

Survivors

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From set *Innistrad: Crimson Vow*

“Good people of “ Torens began but stopped short when he drew a blank at the village’s name. Over the past two years, earning money had involved cycling through Innistrad’s isolated hamlets, eating from the same roast chicken for a week, and avoiding stretches of road where ghastly things prowled for easy prey. Keeping track of where he was had become even harder when all the days blended into a single endless night. “Good people,” he began again. “These are challenging times. And challenging times require challenging things.”

Dammit. The extra half day of travel along the Kessig-Stensia border—thanks to a rather zealous cathar named Ingrid who unceremoniously chased him out of Silbern, his preferred stay—had caused words to feel slippery and serpentine. Regrouping himself, he motioned toward the contents of his wagon, all prepped for display. The canvas top had been pulled up over the wagon hoops with the words “Torens’s Curious Goods” painted on the inside of the cover. In the wagon bed rested wicker bins filled with various small sundries, all reasonably priced and labeled accurately.

Reasonably accurately.



Torens, Fist of the Angels | Art by: Justine Cruz

“Have a werewolf problem?” Torens asked the crowd, reaching into one of the baskets to pull out a small brown bottle. “I have a werewolf *solution*.” He’d never heard any complaints about his anti-lycanthrope serum—mostly because he never stuck around long enough to hear them.

“What about witches’ curses?” he continued, dipping into another basket and producing a necklace strung with hollowed bat bones. “Wear this, and you’ll be hex-free, guaranteed. Plus, it’s one hell of a fashion statement.”

“Vampires?” Some faces in the crowd lit up with recognition. Torens pulled out a small silver mirror, dirty and smudged, along with a flat canister from his back pocket. He slathered the viscous contents of the canister all over the mirror, and after a short once-over with his shirt cuff, he turned the spotless glass back onto the crowd. “Vampires can look like anyone, fade into mist, turn into bats! But you’ll always be able to spot them with this—Torens’s Clairvoyic Varnish! Now don’t all come rushing at me at once.”

They didn’t. Instead came jeers and bouts of laughter.

“People, people!” a voice called out, cutting short the laughter. The man who had spoken stepped forward, parting the crowd like a returning king. “We get so few visitors to our humble village. If you’re not going to show our guest respect, then you should go home.” The crowd responded with murmurs but no protestations as they dispersed. The man introduced himself. “I am Vytas. Allow me to apologize on behalf of the people of Traublassen. They are simple folk.”

“Whatever. The message was loud and clear. I’ll be on my way.”

“Sir, I don’t want you to leave. I have a task suited to a man of your talents. One that pays.”

Hmm. A paying gig would do a lot of good to wash out the sour taste of that day. But frankly, he couldn’t stand being in the same vicinity as Vytas let alone work for him. The man’s wardrobe screamed a pretense of haute couture: a tunic of linen with underlayers of silk and velvet, all with fine gold trimming. Worse was his high-and-mighty tone, like a lord palliating a hog with choice morsels just before nodding a go-ahead to the butcher.

“Pass,” said Torens.

“The offer is most generous,” Vytas said. “I doubt those looking for you would make nearly as equitable a deal. It would be a shame if someone aided them in their search.” He patted Torens’s wagon. “Quite remarkable how fast determined cathars on horseback can travel compared to someone pulling a load like this.”

Torens grumbled. “What do you want?”

“For you to listen,” Vytas said. “Come. We’ll talk in my study.”

Torens and Vytas rode through the village to Vytas’s manor house. Alabaster columns dominated the front facade, and the dozen windows implied at least that many rooms. As they approached, Torens spied a young man standing by the front door. Vytas let out an annoyed groan as he climbed down from the wagon.

“Aleksandar,” said Vytas. “It is late.”

Though he was a clear head taller than Vytas, Aleksandar was a jumble of knees and elbows under a messy blonde mop. In a few years, Torens surmised, he’d fill out his frame. But until then he’d have the presence of a noodle in day-old soup.

“It’s about rent, sir,” Aleksandar said, managing to stay in front when Vytas’s man tried to sidestep him. “Give us one more week. My father has some contracts coming in, and—”

“This is neither the time nor the place.”

“Why not?” said Torens, joining them on the doorstep. “Give the kid a break.”

Vytas leaned in close to Torens. “These are separate matters from ours.”

“I’m hearing you out. Why don’t you do the same for him?”

Vytas harrumphed but maintained his composure.

“Aleksandar, you and I can discuss things after my dealings with this gentleman are concluded. In the meantime, take his wagon to the stables.” Vytas straightened his shirt, pulled his cloak tight, and beamed a wide smile back at Torens. “Shall we?”

Vytas’s manor was as ostentatious as the finest mansion back in Thraben. Before The Travails, Torens had served as a Mausoleum Guard; his least favorite jobs were house calls to the homes of jumpy aristocrats who swore their dead relatives had risen from the grave to steal back their inheritances. It usually turned out to be the cat (except for that one time). Greeting Torens just inside Vytas’s foyer was a bronze sculpture of a wolfpack dashing across a prairie. Farther up, on either side of a grand archway, hung two paintings: one of Vytas himself, with a generous tuft of hair on the top of his head, and another of a bearded man clad in a black tunic and coif, a pair of thick-lensed spectacles balanced on the tip of his nose.

“My great-grandfather, Taivas,” Vytas proclaimed. “He founded Traublassen with nothing more than a vision and his knack for hunting.”

Torens followed Vytas through hallways bedecked with various art pieces until they arrived at a room dominated by a dark wooden desk topped with papers, quills, and a decanter of wine. Vytas poured out two glasses.

“What’s the job?” said Torens, ignoring the wine Vytas nudged toward him.

“Not one for niceties, eh?”

“Threats don’t exactly make a great first impression.”

“Threats?” Vytas lowered himself into his leather-backed desk chair. “It’s my business to know who is coming in and out of my town. I have extensive church contacts. Word can travel fast, given means and motivation. A weapon imbued with a runechanter’s ward is quite the motivation for your fellow cathars, as is the apprehension of the brother-turned-thief that absconded with it.”

Torens stewed in silence. *Exactly how much does Vytas know?*

“Relax. I have no interest in your internecine squabbles,” Vytas continued. “In fact, I sense a good soul in you, despite what I’ve been told. You carry yourself with a certain nobility that I believe surpasses whatever issues have plagued your past.”

“Get to the point.”

“Indeed. You’ve no doubt taken note of the people of this town. They’re stalwart stock. My great-grandfather ensured that from the outset. He formed alliances, used his wealth to encourage more settlers and provide for their security.”

“His *tenants*’ security.”

“He shouldered the risk, as I do now. I provide seed, medicine for livestock, arms for the village’s security. Some measure of compensation is a reasonable expectation.” Vytas straightened some papers on his desk into a neat pile. “Still, no one is perfect. Recently, some reports have come to me in private about strange sounds emanating from the keep overlooking the village.”

“A keep?” Torens didn’t remember seeing such a structure on his way into town.

“With the encroaching darkness, it can be hard to discern against the horizon,” said Vytas. “According to reports, the noise is a faint screeching. It could merely be some wounded animal, but it’s my job to be sure.”

“No one seemed very distressed back in the village square.”

“With all due respect, you’re an outsider. They don’t trust you like they trust me.”

“Trust. Sure. That’s what I saw back in the square.”

Vytas smirked at Torens’s barb. “You will investigate the keep. If you find something out of the ordinary, you will take care of it. Discreetly, of course.”

“Of course,” Torens sneered. “Got me over a barrel.”

“Hardly. The fee will absolutely be worth your time.” Vytas pulled open one of the lower drawers of the desk, pulled out a small box, and lifted the lid to reveal that it was filled with pristine gold coins, each stamped with the laureled symbol of Avacyn. Vytas counted out twenty-five, one by one, and slid them across his desk into a pile. “That’s half with the other half due upon completion.”

Torens picked up a coin to study it. He pressed it between his fingers, flipped it over close to Vytas’s lantern light, even sniffed it. It was the real thing. And fifty total for the whole job? That was enough to keep him well stocked for well over a year. Still, this whole deal felt off, even accounting for Vytas’s coercion and Torens’s own revulsion at working for someone so slimy.

“So,” said Vytas, wrenching Torens from his thoughts. “Do we have a deal?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“There’s always a choice,” said Vytas. “It’s simply that some options are better than others.”

“Fine, except for one thing,” said Torens, sliding the coins into his hand. “How much is the boy’s rent?”

Vendors in Hanweir’s famed marketplace split their time packing up their booths and hurriedly addressing customers’ last-second purchases to avoid an impending cloudburst. The hubbub was a perfect distraction for Torens to slip his hands into unguarded pockets and come away with spare coin. At twelve years old, his fingers were small and precise—perfect for pilfering bits here and there to surreptitiously add to the family coffers—as long as he had a bit of cover.

Wandering by the livestock pens, he spotted the perfect mark: a well-dressed man flanked by two servants holding their cloaks over his head, deep in negotiations with a farmer selling chickens. One of the servants shook a single gold coin at the farmer’s face while the well-dressed man held the hard line: “One gold for the whole lot! Take it or leave it!”

Gold! Torens had never seen it in real life. His mother, a washer woman, made her wages in copper. His woodworker father, on the other hand, must have been paid some measure in gold, but only a scant few silvers survived his ale-fueled bets on the turtle races down at Lost Lake tavern. Even two or three coins alone could feed the whole family for several weeks.

It had started to drizzle. Standing back up, Torens stepped into the flow of the people making their way out of the market. He worked his way up to where the well-dressed man and his cohorts stood, and, timing his window just right, he jabbed his arm out and dipped two fingers into the servant’s open pocket, pinching out two of the precious coins. He drew his arm back with his bounty held tight and took a moment to gaze upon the prize.

It was a moment too long. The servant lunged after Torens, and while the boy managed to evade his grasp, the men gave pursuit. Unfortunately, the crowd that had provided him shelter now impeded his escape, and it wasn’t long before he felt a set of hands grabbing his arms, another set holding his neck. He was dragged back to the merchant’s booth. Waiting for him there was the well-dressed man, a scowl on his beet-red face.

"Insufferable brat!" said the man. "You know what happens to dregs like you? You disappear. Because you're of no use, not worth anyone's care."

Suddenly, Torens felt one of the servants let go of him. He turned in time to see the man thrown across the path into a crate of fish. The other servant hopped up to his feet, only to receive a well-placed gut punch. A towering shadow overtook the well-dressed man, who, finding himself alone, fell backward onto the muddy ground.

"Wh-what is the meaning of this?" he stammered.

Torens stood up, smiled, and approached his savior: his older brother Elamon, who stood one and a half heads over everyone else in the market. Before Torens could celebrate, Elamon snatched the coins and tossed them back at the wealthy man.

"Never touch my brother again," Elamon said to the men on the ground. "Now leave."

Scurrying up to their feet, the man and his servants scrounged up their money and fled.

Taking Torens by the collar, Elamon dragged him underneath an outcropping to escape the now-downpour.

"I'm not always going to be around to save your hide," he said.

"Like you're some hero!" yelled Torens. "I didn't need saving!"

"How many times have I pulled you from the fire? I've lost count."

Torens had no rebuttal. Instead, he focused on his lost quarry. "We needed that money!"

"Not this way," said Elamon.

"But—"

"Enough!" Elamon jammed a finger into Torens's chest, pinning him to the wall. "We're going home."

In the dead of night, going alone into the unknown was a choice made by the foolhardy and the desperate; thus, Torens didn't protest when Vytas offered his son, Boris—burly and taciturn, with a jaw like an anvil and the charm of another, slightly heavier anvil—as guide.

"You stink of the city," Boris said upon introductions. Torens sniffed the inside of his collar. He wouldn't have been mistaken for a bouquet of flowers, but at least he didn't smell like a particularly busy day at the slaughterhouse. Traublassen's major cash product was in the pelt and fur trade, and chief among Vytas's trapper corps was Boris.

The keep's days as a protective structure were long past. After crossing a bridge over a dry moat and passing through a crumbling barbican, Boris and Torens arrived at a small courtyard. Perhaps once this had been a verdant garden, but all that remained now were empty stone planters on top of brittle, broken dirt. They crossed the dead ground and approached a set of tall black iron doors, a sculpture of a hellkite embedded into it.

"My great-great-grandfather Taivas built this door," Boris said, patting it like a pet. "He was a visionary, a genius." Placing the lantern on the ground, he pulled a brass sphere the size of his fist from his belt pouch and placed it into a recess in one of the dragon's eyes. The low grinding sounds of tumblers turning against stone followed, and the door slipped ajar.

Suddenly, his prideful smile vanished, and, unsheathing a long knife, Boris sprinted back toward the barbican. Torens gazed past the edge of the lantern light. He saw nothing but heard sounds of a struggle, prompting him to reach into his satchel and grip the iron-shod handle of his weapon. He let go when Boris returned with Aleksandar, the young man from earlier. He'd changed out of his work

clothes into a well-worn suit of archer's armor, the hard leather at the elbows cracked and flaking. On his belt hung a sword in its sheath.

"Why are you following us?" asked Torens.

"I wish to offer my protection while you are exploring the keep," answered the boy. "It's a matter of honor. You paid my family's rent."

"Honor and a tin of rotten fish won't get you much more than a stomachache," said Torens. "If you're lucky."

"Listen to sense, boy," Boris mocked. "Go back home and make sure next month's rent is on time. Or would you rather do this dance again?" Judging from Aleksandar's despondent expression, the answer was no. The kid may have had guts, but he didn't have the muscle needed to back that mettle up. At least he knew it. Satisfied with himself, Boris turned his attention back to Torens. "I'll lock the door behind you—for the safety of the town." He pointed up to a small window on the second floor. "When you're done, shine a light, and I'll let you out."

Torens nodded and stepped inside. Then he turned to Aleksandar.

"You coming or what?"

Aleksandar broke out into a smile and raced to Torens's side.

"Your grave," Boris grumbled as Aleksandar hustled past. He shut and locked the door behind them.

Torens, with Aleksandar following, stepped into the quiet hallway. Shards of stone tiles and bits of fallen masonry crunched underfoot. The sounds of tiny claws skittering on the floor came from just outside the edge of the light. At the end of the corridor was a doorway that opened into a wider space on the other side.

"Sir?" said Aleksander. "Why did you change your mind back there?"

Torens didn't answer right away. He scanned the edge of the light for larger signs of movement among the shadows and then proceeded to the doorway. Extending his lantern inside the room beyond, he guessed that this was the keep's great hall, judging by its size. At the far end of the hall was a staircase winding upward to a mezzanine overlooking the ground floor. This place may once have been party to feasts or meetings of import between significant dignitaries. None of that opulence remained.

"I hate bullies," said Torens, waving Aleksandar forward. "And I really hated that one." He knelt, placing his satchel onto the ground. Then he reached inside and once again grasped the handle of his weapon. Electric pinpricks climbed up his arm. "It was still a mistake to follow us."

"I told you why I did. You paid—"

"That's nothing."

"It's not nothing," said Aleksandar. "My family runs a smithy. Without the sun, crops don't grow, and no crops means no need for new farming tools or fixing old ones. We're lucky that I tend Vytas's stables for a bit more money, but there's only so much belt-tightening we can do. You saved us."

"I didn't save anyone," said Torens. He stared at the ground, searching for a change of subject, before catching sight of the scabbard on Aleksandar's belt. "Let's see that sword of yours, kid." The boy unsheathed a sturdy-looking blade and handed it to Torens, who balanced it across his palms to test the weight. "It's good work," he noted as he handed the sword back. The boy was beaming. It didn't matter that the make was simple and the hilt crude. "You know how to use it?"

"I've had a few lessons from my mother," said Aleksandar. "She grew up in Estwald, where her father was captain of the guard. She's shown me a few tricks."

“Sounds like your family’s pretty close. Mine wasn’t exactly hugs and kisses.”

“It’s always been just the three of us. We take care of each other.”

A scream pierced the silence, a human cry.

“It’s coming from up there!” Aleksandar exclaimed as another scream rang out. “C’mon!” Sword in hand, he bolted up the stairs. Torens pulled the mace from his satchel, flooding the room with bright white light. Rushing up, he reached the landing in time to see Aleksandar throw open the locking pin and charge in.

The night was full of laughter, the slosh of indisputably diluted ale poured into cups followed by the slap of pale amber splashing onto the tabletops. Jorelda’s Pub was the latest venue to be graced by Marguerite, one of Gavony’s most celebrated bards. It turned out that would-be nobles and gutter ruffians alike enjoyed bawdy songs, even if the tipsy mandolinist accompanying her played every third chord sharp or flat.

Torens raised a stein to his mouth with an unsteady hand. His contact was late. It had taken the better part of a month to organize the shipment of bezoars, talismans, rare herbs, and other items declared contraband by the town council. The ban hardly affected demand. Rumors out of otherwise peaceful hamlets pegged the missing travelers not on desperate highwaymen, as the authorities proposed, but on creatures more terrible. Whatever the story—a wolfpack ten thousand strong, winged monstrosities assembling on the Ashmouth, or some other concocted nightmare—it stoked fear in the population that made for fertile, untapped markets.

All Torens needed was this one deal to pull through. No more fending away debt collectors, who’d learned to wait until Elamon was away to accost his mother. The take would be enough to outright purchase a home and ensure food was always on the table. All that was left was to meet up with a man named Rogel and finalize the deal. Regrettably, Torens had neglected to obtain a description of Rogel, leaving him to sit at the bar and huddle over his drink.

From out of nowhere, a pair of bear paws gripped his shoulders and shook.

“Little brother!” Elamon, smelling of oiled armor and sweat, sat next to Torens and ordered an ale. Many in the bar momentarily tore their attentions away from Marguerite to gawk at Elamon out of admiration, desire, or fear. He’d become somewhat of a local celebrity, thanks in part to him rooting out a werewolf among the ranks of his fellow garrison members. Goodly people raised their fists in his honor. Outlaws on the lam slinked off seats and made hasty exits. “I didn’t expect to see you here!”

“Same,” said Torens, scanning for lines of egress. “You’re not the carousing type.”

“A contact tipped us off that some kind of deal was going down here tonight. Last week, we intercepted an entire crate of severed fingers, hundreds of them, each labeled as the holy digit of Saint Traft himself. Can you believe that?”

Torens could. He wasn’t involved with the deal but knew the people who were. They’d gone into hiding now that the loan sharks who lent them money were coming for their cut in either coin or blood, whichever was most expedient.

“I thought you were a town watch, not a trade federation.”

“I tried to tell Captain Lysandra. She responded by sending me on this wild goose chase.”

“Have fun with that. I’m going to go.”

“Not so fast,” said Elamon, laying a hand on Torens’s shoulder, lowering him back into his seat. “How long has it been since we relaxed and talked?”

Damn. Why couldn't it be easy? "Let's see. I'm twenty-one, so. . .twenty-one years."

Elamon took a long drink and nodded. "I don't expect you to understand." He was different than what Torens remembered—more sullen, content to gaze into the froth topping his drink. "You're still staying with your friends by the docks?"

"Yeah." Friends? More like accomplices. After their father died two years before, leaving Elamon the default man of the house, the rule of law came swiftly. A curfew. No carousing at local dives. An ever-expanding list of "hoodlums" Torens was forbidden from associating with. Their nightly arguments rarely did more than agitate their mother, herself sickly and bedridden. Two months of this, and Torens had had enough. He moved out and into a hovel ironically populated by the kinds of people Elamon thought he was placing on his list. Still, Torens felt like they were his people, those who understood that you either claw out of the pit or get swallowed. No middle ground, no room for principle when survival was at stake.

"Ma asks about you. She always sets a place at dinner."

"Don't," said Torens. "You know how it would be if I was back at home."

"You could at least stop by to see her once in a while. Just last night. . ." Elamon's voice trailed off as his gaze drifted from Torens to a point across the room. Turning his head, Torens spotted exactly what his brother was looking at—just inside the doorway was a gaunt man who more resembled a lost rabbit than a typical bar patron. He'd only have stuck out more if he were on fire. Elamon got up and left a few coppers on the bar. "Buy us another round. I'll be back."

Torens didn't know if that was Rogel who'd just entered, but he couldn't take the chance.

"Elamon!" he called out.

"What is it?"

"For what it's worth, I do understand. Thanks for always looking out for me." Torens curled his fingers around the handle of his stein. "I'm sorry." With that, he picked up the stein and whipped its contents into Elamon's face, using the moment to barrel past his brother, through the crowd, and out the door. He had to get somewhere safe, and quickly. Torens slunk down a gangway between two shops and emerged on a small, twisty lane with the intention of blending in with the rest of the nighttime carousers. A good plan, but it wasn't meant to be.

"Stop." Elamon was approaching from the far intersection, his crossbow loaded. "Why, Torens?"

"You know why," he answered.

"Every day, I work to help our family! To gain respect! This is how you succeed!"

"Respect? From whom? The captain who bullies you? And the council? They're too busy sipping fine wine while caravans are being slaughtered on the roads. We're nothing to them. We don't matter unless we make our own opportunities."

"No," said Elamon, only a few steps away. He threw down his crossbow. "There is a right way to do things."

"Does that include arresting me?"

Elamon lunged for his brother, but Torens nimbly ducked and darted away from every attempt. Elamon move forward with another attempt at a bear hug, but Torens dodged again. His brother was pulling his punches—Torens could tell. Even with his armor weighing him down, Elamon was faster than this. If the circumstances only involved convincing Elamon to stand down, perhaps there were options for Torens other than running away. But his brother's lenience, wrought by either love or heartbreak, wouldn't help him fend off the rest of the guard who would soon swarm the area around Jorelda's.

Torens waited for Elamon to reach for him once more. This time, he feinted a punch, throwing his brother slightly off balance. That was the opening he needed to break away and get lost in Hanweir's twisty alleyways before skipping town.

Too late to stop Aleksander, Torens launched himself across the threshold and into the doorway. The darkness on the other side was thick, choking—smoke as dense as shadow. The light from his mace, which had been a boon, lit up the smoke, surrounding him in a blanket of featureless gray.

“Aleksandar?” he called out.

Answering him were a series of snarls and hisses that seemed to come from everywhere, and then, arising mere inches from him, a taloned hand attempted to rake him across his face. He managed to dodge backward and swat the claw away with his mace, causing whatever creature it was to squeal in pain. Torens stepped back into a defensive position only to walk right into two more claws slashing him across the leg. He fell to his knee, spying a flurry of three-toed feet clacking on the floor underneath the smoke cloud.

“Aleksandar! Where are you?” He came back to his feet and stood his ground, waiting for something meaty—a head, a body—to swing at. None came. Instead, the smoke dissipated, allowing the light from Torens's mace to gradually permeate the room. The first thing he spotted was Aleksandar's sword on the ground next to the shattered remains of Boris's lantern. He bent to pick up the sword, uttering every curse he'd ever learned.

“Torens of Hanweir,” said a woman's voice from behind him. He swung around with mace and sword ready to strike, only to be faced with something—someone—completely unexpected. Pushed into the corner of the room was a decrepit bed and, on it, a woman in her bedclothes, the covers bunched up around her as she huddled against the stone wall. Had she been there the whole time?



Eruth, Tormented Prophet | Art by: Ekaterina Burmak

“How do you know my name? What the hell is going on?”

“The devils took the boy to their master.”

Devils. Great. And their demon master. Double great. Torens had experience with zombies and ghouls as a Mausoleum Guard, but demons were reserved for Moor Chaplains who specialized in exorcisms or Spearsages adept at incinerating fiends with angelic flame. Best thing he could do was insult the things and then die.

“My name is Eruth.” She pulled the bed covers away to reveal shackles on both her ankles chaining her to the wall. The skin under the metal was blistered and raw. “I’m a prisoner of the hunters, as you are.”

“Hunters?” he asked.

“Those men who stink like fresh meat left to dry.”

And there was the catch. Vytas and Boris and maybe the whole damn town were a bunch of cultists, and Torens and Eruth were the main course for their demon lord. Torens promised that, should he ever encounter Boris again, he’d see how appreciative that offal-smelling brute would be when his great-great-grandfather’s visionary genius was dropped on his face.

“Let me get these things off,” said Torens. He studied the chains attached to Eruth’s ankles. They were thick and strong, but at least there didn’t seem to be any magic involved. A bit of elbow grease and the right angling, and he could bend the shackles enough to slide her feet out. “Your legs. I gotta touch them. That okay?”

“Do what you must.”

He knelt down and got to work, first testing the tensile strength of the chains with his hands and then wedging a flange on the head of his mace into one of the clasps to pry it open. “What is this place?” he asked. “Some kind of evil temple?”

Eruth shook her head. “I only know what the Dark Lady tells me.”

He looked up. “Who?”

“The Dark Lady. She’s standing right behind you.”

Torens held his breath as he turned to see no one, noting that his mace had not flared up as it normally did in the presence of spirits or fiends.

“She’s my companion. I learned your name from her. And she’s the one who has helped me evade people like you. Cathars.” The way she said it—more spat out than stated. It wasn’t like it was his choice to join the ranks of Avacyn’s soldiers. After running away from Hanweir, Torens had made his way toward the high city of Thraben. Soon after, he found himself besieged by zombies and skaabs along with the city’s population. When he was caught scavenging corpses on the battlefield, he had the sheer dumb luck to be brought before the commander of the Gavony Riders. Someone less understanding than Odric would have jailed him and left him to rot. Instead, he offered to put in a word with Thalia, Thraben’s new guardian. *You’re a survivor*, Odric had said. *The church needs men like you, especially now.*

“I’m retired,” said Torens.

“Is that not one of their holy weapons?”

“It was. Now it’s not.”

Eruth went on. “Cathars came to Lambholt demanding information from me.”

“From you? Why?”

"I have dreams. Visions of the future, mostly about the impending deaths of others. When they could not act on what I told them, they called me a heretic and erected their execution blade in the center of the village."

Torens had heard stories of so-called "mad prophets," people who purported to divine the fates through communion with lost gods, nature spirits, or demons. Usually, these unfortunate souls were left to wander byways spewing proclamations into the air. More recently, they'd been corralled and sent to facilities like Geier Reach Sanitarium. But execution? That was the purview of one particular group within the church.

"Inquisitors," he growled.

"Sadists in vestments playing at holiness. I fled to the mountains, and there, the Dark Lady came to me. I've only been able to keep one step ahead of them because of her."

"She didn't warn you about the hunters. Isn't that a bit suspicious?"

"She's proven herself to me. Unlike you."

"That's fair," he said, sliding Eruth's feet out of her fetters. "You're free. Can you walk?"

Eruth placed her feet onto the floor, leaned forward, and stood, only to double over immediately after. Torens caught her and walked her around the room until she had her legs under her once more.

Sitting her on the bed, Torens questioned her: "The devils' master. Tell me where."

"The Dark Lady says that he's down. Deep down below."

"Not much to go on, but I'll figure it out. Stay here until I come back."

"I am coming with you, Torens of Hanweir. My destiny is down there, as is yours."

"It's just Torens, okay? And no, you're not coming because it's not safe." He tried to stare Eruth down, but she only gazed back at him with the glassy-eyed stare of someone whose experience lay one step away from the abyss. "Fine," he said, pressing Aleksandar's sword into her hands. "If you're with me, you'll need this."

"I'm no fighter."

"And I'm no hero. But sometimes, it's gotta be you."

Torens spurred his horse faster. Almost there, he thought.

The roads linking Thraben to the rest of Gavony had seen much traffic lately, and those connected to his hometown were no exception. A week earlier, refugees from various parts of the province had begun to stream into the high city. Their reasoning was sound. If any place was a haven from the madness that had beset the land, the seat of the church would have been it. But to Torens, Thraben felt more like bait for a giant rat trap about to get sprung, and he'd rather not have had his neck in prime snapping position.

Leaving was bittersweet. In the three years he'd been part of the cathars, Torens had grown fond of the motley crew the church had assembled out of desperation: ex-convicts, men and women estranged from their families, lost souls searching for purpose. But once Odric was ousted from his place on the Lunarch Council, Torens forfeited his trust in the banner. That didn't change the respect he had for those he served with, so it bothered him to abandon his post. But once he'd heard the confusing, nonsensical testimonies of those who'd fled Hanweir, he knew he had to leave right away.

His departure came at the perfect time. Some refugees described a great earthquake that swallowed Han-weir. Others talked about their friends and neighbors becoming monsters before their eyes. And the wildest, from a pair of boys so exhausted from non-stop traveling that they were barely able to speak:

"It's gone. The whole town just walked away."

Torens slowed his horse as he approached the shore of the River Kirch, the waterway that facilitated Han-weir's rise as Gavony's agricultural center. Sticking out of the water were the masts of several sunken boats, along with the crushed remnants of the piers that had once made up the wharf. He realized that he was standing where the docks used to be.

This is not possible, he thought as he led his horse along the river. With each step came the soft squish of soggy earth, yielding not water but a wretched slime that coated his boots. All that remained of the town's formidable walls were small pieces of masonry also coated in the same dark, sticky muck. Beyond the field of broken stonework lay an empty pit, as if the entire town, all at once, had been gouged out of the earth.

Nausea hit him, roiling his insides like the churn of the thunderhead above, an apocalypse in repose. The next moments were a blur of shadow and wind as he wound through phantom streets imprinted onto his memory, all the way to the spot where the hovel where he and his family lived used to be.

The place he once called home.

Torens stood up and fetched the leather scroll case a courier had brought to him eight months before. He didn't have to open it to know who'd sent it, and he had not been inclined to read what the sender wanted to say. Until now.

Torens,

Do you know how difficult it was to find you? I expect you do. But I did thanks to a friend whose sister is a Parish-Blade in Thraben. I never would have thought you a man of faith, but you've always managed to surprise me.

Mother is not doing well. She sunk into a melancholy after you left, but lately it has been far worse. She refuses to leave her bed, and it has been days since she has eaten. It would do her good to see you again. It would do me good, too. It is strange how you have found your belief, while recent times have robbed me of mine. Perhaps we could talk about that when we're together.

Send me word when you're on your way.

Your brother,

Elamon

The letter slipped from his fingers and dropped to the ground. The parchment turned a foul green upon contact with the muck, disintegrating within seconds.

"I'm here," Torens said to nobody.

By the light of his mace, Torens and Eruth followed the incline of the floor to the lowest elevation in the keep, all the way to a second enclosed courtyard at the rear of the structure. No, not a courtyard—a graveyard, with ancient headstones overtaken by brambles and a gnarled tree at the center rising like a claw springing from the earth.

At the tree's foot were a pair of doors built into the crest of the hill. Heaving the doors open, Torens extended his mace in, revealing the macabre décor that lay beyond: human bones stacked like bricks, shoulder blades arranged into spiraling rosettes, skulls embedded into the wall as hollow-eyed sen-

tinels—an ossuary, much like the ones in Thraben maintained by Devisers who infused the walls of tombs and chapels with protective magic.

Torens led the way. Soon, the bone-lined hallway narrowed into an undulating passage lined with glass vials, each held aloft by a careful arrangement of human finger bones. A tongue of azure fire burned within each vial, the flames containing fleeting images—faces, locations, events—like a ghostly phantasmagoria.

“What are these?” he asked Eruth.

“Memories,” she said, peering closer. “Fear, horror, pain.”

“How do you know?”

Eruth provided no answer. Torens’s gut told him that he’d find out soon enough.

They pressed onward, the passage narrowing to single file before opening into a cavernous chamber dimly lit by rows of vials from floor to ceiling. The devils knelt before a taller figure standing on a dais at the far end of the room. They gurgled, as if in a trance. This had to be the leader, the master at the heart of everything that had gone on this night. A devil holding one of the vials pushed forward to the foot of the dais, where it threw the container onto the floor. A spout of blue flame spiraled upward, illuminating the master’s face.

No. It couldn’t be.

“Aleksandar?”

“That’s not him,” said Eruth. “It is only his body; there’s something else in there with him.”

Smoke rose from the shards curling around Aleksandar’s shuddering body. With his eyes closed, Aleksandar twitched and spasmed, his fingers curling and his jaw clenching. A tear escaped his eye as he looked out and smiled once he met Torens’s gaze.

“She is correct,” said the gravelly, impossibly low voice escaping Aleksandar’s lips. Torens had heard of entities that could possess bodies and minds—demons for sure, but certain spirits of the long dead as well. “You may call me Umbris.” It took a step backward and motioned to the floor where a small, raised ring of metal etched with runes encircled its feet. Torens was no wizard, but he could hazard a guess as to what kind of magic was at play: a binding circle of cold iron preventing escape.



Parasitic Grasp | Art by: Rovina Cai

“Let him go,” Torens commanded.

“No,” said Umbris. “He is mine by right.”

“What right?”

“By the terms of my binding set by the sorcerer Taivas more than a century ago. While the people of Traublassen slumber, I take their fears and sorrows so, come morning, they wake up refreshed and comfortable.”

None of this made any sense to Torens. “For what purpose?”

“One is not ready for a hard day’s work if preoccupied with sorrow or loss. It is easy for me to free them from the pain of their memories, to purge their pasts. Stability breeds docility, after all. In exchange, Taivas’s lineage furnishes me with what I need.”

“Victims,” said Eruth.

“They are my tributes,” Umbris fired back. “The full spectrum of pain can only be experienced through a living body, flesh and blood, which I do not possess myself. Take young Aleksandar. The anguish he felt at discovering the corpse of his young sister is delectable. The heart races, the lungs constrict, the knees weaken, and the eyes burn. It is glorious. I’ve wanted to feel it since I first took her memory away from him. He’s got many years of productivity in his future, the good lad.”

Just the three of us Aleksandar hadn’t remembered his own sister or her death. Torens tightened the grip on his mace. “You had no right! I don’t care about any damn agreement. You will let him go now!”

“Your fine weapon can most certainly injure this body, but it will do little to me or change our circumstances. What issue is my own enjoyment? I end suffering! Is that not a noble cause?”

“Don’t believe anything it says,” said Eruth.

“You are one to talk!” Umbris exclaimed. “Have you not wondered why I did not take you as tribute? Another has already claimed you, and I do not share. What honeyed promises did your Dark Lady make to take hold of your soul?”

“She saved me!” said Eruth. “When the whole Plane went mad, I would have, too, if she hadn’t appeared. You are the liar!”

“One of us is lying.” Umbris twisted Aleksandar’s head at an unnatural angle to gawk back at Torens. “Has she told you of her dreams? The ones about you?”

Confused, Torens stepped away from Eruth. She had said that her dreams contained visions of the future. Had she seen his future? “Why didn’t you say anything?” he asked her.

“It was not the time.”

“Then when?”

“She will not give you answers,” said Umbris. “Her own fears remain elusive to my spying thanks to her unfortunate stowaway. But through her, I have seen all I need about *you*. Such a tragedy—the fate of your town. And your dear brother, Elamon—”

“Don’t you ever say his name again!” screamed Torens.

“What if I told you I can help you?”

“I’d say you can stuff it,” Torens spat. “I don’t care how powerful you are.”

Umbris laughed. “Powerful? Power is a trap. You see Vytas as a prosperous man, a powerful man. Yet, since he was a child, his dreams have been consumed with being anyone but himself—Any other fate besides the legacy that Taivas had meted out for him. Trapped by Taivas, just as Taivas trapped me here. Vytas and I we were brothers in suffering, and in time, we understood what a wonderful system Taivas had created. So elegant! We had something more precious than power or freedom—we had purpose! What is your purpose, Torens of Hanweir?”

Torens felt the strength in his arms waver, the resolve in his heart blink out of existence for a second before returning a bit weaker than before.

“Your pain,” said Umbris. “You suppress it, yet it remains all-encompassing. You could have opened your brother’s missive and returned home right away. But because of your ego, your vanity, you didn’t. The faithless son if only you could have seen as I do, with the eyes of belief, of conviction and clarity. *I* would have seen the danger stalking Hanweir. *I* would have made my family leave—no negotiation. *I* would have saved them all instead of merely surviving.”

“Don’t listen,” said Eruth, but her voice sounded distant and hollow. Because Umbris was right. Torens was a survivor—one who lived while others around him met grim ends.

“It is not too late for you, Torens,” Umbris continued. “Allow me to take your pain away and give you purpose. Riches? Fame? Acclaim as the hero who vanquishes evil in the name of justice? All of that is there for the taking. Meanwhile, I will keep your secret safe and hidden, where no one will ever find it. Especially you.”

“What’s the catch?”

“Nothing. I have my tribute already. All you need to do is walk away.” Umbris crouched down and whispered to one of the devils who disappeared in a wisp of smoke. “The door will be unlocked. Then you’re free to go.”

“Torens,” said Eruth. “We are not gods. We are not demon lords or angels. We cannot shape the ends of divinity.”

“I should have been there,” he said. “Elamon I just didn’t want him to say he was right. I didn’t want to hear a lecture on all the things I’d ever done wrong. Was that a good enough reason to turn my back on him? On all of them?”

“Destinies cannot be changed, only delayed or hastened,” she said. “I know because I’ve tried—hundreds of times. I warn someone of danger, and another danger befalls them. I orchestrate events to prevent a situation, and the new arrangement proves even deadlier. No matter what I did, fate always won.”

“So, what is my fate—the one that you dreamed about?”

“That’s for you to decide,” Eruth said.

“What the hell kind of answer is that?”

“One that changes nothing,” said Umbris.

Torens muddled over his next course of action. To have Hanweir melt into inky oblivion—it wasn’t anything he could have ever considered possible. What if Umbris was telling the truth? If it could rewrite the past in Torens’s mind, would that open new paths for him? Or like Vytas’s promised riches, was it a trap? He so wanted Elamon to be there to tell him the right thing to do. But his brother was gone. All Torens had was his instinct to survive, to find unorthodox ways to skirt out of impossible situations.

So that’s what he went with.

“Tell me what you wish to do,” said Umbris.

“I wish you would shut the hell up.” In a single motion, he strode forward, arcing the mace above his head and swinging down with the entire force of his body. He thought he saw an expression on Aleksandar’s face of surprise, confusion, and most notably fear. Was it Aleksandar fighting past Umbris’s thrall? Or was it Umbris’s turn to fear for himself instead of basking in the fear of others?

Either way, Torens had made his choice. When the head of the mace met the binding circle, the impact sent a thunderclap pealing throughout the catacomb and bathed the room in intense blue light. When the light faded, Umbris stepped past the confines of the iron circle, the runes inscribed to keep it trapped no longer visible. One foot, then the other.

“This is unexpected,” Umbris said.

Torens picked up his mace and settled into a battle stance, eyeing the devils who gathered around their newly freed master.

“Good. Because I have a proposal for you to consider.”

“I’m listening.”

The shouts from the village square carried far up the hill. Shopkeepers, forgemasters, and farmhands brandished the tools of their trade as weapons against those whom they once swore fealty to. Vytas, in a robe of vibrant red and green, along with Boris and a handful of his hunters, were surrounded.

Torens turned away from the scene below. “I don’t know about this.”

“You did what you were destined to do,” Eruth said. That was no reassurance. The position of judge and jury was never one that sat well with Torens, even if it could be argued that Vytas and those who came before him had signed their own family’s death warrant.

“I’m leaving,” he said. “There’s unfinished business I have back in Gavony, some things to answer for. I can stop by Lambholt if you like.”

Eruth shook her head. “I’m staying. These people will need guidance. The Dark Lady says that this is my chance for a new beginning.”

“You’re staying here? I’m sure a home-cooked meal would hit the spot.”

“Lambholt is not my home anymore.”

“But your family—”

“A few weeks back, before the hunters took me, I had a dream about my mother.”

“And?”

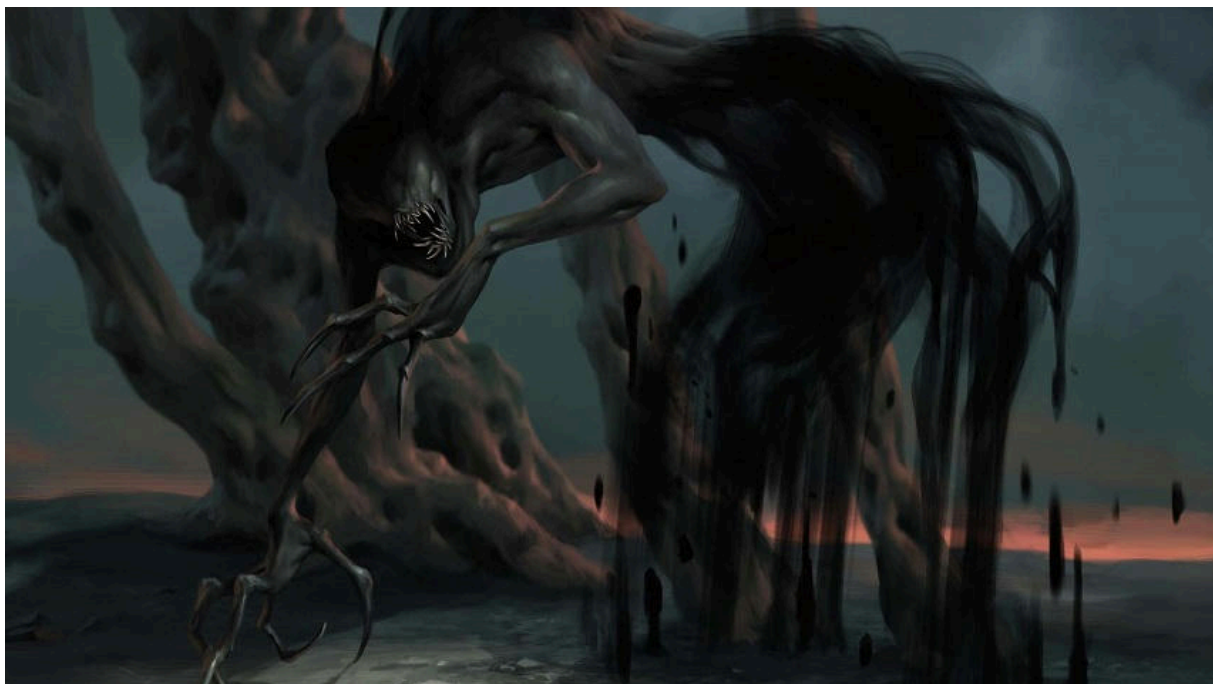
“She was happy.”

Climbing the hill toward them was Umbris in Aleksandar’s body, a wide smile on his face.

“It is sweeter than I could have imagined,” it said. “Visions of fear and pain do no justice compared to bearing physical witness.” Umbris exuded a dark aura not perceptible in his underground prison. But out in the wild night, the effects of his presence were evident, from grass underfoot turning brown to the pervasive chill felt in its vicinity.

“Remember your end of our bargain,” Torens said. He knew it wasn’t wise to trust Umbris at his word. Nevertheless, it had fulfilled at least part of what it had promised. Down below in the ossuary, the devils were hard at work shattering the receptacles holding the townsfolk’s memories collected over the years. Umbris himself would make sure all the people knew that Vytas and his ilk were responsible. *For my own edification*, Umbris had said.

“It is time,” said Umbris. “There is so much of this land I yearn to see.”



Umbris, Fear Manifest | Art by: Daarken

“The next time we meet, I’m bringing you down,” said Torens. “I promise you.”

“We will have many tales to exchange on that day,” it said. With one final grin, Umbris relinquished control of Aleksandar, who collapsed into Torens’s arms.

“Sir?” he said weakly.

“I’m here,” said Torens, embracing Aleksandar tightly as the boy’s faculties returned. Aleksandar began to tremble and break down as Umbris’s influence waned, his confusion giving way to the realization of his sister’s existence and then her death. Torens steadfastly held on.

"I'm here," he repeated. He gazed downward at the mob in the village square. Calls for retribution and justice had boiled over into a desire for blood. One man picked up a stone and hurled it at Vytas. The old man managed to duck the rock, but he didn't dodge the next two. Torens closed his eyes and imagined another day, another time, another dream, to the chorus of stone hitting flesh, stone breaking bone.

"I'm here."