," Cecilia suggested and pulled me faster than I could walk. The narrow alleys of the district made it impossible to navigate quickly to the source of the fire. The closer we made it the hotter the flames became. Heat radiated far from the fire itself, while the smoke started to spread within the city walls.

The frightened scream of a girl penetrated the air. With quickened feet we rushed through the last intersection.

My eyes drowned in horror, forcing me to a complete stop. I did not know where to look. To the right, the large textile factory was ablaze with flames licking the sky. Henry, the captain of the city guard and husband of the owner of the factory hung mutilated from the top of the building. Burned bodies lay outside the building, having collapsed after the fire burned too deep into their flesh. Another girl's fate had been sealed in front of our eyes. Her clothes caught fire as she tried to exit the building. A band of men stood around the factory with triumphant smiles.

A second girl ran out of the house before the fire could take her. With lustful eyes Jason, the miller boy, grabbed her by the arm on her way out and ripped off part of her blouse. Frightened, she protested with tears rushing down her face.

"Leave her alone!" Cecilia cried.

The group noticed us for the first time. At once their smiles grew even wider. Unflinching Cecilia walked towards the girl. All I could do was follow her.

Roughly she pushed Jason off the girl, took her by the hand, and walked away. He grinned playfully and groped Cecilia as she turned away. Before she could slap him across the face, I had transported his head to the ground. Over the past year I had learned to use my cane for more than just walking.

She looked at me in surprise. Jason began to move again, pressing his palm against his face.

"Move," I ordered her, noticing the men collectively approaching us. One of them drew a knife.

"Run already!" I hissed and moved my cane from side to side like a sword.

"I am not leaving you here," she said.

"You know I am not fast enough," I said, "Run and get the guards!"

At last she listened, chased by a few of the men.

The one with the dagger stepped closer to me and jumped, jabbing out his blade. Taking full swing, I knocked the solid metal eagle into his cheek.

He went right down next to Jason. Just a few seconds later, the next man came at me holding a large rock in his hand. With just enough time I regained balance and rammed the other end of the cane into his stomach.

A man behind me had drawn a sword and aimed for my head. With a second away from death, I dodged his blow. Stress and pain shot through my damaged leg as it hit the ground. Clenching my teeth, I pushed myself upright onto my cane. Blocking his next blow would have been useless as the steel would have gone right through my cane. Jumping, running or staying; it all shot through my mind as the man took swing to cut off my head.

Before I could decide, an arrow pierced into his side. Distracted by the pain he shrugged together and looked for his attacker. With a full swing I knocked him out.

The battle had begun. A group of city-guards charged with drawn blades at the constantly growing number of insurgents. A young man holding a large bag under his arm ran around handing out weapons of all kind. Armed with swords, axes, and hammers they stood their ground against the incoming guards.

I was quickly forgotten in the midst of arrows and steel. A guard cut down a citizen to my left. Two citizens struck out and killed a guard to my right. It was pure chaos.

The blood pumped wildly, almost out of rhythm, through my veins. With big painful steps I circumvented the combatants. Three men followed me but were quickly cut off by more guards that had come running from all districts.

A group of five soldiers ran towards me as I hobbled parallel to the square. One of them was Anthony with a blade in hand.

“Let’s go Adam,” he yelled. “We need to return to the mansion, the Merchant District is about to close its gate!”

“First we need to send more guards,” I said joining their formation. “The rebels are outnumbering us.”

“All the guards are entangled already,” he said out of breath. “The

merchants maintain their personal guard and so is the Inquisitor. We can't protect the people from themselves."

I threw a quick glance back and watched as three guards stood back to back surrounded by two dozen men armed with swords, bats and stones. Resistance was indeed hopeless. Before he yelled at me again I picked up my feet and followed them as fast as I could. Anthony and two guards charged towards the gate as the chains began to move. The grate slowly began to lower into the gate. My knee started to pain. I was prisoner of my own body. "Just give me one second," I said catching a breath under the burning pain. The two guards that had stayed with me grew impatient.

Anthony reached the gate. His two guards held up the grate from moving any further while he argued with the Merchant District's gate keeper. With undying vigor I picked up my pace and pushed my way the last fifty feet.

A loud noise erupted from behind me. Feet. Stomping feet. In my hobbling sprint I paused to take a look around. A horde of around a hundred citizens ran after us with torches and knives. Their faces wore the demonic possession of the mob.

"Let's go!" cried Anthony, who seemed to lose the battle over the gate with a group of merchants that had assembled around him.

I only had twenty more feet to go. The mob drew in closer going at an immense speed.

"We won't be able to close the gate in time!" yelled the gatekeeper at Anthony. Furiously he pointed at the storming masses, "If they get in we are all doomed!"

Fed up with the wait, the merchants detained Anthony and his guards. Angrily the gatekeeper flipped the switch and the grate began to lower again. We were less than ten feet away.

I yanked my cane through the gap and jumped, sliding inside just before the grate locked my two companions outside. A merchant reached out his hand to help me onto my feet while another handed me my cane.

"Open the gate!" I ordered the gatekeeper.

“I won’t let those animals destroy our district,” he said blocking the switch with his body.

“You can’t let them die out there. They stayed behind to protect me!”

“Then their blood is on your hands, not mine,” he said pushing me off him as I tried to reach for the switch.

“It is alright, Mr. Blacksmith,” one of the two said with panic in his eyes, “we shall die for God. And for you.”

They drew their swords and assumed battle stance. Their swords tilted slightly upright facing the approaching horde.

Five seconds. I saw their arms shaking. Three seconds. The mob cried out. One second. The guards took swing.

With a loud thud, masses of bodies clashed into another, pressing against the grate. Before the guards could hold anyone off, their bodies were mangled by the violent collision of the mob and the gate.

We all jumped back, as their arms reached out for us through the grate like a pack of wild beasts.

“They will be locked out for now, but sooner or later the grate will give in,” the gatekeeper said. “Take whatever weapons you can find and spike those sons of bitches.”

“You can’t kill them,” I objected, “the city is lost if any more people die.”

“Boy, I rather kill them, before they kill us,” he said. “Go and find the Inquisitor. He must know of something to do.”

“There is nothing he can do,” I said.

“Maybe our immortal leader is not so godly after all,” another hissed. “Then you go and do something.”

Anthony grabbed me by the arm and pulled me through the crowd of merchants. “There is no time for arguing,” he said, “we need to get you to safety.”

We reached the top of the terracotta boulevard, when the merchants began stabbing with spears and halberds through the grate. The cries of the citizens rang through the air, like the squeaks of dying game. Line after line

they killed off, until the mob grew tired. Groups began to split and rushed to the square. In the distance five houses were ablaze.

Anthony pushed me through the red corridor, where I had first met the Inquisitor in person ten years ago.

“Where is my wife,” I asked him on the way up the stairs.

“She awaits us in the Inquisitor’s chambers. We will pick them up and seek refuge in the safe-room.”

“Why hide in a safe-room?” I said, “We need to do something!”

“Sooner or later the people will break through the prison into the mansion or make it into the Merchant District. The best we can do now is to hide out and wait for the temper to simmer down.”

After a few turns, we burst into the chamber. Cecilia stood aside the bed, crying uncontrollably. The moment she saw me, she fell into my arms. Her whole body was trembling in fear. I held her, watching the violent chaos outside. There was no going back now... At least nothing would ever be the same.

“We need to leave,” Anthony ordered. “All of you!”

Without a response the Inquisitor sat abject in his bed. Blankly he stared out the window.

“Cecilia help me take him,” Anthony said.

“I am going nowhere,” the Inquisitor said in a low solemn tone. “Leave me here. Let them have what they came for, so that they may leave this city in one piece.”

Cecilia dug her nails into my shoulder at the thought of leaving him behind. Her sobbing grew louder.

Anthony clenched his teeth, “We need to leave. Right now!”

Cecilia ran to the door, but I let go of her hand. With panic she turned around.

“I will be right behind you,” I said, “there is something I have to ask your uncle.”

“Don’t be a fool Adam,” Anthony hissed and stepped out the door, “Be quick, don’t make me come back for you.”

They rushed out and the door fell shut.

It was me and the Inquisitor. His weak yet piercing eyes were directed upon me, "Ask your question, son."

"I am not your son," I hissed. "You act like the father of us all, yet you are the most dismissive parent."

"Don't taunt me boy, I am dying."

"How can you die?" I said. "That is my question. I know that you founded your rule on lies. You never were part of the Global Resistance. You were an Aristocrat. You are an immortal."

"That is what they told us," he said. "Old it made me, but immortal? I don't think man will ever replicate the power of the gods. Till now science had been my guardian angel, but even that has turned its back on me." He wiped the sweat from his forehead, "Scientists, leaders, common men, the one virtue we all share are lies. They unite us along with our basic greed. Lies and greed are the most human traits there are, don't you agree?"

"No, I don't," I snapped at him. "You are nothing but a narcissistic old fool. You think your old age makes you wise, but you are so wrong... so wrong about everything. There is good in men, but you breed evil with all you do. Today I might die, but for once I can rest in peace. I can finally rest in peace because I know that if I die, you will die with me. And if there is this heaven you preach about, I will surely go there. But you may burn in hell."

I reached for the door knob. Before I could leave, his wrinkled weak hand grabbed my wrist.

"Why do you hate me?" asked the Inquisitor, as he lay dying.

Screams of citizens penetrated the thick windows of the mansion, their voices burning in my head like the flames consuming their houses in the distance. The protest began to swell on the streets, as it did in my heart.

"How could I not?" I responded in spite. "After all you've done? The lies, the deceit... the murder you've brought upon me and this entire city."

"You don't understand," he said, smiling as if humoring a fool.

I pointed outside to the wild masses trying to break their way into the

mansion. Bloody swords and pale faces filled the square. “Don’t you see where you got us? Where is this God you always talked about? He is nothing but a lie!”

He wiped the sweat off his wrinkled forehead. “Hope, Adam, hope,” he paused, staring out the window into the city from the safety of his bed. His eyes were searching for some hope of his own. “Give the people something to live for ... give them a God and you give them a purpose. It might be a lie, but is it evil?” Bewildered, he observed me. “How can you scorn me for giving the people something that gives them hope, motivation ... even happiness? There are many things you don’t know, Adam.” His eyes sought the mirror at the door of the wardrobe, while his voice was tainted with resignation, “You must become your enemy to truly understand him. I am not asking for forgiveness, but I want you to understand me.”

“Understand you?” I snapped. “You lie there in your bed dying, ignorant of all the pain you have caused. You have not seen the horrors I have seen. You have not felt the anguish I have felt.”

Incensed, I turned my back on him, unable to look at him any longer. I grabbed a golden plate resting on a table close to his bed. “Was it all for this? Riches? Power? Comfort?” Before he had a chance to respond, I slammed my hand across the table, sweeping the goblets, plates, and bowls to the floor. A plate spun atop the marble, and when it came to rest, I found myself gazing into my own distorted reflection. “The golden age you promised was never meant for us. It was all for you. *Just* for you.”

A low chuckle fell from the old man’s pale lips. “There is no golden age, Adam. There never was. We are in a *Dark Age*. Darker than the abyss of the darkest night.” His voice grew sterner. “But why frighten the people with such truths? The moment we accept our demise, it becomes our own reality.” A painful cough rattled his throat. He blocked it with his hand, now crimson as it dropped beside him. Pensively, he looked at the bright stain across his palm. “You are right. If I want you to understand me, I need to understand you first.” His breaths were heavy. He opened his mouth as if to



say something, only to shut it. With weak eyes, he looked at me, reconsidering a thought. "Tell me your story," he said at last.

But now was not the time for storytelling. The noise outside rose, drawing my eyes back to the window. The mob in front of the mansion had grown bigger and wilder. Their bodies clashed and kicked against the thick metal door barring them from the prison. Once inside, only one more barrier needed to be broken through to enter. Then, they could find and kill us all.

Hesitant, I looked at him again.

"Take it as the last wish of a dying man," the Inquisitor said calmly. "It will take them a long time to find their way up here."

Part of me wanted to run. Part of me wanted to stay. At last I pulled up a chair and sat down next to him, "it all started the night of my seventeenth birthday... The night I realized that you and your rules were all that stood in between me and the girl I loved. I knew you had to die."



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## Epilogue

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“AND HERE WE are,” the Inquisitor said in slow breaths as I concluded my story.

Quietly I got up from my chair and walked towards the window. The violence carried on as the fire spread further into the Industrial District. Some groups still fought in the streets, but most conglomerated in the square, unknowing of what was next. To the West I caught a glimpse of the Mount, standing so peaceful and undisturbed above all the violence.

“Do you regret not having pushed that dagger through my back?”

“I think I do,” I responded uncertain of my true opinion, “I often think of that night and wonder what would have happened... How things could have been different.”

“Intriguing isn’t it... history lying in between one’s fingertips. And over and over one asks himself: What if?” His eyes drifted off into empty space, gazing into some faint old memory.

“Anyway,” he said clearing his head and focusing back on me, “You were always a pensive child, yet so naïve. You might not think it, but compared to everyone else you had a mostly peaceful childhood. When you

just told me of the nights you spent on ‘the Mount’, classes with Cecilia, or even the break-in, you smiled. There was so much more happiness and hope in you back then. Now when I look into your eyes I see only darkness. It is as if the haunting images that plague your mind, can be seen in the dark of your eyes.”

“Isn’t that what they say about the Grey Guard? We kill and suffer until that last grain of hope and joy is wiped from our eyes. There is a reason for everything, old man,” I responded coldly. “Life is like riding a ship into the storm. For every wave you take up, you have to drop just as deep. For all those happy moments, I was scarred with an equally painful memory.” With a loud thud the mob broke down the door of the prison underneath the mansion. “I was naïve indeed,” I went on, “not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined the years that lay ahead of me.”

“You suffered, lost friends, and lost hope. You went through what everyone else went through,” the Inquisitor tried to explain to me with his former didactic tone.

“I suppose you are right,” I admitted thinking about my years in the Guard, “but deep inside I never gave up all hope. The thought of returning and bringing forth your fall gave me a purpose.”

“But why did you want me to fall? Why was my demise such an obsession of yours?”

“Blame. I blamed you for all my shortcomings, I blamed you for all the limitations life gave me, and I blamed you for every friend and loved one that died.” I took a long deep breath and looked away from him, “It just always seemed easier to make you the face of evil than to accept my own mistakes.”

An inconspicuous yet confident smile conquered his face. He relished my admission of fault for a moment, but quickly sought more, “But tell me one more thing, Adam. Why did you seek the past? What did you intend to find?”

“I was searching for the same thing you are searching for in my past: Answers. I did not just want to fight the demons that haunted our city

outside the gates. I wanted to escape them, and in my heart I knew that there was such a possibility.” I raised my voice at him consumed by anger, “And I knew that you would do everything in your power to maintain the ignorant bliss that you spread through your constant celebrations of seventeen year olds. You kept the people just content enough to not ask questions.”

The Inquisitor was quiet. He knew I was right, but was not ready to admit it.

“Why the secrecy? Why did you want no one to know about the Underground Empire, the world before 2050, and the Gate Watchers.”

“Knowledge is power Adam. The moment the masses acquire this power, control fades. And when control fades, chaos erupts.” He pointed to the havoc that was raging outside in the city, “You know as well as I do that I am not to blame for this. You and your stubbornness, planted the seed of rebellion. And it grew beyond you. We need a miracle now or this city is lost.”

“All these years, this has been your alibi? Keeping the people safe?” I asked incredulously.

“Have I not kept them safe? Over a century ago I formed this city with my own hands, Adam. I am the oldest and longest lasting ruler this world has ever seen; from Caesar down to Napoleon. The reason we have lived this long was that we were content with our situation. I never ventured for the greedy mission to expand our city to make it an empire. My brother Alexander did, losing all his power in the process. Power is like a house of cards. If you leave it alone it will stand forever. But if you try to build it higher and higher, sooner or later it is bound to collapse. All I did was control the cards, making sure that no other man could build his own tower. It made mine the largest in this valley. Maybe beyond the valley there is a greater ruler, but that never mattered to me. All there is and has ever been for me was this valley.”

“Then why didn’t you seek peace with the villagers?”

“I tried Adam, I tried. Many times I was close to creating peace, but

each time something went wrong. Villagers set traps for the guards, to pay back for the raping of their women, while guards killed villagers that had murdered their friends, claiming they mistook them for game in the woods. Too much blood had already been shed for a fresh start. I learned that there would never be a clean slate, so I made the best of it. I united my men under the banner of the Grey Guard. The savages were the common enemy of the people, and I was their leader and protector. After years I realized that the unison and faith created by the hatred for the savages was far greater than the few lives that were lost out in the woods. It was a high price to pay, but it all went towards the stability of the city.”

“We are all just pawns in your game of chess,” I looked at him with disgust. “The savages are of such a benefit, that you never even ventured to destroy them completely. You kept them weak enough to not cause major problems, but strong enough to keep the Guard busy.”

The Inquisitor smiled weakly, “You learn quickly, Adam. You have the mind of a leader. Once the savages are gone there is no need for protection and all limitations disappear. People would leave the city and dissipate. In the matter of a week we would live in a ghost town, while citizens are out in the wild with no knowledge of survival. Some would seek to explore what lies beyond the valley falling victim to the radiation that still exists in parts of the country. In other words, men can’t handle liberty. The moment you give them too much of it, social stability falters. Once social stability falters, personal stability will decline and honest good men turn into mad lunatics in the search for power.” His eyes became glossy, “It takes time and a critical mind to see it, but I sacrificed myself for this city. I would have traded my power for a regular life any day. I wanted to live, love and die. But all I did was rule in solitude. It was my duty.”

I almost felt pity, but it was not enough to forgive his actions.

Voices and stomping drew me back to the present. The mob must have found their way into the mansion. Time was running out. Grabbing the cane I pushed myself up onto my crippled leg.

“Where are you going?” the Inquisitor asked.

“I need to leave, my time to die has not come yet,” I responded hobbling towards the door.

“There is one more thing I must tell you,” he said. I paused with the doorknob in hand.

His eyes were closed, his voice raspy. “Cecilia is my daughter.”

“I knew,” I said recalling that the gate to the Underground Empire had been shut long before her birth. “But who was her mother?”

“A common girl,” he said, “she took her life after I told her that our love may never be known of.” He was quiet, “I too have loved and lost.”

The noise grew louder. The mob was only few stories below me, ravaging through the many rooms.

“My time has come,” he said. “Out of all people, you are the only one to stay with me in my final moments. Even if it is the one right thing I did during my life, let me tell you that I am sorry for the wrongs I have caused you. You are right. There are good men in this world. Men like you that turn night into day and in the face of darkness know that light is near. I envy you for that.”

His voice died off at the end of the sentence.

The door to the chamber was ripped open. Anthony had come back for me.

“You must come with me right now,” he urged. “They are almost here,” his eyes drifted off to the Inquisitor who lay motionlessly in his bed.

I nodded at his troubled look. “I cannot come with you,” I said. His body tensed. “Before you object, hear me out. There is something I must do. One last time I ask you to trust me, my friend. See this as my final wish. Take the tunnels to the Temple District and notify the bishop to ring the city bell five times. I don’t know how you will do it, but I depend on you to.”

His teeth were clenched, “One last time.” Our eyes remained glued on another, “It was good knowing you Blacksmith. I’ll see you up there.” He let go of the doorknob and vanished down the stairs.

I knew there was only one thing I could do now. Carefully I took

everything I needed and made my way out the door. On the stairs I could hear the men ruin the rooms below. Quietly I walked into the marble hall, with the golden throne at its end. With determined steps I walked inside.

When everything was prepared, I rested on the golden throne. The room was vacant, dead and quiet. My eyes drifted off to the window, gazing into a horizon past the valley. That moment for just a second or two an eagle passed through the air. It was the first I had ever seen.

The bell struck once. I got onto my feet. It struck twice. Slowly I walked to the door. It struck a third time. My hands pulled open the double door. It struck a fourth time. I pulled open the red curtain. It struck a fifth time, and I spread my arms.

I was the Inquisitor.

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## About the Author

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Felix Oliver Hartmann was born in Germany in the mid-nineties and immigrated to the United States in 2008. At just 21, he is a student of political science, full time startup entrepreneur, experienced financial trader, and now published author. Since early years, Hartmann has had an affinity for writing, which came to fruition when completing his first novel, *Dark Age*.

*Dark Age* brings together many of Hartmann's influences, from his interests in Artificial Intelligence and tech, over his love for political theory and philosophy, to his childhood hometown that is reminiscent of the dark ages. Hartmann continues to pursue a vast variety of genre-crossing writing projects that are set to be released throughout 2017 and 2018.



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