

Red Snow

Prologue

"No, not that one," whispered the Demon, its voice rising from deep inside Itan's mind, "Not that one either."

Itan walked passed the women standing in the cold, arrayed like pigs in a market. *What did it matter which whore I killed for the Demon? A life is a life after all. But no, the bloody beast has to be picky.*

Itan kept his head down, trusting the old cloak's hood to keep his face in shadow. It also concealed his sword and the Demon's idol. Snow crunched under Itan's boots as he made his way down the street. It had many names, northern dock street, and the parallel, sinners market and husbands delight, daughters refuge and widows home. *The Demon might reject those women but there are always more to chose from. What is it looking for anyway?*

"Food, we look for foood," answered the voice, it drew out some sound while shortening others. Itan had seen a talking bird once, the Demon reminded him of that.

The working women darted in and out of the next warehouse worming themselves up inside and braving the cold again. *Weatherproof clothes and advertising the good didn't go hand in hand.*

Dumb thing, I know that. What makes one better than the other?

"Hm..." The voice hummed, somehow Itan could pick out its irritation. *So it can hear my every thought, great. I wasn't told the Demon could do that. Can't I even enjoy the privacy of my own mind?*

"Nooo, No word."

What?

"No word in your... speaking. What we look for, you have no word, no concept, no idea for it."

So some taste better than others?

"No, not taste... provide more... nourishment, yes nourishment."

What about me? Are you going to kill me?

"Hmmm..." it sounded amused.

I can tell its moods, not only is it in my head, I'm in its head too. Does it even have a head?"

"Ooof course I have a head, how else would I eaat? Silly humaaan."

You did not answer, will you try to kill me?

"Nooo, You bad eating. You good host, much stong, plenty deadly, good host."

What about my master? Will you try to kill..

"Nooo," it interrupted, Itan felt it's sadness, "Your master good eating, very good, but too useful alive."

The next whorehouse presented its women like the others, the first Itan came to was barely old enough to be called women, a black eye marred her left side. The colour had turned into a greenish yellow, that made it about two weeks old. Itan could tell, he had seen enough bruises in his times as a soldier. The girl wore a rugged fur overcoat,

years ago it might have clad a noblewoman, today it warmed this little whore. She wasn't the only one clothed temperature appropriate, two working girls stood behind her, one a little older than the first, the other middle-aged. Both of them sported mismatching coats and great cloaks. It spoke well of her owner, they cared at least this much about the women's well being, more than Itan could say about any other flesh peddler he had seen recently.

The girl opened her coat and presented herself to him. She was meek, all but underfed. She had no breast to speak of and the way her collarbone stood out, or rather the way her skin clung to her bone drowned any desire her sight might have aroused in him. *I would rather feed this girl than fuck her.*

"Hm..." The Demon sounded displeased, "maybe this one."

Do you want her or not?

"Hm... No, keep ... looking."

Itan knew the Demon wasn't telling him everything, he had felt its interest in her.

"She good eating, but small portion, not worth effort."

The girl looked up at Itan with a mix of hopefulness and dread. Dread stood out to Itan. *There just behind her eyes.* The cheep smile on her thin lips did nothing to distract him from her eyes. I have seen those eyes before, looking up at me, looking up at me out of the skulls of men I was about to kill, knowing what was coming and powerless to change their fate. She pushed a strand of her golden hair back behind her ear, back to where it had escaped from. *In another life, this girl might have been pretty, what a waste.*

Itan shook his head. The girls head dropped but Itan saw the relieved smile, she tried to hide. He walked on to the next whore. He heard the girl exhale a long breath. In the corner of his eye he saw the girl pull the mantle close around herself, hugging herself tight.

"What's wrong with Leech?" The middle-aged women asked.

"No, not the fat one," whispered the Demon.

"She's too young," Itan answered her, speaking the first words coming to mind, they also happened to be true.

"Ha, we don't hear that one often, do we, Mari?"

"No we don't," the young women said. She looked him up and down, like a butcher inspecting a piece of meat, all the while twirling a strand of midday black hair around her middle finger.

"Yees. That one," the Demon whispered with an overwhelming sense of satisfaction. *Finally.*

"You, how much?" Itan asked. her answer didn't matter, Itan had been given all the coin he needed, he only asked because it was expected of him. She pursed her lips and winked at him "Depends on what you want."

"Three hours, nothing fancy."

"Seven silver."

"Fine."

Did I accept the price too quickly? Her friend was watching, would she remember me easier if I had bargained? Did normal customers do that? No way to tell. She took his hand and pulled him towards the brothels front door.

"No, not here, my place," Itan said.

She dropped his hand and shook her head, "we don't do that anymore."

"What?"

"We only serve customers in-house."

"I'll make it eight silver."

"No," the girl took step back.

"Why?" Itan feigned a puzzled expression but he could guess the answer. *They have heard about the others, haven't they?* The middle-aged whore stepped between her and Itan, crossing her arms in front of her ample chest. The black haired girl moved half behind her like pup behind the bitch.

"Have you not heard of the murders?" she asked.

"What murders?"

"Girls been going missing, two were found dead."

Only two out the seven? Good, dumping them in the river had worked better than expected.

"That concerns me how?" Itan asked.

"Boss says we are not to leave the house anymore or we'll end up like them."

So much for the idea that whores wouldn't be missed.

"What's it bone be?" The younger women asked, "Here or not at all."

She crossed her arms in imitation of the older women.

"Yees that one, I want her."

You can't have her, she won't come.

"I waaant!"

She licked her lips and eyed the coin pouch.

"I'm not going to set foot in there" Itan said, nodding towards the door, "or lie in one of those beds, who knows what crawls in them. Nine silver, take it or leave it."

The girl nodded and walked towards him, the middle-aged woman grabbed her arm.

"No," she said in a tone that allowed no argument.

"Kill the fat one," hissed the Demon. "I want the night hair female, I'll take her heart right here and now."

We can't, someone will call the city guard.

"Let them come, we'll kill them one by one and mark our territory with their corpses," he felt the Demon's delight at the suggestion. Each time the Demon spoke to him, Itan could feel more of Its mind, the notion of claiming territory had a special meaning to its kind.

No, we are better served with secrecy. We can't afford to be noticed, you'll get your food don't worry.

"Hm..." Itan read reluctant assent in its voice.

A tall man opened the door behind them and stepped out, he was brought shouldered and carried a stander issue Esalli morningstar. Rust patches covered the chain connecting the spike ball and shaft. What scum treats a weapon like that.

"Everything fine?" the man asked with a western accent.

"Yeah," the mid-aged woman said, her eyes asking the silent, "are we?"

We have drawn too much attention already.

"Fine," Itan shrugged and walked away. While walking away he heard the women argue, the younger one was quite mad at the other. *Don't be girl, she just saved your life.*

On the corner of another alley, Itan stopped and looked back the women were still arguing. The blond girl followed a tall man inside, her shoulder slouched and her head hanging. How many fathers and husbands have I killed, how many wives and daughters did I condemn to this fate?

"I do not understand," the Demon whispered.

What?

"Those females, they mate for payment?"

Yes.

"That is no way to chose a valid maaate. Do they not wish to find the best... blood contributor for their offspring?"

There are no children, hopefully.

"Whaaat? You mate without procreating? Wwwwwhy?"

It's fun. Itan shrugged even though he knew the Demon could not see the gesture.

"Do humans hunt without eating their prey? Chew without swallowing?"

We sometimes hunt for trophies and eating carnivores is frowned upon.

"Huumaans, you are insane."

Didn't you just recommend we marked our territory with the corpses of murdered Guards?

"Yees, what is wrong with thaaat?"

Itan shook his head and walked on.

A single snowflake danced passed Itan's face. The buildings in the alley he slipped into stood only two stories high. Itan walked passed a tavern, two drunken men stumbled out. A gust of warm air blew passed him, it carried that stench of old sweat and pipe smoke. Another brothel further down drew his eye. Four women stood in front of the stone stair, it led up to an ornate archway. *Red sandstone is rare in the city, whatever the building had been before its current use, the owner must have paid good money for these stones.*

Up close Itan saw horses and a pair falcons carved into the sandstone arc. The women watched him approach, one walked up to him. Her skin was pail as milk and Itan saw each and every single blue vein, she wore almost nothing. *How can she stand the cold?*

"I'm Girisa, would you like to come inside?" She asked.

"Nooo," the Demon said, Itan felt its disinterest.

Itan shook his head.

"Cloosser, closer to that one, that one!" Itan knew somehow the Demon meant the fourth whore.

Itan pointed at the girl, "Her."

"New girl?" the first asked, "She is expensive. I don't know why the Lady keeps up with her. Don't you want someone with more experience? A real woman?" She put a hand on her chest for emphasis.

"No," Itan stepped passed her.

She muttered something under her breath and followed him. The girl had never taken her eyes off him. Her hair was red, not the orange-brown of an autumn leaf everyone meant when they talked about red hair, no hers was a rich and dark red, the colour of

blood. She stood out like a goose in a duck pond. Unlike the others, she showed almost no skin. Her cloaths were hidden by the planked she had wrapped around herself, Itan could smell the horse from where he stood. She did not present herself that way the other whore had done, she glared at him with undisguised disgust.

"Yees, good eating that one, good eating."

"How much?" Itan asked.

Movement in a window above made him look up, the unlit room too dark for Itan to make anyone out.

Someone is watching. sure one or two strong men would be waiting inside, behind the door in case someone out here caused trouble they needed to solve.

"20 silver," she said in a matter of fact voice.

Something was wrong about her. Over the last three weeks, Itan had come to expect a mix of hope, greed or resignation in those women's eyes.

She did not share their expression. She looked disgusted, not with herself but with him.

Hm, whatever gets you through the day girl. The price was way too high, no one in this part of the city would pay that much. *Maybe she used to be some kind of nobleman's whore, maybe she fell out of favour and ended up down here.*

"Yees, her good food," the Demon grew impatient.

"Done."

One of the other girls stifled her laughter, another raised an eyebrow: the girl seemed surprised herself. *She didn't expect me or anyone to accept her price.*

"Show me the coin first," she demanded.

Itan counted out her coin by troping one after another in a smaller pouch, his master made sure he had enough and not a single pouch bore the house symbol. The final coin vanished with a sweet click of metal hitting metal.

"Alright, come in," said the girl.

Itan shook his head, "my place."

"No," said the girl, the others murmured in agreement.

Not again.

"Caaan we kill them, this time?" asked the Demon.

No, we can't risk drawing attention to my master, if the Inquisition or the Council finds out what we are up to...

"I caaare nothing for your authorities, I hunger, blood-hair is good eating, let's eaaat!"

Another girl stuck her head out the door "Estra? Your master said to tell you to accept."

The girl inhaled sharp, her eyes wander down his body and up again, lingering longer on his upper body, she swallowed visibly. *Looks like your master wants the silver more than you.*

"My lucky day, I guess," she muttered.

Itan handed her the money pouch, she passed it on to the first girl who had greeted him. She walked to his right side and hooked her arm around his right, as if he was escorting her to some glamorous occasion. *Definitely some nobleman's whore, but wasn't women supposed to walk on a man's left side?*

"Lead the way."

"Yees!" the Demon's impatience grew with every passing Minute. When Itan turned to go, the red haired girl had turned with him to stay on his right side. Itan spotted a little bulge in her makeshift cloak, around the height of her right knee. *Is she carrying a*

sword? No, she can't be, what whore carries a sword? Sure the smart women carry knives. Itan's fingers traced the cut on his left thigh the second whore he had killed for the Demon had given him in her desperate struggle. *Anyway, a sword would be on my side if she carried one.*

They walked in silence, their steps left deep prints in the soft snow. *I had loved that stuff when he was young, the war cured me of that notion. The cold has killed more Estari Soldiers than any enemy.*

"Solid waater, straaange," mused the Demon and Itan got a faint impression of interest. *Of course no snow in hell.*

"Nooo, not hell" the Demon whisperd.

What?

"My hooome is not what you call hell."

The girl stomped down hard with every step. *Maybe she is not used to walking in snow, maybe she wasn't used to walking much at all? Some nobles and their pets look like they get carted everywhere.*

The path Itan had chosen took them along the second wall. Great snowdrifts piled up against it, a good wall guard would have cleared it. *To be fair the capital hasn't seen a battle in centuries and even then the outer wall had never been breached.* Snow fell as they walked, it began as a flake here or there and turned into a constant stream. *Good, bad weather will keep the people inside, less chance to be seen.*

"Faaaster," whispered the Demon, its impatience overshadowing its delight. *Almost there, just passed the next gate to the docks.*

A noise startled Itan, someone was behind him. He spun around, his hand went to his sword hilt and froze there, the alley behind them was empty. The familiar crunch of snow had warned him of a person following him. *I could have sworn someone was behind me. I'm getting old, my mind is playing tricks on me.*

"Are you alright?" the girl asked.

"Yes, keep moving."

The girl looked down the empty alley, her lips formed a faint smile. Itan noticed her left hand hovering close to the place her sword hilt would be if she really did carry one. Snow crunched again only a few meters down the alley.

"Wee are not alooone," whispered the Demon.

Itan saw a footprint close to where his instincts told him the person following him ought to be. The oddest part was the way snow behaved, a little under shoulder hight the snowflakes disappeared. *What is that? Is that one of your kind, Demon?*

"Nooo, not my kind. One of your kind, humaaan."

Watching the snowfall closely, Itan noticed a second patch of snowless air. It moved towards him. As he watched a footprint appeared in front of the other with the little crunch that had betrayed them in the first place. *That can only mean two things, either the Inquisition found us, or a cursed who had eluded them did. Either way, we are in trouble.*

"Show yourself!" Itan shouted.

The girl stepped back, her gaze darting between him and the empty alley. A figure appeared in one void, she wore the grey robes that marked her as a member of the Inquisition. *Fuck.*

She let her hood fall back, revealing a woman about his own age. Her skin looked worn, deep lines marked her face. Her hair was white with hints of grey. *Stay calm, they don't know it was me, they can't know, can they? Who knows what their bloody magic told them.*

"What do you want?" Itan shouted.

"Nothing," she said with a smile, "I just want to ask you a few questions."

"And if I refuse?"

"You would not like the consequences."

"So ask."

"What is your name?" The Inquisitor asked.

"Harel"

"Lie!" she put her hand on her sword hilt.

Shit, how did she know?

Itan spat into the snow. "My name is none of your business. I'm not cursed, I wield no unnatural powers. I don't fall under your authority."

"My authority begins and ends where I say it does," she said without the false smile,

"What do you know about the missing girls?"

"Apparently they went missing."

"You're hiding something."

Fuck. "A girl just told me about them, that's all I have been told" *puzzle out that one bitch.*

"True. But I asked what you know, not what you have been told. Better men have tried to match wits with me and failed. What do you know about the two girls found dead in the river?"

"Well, I guess they aren't missing any more?"

She drew her sword. It was a short and narrow blade, little more than a sharpened iron rod. This was an Inquisitor, the people hunting down mages with unnatural abilities, supposedly the best-trained fighters in the country, maybe even the continent and that thing was her weapon? One touch of his sword would snap it in two.

"Shee is good eating tooo."

"Don't test my patience," the Inquisitor said.

"I hear they fish dead bodies out of that rivers every day. I have nothing to do with any of those"

Her bitter laugh surprised Itan, "You think you can lie to me? I know your emotions better than you know them yourself. I can tell you're hiding something, tell me what i want to know or I'll make you regret ever crossing my path."

I already do. "I'm not afraid of you."

"Lie," She said, "do you know who killed those girls?"

"No idea."

"Lie! You know who killed them."

"You wouldn't believe me."

"Why did you kill those girls?" The Inquisitor asked.

"I didn't."

"Lie."

Wait what? I didn't kill them, the Demon did, not me.

"You got the wrong men," Itan said showing his empty hands, keeping them at belt height.

"Oh really? I can feel your deception, I can feel your fear, you are afraid I find something out," she mused. "It's not the fact that you are the killer, you are protecting someone, aren't you? Yes, that's it. Who is it?"

I need to get out of here. I need to get out before I reveal the master, my life would be wasted if I did.

"Flight or fight?" The Demon asked.

We can't run.

"Yees. Fight!"

Itan drew his sword, beside him he heard the sound of metal scraping on metal. The girl had drawn her own blade, a bastard sword she leveled it at him. The horse blanked lay discarded on the cobblestones, under it she had been wearing grey.

"Fight! Kill them all! Eat them all! Yes, fight!"

"I didn't kill those girls," Itan shouted, "a Demon did."

"What?" the white haired Inquisitor mumbled, the confusion plain on her face.

Itan sized that moment of distraction, he spun around and took step towards the girl. Her sword slashed at him, Itan caught it on his left arm protection. Too fast for her to react Itan closed the distance bringing his sword up in a fluid motion. He rammed the blade into her left side, right above the kidney, driving it up through her heart. The blades moved without resistance, it only stopped when the crossguard hit her robe. The silver tip stuck out her shoulder reflecting Untara's light. His sword cut through that girl like a heated knife through butter. *It is as sharp as they day I earned it.*

Wasting no time, Itan planted a solid kick on her sternum. The girl was thrown back as he intended. Itan drew the blade out of her falling body as if she was its shiv. His first trainer had told him to be wary of the mortally wounded, the body kept going even when it had no right to do so. *Some wounded tried to take their killer with them.* Not her, she was busy fighting for breath, a useless gesture but the body does what it wants in moments like these.

"Noo, you spoiled good food!"

Itan turned to the women, a young man with blond hair in the grey robes of the Inquisition stood where the second void of snow had been. He looked horrified at the girl. *Dumbstruck, good, he's no threat right now.* The women held her meek weapon in a guard position. Itan swung his real sword in a horizontal arc, intending to cut her head clean off. She held her twig of a sword in its path and reinforced her block with her left hand at the blade's tip. Itan's blade sang as it cut the air. The sword and rod met, the twig didn't break. Itan's sword had been halted. The little rod looked intact, not even a scratch on it. *It should have been shattered How is that possible?. Inquisition and their unnatural magic.*

The old Inquisitor grinned, it showed her yellow teeth. Her left hand slid down her tiny weapon until she touched his blade. Smoke rose from her gloves, the leather cracked and furrowed, like dry mud in the summer sun. The gloves decayed into tiny flakes peeling off one by one. Where she touched the blade, the metal began to boil and sizzle. The affected area expanded down towards the hilt. The solid metal turned to liquid. The sword's upper half bent under its own weight. The tip broke off and hit the cobblestone, drops of liquid metal splattering like water. Itan stood there, holding a hilt with a hand-length of metal, he stared at her. *That blade was a gift, I earned it, you will pay bitch.*

"Food, kill them, good eating."

How? the have powers, I'm no match for them.

"I have power too, aask and I shaall give."

You can help me? Then do it.

"Aaask."

Help me.

"Aaask nicccer."

Please help me, I beg you.

"Better. Take power, take it."

A wave of warmth spread through Itan's body, emanating from the Idol around his neck. It poured into his arms and legs down into the tips of his toes. The power was exhilarating, it felt like a warm summer day and a lovers embrace and wind on his face and the joy of battle and meat and wine and beacon and sex and life itself, it felt like everything that made life worth living. Itan's body shuttered.
"Kill her, kill them all, good eating!"

Itan threw the useless hilt at the Inquisitor, it felt so light in his hands, throwing it took as little effort as throwing a ball of yarn. The bitch deflected it with her joke of a blade, an action that by all rights should have bent or broken the tiny thing. *That was a mistake.* While she was distracted by the oncoming junk, Itan closed the gap between them. A split-second after she had altered the hilts trajectory, Itan had gotten close enough to grab her arm, intending to break her balance Itan pulled on it. The Demon's power warmed his mussels, Itan felt as if he was 20 again. No, he felt even better. He pulled with all his strength, he pulled with all the strength the Demon gave him. She didn't lose balance, she didn't budge. Her arm did.

Itan's watch with grim fascination as the fabric of her clothes rip apart. The split beginning right under her shoulder. The arm beneath it was well muscled for a woman her age. Itan saw the muscle stretch until they reached their limit. Her shoulder joint left its socket. The skin broke first, above her elbow, a tiny red line spreading out around the arm, it widened like a cleft in the earth itself. Tiny fibres of flesh heled both parts together, they snapped one after the other. White bone showed as it was pulled out under the upper arm muscles. Itan looked in horror at his hand, at what he was holding in his hand. The Inquisitor's lower arm, the upper arm bone still attached to it, sticking out the muscle mass. A detached part of his mind marvelled at the sight. *That round part on top, is that what the surgeons popped back in when I dislocated my shoulder?*

Don't mind that now, focus on your opponent. The women lay on the ground clutching on the stump of her arm, desperately trying to stop the blood from running out and failing at it.

"No!" Shouted blonde.

Itan had kept an eye on him, instead of assisting the old Inquisitor the way a good soldier would have assisted another, the boy instead ran to the girl. He stood between Itan and her, sword raised. Itan raised the woman's severed arm in salute, the boy's face turned as white as the snow around him.

"Thaaat one, good eating" Itan's stomach growled in response to the Demon's hunger.

The boy stood in a defensive position every new recruit was taught in his first week. The blade shook a little and he gripped with both hands. *He is afraid, good.* Itan took a step toward him, the boy took two steps backwards. *He may be wearing an Inquisitor's robe but that boy is as green as they come, I bet he is shitting his pants right now.* The boy backed up further, Itan reached the point where the girl had dropped her bastard sword. He picked it up and noticed that the girl was still alive, sitting up, fighting to regain her breath. *Cursed magic, how can she survive a that?* "Food? Food not spoiled? good," the Demon whispered with delight.

I'll take her head off, let's see how she survives that. The sword hit a wall mid-swing, the girl vanished. *I hate magic.* Itan reached out until his hand met the barrier, it was as smooth as a frozen pond and perfectly transparent, any glass merchant would be envious of it. If he didn't feel it, he wouldn't believe the barrier was there. *How long has it been here?* The boy looked sick, he made no move toward Itan so he allowed himself a moment to assess his situation. He found the girl next to the old Inquisitor, tending her wound. Itan noticed a line in the snow just outside the invisible wall, it had a slight curvature and Itan guessed it was a dome, snow piled up on top of it and slide down the sides. *The boy is its centre, nothing goes in or out, neat trick.*

"You drew me away so you could trap me, good move boy but," Itan paused, "do you really want to be trapped in here with me?"

"You say that every time."

"Kill him, kill him again!" The Demon screeched, its voice sounding far away.

Itan threw the arm at him, the boy sidestepped it with ease. Itan cut at him in a heavy diagonal arc, the boy deflected the blow. Two followup attacks forced the boy to move, Itan turned and stabbed at his chest, again the boy dodged. *What is going on? He has no skill in fighting, he holds his sword like an amateur and yet he parries as if he knows exactly what I'm going to do, can he read my mind? Why doesn't he attack?*

"Force, brute force, it worked every time," whispered the Demon, its voice echoed as if it came out of a cave.

Itan followed the Demon's advice, using its strength Itan attacked the boy without mercy. The boy dodged hits that were supposed to beat the sword out of his hands, stabs meant to kill him he deflected, looking clumsy all the while. *How is a single person allowed to have this much luck?* The boy's luck ran out, he moved his sword too far to one side and Itan stabbed forward puncturing his right shoulder, the boy could not bring the blade up to stop the stroke that took his head clean off. "Teraan!" shouted the girl, her eyes wide with shock.

"Yees, now feed me! Before it spoils."

Itan grabbed the Idol from the chain around his neck and pressed it to the boy's chest right above his heart. As he had done to the girls before.

"Clooser."

This time felt different. The warmth in his right hand changed, the muscles in that hand contracted in a spasm. Itan mounded when more power flowed into him, his right hand pressed the Idol down. He heard bones crack and the Demon's delighted howl. Something flowed from the body, passed Itan's fingers into the Idol, it felt like the Demon's warmth, like its power and yet somehow different, whatever it was, the Demon hungered for it. *It's eating the boy's soul.*

"Nooo. No soul, you have no word for it"

Itan didn't listen, its words didn't matter, all that mattered was the Demon's power, it engulfed his soul like a blanket of pure joy. The power ebbed away and Itan found himself kneeling in the cold snow over a broken boy's body.

The girl stared at him in disbelief, her eyes flicked between him and the boy. She pulled a knife and threw it at him, it whistled past his ear. Whatever that barrier had been, it died with the boy. Itan ran towards her, lifted his blade above his head, the girl pulled another knife out and held it up to block. Itan cut down, the sword and knife met above her head, the knife did not move a single hair's width. *The force should have ripped the knife out of her hand, even if she had blocked with something solid like a shield, that blow would have driven a grown man to his knees.*

Itan's new sword broke. *Again? I hate magic.* Its upper third broke off and continued its path down toward her head. It sliced a hole into her Robes hood vanished from his sight and reappeared behind her legs where it buried itself between two stones. *There is no blood on it.*

"What are you?" Itan hissed.

Her answer was a slash aimed at his throat, he caught her arm before she reached him. *If cutting doesn't work, let's try this.* Itan squeezed her arm, his Demon reinforced strength pressing in on her bone. She screamed and dropped the knife, it hit the ground with a clang. Itan's finger lost all resistance and snapped together. The girl pulled her arm back. Itan tried to grab it again but his hand passed through her as if she was made of mist. *I fucking hate magic.* She reached for her knife, Itan kicked it away. She stepped back, even the snow passed through her though she still left footprints. She exhaled sharply as if she had held her breath, a snowflake caught in her red hair. *Whatever that trick of yours is, you can't do it for long, can you?*

Itan attacked her with her broken blade, she took a deep breath and waited for it. When the sword had passed through her, she reached out for him and put the flat of her palm against his chest. Something happened to his clothes. Itan tried to move his clothes resisted him, it felt as if they were made of thick tar instead of cloth. The girl stepped back as quick as she had come, he tried to hit her but his clothes had different plans.

The girl looked at her Master, looked at the dead boy and then down the alley, down to where Itan had sent her knife. She looked at him and he at her. Itan had seen

those eyes a thousand times, men who fought the urge to run, men on that blade's edge between fight and flight. The girl chose flight.

She grabbed the woman's shoulders and pulled her towards the city wall. *Oh no, you are not getting away.*

"Yees, chase them, hunt them, eat them!"

Itan followed her as best he could, without the Demon's strength he could never have keep up. *I would have been trapped inside his own clothes.* With every step, the power holding him back weakened. Itan had nearly reached the girl. She kneeled one hand resting against the wall, the other held the woman's good arm. The girl stood up and walked into the wall. Itan stopped, staring at the sight. *That is not possible.* The woman was dragged after her. The last he saw of the old Inquisitor were her brown boots disappearing into the inner city wall.

"Hmmm, pitty. They good eating, eat them later?"

Hell no, I'm not going to hunt Inquisition for you.

"We will see."

Itan threw the broken sword away, he had no use for it. He took a last look at the alley and left it, leaving behind the head and body of the young men he had just killed, laying on a bed of red snow.

Chapter 1

Fire, it had to be fire. They stopped in front of the burning tree. Beraan fought to regain his breath. *Of all the curses inflicted on Men, my first had to be fire.* After the world around him stopped spinning, Beraan looked around, Midas inspected the tree, not even breathing hard. A black handprint marked the spot where the cursed had touched it. Beraan had learned the hard way that one couldn't use a big piece of wood to start a fire, one had to begin with small splinter and add bigger as the fire grew hotter. *How hot had the cursed's touche been to ignite the entire trunk?*

"Where is he?" Midas asked.

"Don't know," Beraan answered.

"It is your job to know, figure it out!"

"This damned thing," Beraan held up his left hand, showing the Amulett dangling on its golden chain, "It only shows me something when the cursed uses his power, it's useless unless..." A flash of purple light a bit to the right made him pause.

"There!" Beraan pointed, "He's that way."

"Good job, kid," said Midas and ran off in the direction Beraan had indicated.

Kid? You are not that much older, asshole.

Beraan took a deep breath and followed him lifting his grey robe so it wouldn't catch on a branch. Tearing a hole in it on the first day he got them just wouldn't do. Running in a forest at night was a terrible idea for normal people but Midas cheated, one of the two Amulets the Order had given him gave him an awareness of his surroundings.

"Pit!" Midas shouted and Beraan saw him jump over the creek a little stream had carved out for itself. Untara up high in the sky provided just enough light for Beraan to see it. He jumped and missed the landing. Beraan slid down the slope, grasping for purchase. A fist full of sand was all he got. Beraan saw another purple flash, followed by a sharp sting behind his right eye, he groaned. Midas held out his hand and Beraan took it, he pulled him up. *Say something smug and I'll hit you.*

"Are you alright?" Midas asked.

"Yes... no, my Amulet is giving me headaches, is that normal?"

"Wich one?" Midas wiped his dirty hand on his outer robe.

"The sensory."

"When I got mine, it made me nauseous for two weeks but no pain, if it gets worse, tell master Kelaan."

"The cursed used his power again, somewhere over there."

Midas nodded and lead the way, a little slower this time. *He thinks I can't handle myself, I'll show him.*

They found the cursed in a clearing, kneeling in a circle of burned and burning grass. He wore simple peasants clothes, most of them deep orange-brown. Beraan guessed he was around Midas age, in his early twenties. The left side of his head was reduced to smoking patches of black, red and pink skin. The man stared at his burning hands, his clothes were smeared with sud and dirt. He looked at them for a second but

his hands were apparently of greater interest. The image of a different fire-wielding cursed flashed in front of Beraan's eyes. *It's not him, he is not the laughing man.*

"Please, make it stop," the cursed whimpered.

Oh yes, we will make it stop.

"Stay back," Midas wisped and approached the cursed, raising his hands up and out to both sides. *Idiot, he is going to get himself killed. And I'll have to explain to this master Kelaan why Midas is dead.*

"Calm down," Midas said in a soothing tone, "we are here to help you."

"How could this have happened to me?"

A gust of flames rose up from his hands, it took the shape of a mushroom, its sides bulging out as it dispersed. While Beraan saw the fires with his eyes, with the sight his second Amulet gave him, he saw a purple flash of light. One image lay over the other, another spike of pain stabbed him behind his eyes.

"Look at me," Midas said, "what's your name?"

He turned to look at Midas, the flames had taken both his eyebrows.

"Temaraan," tears rolled down his cheeks leaving lines in the sud.

"Temaraan. Good, I need you to extinguish those flames."

"I can't," another burst of flames, smaller this time.

"Yes, you can," said Midas.

"I can't control it. I would have stopped the flames if I could, I didn't want to hurt them."

"Who?" Beraan asked, earning him a forbidding glare from Midas.

"My wife," the man said staring at his hands again. "My daughter, my son."

Has killed already?

"I didn't want to hurt them, the flames were all around me, I couldn't make them stop."

"It's alright now," Midas said, "there is a place for people like you, a place where you can't hurt anybody."

He looked at them, his eyes widened as if he really saw them for the first time.

"Inquisition, you're inquisition!" The flames around his hands grew brighter, Beraan was forced to shield his face.

"Please, we want to help you!" Midas shouted.

"No! Inquisition only serves them selfs, Inquisition takes people away, they are never seen again."

"That's not true," protested Midas, the soothing and non-threatening voice he had used slipped and let his irritation peek through.

"You people took my sister!" A gust of flame accompanied his outburst.

"Please, calm down, if your sister is in the refuge then you will see her there."

"No, No, No." he shook his head as if to shake off Midas' words.

"Think of your wife and children, you can't hurt them anymore if you leave."

"No one can hurt them anymore," he whispered, "they're gone, I killed them"

the man shrunk in on himself like a waterskin losing its content. The flames faded back to the size they were before.

Beraan and Midas looked at each other.

Midas doesn't know what to do.

"He has killed," Beraan whispered, "the case is clear if he doesn't willingly..."

We should kill him and be done with it.

"Just because we are allowed to, doesn't mean we have to. I'd rather see him in the refuge than the ground." Midas whispered and turned to the cursed, "Temaraan, please focus on the fire, imagen it fading away."

The cursed did seem to hear Midas.

"Ashes, only ashes, my house, my home, only ashes," the man rocked back and forth.

"Why did this have to happen to me? I did nothing wrong, I'm a good man, I don't deserve this, they didn't deserve this."

"What should we do?" Asked Beraan.

"I don't know," whispered Midas.

I knew you didn't have a plan.

"Let's keep him talking and wait for Master Kelaan, he'll know what to do."

The cursed stood up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Beraan asked.

"Home, someone has to bury the bodies."

"We can't let him go back to the village, out here he is no threat to anyone," Midas whispered.

No one but us.

"Temaraan, look at me." Midas said, "It's alright now, we'll take care..."

A burst of flames turned the grass in front of their feet to smouldering cinders.

"Stop saying that! It's not alright, it will never be alright!" A wave of heat washed over Beraan. "You! Inquisition. Do you know why everyone hates you? You are supposed to protect us, instead, you make everyone grovel before you. You think I'm cursed? You are the curse on this land."

Beraan drew his sword, fire engulfed his right side. He dropped the blade and dove into the ground, rolling over and over to kill the flames. Once they were gone Beraan pulled off what remained of his gloves. Half his outer robe had been burned away or was still smouldering, he dropped the rest. The smell of burned hair crawled up his nose, Beraan touched his head. *Not burned.* A little girl screamed and pounded her fist against a locked door.

Focus! You are in the forest! They are dead and this cursed is not the laughing man.

"Temaraan, please. It doesn't have to be like this," shouted Midas, he faced the Man sword ready. A blast of fire drove him backwards.

"Temaraan..."

At this distance, the flames the cursed sent at Midas dissipated before they had a chance to reach him. *If I get to close I'll end up roasted.* Back in the Forge, his weapons instructor had been fond of throwing knives, many students had taken to them, Beraan hadn't. *Oh, Lira, I wish you were here.*

Beraan searched the ground around him for something he could use. His hand found a rock. Beraan reached in his mind for his Amulet. The power inside reacted to his will, it flowed through him into the rock. It settled in there, waiting for something, for a command, no, for a direction. Beraan lifted his flat hand in front of his right eye so the rock and the cursed lined up.

"That way," whispered Beraan. The rock left his hand with a woosh.

It struck the cursed's right shoulder, he stumbled but caught himself. *Hm, I aimed for his head.* Midas was still useless, bursts of flames kept him at a distance. *At least he presents a target, every flame the cursed throws at him, he isn't throwing at me.* The man turned to Beraan and walked towards him, Midas followed him as close as his flames allowed.

Beraan padded the ground in search of another stone, he couldn't find one. *If I make it out of here, wherever I go I'll carry an entire bag of stone with me for the rest of my life.* Beraan got up and backed off. He saw the purple light shine in the man's left hand before it turned into the constant stream that kept Midas at bay. The same glow gathered in his right hand, the cursed pointed at Beraan.

Midas threw something round, it landed between the cursed and Beraan. To his magic sight, it emanated a faint yellow glow. Two flashes of yellow light followed one in the forests at the edge of the clearing, the other right above the golden orb. Of course, his Amulet sent another needle stab into his eyes.

"That's enough!" Master Kelaan's clear voice cut through the night. *Where did he come from?* Beraan lost sight of Master Kelaan when flames engulfed him. The last Beraan saw was the silhouette of his master holding his arms wide to each side as if he invited the cursed to burn him. Beraan had to turn away again, the heat was too much. Where his master had been just a second ago, a steady stream of orange and yellow filled the air. The cursed lowered his hand, the flame tide ebbed. Where Beraan expected to see the ashes of this old man who was supposed to be his first master, he found the man still standing there.

How? Beraan saw a silver shimmer around his Master's clothes and skin. While the cursed's attention was on master Kelaan, Midas circled around to Beraan, he answered Beraan's disbelief with an infuriating grin. *He had known master Kelaan was coming.*

Master Kelaan walked slowly towards the cursed. He tried to burn him again without success. The flames washed over that silver shimmer like waves, leaving the flesh and fabric under it untouched.

"I have been to your house," Master Kelaan said, "I have seen the remains."

"How dare you go there!"

Another burst of flames.

"I have seen what is left of you Home, of your family, your life."

More fire streamed out of his hands to bathe master Kelaan, it didn't leave a single black spot on his grey robe. Even this far away, Beraan found the heat unbearable.

"Your past is ashes, what will your future be?"

The cursed looked at him with a blank expression, the flames died down.

He finally realized how useless his flames are against master Kelaan.

"Where will you go from here?"

"I don't know."

"How would you like things to be?"

"I want my family back"

"What were their names?" Beraan thought he heard genuine curiosity in master Kelaan's voice.

"Marita, my wife," tears filled his eyes, "our daughter Samaria and our son Tebaan." The last name caught in the man throat, Beraan barely understood him.

"What do you think they want for you?"

"They want nothing, not anymore. I...I killed them."

"I know."

"I didn't want to..."

"I believe you," Master Kelaan said, putting a hand on the cursed's uninjured shoulder.

"I couldn't make it stop, I tried to, I tried."

"It isn't your fault."

Of course, it is, he killed them. Who else would be at fault?

"I didn't want to hurt them, I'm a good man."

"Yes, I can see that."

"Why did this happen to me?"

"I don't know."

"The world is cruel."

"Yes, it can be. The question is how are you going to act in face of that cruelty? Will you make it better or worse? Will you burn everything down?"

"No" the Men looked around him, taking in the damage he had caused. "I don't want to hurt anyone."

Yeah right, did you decided that before or after you tried to incinerate Me and Midas?

"Then come with me, I'll take you to a safe place," Master Kelaan said.

"I don't want to leave, I have friends and family here."

"You know those people better then I do, tell me: how will they react to your new power."

The man's head sank to his chest.

"They'll be afraid of me, fear me, they'll say I'm cursed."

"The refuge was made for people like you, you will be safe there and people will be safe there from you."

"The refuge, I heard about it, they say its a prison."

Master Kelaan raised his hand to encompass the clearing in the forest, half of it was burned. To one side trees stood ablaze like torches for the absent gods.

"Tell me honestly, do you believe someone with this potential for mayhem should be walking around freely, among ordinary people?"

The man shook his head.

"No," he whispered, "no, they shouldn't."

"I'll take you there myself if you want."

"Alright, I'll come with you," the cursed said.

Master Kelaan backend Midas and Beraan to come closer.

"I killed everyone I cared about, how can I go on?" The cursed asked, Beraan wasn't sure if he asked master Kelaan or himself, anyway his master answered.

"You don't. All you can do is live your life, one day after another."

"You don't understand, they are dead because of me."

"I understand completely."

Beraan picked his sword up, it had surd and ash all over it but seemed fine none the less. Beraan kept both eyes on the cursed, something in the cursed man's deminer didn't sit well with him. The cursed stood still, eyes closed, no way of knowing what was going on in that man's head. *We are all close enough now if he wanted to, he could kill Midas and me, maybe even the master if he caught him by surprise. If Master Kelaan's Amulet works anything like mine, he has to will it active to protect him.*

The cursed man held his hands up in surrender. Beraan noted that one palm faced Midas, the other master Kelaan.

The cursed shook his head "I don't want to go on without my family."

That's it, he is going to burn them and force me to kill him.

Beraan lunged forward, extended his right arm and plunged the blade into the cursed man's chest.

Chapter 2

"Why did you do that?!" Midas shouted.

The cursed Man sank to his knees. Beraan pulled his sword out and stepped back, in case he tried anything.

"He was going to kill you," Beraan shouted back.

How about a thank you, I just saved your ass. There was no need to be cautious, the cursed collapsed.

"No he wasn't," shouted Midas.

Master Kelaan kneeled down beside him and pressed his hands against the wound. Blood seeped between his fingers.

"Yes, he was," Beraan shouted, "I saw it in his eyes. You heard him say he didn't want to live anymore? He was going to burn the two of you and make me kill him."

"That's absurd, he..."

"Enough, both of you" Master Kelaan closed the dead Man's eyes. "It doesn't matter, he is dead. We failed."

Failed? We got him, no one else died. I'd call that a great success.

"Master," said Midas, "I don't understand, he surrendered and Beraan killed him, how can you condone that?"

Master Kelaan looked right into Beraan's eyes. "Beraan, are you certain he was going to attack?"

Without a doubt. "Yes Master."

"If you had to make that choice again, would you do it?"

"Yes Master, without hesitation. He was about to burn the two of you, I could see it in his face."

"That is all I need to hear," said master Kelaan.

"But he killed him in cold blood," protested Midas.

"He killed in defence of himself and his team."

"I'm not convinced that Man was even going to do anything, Master."

"You don't need to be Midas. I am and that is that. It isn't the outcome I had wished for but in the end, Beraan did nothing wrong".

"But a Man is dead, Master, does that not warrant some consequence?"

Can you stop trying to get me in trouble?

"So are his wife and children, he killed them by his own admission. He was no innocent Midas."

"Killing in self-defence is one thing master but this..."

"It was self-defence," shouted Beraan

Master Kelaan raised his hand to shut Beraan up.

"It was justified." Master Kelaan put a hand on his shoulder. "Midas, I'm glad to see that you are not as ready to kill the cursed as so many in the Inquisitor are these days. I saw you talk him down, you did well. I'm proud of you. We are supposed to make the hard choices, Beraan did. Now, I'm tired. Running through a forest is for younger men."

"What about the body?" asked Midas.

"The blues can take care of it," Master Kelaan said. "Let's go home".

I never understood why it's called making the hard decision because it was really easy, letting a cursed life or killing him, I'd chose death every time. The fact that

he was going to kill them just made the choice immediate. Master Kelaan trying so hard to calm him down and capture him alive, that was the wired part.

Midas lead the way, Beraan and master Kelaan followed a few steps apart. Their progress was slow, no need to hurry this time. The clouds parted and Utara lit up the forest around them. Beraan looked up at the red and black disc high in the sky. Some people said it was a sphere, not a disc, Beraan didn't see the difference. *The midnight eclipse was yesterday, the winds will pick up soon.*

"How are you holding up?" Master Kelaan asked.

"Master?" Beraan asked, imitating they way Midas talked to the Men.

"The first day on the job and you were already forced to take a life. How are you?"

Beraan shrugged "I don't know, fine I guess. You said it yourself, I did nothing wrong."

"Yes, I did say that. I'm sorry I have not given you the attention a student deserves. You were dropped on me rather abruptly."

"Didn't you ask for a Third? I thought three was the normal size of a field team."

"It is. Hargus, my previews Second was raised to master a bit early for my liking."

"Midas took his place?" Beraan asked.

"Yes, he was raised to second."

"As his master, I thought you were supposed to make that call."

"It takes more than one master to make a master but you are right, usually I would have suggested his promotion and the higher-ups would agree. Instead, Hargus and I got new orders."

"Why are you telling me this, master?"

"Do you know why young Inquisitors are promoted early?"

"Because there are so few of us?" Beraan guessed.

"Yes, that's half of it, go on."

"So I would guess either the number of new recruits is dropping or the number cursed is rising, which mean more confrontations with us, resulting in more Inquisitor deaths, thus increasing the demand for team leaders, regardless of their skill.

"Good. At least they didn't send me someone with a brick for a brain. You're right on both sides, the recruitment numbers are plummeting and cursed incidents have become more frequent than in any other time in recorded history."

"There are more cursed? Why?" Beraan asked.

"Good question, no one knows. Though I suspect it isn't an increase in cursed but rather us getting better at finding them."

"What about the recruits," Beraan asked, "Why are there fewer?"

"Fewer people chose to be tested, fewer tested positive join the Inquisition. The ability to use an Amulet has always been rare. Interestingly enough the number of people able to use just one Amulet is increasing, so the Sentinels are doing fine, for now."

"What are we going do about that?"

"What can we do? Some Masters wanted to implement a mandatory draft for all who had the ability. The council wouldn't have it and rightly so."

"Why wouldn't people join us?" asked Beraan.

"Why did you join?"

That was a question no one asked in the Forge. Whatever answer a student would give, it carried too much pain with it. Some had nowhere else to go, some had

lost everything to the cursed and some just wanted revenge. Beraan counted himself among all three groups.

"I had nowhere else to go."

"I'm sorry to hear that, the Order is all that is left to most of us." Master Kelaan didn't say any more after that. His eyes were on the ground in front of his feet but his thought seemed to be far away.

They reach the edge of the forest, beyond it lay the fields and pastures surrounding the outlying villages of Kurum Ebanil, the second biggest city in the country. Half an hour of boring walking brought them to a little village's centre, where a carriage waited for them. *Praise the saints*. A man wearing the blue robes of the Order's servants greeted them. Master Kelaan gave some orders Beraan didn't care listen to. Midas' elbow jab to his side reminded Beraan that he was supposed to open the door for them. *Oh yeah right, etiquette*. At least the seat was comfortable even though Beraan had to ride backwards. Midas sunk into one corner and dosed off before Beraan could even sit down.

"Master, I can I ask you something," said Beraan.

"Apparently so," Master Kelaan answered with a smile.

"I have been getting headaches when I see magic flashes."

"Really? Show me your Amulet."

Beraan pulled his left glove off and showed him the back of his hand where the golden Amulet set, bound by four strings looping around to a ring on his palm.

"Oh, you were given that Amulet. How long have you been using it?"

"It was given to me seven days ago but I could only practice two, then I was told to pack my bag and get here."

"It gave Garahel trouble for two years before he got used to it."

Two years? Fuck no. "Was this Garahel the Inquisitor who carried it before me?"

"No no, Gar got it thirty years ago, give or take a few. I was just promoted to second when he became my master's next student. "

"Did it give him headaches too?"

"No, for him the extra sense didn't settle."

"I don't understand."

"How do you perceive magic with it?"

"I see flashes of light when someone uses magic."

"It's not like that for everyone. The Amulet gifts you a new sense, like sight or smell. The problem is that our mind doesn't know how to deal with that information. So the Amulet usually picks one sense and overlays its information, sight in your case."

"It didn't make Garahel see magic?" Beraan asked.

"No, it was touch and smell for him."

"So he could smell magic?"

"In a way, yes. The Amulet presented magic to him like that, of course, the first years it manifested itself sometimes as a sense of touch. Whenever someone used magic, he complained that hands were fondling him. "Master Kelaan broke out laughing. Midas' head perked up, looked around and went back to sleep. "You can't believe how many times we did something mundane and he would jump up all off a sudden and shout, get your hands off me."

He smiled and for the first time, he didn't look that old.

"Of course we started teasing him, groping him when he was distracted, gods we were a mean bunch back then."

"We?" Beraan asked.

"Mira, Gerben, Selsa, Harus, Betaan, Solus and..." His smile vanished. "Well, it doesn't matter they are long gone now. All except Mira, I've heard she is now the best Inquisitor the capital has seen in the last hundred years. I don't doubt it, she has always been competent. Good for the capital to have her, they need everyone dumb enough to live there, I haven't been there myself in twenty years."

I haven't been there in two and if I never see it again it will be too soon.

"So you think the pain will go away?" Beraan asked to break the silence.

"It never does...wait you talk about your headaches? Sure give it time, give the Amulet time to get used to you and yourself time to get used to it, sometimes it feels as if they are alive, doesn't it?"

"Are they?" Beraan asked.

"No, I don't think so. What happened to your right hand?"

"My glove caught fire, I pulled it off"

"The Amulet is fine?"

"Yes," he held it up.

"You got Selsa's Amulet," said Master Kelaan.

"You know someone who wore it too?"

"That's the problem with a limited supply of Amulets and a close-knit group using them, in time you get to know everyone."

"I haven't quite figured out how to use it, it makes things move away. I shot a pebble with it."

"Nice, Seli liked to shoot coins around, and of course she tended to lose them, terribly expensive that girl. Also, it doesn't create motion, it imbues acceleration."

"Whats the difference?"

"Tell me, when you use it to shoot things around, do they fly with the same speed or do they speed up?"

"They get faster, I wondered why that happens."

"Motion alone has a constant speed, acceleration creates speed."

"What's the difference?" Beraan asked.

"Oh well, if you just want to hit something in a straight line then there isn't one. But, if you want to get to the awesome stuff, you'll need to develop a greater understanding motion and acceleration. The things Seli could do with that Amulet, the mastery she had over it, shooting pebbles is just the beginning, She could make sand dance."

And that means what exactly? Sand dance? I'm not fighting with sand, this guy is too weird.

"Ah, I see," Beraan said instead.

"Good, good, I'll guess you will understand in five or ten years. There is an exercise I want you to do. Get yourself a ring of some sort, I don't know, bent a branch and tie it together, use a rope it doesn't matter. You need a ring just big enough to fit your arm in from fingertip to elbow. Then I want you to shoot ten pebbles through, after you manage that, take a step back and do it again, and another step and so on, you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good, the fun part begins when I make you use two or three rings but one will suffice for now. Any other questions you want to get off your chest?"

"Why are some flashes a different colour?"

"What colour?"

"The cursed man's hands glowed purple when he used his magic when Midas used his awareness it was a deep blue, I saw a golden flesh before you appeared, by the way, where did you come from?"

"Hm... interesting," he held out his and it glowed purple, a little flame appeared in his palm. "Can you see colour?"

"Yes purple."

"Good, very good," the flame and colour disappeared. "It looks like your Amulet represents different kinds of magic as different colours to you?."

"Different magic, different colour, got it."

"Poor Gar felt as if he was being touched in different places. After a while, the Amulet settled on his sense of smell. He said my fire smelled like lemon. Mira's smelled like pine needles and Betaan's like freshly cut grass. Poor Seli, he always said her magic smelled like horseshit to him, though I think he was just teasing her."

"Ah, I understand, because the Amulet can tell the difference and shows it to us this way

"Yes, that is... "

The carriage stopped, someone shouted something outside. Beraan could only see the fields and villages behind them. *We should be close to the city now.*

Master Kelaan gave Midas a shake. "Midas, go see what's going on."

Someone knocked against the door. "Master Kelaan?" A female voice asked outside.

"Yes, enter!"

A woman in blue opened the door and stuck her head in.

"Saints be blessed I found you. An urgent letter from the Grand Inquisitor."

She handed him a role in a leather tube and closed the door again.

Master Kelaan read it, moving his lips in silence while reading, the way Beraan had done when he was young and had to sound the word out. When he was finished he put the letter back inside.

"Looks like your bedroll has to make do without you Midas. There has been an incident in the capital, we are needed there, immediately."

Kurum Adanil, of all places in the world, why did it have to be that city. I don't want to go back.

Chapter 3

Estra leaned against the cold stone wall, the stone bench wasn't any warmer. Teraan's body lay on a stone altar, wrapped in linen. "Interior decorators, they pick a theme and stick with it," Estra told the body. The silence pressed in on her. "That would have cracked you up." She smiled a bitter smile. "I miss you. I woke up this morning my hand fell over to your side of the bed and for a moment I wondered where you were." Estra stood up and walked over to the stone altar. "Teraan, i... you know... you knew, didn't you?" She reached out to touch his head but thought better of it. "I want to see your face again, one last time." *I could tear those linens off. No, no.*

"I am sorry." Her vision blurred, she used the sleeve of her gray robe to dry her eyes. "It is my fault you died. If I had reacted faster... I could have killed that man before he got to you... or master Mira. If I had turned my robes intangible his kick would never have stunned me. If I trapped him immediately... if i..." Estra wiped new tears away. "If I had trained you better you would have stood a chance." Estra touched his shoulder, it was as cold as the basement room. "I failed you... I am so sorry... I don't know what I was thinking... Me trying to be an Inquisitor." She wiped tears away again, "an Inquisitor.. me... I should have left the order when I was old enough."

Estra couldn't tell how long she stood there, holding his stiff and bandaged hand. Her tears dried after a while. "I brought you something," Estra got her violin out of its case, the only possession the order allowed her. "You were so cute back then. You thought I wouldn't notice you outside my room when I practiced. I did notice." Estra pressed the soft wood against her neck. "I waited three weeks for you to find your courage and knock. That time I accidentally run into you and invited you in, well that wasn't much of an accident." Estra played the first melody, the triumph of the valiant, his favorite. "Every time I finished practicing you applauded and left. Ever time i wanted you to stay." After that, she played the autumn winds and the lone man's woes. Those two she played the first night he didn't leave.

Estra had to pause twice while playing the hopes and dreams of wandering stars. Memories of the picnic in the golden fields outside came back to her. Estra sitting on the blanket, Teraan head in her lap, his eyes closed and listening to her play. *It is my fault he is dead.*

A string ripped and wiped her finger, Estra dropped the instrument. It hit the floor with a crack, the neck broke in two. *Perfect, just perfect. Gods if that was supposed to be a singe, I got it.* Estra picked the broken pieces up and stuffed them in their case.

When she was done Estra set down next to the altar, resting against it. "I failed you Teraan, I failed... I don't know what to do." Estra banged her head against the stone. It hurt, at least physical pain faded. Sometime later two blues came in and carried the body away, they speared Estra only a glaze and left her alone and the cold and empty chamber.

Estra walked up the long stairs one at a time, she used to run those up and down when she was little but today, she just didn't have the energy for it. A nurse closed the infirmary door right under Estra's nose.

"I'm sorry," said the nurse. "Master Mira is in no condition to receive visitors. I can't allow you to see her."

"She is my master, I have to speak with..." Estra said.

"No," the nurse interrupted her, "she is being prepared for surgery."

"But I was told the same yesterday."

"Because she was!" The nurse raised her hand in exasperation. "Master Mira has been on and off that surgery table since she was brought here."

"I thought she was stable."

"Do you know what kind of wound she suffered from?"

"Yes, it was a deep laceration."

"On top of that, some idiot stuffed what was left of her arm in a blacksmith's fire," the nurse shook her head, "can you imagine that?"

That idiot stands right in front of you, not that I'm gone tell you. "I was told that saved her life, stopped the bleeding and so,"

"Yeah maybe," that mollified the nurse somewhat, "what that idiot failed to consider, was that smithies aren't the most sanitary place."

What else should I have done? Master Mira lost blood too fast and tying the arm of did nothing.

"Did the wound fester?"

"Yes, so the surgeon cut that part off, then the new wound turned necrotic, so they cut that part off too."

Estra covered her mouth, "that's horrible."

"So girl, you understand why she is in no condition to receive visitors? Good, now leave me alone there is much to be done."

Estra found Milisa exactly where she knew she would be, in the library on the second floor and the big corner table. *She is lucky her robes are blue so the ink stains can't be seen.*

"Hey Mili, what are you reading?"

The blond woman looked up at her.

"Come and look at this, it's a middle-high Estralen interpretation of an old Estralen translation of a pre-dynastic text about... yeah I'm not really sure what it's about. It's

either a record of worship rituals or a creation myth with strong early Erasen influences."

"Ah, why didn't you say so earlier."

"You have no idea what I'm talking about?" Milisa asked.

"Nope, but I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"Enjoy? It's a nightmare, there can't be any Erasen because this text predates the rise of the first proto-Erasen culture by at least two thousand years, maybe they developed the sun motive independently..."

Milisa bit her lips in thought, her expression changed as she took Estra's appearance in.

"You look terrible."

"I just finished Teraan's vigil," Estra said.

Milisa engulfed her in a hug.

Your only three years older, it's so unfair you're a head taller.

After a moment Estra tried to free herself but her friend held her tight.

"It's alright" Milias whispered.

"No, it's not. Teraan is dead and it's my fault."

"How can you say that?"

"Because it's true, I should never have become an Inquisitor. I'm no good to anyone. I think, I think I should leave the order."

Milisa released her, took a step and slapped her. The sound echoed back and forth throughout the Library.

"You listen to me and you listen well. You know how much I wanted the grey, you got it, I didn't. That sucks but I made the best of it and so will you. Yes, you are hurting and you have the right of it, I'm so sorry. Your boyfriend was murdered, so what? My mother was murdered, your mother is dead whoever our fathers were they are most likely dead too. Just because life gut-punches you, doesn't make it right to throw away your gifts, your place is in the order, you can do Good here."

Estra rubbed her left cheek, "are you done?"

"Only if you're done bathing in self-pity."

"It's not self-pity, it's the truth, I..."

Milias raised her hand, "want another?"

"No, I surrender" Estra felt herself smile.

Teraan is dead, his vigil was less than an hour ago and I'm having fun... how could I...

The smile vanished.

"It will get better," said Milisa.

Milias hugged her again.

"I don't want to hear any more about leaving the order," said Milisa, "is that understood?"

"Fine."

I won't tell you about it.

"Don't wallow in the past, it's gone. Look towards the future."

"In which book did you read that?" asked Estra.

"Torsons' meditations, interesting thoughts but terrible grammar and his handwriting, abysmal."

This time Estra did laugh. *I failed you Teraan, I could not save you but I will make it right. I will find that cursed and kill him, I won't fail you again.*

"There is something else you may be able to help me with."

Milisa glanced at the restricted area, "I can't help you get into the masters section."

"No, not that. The cursed who..." Estra paused and swallowed, "the cursed who killed Teraan used a power I have never heard of. I need records of all powers the cursed have manifested. You think we got something like that here?"

Milisa lifted her hand to encompass the four storey library.

"Sister, you have come to the right place."

Sister, you haven't called me that since we were little and played make-believe.

After half an hour, observing Milisa diving into rows of books and emerging with one or two only to put one back and look for another, Estra found herself with half a dozen book, ranging from a barely legible diary to a beautifully illustrated tome so heavy it took her and Mili to carry it over to the table. *That's a lot. What made me think this would be easy.*

Chapter 4

Kurum Adanil, the capital is as ugly as the day I left. The carriage crested a little hill, on its zenith Beraan and Midas got a good view of the city. It hugged the great river on both sides. The sun peeked just above the horizon, climbing it would take half an hour. Beraan pulled his clocked tight, up in the carriage's driver bench nothing protected him from the morning winds.

"Would you look at that," said Midas.

"What?" asked Beraan.

"The walls, what do you think, how high are they?"

"I have no idea." *Wait until you see them up close.*

The two great walls around the city were the reason why the capital had never been taken. Even from this far away Beraan was able to pick out the smaller walls separating the city into the districts. The imposing sight the great wall presented was spoiled by the slums that had grown in front of the outer most wall. Tradition would dictate that another wall was to be built to protect those slums. *Who cared for those traditions anymore?. They don't have the money for it and who would attack us anyway?*

Beraan's eyes wandered upstream where the two rivers merged, in the triangular landmass between them, he saw the two great cathedrals and right next to them he found their destination, the Order house Prime.

"Have you been here before?" Midas asked.

"Why?" Asked Beraan.

"Just asking. You have been quiet since the forest, since you..."

"Killed a man." Beraan finished for him.

"Yes."

"I'm fine."

"Do you dream about it?"

Fires burning all around him, his sister screaming, banging her little fists against a door, the door doesn't budge, a wood-beam breaking loses, pinning his father to the ground, the flames creeping ever closer, his mother dead, her corpse consumed, the smell of burning hair and flesh... In the doorway stands the man, flames all around him, coming off his hand and head, setting everything on fire, burning everything but him. His voice echoes in Beraan's ears, he doesn't say a single word, all he does is laugh.

"No." Beraan closed his eyes, the images retreated back to where they came from. "No, I don't dream about killing the cursed in the forest."

"I did," Midas said, "the first time I was forced to kill. Every day for months, I was back there in my dreams. Even today I still dream about it sometimes."

"Did you need to do it?"

"Yes, she was about to kill someone."

"So it needed to be done," asked Beraan.

"Yes."

"Then why are you beating yourself up about it?"

"Because taking a life is wrong, it is that simple. Every life lost is one Soul less working towards redemption"

Oh, a religious nut. "That's dualist talk right?"

"Yes, though the great Dichotomy is the proper name," said Midas.

"Ah... I didn't know that."

"Which religion were you raised in?"

"My parents believed in the virtues," the smell of burned hair crept up his nose. *Don't think about them,* "but I never paid much attention."

"Yeah neither did I, but lately I have been talking to the priest some more."

"Master Kelaan allows that?"

"Of course, why wouldn't he?" asked Midas.

"I was told in the Forge to stay away from all three religions."

Midas laughed, "you didn't pay attention there either, did you?"

"Well, there was this girl, she set right next to me and she was far more interesting."

Beraan grinned, thinking of Lira.

"As Inquisitors, we are supposed to be neutral. We are not allowed to associate with any of the great religions. There have been instances of Inquisitors leaving the order and taking their Amulets to a church, tipping the balance of power between them. So the churches forbade each other the use of Amulets in return for our neutrality."

"And the point is?" asked Beraan.

"We can not associate as Inquisitors but peace of the soul is for us the find wherever we might."

They rode on in silence, Beraan looked around. In summer the field to their left and right would be filled with golden crops, swaying in the wind as far as the eyes could see. The rivers carved a fertile plain that feeds half the country, his father had said so. Today it was covered in white, at least the snow had stopped falling. White clouds filled the sky and met the white fields, Beraan couldn't even tell where one ended and the other began.

"You didn't answer my question?" Midas asked after a while.

"Which one?"

"Have you been to the capital before?"

I was borne here, raised here and lost everything that mattered to me here. No, I didn't lose it, it was taken.

"Yes."

Midas waited for more. When Beraan didn't say anything else he muttered to himself, "alright then."

"You think there is another road stop before we get there?" Midas asked.

They had stopped three times a day on special waypoints prepared for hasty travel, riders had been sent ahead and horses prepared for them. They switched the horses and continued on. Beraan was told a trip from Kurum Ebanil to the capital took between eight to ten days, they made it in three.

"No, we passed the last one this morning," said Beraan.

"How do you know?" Asked Midas with a smile.

"I traveled this road on my way to the Forge."

"So you came from the capital?"

Can you stop digging? What does it matter to you anyway?

"Yes."

"Tell me about the city, how was it growing up there."

That's enough.

"The same as everywhere else, the flowers smell like flowers, people smell like people and the streets smell like shit. What about you, where do you come from?"

It took them a little over an hour to get from the final hill the outer slums. All that time Midas talked about his family, he talked like a leaking waterskin, only those run out of contents. He talked about his childhood, him growing up in a fishing village outside Kurum Umanil, how his ability to use an Amulet elevated him out of that life. He told about the life of a fisherman, about his sisters getting married, one of them expecting soon and his hope to visit them if Master Kelaan allowed it. *I should no have asked... at least he doesn't bother me anymore.*

Beraan tuned Midas out, sometimes responding with a nod, a yes or no or a question where he felt he was supposed to ask one. Beraan's eyes wandered over the plains around him. Farms grew rarer the closer they came to the city. His father had told him something about farms once but he could recall it, something about the land close the city being own by the nobility. They send their workforce out every day to tend the field within walking distance.

As they came closer to the outer wall, house sprung up on each side of the road. If one was so generous as to call those messes of wood and stone a house. The outer gate wasn't just one gate, it was a series of four. The first gate led them into a corridor that ran parallel to the outer wall, two gate-houses blocked the way for anyone who made it past the first. The high walls to all side trapped an attacker while archers rained arrows down on them. The gate stood wide open, Beraan had been told the gate had not been closed in living memory. *I wonder if the thing even works.*

His father had taken Beraan once to the annual drill, those walls lined by countless men had been an impressive sight. Beraan searched the wall tops for guards, he only found a few and they looked as bored as the one on the ground. That guard waved them through without question, once they saw the grey robes marking them as members of the Inquisition. *Sloppy, just because we wear them doesn't mean we are Inquisitor. Ah well, as father used to say, war kills people, peace kills discipline.*

"It doesn't smell so bad," Midas said after they passed through the last gate and entered the city.

"This is the craftsmen quarter, you should visit the tanneries downstream some time."

"Na, nothing good flows down a river. So what are the others called?"

"The first quarter, craftsmen, the high quarter, the upper and lower wise men, the old and new docks, the outer quarter and then upper and lower west and south-quarter."

"That makes a lot quarters," Midas asked, "someone didn't learn their numbers."

"No one cares what they are called."

The road lead them passed the market. Shops lined the outside of the rectangular marketplace. Wooden boxes served as selling stands. People walked the market in orderly lines. Beraan remembered the pathways drawn on the floor. Like good dogs, the

citizens Kurum Adanil followed a line when they were given one. They wore clothes of all colours, except grey and blue those were reserved. The dominant colour was an orange-brown. That color came from a root people used to wash their clothing. The older a piece got the browner its colour. Those who could afford it showed their wealth in vibrant colours. A woman walked the market, two guards in front of her, she wore a dress of green and golden blond hair curled down her back, her servants wore only a shade of brown, four guards brought up the rear.

"Which way?" Midas asked when they reached a fork.
Not right, "left, to the first quarter, then through the old docks, across the river to the Temple square."
"No," called master Kelaan out of the carriage, "take the right, into the high quarter, it's faster and the guards won't dare to deny us passage."

Master Kelaan had been right, the guards didn't look at them twice. The gate was small compared to the out city gate. There, three or four wagons could pass each other. Here, the carriage barely fit and Beraan had to duck unless his head scraped the tunnels stone roof.

The higher quarter could not be more different from the craftsmen quarter. Its streets were wide and walkways framed the road. Trees had been planted everywhere. The houses in the craftsmen quarter stood directly at the streets. *I always feel as if I'm being crushed between them.* The houses here gave a sense of vast and openness, the houses themselves stood behind well-maintained gardens. *Maintained by their servants of course.* The walls and fences showed of elaborate metal work, doubtless in a show of wealth. There was no traffic on the road, a patrol of guards in different colors passed them by. A servant carrying books waited to cross the road, he bowed when he saw them and hurried on.

When they passed the central crossroads, Beraan's eyes wandered up the road north. Where they found a black ruin of an estate. It stood out like an infected wound among the pristine buildings. *Why has no one cleaned that up?* Beraan thought of the boy who had lived there, a dead boy. The burned down ruin teased the memory of flames out, the smell of burned hair..*No, they are dead, it was not my fault, there was nothing I could have done.*

Beraan let out a breath of relief when they left the high quarter. *I hate this city, I can't wait to get out of here.* The west quarter stank of shit, just like Beraan remembered it. The people here duped their shit on the street bucked after bucked and let the rain take care of it. *At least frozen shit doesn't smell, I don't want to be here in summer ever again.*

The took the bridge over the river, it was two wagons wide and made of stone. Two-thirds of the way, a gatehouse stood as silent a reminder of a time when this bridge was the western entrance to the city. That city made up today's first quarter. *The gatehouse isn't even maned.*

On the other side of the bridge waited the Order house Prime.

Chapter 5

The Order house Prime stood on the western side of the Temple square, right across the Temple of the Virtues. Beraan had been dragged there when he was a kid only to be bored by the priests. But his parents had not been interested in a child's sophisticated arguments which most of the time boiled down to, "I don't wanna".

On the northern side towered the dualist's cathedral, it had some official important sounding name that little Beraan at the time promptly forgotten. He did remember the cathedral on the southern side. It was called the cathedral of singularity. Beraan's father had despised those Unitarians, Beraan hadn't understood what he was talking about, their believe just seemed strange to him. As far as he had understood, they thought all human life or all live in general were actually one being. Little Beraan had put that idea to the test immediately, pinching his little sister's arm. When she cried out in pain and he didn't feel it, he decided they were two beings, not one and that believe was nonsense.

The Virtues made much more sense to him, pick one and emulate its attributes. Be a better person than you were yesterday. While it was good enough to pick only one of the lower virtues, it was thought that one should aspire to all the higher virtues, Truth being the highest among them. Little Beraan had wondered back them, why they had to make it so difficult, wasn't being loyal for example good enough, did he have to tell the truth, be kind and polite and all the other things too?

Midas brought the carriage to a stop and threw Beraan out of his reverie with another elbow jab. The Order house Prime was a busy place, people in blue robes hurried up and down the great marble stairs leading up to the main entrance. Guards in blue gambesons stood their posts. *In the Forge the guards double as combat instructors, their official function dwindled down to turning away the occasional baggers. I wonder if these guards are as skilled at fighting.*

Midas stretched like a cat after he hopped down from the driver's bench. Beraan opened the door for master Kelaan. He looked around the square with an odd mixture of joy and sadness.

"Let's not keep the Grandmaster waiting, she doesn't like..." Master Kelaan fell silent, Beraan followed his gaze to a person in white robes standing on top the highest step. Master Kelaan climbed up the stairs. Midas took his place as his second, one step behind and to his master's left. *Stupid etiquette, whoever thought it was a good idea to make up rules for mundane shit was a good idea?* Beraan hurried to take his place two steps behind his master and one to his right. *I hope I didn't embarrass master Kelaan in front of... who is that anyway? White robes, that must be someone really up high.* Kelaan stopped in front of the woman and bowed deep, Midas and Beraan followed his lead. She was old, her hair was white and strawy. Age had not been kind to her wrinkled face.

"Grandmaster Glinn," said Master Kelaan, he emphasized the grand.
"Oh stop groveling and let me look at you Kel," the Grandmaster said.
He straightened and her smile revealed more missing than remaining teeth.

"It is so good to see you again, how long has it been?"

"Nine years since you visited Kurum Ebanil, Grandmaster."

"Ah yes, the north pass incident, which reminds me to remind you, that anything concerning that matter is only to be shared with masters or high Inquisitors."

"Why are you bringing that up now of all times?" asked master Kelaan, he sounded confused, "is this cursed connected to..."

"No, no, not at all. Selsa's daughter has been asking questions, you are going to meet her soon."

"I understand Master," said master Kelaan, "why exactly am I here?"

I don't. Selsa, was that the woman how held my Amulets at some point?

"Follow me," ordered the Grandmaster and turned away. They walked down the hallway. "You want the long or the short version?"

"Short," said master Kelaan

"Mira and her team tracked a cursed, he injured Mira and killed her third. Her second got her out."

"How bad is it?" asked master Kelaan.

Who is this Mira and why is he worried about her? Mira? Was she among those friends he told me about?

"She has been in surgery every day, they say her arm is lost and they have to take more off every time. They can't tell if she will make it."

"If anyone is too stubborn to die in a bed, it's her."

"Are you going to go see her?" Asked the grandmaster.

"I don't think she would want to see me, or rather she wouldn't want me to see her like that."

Her voice softened, like a grandmother talking to a child. "Kal, how long has it been?"

"Twenty-two years, seven month and three days."

Her eyebrows shoot up "Kel..."

Master Kelaan didn't let her speak, "what kind of ability did the cursed show?"

The grandmaster shook her head, "fine. He manifested Inhuman strength."

"Strength? that's it?"

"Kel, he ripped her arm off. With his bare hands."

"Alright, give me the long version now," Master Kelaan said.

"Two weeks ago Mira came to me, remember that case when she went undercover in that brothel for two months?"

"How could I forget," a smile danced over his lips.

"Apparently, Mira has kept in touch with some of her coworkers, two of them approached her about girls gone missing."

"Any single of cursed involvement?" asked master Kelaan.

"No."

"And you let her pursue the matter?"

"Not at first but in the end, there was nothing that needed her attention so I agreed."

"She threatened to leave her Amulets and robes in the Order house and investigate as a private citizen, didn't she?" asked master Kelaan.

"Yes, she did." the Grandmaster said with a sigh.

Master Kelaan laughed. The great double doors open into a dining hall, the tables stood in four long rows. The ceiling was twice as high as in a normal building and four pillars held it up. *It looks like a temple.* The Grandinquisitor lead them to a

table where a girl about Beraan's own age ate her breakfast. She wore her long red hair braided tight behind her head the way most girls in the Forge did. The rest just cut it off.

"She looks like Sili," muttered his master.

She sprang up and bowed, "Grandmaster."

"Master Kelaan, this is Estra, Mira's second," the Grandinquisitor said in a pleasant tone.

She is barely older than me and second already?

"Estra, this is Master Kelaan, he is going to find your attacker and take care of him. You are assigned to him until further notice, do you understand?"

"Yes Grandmaster," the girl said.

"Good, I'll leave you to it, Kel."

They all bowed to her as she left.

"Please sit down," said Master Kelaan, "I need you to tell me exactly what happened."

"Where should it start?" she asked.

"At the beginning," Master Kelaan said with a smile.

"About two weeks ago master Mira told Teraan and me, that several women disappeared in the dock street. We were to find out what was going on and see if cursed were involved."

"It wouldn't be the first time," master Kelaan interrupted her. "Sorry, go on."

"We checked every report of a missing person related to prostitution for a week, most of them were runaways or changed hands without telling their coworkers about it. However, eleven girls vanished without a trace. Nine of them after they served costumers at home. So the second week we asked the brothel owners to forbid housecalls and take note of anyone vehement disagreement."

A blue robe inquired if they wished for food and drink. *Yes, I'm starving.* Master Kelaan told him to bring whatever and the girl to continue. *What was her name again?*

"It was Teraan's idea to focus on the brothel who hadn't lost anyone yet. He and Master Mira watched the street while I was told to mingle with that working girls."

"Yeah, undercover with hookers is kind of a tradition," Master Kelaan said.

"I wasn't really undercover, I just stood next to them and if someone approached me, I just asked four times the price the other girls did and most men left me alone."

"Mira checked the emotions of the passing men." Master Kelaan said it as a statement, no a question.

"Yes, on the seventh day we found who we were looking for."

"How did you recognize him," Beraan asked, earning him looks. *A third's job is to observe and obey, only to act if told so.* In his ears the words of his instructors echoed. The girl answered him anyway.

"I didn't, Master Mira send word to go with him, that was our agreed signal. The plan was to let him take me where he committed the murders and get as much information out of him as possible, then deal with him."

"What went wrong?" Master Kelaan asked.

"We were walking through a sidealley when he noticed Master Mira and Teraan following us, despite Teraan's invisibility."

"They trailed you while they used invisibility?" Asked master Kelaan with a raised eyebrow.

"A little trick we practiced, I stomped my food every few steps, they could follow the sound. It also distracts people watching, so Teraan could take a peek and disappear again."

"I don't understand master," Midas said.

"Invisibility not only prevents others from seeing the user, it renders the user blind as well," explained master Kelaan. *Interesting, Midas gets to asked questions and I don't...*

The whatever the blue brought turned out to be bread, butter and eggs. Everyone was given a single slice of a sausage, Beraan had never seen its kind before. After the three days ride on travel rations, the food was delicious.

"He noticed them, what happened next," asked Master Kelaan.

"Master Mira left the invisibility and questioned him. Without any warning, the cursed drew his sword and ran me through. A kick to my sternum took me out of the fight, when I got up again Teraan had trapped himself and the man in a temporal bubble.

"He did what to you?" Asked Midas.

"He rammed his sword into my chest. I moved my body to an intangible state. It passed right through," she said with a shrug.

"You can do that?" asked maser Kelaan. "It took Girel fifteen years to pull that trick off."

"I hear that a lot," she held her left hand up where the golden oval dangled on its chains.

"This thing isn't working right, or at least I haven't figured it out yet. Putting myself in a non-interactive state is easy but I only managed to do it with objects a few times. I was told it's usually the other way around."

"Mm... interesting," said master Kelaan, playing with his grey, three days beard. "How long have you been wielding it?"

"Three years."

"I thought intangibility in objects was the easiest part."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me," she said.

"And your own body goes into non-reaction without problems?"

"Yes, Master."

"Amulets can react to each person differently. But you were telling us what happened, continue please."

"Do you know about the limited time reversal Amulet?" The girl asked.

"Yes," said Master Kelaan and Midas nodded, Beraan shook his head but no one cared.

"Teraan trapped the cursed inside the field. He fought the man and lost. When he was close to death he turned back time inside the bubble and tried again. The second time around, Teraan knew how the man would fight and countered his moves. Of course, the cursed didn't remember the previous iteration, he repeated every move until he reached the moment when the last loop had ended. After that Teraan was forced to improvise and lost, only to repeats it all over again."

"Was he a competent fighter?" Asked Master Kelaan.

"The cursed was quick with his blade and didn't waste a move, he knew his way around a sword," she hesitated, "Teraan was not very good. I mean he passed the exams and I practiced with him every day but... Master Mira said it best one day, some people are born for a blade, Teraan was not."

"How long had he been Mira's third?"

"He graduated last year, six months ago his first master asked for a replacement and Teraan was assigned to us."

"What happened next?" Master Kelaan asked.

"He ripped his heart out."

"What?" asked Midas and Beraan at the same time.

She took a deep breath, "the man reached into Teraan's chest and ripped his heart out."

"What did he do with it?" Asked Beraan before he could think any better of it.

"I don't know. I didn't see him holding it, all I saw was him pressing his fist against Teraan's chest, I heard his ribs crack and hours later I saw the hole in his chest. Grand Inquisitor Glinn had that surgens take a look and the confirmed his heart was gone."

"I see," said master Kelaan.

"I don't," she said, "he already cut off his head, there was no need to do that to him, I can't think of a single reason why someone would do that."

"It could be a trophy, or it could have ritual meaning to him," suggested Midas.

"I spent most of the last six day in the library looking up cults and occult practices past and present, it was a dead end. He didn't look like a member of a jungle tribe or a Motargi of the western plains."

"How did you get out?" asked master Melaan.

"I... I ran, i grabbed master Mira and go out of there."

"How?" asked Midas.

"We were close to the second wall, I found two large blocks of stone in the foundation. I managed to put one in a half tangeble state and the upper stone in full intangebility . I pulled her through and all the man could do was watch."

"What was her condition?"

"She was unconscious, her arm gone and the stump bled without end. We were close to a smithy I know and I dragged her there, we cauterized the wound. I took possession of a carriage and got her here."

"Thank you that is enough for now." Said Master Kelaan, "I need to see that alley for myself."

Chapter 6

Beraan opened the carriage door for Master Kelaan, Midas and the redhead. They walked down a back ally, it ended in the second wall. They stopped in next to a patch of brown snow. Beraan gave the snow only a glance, something else drew his attention. A black mist hung above the brown snow. Another cloud hung a bit to the side, it was as thin as candle smoke.

"What is that?" Beraan asked his master and waved his hand through it.

I didn't disturb the smoke at all.

"What is what?" Midas asked.

An insistent pressure behind his right eye told him what he missed at first glance, he wasn't seeing that mist with his real eyes, the Amulet was showing that mist to him.

"It is magic," he muttered. "Master, there is some kind of smoke, here and over there," Beraan pointed at the spot.

"That's where he... injured master Mira," the girl said.

"I have never heard of magic use leaving residue," said Master Kelaan rubbing his chin,

"This is where he killed Teraan?"

The girl looked down at the spot, her eyes unfocused. She swallowed visibly and nodded.

"So, the field ended there and Mira ley over there." said master Kelaan. "How did you get her out?"

Estra pointed at the city wall. "Through that stone block over there."

"He let you?" Asked master Kelaan.

"No master, I used my inertial manipulation Amulet on his clothes."

Master Kelaan laughed, "well done, Hirtus did that once to me, it felt as if the air itself became mud. Why didn't you kill him then and there?"

"I couldn't, I ran out of throwing knives and lost my sword."

"Back up a bit, where was your sword?"

"He was holding it," she said.

"He took your sword? You didn't tell me that earlier."

"I'm sorry master, I forgot."

Sure you did, nice little embracing detail you just happened to forget.

"Didn't he have a sword of his own?" Master Kelaan asked.

"Yes master, he threw what was left of it at Teraan."

"What was left?" Master Kelaan said. "Let me guess, Mira got her hands on it?"

"I think so, the sword looked like it, but I didn't see how it happened."

"Was it recovered?" Asked Master Kelaan.

"Not as far as I know. The Blues brought my knives and my sword back, as well as Master Mira's and Teraan's Amulets. No one mentioned a broken blade."

"Midas, see if you can find something," said Master Kelaan.

Midas closed his eyes, Beraan could see his Amulet glowing in a deep-blue light in his magic sight. Midas head glowed the likewise, four bulges made of light grew on it, extending out and expanding. Four rope-like tendrils stretched out, waving through the air, touching the ground, disappearing in the snow. They reminded Beraan of Hands feeling around for something or dogs sniffing the ground. One of them stopped.

"There" Midas pointed at the heap of snow it stuck in. The light around him disappeared and the tendrils fade away.

Midas walked over and dug a hilt out of the snow, its blade only a hand width long and ended in a deformed mess. The metal looked molten and frozen again mid-flow.

"Show me."

Midas handed the hilt to master Kelaan "Strange, it looks like a common footman sword."

"Whats strange about that Master?" Midas asked, Beraan was wondering the same but didn't dare to ask questions again.

"It's made for stabbing while inside a shield wall. To fight alone in an alley like this, other types of swords would be more useful. Why would anyone use this?"

"My uncle kept his blade after the Esallen war," Midas said, "he kept it clean and sharp, never had to use it again though. He said owed it to the blade."

"Master, you think that man could have been in Esalla?" the redhead asked.

"Maybe," Master Kelaan said, "you said he was my age?"

"I think so, give or take a few years."

"Did he use any fighting style you recognized," asked master Kelaan.

"No Master, I didn't see any style but he could handle a blade, the way he held himself, the way he moved, he would fit in with our guards."

"So we got a Man my age with experience and a sword that makes no sense using alone in the open." Master Kelaan looked around, "I have no idea how to find that guy."

What? You are supposed to be the master here.

"Keeping close watch Dock street and waiting for him surface again looks like our only option.

"I doubt he will come back there," said Midas.

"Why is that?" Master keaan asked.

"He must know we are on to him, the Inquisition can not let the murder on their own go unpunished. He wont show hise face again unless he is stupid."

Never assume you opponent is stupid, thats what vather used to say. this midas is not as dumb as i thought.

"Agreed, if I was him I'd change my target. But remember, we can assume that whatever drove him to kill will do so again, If his urge to kill young women is stronger then his caution, we might have a chance."

"What about mercenaries?" the redhead asked, "a man with his talents must make a living somehow. Maybe someone knows him."

"You know where to go or who to talk to?" Master Kelaan asked, "because my contacts are twenty years old and Mira didn't frequent those circles."

"No, Master."

"Master, could I see the hilt please," Beraan said, "I think it should be on the hilts underside, yes here." He held the hilt up for all to see, "there is a smiths mark on its flat. We could find out whos mark it is, track the sword's history until we find its current owner."

"Sword change hands too often," said master Kelaan shaking his head. "Who knows if he really was in the Esallen conflict. He could have gotten it anywhere, might have picked it up from a fallen soldier or even from an Esalli. I don't like waiting for him to kill again as little as any of you but it is our best option."

"Master," Midas said, "I think Beraan's idea has merit if you permit I would like to follow up on it."

Master Kelaan looked from Midas to Beraan and back, "Alright Midas, take Beraan and find out what you can, don't do anything stupid, it might be safer for you two if you weren't present when I face that man."

Thank you for the vote of confidence master, at least he values Midas as little as me.

Beraan and Midas got to keep the carriage, master Kelaan wanted to walk the way the redhead and the cursed had taken. After that, he said he would find a nice place from where he could keep watch on Dock street.

"Thank you," said Beraan after he pulled the door shut, "for speaking out for me."

"No need, it was a good idea," said Midas, "so where should we start?"

Beraan shrugged, "I don't know either, the first smithy we come across?"

Midas knocked twice against a wood panel above his head. It slid open and the blue driver looked in on them.

"Take us to the closest smithy,"

"Yes, master" The blue closed the panel and a wip crack a second later.

The closes smithy turned out to be located in the street first on the left after they entered the crafters quarter through a massive gate. Beraan managed to finally put a finger on what gave him this oppressive feeling. *Unlike that high quarters, the houses here where build side to side. There is no space between them, it feels as if I am on the bottom of a chasm. At any moment the walls could start to move in for no reason and squish me like a bug.*

A rusty singe with a hammer and an anvil hung above the door, it swayed in the breeze. This close to the high wall the wind wasn't as bad. *What must the winds be like up there?*

"Beraan," Midas said, "you take the lead in there."

"Why?"

"First, it was your idea. Second, master Kelaan and hargus did the same when I was thierd."

Midas followed Beraan inside, wherever he looked he saw weapons. On the wall behind the counter hang swords of all designs. Some long and narrow, some short and some even curved. Swords weren't the only weapons display, pikes and polearms lined the wall, some had axehead, some wicked spikes and some combinations of the two. One even had an iron ball on a short chain affixed to its top. *I can't imagine when that would even be useful.*

Beraan had overlooked the boy on his knees in front him scrubbing the floor. Water vanished between the old and bent wood. Beraan and Midas avoided the wet patches and the stains looking like dried blood.

The boy sprang up and greeted them, "how may I help you."

He was a year or two younger then Beraan.

"We would like the speaker to the master smith."

Beraan's eyes fell on another man with broad shoulders sitting in the corner, watching them. He wore a sleeveless shirt that showed his muscles. A door right next to him blocked sight of another room, Beraan could hear the rhythmic sound of hammer blows coming from back there.

The boy's eyes flicked to the door and back "Father doesn't wish to be disturbed when he is working."

Doesn't he know who we are? Doesn't recognize the grey robes that make us as Inquisition?

"We are here on official Inquisition business," said Beraan.

"I am sorry, his instructions were clear, I am not to let anyone interrupt him."

"You do know who we are, do you?" Beraan asked.

"Yes, I do but.."

"No, but!" Beraan interrupted him, "we are not here to buy anything, we need information, we need to find someone and your master may be able to help us, so go to him and tell him two Inquisitors are here to see him."

"No," said the man in the corner, he got up and laid a hand on the boy's shoulder.

Is he mad? we are Inquisition, how can he refuse us?

"Who are you?" Midas asked.

"I am the man who makes sure there is no trouble in the store."

No trouble? If I decided to make trouble, there wouldn't be a thing you can do about it.

Beraan let his outer robes fall back, revealing his swordbelt and the hand hovering next to it. The Man stiffened, he gripped the stick with the spiked metal ball.

Midas spoke before Beraan could teach this guy a lesson. "We are not here to make any trouble, we just need to speak to your master smith."

"No. You are not welcome here, leave or I'll make you."

That's enough. "How dare you?" shouted Beraan.

Midas raised his hand to shut Beraan up. To the Man, he said in a cold voice "Hindering our investigation is as good as helping a cursed? Do you know what we are allowed to do with people who help the cursed? Would you like to find out?"

The boy looked up to the men, a little nod of his head and the boy ran for the door. Beraan got a glimpse of the workshop in the other room.

"Let me do the talking," Midas whispered.

Why? what did i do wrong? I got them to move... "Fine," Beraan said.

"Two Inquisitors are here to see you father," the boy's said.

"Is one bleeding out again!" came a shout out of the back.

"No, father."

"Are they buying?"

"No."

"Send them away!"

"We only need a moment of your time!" shouted Midas.

"I'm working!"

What is wrong with these people? Have they no regard for the Inquisition? We keep them safe, where is the respect we deserve for that?

Midas took a calming breath. "How many of your weapons are bought by the Order? How much would it cost you if our patronage ended."

Nice, go for the money. Hit them where it hurts.

The hammering stopped. the man appearing in the doorway was ugly, there was no kind word to describe him. Little pockmarks dotted his skin which hung in flaps like old leather. Beraan had seen that on baggers but this man was well muscled and brought of shouldered. His nose bent so many times it looked comical, it must have been broken more times then one could count.

"What, do you want?" Asked the blacksmith.

Midas pulled the hilt out of his robe, "have you seen this mark before?"

The Smith circled the mark with his thumb, "never seen it in my life."

"Can you tell us anything about the sword?"

He turned it around and studied the blade. He took particular note of the breaking point, his deminer changed from annoyed to curios.

"Not much left of it for sure, how was that steel broken. I have never seen a pattern like that."

"Magic," Midas said.

The curiosity vanished as quick as it had come, he handed the hilt back to Midas so fast one could think it had bitten him. "Is that all?"

"Yes, thank you for your time."

Yeah, thank you for nothing.

He snorted and went into the backroom again, Beraan and Midas left the store to the sound hammering.

They went back to the carriage and told the driver to get them to the next smithy.

"Beraan, I need you to keep calm in moments like that," Midas said after the set down.

"I got them to move, didn't I?" Protested Beraan.

"Yes, but you have to be so... hard headed."

"They had no respect for us, no respect for the Inquisition."

"So what? Are you going to escalate the situation? Start a fight? Beat some respect into them?"

"Yes. Maybe," said Beraan.

"You can't do that," said Midas throwing up his hands.

"Technically i could have, the Order gives us a lot of room for judgment, wouldn't you agree that they refused to cooperate in finding that cursed?"

"That's not what I mean, just because you are allowed to do something, doesn't mean you should."

"I didn't DO anything."

"What about next time someone pisses you off? What if I'm not around to reign you in?"

"Reign me in?" shouted Beraan. "Am I your dog now?"

Midas shook his head, "you don't have to go through every wall head first, why are you looking for a confrontation so hard?"

"I..." Beraan stopped.

I don't know, am I? I'm not looking for trouble, it just finds me.

"I'm not looking for it..."

"Three days, we work together for three days and you already killed a cursed. In there you were so close to starting a fight that would have ended in either him dead or one of us, tell me I am wrong?"

Beraan let that sink in for a moment.

Was he right?

Yes, he was.

"What should I have done?" Asked Beraan, louder then he had intended to.
"Remained calm and think your way out of your problem. Force is always the last option."

"The way you did?"

"Yes, don't expect people to behave the way you want them to or think they should. Try to imagine yourself in their position, what do they want and how can you use that."

Father would have been proud if you were his son Midas, he always talked like that.

"That's kind of devious."

Midas shrugged, "its better than brute force."

"I guess so, still they shouldn't have acted that unaccommodating, we are Inquisition after all"

"Yes, i wondered what was up with that."

The next three weapon smiths they visited couldn't help them either. At least they had been friendly. The last one to an extent that bordered the absurd, apologizing over and over again he couldn't be of service.

"What now? Beraan asked.

"It's late, let's call it a day," said Midas. "We'll keep checking smithies tomorrow, how many can there be in the capital."

The answer turned out to be, a lot.

Chapter 7

A knock on the door woke Beraan.

"Who is it?" Beraan shouted, tiredness slurred his speech.

A young woman in blue robes entered, "The first hour of Eba has just begun, Master Inquisitor."

Master? *That sounds so odd, do they call anyone above them master? I could get used to that.* "Thank you."

"Anything you need a washed?"

Beraan gave her the bundle of yesterday's clothes and the day before that. *I think I have been wearing the same robes since we left the forest.* She took them with a shy smile and left.

Beraan put on the other set of clothes the Oorder provided for him. He had found them neatly folded on the desk after a blue had shown him to this room. He laced his boots and strapped his sword on. Beraan looked around the spare room, a cot, a table and a chair. *They don't give us much, do they? All that incorruptibility talk makes somewhat sense but can't I have a real bed? And why is there no chamberpot?*

Beraan wandered the unfamiliar corridors until he found a blue who gave him directions to the training area. It looked like the dining hall, twice as high as a normal room with pillars holding the ceiling up. They widen towards the top and formed elegant arches with the neighboring pillars. The combat instructors were easy to pick out, they carried themselves with the same expression of ready tension he had come to expect from them back in the Forge, like a cat ready to pounce and yet trying to look relaxed. Guards sparred with instructors or each other. On the far wall a statue of Kumregan, the Saint of martial prowess watched them strive to be his equal.

A Blue got him some wooden rings and rope to hang them up with. Beraan went to an empty corner and bound them to a metal bar used for pull-ups. Beraan pulled out his bag of pebbles he had filled on the way to the capital. He put one on his palm and set it right above the Amulet's inner ring. In his mind, he reached for the Amulet and felt it respond. He pulled the energy into himself, then directed it into the pebble. The energy wanted something. Beraan knew it was not conscious, it did not want but that idea was the best comparison he could think of. Beraan thought of the ring, the pebble shot of missing it and struck the wall behind it. The sound was drowned in the thunder of wooden swords and staffs hitting each other. The second pebble hit the mark and broke apart when it hit the wall.

"You gone have to practice a lot more."

Beraan spun around, Master Kelaan stood behind him, practice sword in one hand, the other stroking his stubble.

"Did you figure out how to modulate the rate of acceleration yet?"

"The what?" asked Beraan.

"How much power you feed it and how fast it converts," he must have seen Beraan's confusion. "How fast the pebble gets faster."

"No Master, I tell it to go and off it goes."

"Well then," master Kelaan picked up another ring and laid it on the floor, two steps behind where the first ring dangled on its rope.

"I want you to let you pebbles land in the second ring after it passes through the first."

"I don't know how."

"Yeah, thats the point. Figure it out," Master Kelaan turned towards the sparing guards and walked, practice sword resting on one shoulder.

Great, just great. Best master any student could wish for, spew some incomprehensible shit and fuck off.

Beraan picked another stone and shoot it through the first ring, it came nowhere near the second ring. *How am I supposed to do that?* The next pebble took the same path as the one before. So did the next and the one after. When Beraan reached for another, he found the pouch empty. He looked around and saw most of his projectiles next to the wall behind the ring or spread around after they bounced off it. Not a single one was close to the second ring. One lay in front of him, having bounced off the wall and slid all the way back.

Beraan kicking the stone away in frustration. *This is not working.* Beraan looked if anyone had noticed his outburst, no one had. Master Kelaan sparred with three guards at once. *Can't you give me better instructions Master? You are supposed to teach me, not leave me to teach it to myself.* He took a deep breath to calm himself and went to picked up the rocks.

Alright, I knew this wouldn't be easy, I've gotten through worse. Beraan studied his Amulet, the oval golden centre, the fine filigrain around it, the symbols edged into its surface. *How do you work? How can I use you?* Back on the starting position Beraan closed his eyes and focused on his awareness of the Amulet. It responded to his thoughts, its energy flowed out of it and into him. Beraan didn't press the energy into the rock as he had done before, instead, he examined it. It felt to him like warmth and yet he knew it had nothing to do with temperature. It wanted to move, no, it wanted to become motion, it was motion and yet not. The energy wasn't alive and Beraan didn't get the impression that it was sentient. It wanted to move the same way a stone wanted to fall and water wanted to flow. Beraan understood the energy on some deeper level. *It is motion waiting to happen.*

Beraan fed it slowly into the pebble. Just a few drops. He opened his eyes and thought of the ring, gave that thought to the energy. It turned into motion. The stone flew like the earlier shots but this one didn't fly as fast. It arced down, passed under the ring and skidded to a hold before it even reached the second ring. *That one starved. Wait a second, I did it, I can change its speed.*

I only need to find the right amount of energy. Beraan fed energy into the next rock, to his own surprise he got a feeling for how much was already in it. It was a wired sensation, like finding out you can move your ear. A kind of muscle you never knew you had. The next few pebbles all fell short of their market. With each fail Beraan got a better sense of how much he put into each pebble and how far that energy got the rock. The fifth hit, it passed through the first ring and... overshot the second. *Why did I think it was that easy?*

The next tries showed Beraan that he could either hit the first or the second but never both. *What am I doing wrong? If I could just throw the stone it would be easier. I'm pretty sure I can make the first ring.* Out of curiosity he just threw a pebble the old-fashioned way. He missed, so he threw again. The pebble landed close to the second ring, closer than he had come before. *Nice.* For the next try, he used an underhanded throw, the pebble arced through the first ring, hit the ground inside the second ring and bounced out again. *Yes, that's it!*

Beraan held the stone in his palm, letting only a little energy flow into it, this time he didn't send it directly towards the ring, he aimed it up a little. It overshot the ring again but it came down in a promising arc. A few tries later, Beraan got a sense of how much energy he needed to feed the pebble and which angle he had to use so it would cross the first ring. *Now I just have to find the right angle.* The next pebble was the last in the pouch, Beraan filled it. *That's enough.* He aimed it up. *A little lower.* And set it free. The stone arced up, Beraan held his breath, it came down through the first ring and hit the second right in the centre.

"Yes! I DID IT!" shouted Beraan. The thundering noises of wood hitting wood that Beraan had tuned out as background noise stopped, the absence lending the hall and eery feel. All eyes centred on Beraan, including master Kelaan. Beraan shrugged and shouted across the practice hall, "I've done it, Master."

Master Kelaan bowed his head to the now four guards, they all walked backward and bowed again. Master Kelaan held his practice sword out with both arms, a waiting Blue took it in the same manner and carried it away. Master Kelaan walked over to Beraan, drying his face with his robes. If Beraan's instructors back in the Forge had seen him do that... *Well, I guess a master can get away with a lot.*

"Show me," Master Kelaan said.

Beraan hurried to collect his pebbles. One by one arced them through the first ring. The first two missed the second. *Of course, with an audience, things were always harder.* The third stone hit its mark.

"Are you changing the charge or the rate of conversion?" asked master Kelaan.

"I don't understand Master, I feed the stone less power."

"Charge then, alright, another exercise. I want you to take a rock and let it fly up, straight up."

Beraan did as he was told. The pebble hit the ceiling. Beraan caught it on its way down.

"Your next task is to make it hover. Let it accelerate up at the same rate the ground is pulling it down."

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"You can change the rate in which the energy you invest the rock with is converted to acceleration, or at least you should be able to. Sili could do it, the Amulet can do it, why shouldn't be able to? Make it hover for a few seconds."

"I... I'll try."

Hover? Is he mad?

"You can try it later, it's gone take you a while," said master Kelaan, "right now I'd like to know how proficient you are with a sword."

Master Kelaan waved a few handsings at a Blue attendant, she hurried to a weapons rack and brought two wooden swords. She held them out for master Kelaan, he took one with both hands palms up. Beraan just grabbed one on the hilt and took it. That earned him a scowl from the girl. *Oh fucking etiquette, enough is enough. Is there something the Orders doesn't have rules for? Is there a rule that says in how many bits I should eat my bread, how many times per day i have to piss?.*

The girl bowed and left. Without warning master Kelaan hit his shoulder.

"Keep your eyes on your opponent," he said, "not on her ass."

"I wasn't..."

Yeah, I was.

Beraan and master Kelaan traded blows for a while. Beraan even managed to hit him twice and only paid for it with only half a dozen bruises.

What a bargain.

"Not bad," said master Kelaan, wiping the sweat off his forehead. "I see Harenaan is still teaching."

What? "He, was my instructor," Beraan said.

"Your left arm hangs like a wet sack. That's a mistake Harenaan used to make and obviously fails to spot in his students."

"Ah."

"Your footwork needs refinement, wouldn't you agree Midas?"

"That," Midas said, "is a nice way of saying your footwork sucks."

Where did he come from?

"Beraan," said master Kelaan, leveling his practice sword at his chest. "Always keep an eye on your surrounding, you never know when someone sneaks up on you. By the time you find out, it's too late."

Yeah, yeah, if heard the speech before.

"Yes master, one eye on my surrounding, one on my opponent."

How fortunate that I got two of them.

"Good. Midas, practice with him for an hour, then that run a few rounds around the garden."

"What gardens?" asked Midas.

"I forgot you haven't been here before, follow me," said master Kelaan and lead them out of the practice hall. Down one corridor, he opened a large double door. The garden was as wide as the plaza on the other side of the Order house Prime. Two-thirds were covered in fields, Beraan could tell by the way stone paths divided the white snow.

Children's laughter made Beraan turn to the little grass field. A merciless snowball fight was in progress, severely blues watched the childer, one even joined in the fun.

"Who are those children?" asked Beraan.

"The Order takes care of its own," said master Kelaan, as if that was a sufficient answer.

"You see that path along the wall," said master Kelaan, tracing the outer walls.

Beraan and Midas nodded.

"After your sword practice, go run as many rounds as you can, tomorrow run one more and so on."

Great, more running.

"Yes master," said Midas.

"Good, after that, you are free to go looking for that blacksmith."

You go and watch those whores, we'll find that guy. You will see you were wrong to doubt us.

Chapter 8

Estra spooned down the tasteless water they called soup. *That's not fair, that's my frustration talking.* Master Kelaan on the other side of the table soaked his bread in the soup, turning it into some wet mush.

How can he eat like that?

Six days they had been observing dock street, no single one of them cursed. At least, no more girls went missing during their watch. *It would have been horrible if we had overlooked him.*

The worst part was, the doctors and nurses kept refusing her entry to the infirmary. Estra had contemplated cutting herself just to get in and see master Mira, but she wouldn't have approved of such childish behavior. On the upside, master Mira was getting better, Estra was told so every day she visited.

Estra heard voices outside on the corridor.

"So when are we going to admit it was a bad idea?" That sounded like Master Kelaan's third.

"Probably yesterday," said Master Kelaan's second.

Estra and master Kelaan hadn't seen them since they split up. *No wonder, we have been keeping odd hours.* Once she overheard a blue reporting to master Kelaan that the two boys kept a regular schedule, practice in the morning, they left after that and came back late.

They pushed the door to the dining hall open. After a quick look around they found their master.

"So, how is it going?" Master Kelaan asked.

The second took a deep breathe. "we checked every weaponsmith in craftsmen quarter and new docks, even some on the first quarter." They set down, "after that, we checked every armorsmith. Without success. Then we went to the common metal smiths. We even checked the slums. We talked to every man with an anvil and a hammer who ever made a horseshoe or a nail in his life."

"That was very thorough of you," said master Kelaan.

"I don't know what I should do next?"

"Giving up already?" asked the woman standing behind Master Kelaan. Master Mira looked terrible, her white hair clung together in strains leaving patches of her head uncovered. Her skin had fallen in, it hugged her bones giving her a skeletal appearance. The right sleeve of her grey robe hanging down empty. Master Kelaan sprang up. *He hadn't heard her approach either.*

"Master," called Estra and went to her side, her left side.

Mira's attention was on master Kelaan, all colour had left his face.

"Hello, Kel."

"Mira."

"Master, should you even be out of bed," Estra asked.

"Thank you for your concern. Estra. Sit down and eat child. Kel, I expected to see you sooner."

"I was told you were under the knife when I arrived," said master Kelaan.

"Yeah, apparently the flesh dies when it gets too little blood. They had to cut the black flesh off. I got lucky it stopped spreading before I ran all out of arm."

Master Kelaan made a sound that was a mix between a snort and laugh.

"How is your investigation going?" Master Mira asked.

"Your second and I have kept an eye on dock street, the cursed didn't show up again.

My second and third have been trying to find the smith who made the cursed's sword."

"Good plan, did you find anything?"

"No Master," said the second second, "we showed the ruined sword-hilt to every smith in the city."

"Did you try other kinds of Smith too, they need to make what's in demand so I find it reasonable to assume a weaponsmith would switch his production to mundane wares."

"We did master," said the second.

"Show me that hilt."

He held it out to master Mira, she closed her eye. Her finger traveled over the Hilt. The thierd whinsed as if a fly had bitten him.

What's wrong with that guy?

"Hm... The metal feels different here and there," she pointed at two parts, "something had been attached here, maybe a seal or a crest."

"I don't see how that helps us," the second said.

"Ornamentation," said the third, "a different Smith would have had to make it, one who is specialized in it."

"Yeah, we didn't visit any gold or silversmith," said the second.

"Then I sugest you do so," said Master Kelaan, "after you eat something, it's chicken and something green again."

Master Mira laughed "It's always chicken and green. When you're lucky you get a carrot or two."

"No Master, we have already eaten, which is something I wanted to talk to you about," said the second.

"Have you noticed people being.. I don't know...dismissive, disrespectful and some downright hostile."

Estra and master Mira exchanged glances, Estra stopping her spoon midway to her mouth.

"Yes, I have noticed that," said master Kelaan, "what's up with that Mira?"

"Isn't it the same up north?" Master Mira asked.

"Here and there we got an angry family member or a resentful drunk but most people are polite and thankful," said master Kelaan.

"There is more," said the second, "I've noticed the opposite too, people overly accommodating, almost deferent."

"Yes," Master Mira said, "the gap between those two groups has been widening over that last few years but I have the feeling it grows ever worse."

"I think they are afraid of us," said Estra.

"Why?" asked the third.

"If only I knew," master Mira answered, "there have been more cursed incidents recently with unusually high casualties among the people."

"It should make people appreciate our work more," said the third, speaking out of turn again.

His master should really have taught him better manners.

"They are angry and afraid, fear turns smart people stupid," said master Mira.

"Mira," said master Kelaan with mock indignation, "did you just steal one of master Seretaan's old lines?"

"That doesn't make it less true."

"Has there been any violence against members of the Order?" Asked the second.

"Not yet," said, master Mira, "it was close a few times. The Blues say the get harassed on errands or in the marked."

"What are we supposed to do about it?" asked the second.

"I don't see anything we can do," said master Kelaan, "be civil, don't look for trouble but if someone dares to become violent, defend yourselves."

"Understood Master," said the second, "if you excuse us, it's late."

"Sure Midas."

The two boys left, Master Mira set down across from master Kelaan.

"I waited for you to visit me." said master Mira.

"You're second told me everything I needed to know about the... incident."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Mira..."

"Oh shut up and listen" master Mira shouted, "I waited twenty years to tell you this. It wasn't your fault, I don't blame you from anything."

"You don't? Why did you avoid me?" Master Kelaan asked.

"Your pain, it burned so bright, I could not bear it."

"You could have taken your Amulet off," said Master Kelaan.

"I had a choice, work or family. I chose work. After they died, work was all that was left to me, I have not taken my Amulets of since."

Master Kelaan shook his head.

"You are wrong Miri, it was my fault, I should have been there."

"They died because we did our job," master Mira pounded her fist on the table.

"They died because we weren't there, our job is protecting innocent people like my wife and children, we failed them."

"Is that why you ran away? Ran away like a coward,"

I have never heard her speak with so much disgust in her voice.

"Yes. Yes I left the city, what else could you have asked of me, when every rode was one we had walked together, every park and corner reminded me of her, how could you expect me to stay?" Asked master Kelaan.

"I loved her too, you didn't just leave the city, you abandon me."

"You were worst of all, ever time a looked at you I saw your sister." Master Kelaan shook his head, "No Mira, I needed to get away from it all, you of all people should understand that Mira."

"So where does that leave us now?"

"I will find the man who did this to you and after that, I will leave the city again and forget that I was ever here," said master Kelaan

"Just like that?"

"Just like that."

"You know I can tell you are lying," she said with a bitter smile.

"No, my emotions and my will disagree. that's what you see. I made a choice and that is that."

"Are you ever going to forgive yourself?"

"No, all I can do is... do better in the future, make sure no one else is going to suffer the way we have"

"For what it's worth, I for my part forgive you," said master Mira.

They looked at each other in silence for a few moments, then they seemed to realize that Estra had been there all the time.

Estra bowed and left. *I will talk to her any other time, ask her what she thinks about me leaving the order. Right now master Mira has other things to worry about than my problems.* Back in her room, Estra went to the violin case. She opened it, the ruined shards looked back at her. *What am I supposed to do?*

Chapter 9

Beraan and Midas stood in front of the only silversmith in the high quater. *How was he allowed to keep his shop here? He must have some influential costumers.* Two guards stood in front of the shop. There was something about them, it took Beraan a moment to realize what puzzled him. Their manner was wrong, the way they carried themselves. The Orders guards were trained men and a few women, they all carried the same sense of danger. The sense that told the deepest part of Beraan's mind, mess with me and you will regret it.

Those guards, no those men in uniforms holding weapons, lacked that sense. *I wonder if they could even use those weapons.* One held a spear with a silver snake wound around its shaft opening its jaws wide so it looked as if the spear's blade emerged out of its mouth. The snake's eyes were made of solid gold. *It is pretty I have to give them that.* The other only carried a sword with a beautiful crest of gold and silver right under its too small crossguard. *They are just for show. They are as much an advertisement for potential costumers as well as a deterrent for pickpockets.*

Two women greeted them, they wore dresses that may be the style of this season. They shared the look of kin. *Maybe mother and daughter? She doesn't look much older than her daughter, life must have been kind to her.*

"Welcome, how may we be of service," asked the older woman, her eyes wondering from Midas to Beraan and back, unsure who to address.

Beraan stepped forward and showed her the sword-hilt, "we are looking for the smith who made this."

The women took it and traced the mark with a delicate finger, her daughter reached for it but she slapped her hand away.

"I have not seen this mark before. We don't forge blades here, we just make them presentable for polite society."

Those people you call polite... nothing polite about them.

"We know," said Beraan, "we believe the ornamentation was removed."

The women let the daughter take a look.

"Yes," the daughter said, "but not by a skilled hand, we would have sealed the holes. It looks like someone just ripped it off."

"Dear," said the mother, "take this to your father, see if he can tell the Inquisition anything."

The girl's head sank. "Yes, mother."

The girl left the store, Beraan got a short glimpse of the workshop when she left. *I shouldn't let the hilt out of my sight, it's the only clue we got.*

"Is there anything else I can help you with?" The mother asked.

"No, thank you," Beraan answered and Midas shook his head.

The girl came back, "no, Father doesn't know that mark either."

"I'm sorry master Inquisitor," said the mother.

"What about grandpa?" The girl asked.

The mother rolled her eyes, "sure sweetie, go show it to him."

Beraan heard her walk up the stairs, a little later two sets of feet came down again, one slower than the first. An old man followed the daughter into the store. He walked

stooped over and dragged his left leg, leaning on his cane. His eyes, in contrast, showed no sight of his age. He looked at Beraan and Midas the way a hunter looks at a bear, judging risk and reward.

"What have you done to my sword?"

"It's yours?" Beraan asked.

"I made it." He licked his lips, "who broke it?"

"Are you sure it's yours?"

"Yes, I'm sure, I remember my own work."

"An Inquisitor was attacked with that sword, she broke it."

The men's eyes widened, he set down on a chair behind the desk.

"I should have guessed that, considering the damage."

"How come your daughter did recognize your mark?" Midas asked.

"My daughter-in-law did not recognize it because it's not mine. It's Torenels' mark, mine was behind the crest. Someone removed it," he shook his head, "such disregard for art."

"Torenel?" Asked Beraan.

"He was my partner ... oh ... twenty... no twenty-five years ago, before the war. He made the steel, I made the silver and we shared the profits. This is one of our last works."

"Who did you make it for?" Beraan asked.

"Lord Malgus Deretaan, he ordered 38 for his guard with his house crest in silver and two in gold for himself."

Deretaan, finally we are getting somewhere. But father never mentioned a lord Deretaan.

"House Deretaan?" Beraan said, "aren't they led by a Lady? I've never heard of someone named Malgus."

The old man smiled kindly, "that is understandable, he died in the Esallen war. His wife claimed the title of house lord for herself, rather than pass it to his younger brother.

They said she was afraid for her two-year-old son. Believe that or don't, who can say."

"40 swords," said Midas, "what did he need so many swords for?"

"To arm his guard of course. It was the largest order we had ever taken on. It gave Torenel enough money to move back north again, a pity, our last work together turned out to be our best."

"I don't understand," said Midas, "I thought it was the council's duty to provide the equipment."

"It is, for the common man drafted from a lord's land, but every Lord is allowed his own personal guard of 36, he wanted the swords for them." He leaned forward for a conspiratorial whisper, "you know, they are all show-offs those rich people. Neither the man who wields the sword or the man who gets stuck with it, care what the sword looks like. It only matters to the people who never use swords themselves."

"So the man who owned this" Bran pointed at the broken hilt, "was most likely in his personal guard."

"Probably," answered the old man. "I love a good mystery. What did the owner of this blade do to attract the orders' attention? Is he cursed?"

"Please father, that is none of your business," said the mother.

The way she said "father" made the hair on Beraan's neck stand.

"Daughter," he said in the same tone, "how about some refreshment for our guests and me?"

The mother looked at her own daughter and with a flick of her head, the girl began to move.

"No, daughter, you know how much I love your tee."

The mother left with a bitter sigh.

"So one of my swords was used to attack an Inquisitor?"

Beraan nodded.

"By chance or was this Inquisitor targeted?" the old man asked.

"We think by chance," *why am I answering his questions, its supposed to be the other way around.*

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, why?"

The old man leaned back in the chair, "What do you know about the connection between Lady Deretaan and your order?"

I'm sorry I haven't kept up with local politics, and what does a trinket maker know about it?

"Nothing," answered Beraan.

"What are they teaching you young men these days?"

"Not politics." *Fortunately.*

"Its history I'm talking about, what do you know about the end of the Esallen war?"

Another subject I didn't care about. Beraan looked at Midas for help

"They surrendered," Midas said.

"Yes, but why?"

He is enjoying this, having an audience.

A snippet of a conversation between his mother and father came back to him. "The Inquisition got involved, didn't we?"

"Exactly," said the old man.

"Wait, what?" Said Midas, "the Inquisition took part in the war? Did the Esalli field cursed? Why wasn't I told any of this that?"

"It's always been an open secret, no one denies it, but no one brings it up either."

"Why?" asked Midas.

"Why what? Why did they get involved or why is your Order ashamed to talk about it?"

The mother came back with four cups of tea, she gave one to her father in law, one to Midas and one to Beraan and none to her daughter, she kept the last one for herself. The daughter didn't notice or didn't care, or if she did, didn't want to give her mother the satisfaction. Instead, she listened to her grandfathers with undivided attention.

"After we lost the second battle Saraton, that's the one where Lord Malgus Deretaan fell, the now lady Deretaan got the great council of Lords to demand Inquisition Intervention." He spoke in a hushed voice, "a lot of disturbing rumors made the round about how exactly she got the other Lords to agree with her proposal."

"Yes but why is no one talking about it?" asked Midas.

"What do you know of third Saraton?"

Ha, I know that.

"That's the last battle, we beat the Esalli in a triumphant battle," Beraan said, "a battle we should not have won, our troops were outnumbered three to one."

"And you never wondered how we won that battle?" he put so much disdain into the word battle.

Had the old man been there?"

"We had better tactics... better..." Midas stopped talking, "you're suggesting Inquisitors fought in that battle."

"I'm not suggesting, I'm outright saying it, I saw them, I was there."

"Wait," said Beraan, "did you just say you were a craftsman back then?"

"During most of the war, yes. I was too old for the first two drafts and I had influential friends who could move me of one list or another. After the defeat in second Saraton, a new wave of reinforcement was sent to the front, I didn't escape that one."

Beraan took a sip of his tea, it was red and smelled of berries, his mother had tried once to teach him the proper etiquette... his mother... a burning wood-beam pinning her down... fire... smoke... laughter... *Don't think about it!*

Beraan took another sip, it washed the ash-taste off his tongue.

"Reinforcement, ha..." the old man said, "a joke, you can't push a spear in farmers hand and expect him to fight, nor a smith or baker. Yet there I stood pointing my spear at some poor bastard on the other side who was as scared shitless as I was. He probably didn't want to be there either. Then your grey robes walked onto the field. I have seen things that day, you wouldn't believe them possible." He laughed, "you are Inquisition, you would probably believe them. One woman would touch their weapons and they would melt, their sword, spear or shield, even their armor if they were lucky enough to own some. It melted like butter in the sun." He turned the hilt around. "I guess that's what happens to this beauty.

I saw three men walking together, great guisers of flame erupting from their hands, turning the poor bastards in front of them to ash. I saw a Man walk calmly through the Esallen ranks, no sword was able to touch him, it went right through him as if he was air. It was terrifying to watch the Esalli try to stab him and wound their own men behind him, his weapon, on the other hand, had no trouble hitting their targets. The worst one was the lightning girl, she appeared among the soldiers in a flash, touched them and lightning sparked from one to another".

Beraan saw Midas shift uncomfortably.

"Vanishing in an eyeblink only to reappear at another point. When she vanished, she only left blackened corpses behind. Their robes, that awful grey you wear, they were red when it was over. When it was all done we had a, how did they call it, a non-significant number of casualties. I often wondered how many Esalli made it out of there alive. Some ran, they were shot at by their own archers, until the archers ran too."

His gazes unfocused and he fell silent.

Should I say something?

The man straightened and said, "so there you have it, Lady Deretaan got the Inquisition to perpetrate one of the gratest massacres since the fall of the Highrule."

"Thank you," Beraan said and downed the last of his tea.

"Your welcome young man, I think I would have died in third Saraton if it hadn't been for you people, I'm glad I could help."

The mother escorted them to the door while her daughter helped her grandfather up.

"House Deretaan," Beraan said to Midas back in the carriage, "what now?"

"Don't know, let's tell the master and let him decide."

Beraan called out to the driver, to get them back to the Order house Prime."

"You did good in there," said Midas.

"Na, I lost control of the conversation. I let him ask the questions and I gave answer."

"True but you're still new at this, and you noticed your mistake. Just don't repeat it."

The carriage made that particular sound as it moved over the cobblestone. Beraan was lost in thought, his eyes looking outside the window without seeing anything.

"Do you think he was telling the truth?" Midas asked

"About Lord Deretaan or the war?"

"The war."

"I don't know, I don't see how it matters."

"How it matters? We are supposed to protect normal people from the cursed, not slaughter them, how could the Order do such a thing. What does that make them? What does it make us?"

Beraan shrugged, "It doesn't make us anything, it happened long before you and I were even born."

"How can you be so... so... uncaring," asked Midas.

Why are you so overemotional about it?

"I do care, but it has no relevance on our job, it doesn't change anything about us, we still protect the people."

"Don't you see how wearing their clothes makes us one of them, part of the Order, part of their atrocity, makes us part of their sin. Don't you see, by accepting their robes, their symbol, we share in their guilt." Midas said.

"I didn't do any of that, why should it be my fault?"

"By wearing their symbol, by being part of the Order we accept and condone what they have done."

What are you talking about?

"That makes no sense at all," said Beraan.

"Yes, it does. Think about it."

I share in nobody's guilt but my own.

"Then take it off," said Beraan.

"What?"

"If you think the robes makes you a butcher like the Inquisitors the old silversmith told us about, all you need to do is take your robe off and go home."

It did the trick and shut him up. At least until they reached the Order house Prime.

"I think I can do more good as an Inquisitor then as a fisherman," Midas said.

I could have told you that one.

"Yeah you're probably right about that."

"Yeah, probably" Midas muttered to himself.

Master Kelaan was out again with the redhead, watching dock street. He had left no message or instruction for them.

"What now?" Beraan asked.

"We could ask Master Mira or Grandmaster Glinn for instructions."

House Deretaan is our best lead so far, we need to get this cursed. Every day he breaths is a day too many.

"Or we could just go the Deretaan manner and find out what they know."

"Master Kelaan said we shouldn't do anything stupid, walking up to a high noble house without a master present sounds pretty stupid to me."

Master Mira wasn't allowed visitors after leaving the infirmary without permission. Grand Inquisitor Glinn's assistant refused to announce them and made it clear that two students had no business wasting the Grandmasters time.

A ride through dock street proved fruitless too, wherever master Kelaan and the redhead were hiding, neither Beraan nor Midas spotted them. If they had seen the Order carriage and the two blues driving it, they had chosen to remain hidden.

"All right, that's enough," said Midas, he opened the driver's hatch and said, "get us to Deretaan manner."

Chapter 10

The Deretaan estate stood near the high quarters centre. Unlike the craftsmen quarter with its houses pressed together or the old docks and its four-story buildings, the high quarter flaunted its open spaces. As if the nobles were trying to say, look at all the space we can afford to waste, that's how rich we are. *That's exactly what they're saying.* A stone wall surrounded the estate, it had seen better days. *They maintained the area around the gate well enough.* Further to the sides, the stone walls had crumbled, at one point the wall was cracked almost a third of its height. Fines grew uncontested and lend themselves to adventures climbers. *This wall is a joke.*

The great gate wasn't in any better shape. It was made of wood and framed in iron. At least Beraan thought it was, the rust made it hard to tell. *It probably doesn't even close anymore.* Behind the gate, two walls framed the walkway. The constriction had the same design as the outer gate Beraan had passed a week ago. *Around that corner should be another gate, or two if the designer was smart.*

On the other hand, why would the need a gate? When had the last house war been? In the time of my grandfather or so... nowadays these walls hold back only drunks and the occasional burglar I'd suppose.

The quarts blocked the way, they held themselves like fighting men. Each held a spear and a shield bearing the insignia of house Deretaan, A bird of prey sweeping down in profile, talons extended to seize its unseen prey. The field behind the bird was cut in two, yellow the upper part, green the field below, the bird black and its claws yellow again. The guards uniform was green and yellow highlights. Yellow was expensive. *Another way to show off their riches. Look, everyone, passing by, we can waste money on our servants. The two colors look ugly.*

They crossed their speers in front of Beraan and Midas denying them passage. "We are here on Inquisition business," said Midas, sounding official. The guards looked at each other, one was in his early twenties like Midas, Beraan guessed the other in his thirties. The older guard spoke, "We were not informed of any visitors today." "We are not expected," said Midas *Oh, that was a mistake, don't justify yourself to them, they are just guards, not worth your time Midas, by all right they should bow before us.* "No one enters without the captains say so," the older said. "Where is your captain?" Midas asked, still polite but Beraan heard his annoyance. "Not here," the guard said with a shrug. *He is enjoying this, what a petty little man exercising the little breadcrumbs of power his betters let fall down on him.* "Will he be back?" Midas asked. *Don't Midas, don't argue with them, command. They are so far beneath us...* "I am not privileged with the captain's schedule." *That's enough, let's teach them a lesson.* Beraan looked Midas in the eyes and saw that he understood what Beraan was thinking. Midas shook his head just a little. Beraan exhaled slowly. *Alright, we do it your way Midas.*

"Do you know who we are?" Midas said it without threat or males,
"Of course Inquisitor, do you know to whos domicile you demand entrance?"
Big words for a small head. As if house Deretaan was above the Inquisition, that guy is far too full of himself and the crest he wears.
"Even the greats houses are under the authority of the Inquisition," said Midas.
"Be that as it may, no one enters without the captain's autorotations."
"Then get him here or this situation will become very unpleasant very quickly."
So threatening them is ok now?
The Guardsman raise his speer from the symbolic blocked passage to a defensive position.
"Are you threatening a loyal servant of the house Deretaan who is just doing his job, master Inquisitor?" The man asked in a mockingly innocent tone.
"You are interfering in the Inquisition duty, what is your name guard?" asked Midas.
Then men rolled his eyes and put his speer back against his partners. He looked straight forward as if Midas wasn't there.
"I asked your name, guard."
Both grades ignored him. Midas stepped forward, of the cobblestone and onto the gravel path. The Guard nodded at Midas foot.
"You are on Deretaan property, we must ask you to leave," still in a mocking voice.
"I asked your name?" Midas annunciated each word separately.
"Please master Inquisitor, we won't ask a third time."
"Neither will I."

The guard whistled, half a dozen guards came running out of the gatehouse, two ontop the wall readied crossbows.
They had been waiting there.
Beraan saw blue light emanating from Midas' right-hand amulet, it was not the deep blue of his sensory amulet, it was a light blue the color of a cloudless sky in summer. The light flowed from the amulet through his body to his fingertips and collected there. Midas stretched out his hand in front of him. His palms towards each other, tiny flashes of lighting passed between his fingertips. Each one accompanied by the sound of breaking glass.
Finally some action. Beraan reached for his own amulet, letting the energy flow into his hand, fumbling in his rock pouch for a projectile to use.
"What would your master think if she knew you stood in an Inquisitor's way?" Midas asked.
"Raise my pay." The man's face showed nothing but contempt.
"Last chance, you can ignore the Inquisition's authority but you cannot ignore me."
"What do you think you're going to do boy? You can't push me around, I'm not afraid of your kind. Go run home to your Inquisition."

Midas' hands shot forward, judging by the guard's lack of reaction he was as surprised as Beraan was. Midas grabbed his speer with his left hand and touched the guard's shield with his right. The blue light blinded Beraan for an instant, followed by a sharp stab in Beraan's right eye. The guard dropped both his shield and speer. The shield fell over forward and the speer sideways, it hit the roads cobblestone with a reverberating clang.

Beraan saw the light in Midas hand dim, the guard writhed on the ground, his body rocked by one convulsion after another. Red froth covered his mouth. Beraan smelled the sharp odour of piss and saw the stains on then man legs. Midas raised his hands towards the crossbowmen. "Anyone else?" Midas shouted.

Wait, wasn't lighting short range? Can he even reach them? Beraan kept three rocks ready in case he had to take care of those two. The other guards looked at him in horror and disgust, all except one, that one looked satisfied. The guard had probably been an ass to everyone and now got what he deserved.

"Anyone else?" Midas asked again. Two flashes danced between his hands accompanied by a sound like the high chirp of songbirds. Not a single Guard proved stupid enough to challenge them. One crossbowman looked as if he wanted to lose his bolt but when he saw his comrades made no move on Midas, he thought better of it. "Now, send someone to fetch that captain of yours," shouted Midas. The smiling guard ran off.

The first guardsmen got himself under control, sitting up and spitting blood. "You will pay for this," he proclaimed, his word sounding strange, the reason became obvious when spat out a piece of his tough. *He had bitten it off during his fit.* Midas looked down at him and adopted the same mocking tone the man had spoken in. "Want seconds?" A flash passed between his hand, "Kill them!" the guard shouted. The men looked from him to Midas and back again. Midas held his hand above his head letting a big lightning bold arc from his right hand to his left. Not a single guard moved a muscle. *Not all of them are as stupid as that guy.*

"Get him out of my sight," Midas ordered. Two guards helped him up, when he didn't move, Midas let another lightning bolt flash, this one thundered like its natural cousin. The men hurried to drag the guard into the gatehouse. *Come on, now you're just showing off. Well, at least it worked.*

Midas took a few steps back, the guard's tension eased, shoulders falling and weapons held in a relaxed grip. "What happed to thinking our way out of problems?" Beraan asked. "That's what I did," said Midas, "that guy is nothing but a bully so I played his game an beat him at it." *Maybe, maybe not, there is something wrong about this, our guards would never have dared to act that way towards an Inquisitor.* "We could walk in right now but I think it would be better to get their captain to let us in." "You humiliated that guy so some else would call the captain." "Yes," Midas said, "also I used as little force as possible. I could have killed all of them in a heartbeat. But I only shocked that guy a little." "You could have told anyone to get their captain."

"He wouldn't have allowed it, someone usurping his command? No, I know that type."
"What are we going to do if that captain is another ass like that guy."
"We either go back to the Order house and get Master Kelaan... or we do things your way..."

The captain was a tall man, maybe a little younger than Mater Kelaan, his beard was trimmed neatly and his hair cut short. He carried himself with the authority of a man ready to kill if need be or crack a joke if not.

"What is going on here?" He asked of his men, one answered in a hushed voice that Beraan couldn't understand.

"We are here on Inquisition business," said Midas, "We have questions for your Lady."

"What about?" The captain asked in a matter of fact tone, like a Blue asking what Beraan preferred for dinner.

"That is between her and us."

He shook his head, "That answer is not good enough."

"We just convinced your underling that hindering us is... not a good idea."

"You misunderstand master Inquisitor, there has been no reported activity of cursed individuals, neither here nor on any property belonging to House Deretaan. Nothing that justifies your presence on Deretaan soil without invitation. So I ask again, what business brings you here?"

Midas showed him the ruined hilt, "do you know what this is?"

"The hilt of a sword."

"Do you recognize it?"

"No."

Midas nodded towards his side, "Then draw your own blade and compare."

The captain eyed him as if he was trying to figure out what trick Midas was playing. Beraan had noticed the golden crest on the captain's sword.

He drew his blade and held it next to the hilt.

"They are identical," the captain said, "disregarding the missing blade and crest, of course."

"Captain, how many brothers does this blade have?" asked Midas.

"32 the captain said, 34 if you count mine and the blade held by the Lord in waitings."

"Can you tell me how it could have happened, that this blade was used to kill at least seven women and one Inquisitor?"

Although we actually don't know for certain if that guy used the blades to kill the women, or if it even was him. He could have killed the owner and taken it.

"No, master Inquisitor."

"That's one of the questions we need to ask your Lady, is that a good enough answer for you?"

He nodded, "follow me."

finally, we're in.

The captain led them through the gate, three guards followed behind Beraan and Midas. The building's style was unique. *I wondered if some lord Deretaan had invented it himself or if it was influenced by some foreign culture I have never heard of.* The walkway they were led on was either dug into the ground or the mounds to either side were created by hand. The walkway was sunk beneath the surface level, on either side, a

smooth stone wall held the earth trapped behind it. Up over the top, Beraan could see flowers dangling their blossoms over the edge. The way wound left and right, Beraan stopped counting the open doors they passed through, strong iron portcullis hung above each and every one. *This is a maze, only two people fit side by side.* A few times they passed under wooden bridges spanning the chasm. They knew they came close when the houses replaced the flowers far above.

They walked up a flight of stairs when something caught Beraan's attention, it was gone before he could look. *No, not gone, still there.* Beraan felt another stab behind his eyes, the amulet showed him something. It was like seeing a reflection in a gentle river and seeing the river bottom underneath. Two images overlaying each other, one was a building, one was a black cloud like the one he had seen in the alley. What really cause his confusion was the fact that he could see the cloud inside the building while still looking at the building's wall. *My mind is not made for this.*

"What is that building?" Beraan asked.

"That's the barracks," the captain answered.

"Take us there first."

Midas shoot him a questioning look.

"Whatever magic was used in the ally, it leaves some kind of smoke behind, it's like a footprint of magic. I can see one up there, the guy we are looking for, he was here."

Chapter 11

The captain led Beraan and Midas to the Barracks, a square building made of grey stone, one had wasted any money to make it look pretty. *Guests would never see it, so there was no need to impress anyone.*

"Who's in there?" Beraan asked the captain.

"Right now? No one, master Inquisitor, they're all on duty."

Beraan saw Midas' dark blue tendrils moved into the open door.

"What is the meaning of this?" the captain asked.

Had he not heard what we said or not understood?

"The cursed we are looking for might be in there," Midas said, "please wait outside."

The captain studied Midas before he nodded and took position near the three guards. *Good, he could have made more trouble if he wanted to.*

"Stay behind me," Midas whispered, "in case he is still here."

If that guy is still here, standing behind you won't make much of a difference will it? That guy killed an Inquisitor, true a Third like me but still.

Beraan did as he was told. Midas went in first, letting his tendrils fly in every room before they entered and every side door before they passed. All side rooms connected to the one narrow corridor, at the end one stairway went up and one down.

"You know I can see those things?"

"What things?" Midas asked.

"Your tendrils."

"Why what?"

"The things you send into the rooms."

"They look like tendrils to you?"

"Yes, they don't to you?"

"No, they don't look like anything. It feels like I extend an arm and when I touch something, I know what it is."

"How?"

"Not now, focus!"

Right, I was distracting myself.

Beraan focused on his magic sight, only one cloud appeared in the last room on the right. Midas' tendrils went in.

"Nothing, no one in there."

The cloud hung inside the small room, it had only a bed and clothing stand, it wasn't bigger than Beraan's room in the Order house.

"You really can't see that?" Beraan asked.

"No."

"Try moving your things in there."

Beraan pointed at the cloud and saw Midas' tendrils pierce it, the smoke that was not smoke didn't react to it. Close together Beraan noticed how similar they were, Midas' tendrils were also made of deep blue smoke or at least, that's how the amulet showed them to Beraan.

"I can't feel a thing," Midas said.

Beraan touched the bed's frame.

"No dust," Beraan said.

"It doesn't look sleep in either."

"It looks new," Beraan said.

Midas walked over to the clothing stand, checking each partition.

"Its empty, wait."

Midas pulled a piece of cloth out from the undermost drawer and smelled it.

"Oil? I guess he took good care of his weapon."

Beraan looked under the bed, there was nothing, not even dust bunnies.

"Let's see what the captain knows," said Midas.

The captain and the two guards waited outside.

"Who did the last room on the right belong to?" Midas asked the captain.

The captain looked down the hallway.

"That was Itan's room."

"Itan? We need to speak to him," Midas told the captain.

"So do I, he left without a word two weeks ago."

Two weeks ago? Why are we always two steps behind?

"I see," said Midas, "what can you tell me about him."

"Not much, he kept to himself, didn't talk, he was already in the guard when I got here."

That doesn't sound right.

"Wait, why doesn't he have seniority then?" Beraan asked, "did he do something to make the lady Deretaan pass him over for promotion?"

"Do something? No, he served the lady and the children with fierce devotion, if one of the men lost a single negative word about them, Itan would be quick to... change their mind."

"Did he cause disruption in your command?" Midas asked.

"No, not at all, he was more useful then disruptive. He was just not the kind of person to lead the guard."

"Does he have any family in the city?" Beraan asked.

"Not as far as I know."

Thank you captain helpful.

"When exactly was the last time you saw him?" Midas asked.

The captain blew out a long breath.

"The morning of the mid-day eclipse before last, at shift change."

"That's very specific."

"I was called because he didn't show up to his shift, ruined my day off. I was told then he had packed his belongings and left. Yes I can't tell with certainty when I saw him last."

"Did he act strangely during the days leading up to his departure?" Midas asked.

"That guy always acted strange, no one told me so if he acted stranger then usual."

Why do I not believe you, captain?

"Has he ever shown signs of... special abilities," Beraan asked.

"You mean signs of the curse?"

"Yes."

"None what so ever, I keep a close eye on my people."

"You do?"

"Yes, the lady's orders, it would reflect bad on the house if any of her people were afflicted."

"Has that ever happened?" Midas asked.

"Yes, in my second year, we handed the boy over to the Inquisition as the council's decrees."

"Has this Itan ever shown an unusual body strength?" Beraan asked.

The captain looked at Beraan confused.

"No, we would have noticed that."

"How?" asked Midas, this time sounding truly curious.

"Well, the men sometimes bet on the outcome of certain... competitions of strength."

"Ah and your lady approves?"

"Yes, master Inquisitor."

Liar, she doesn't know, does she?

"Speaking of your lady," Midas said, "I believe you were taking us to see her."

The main house towered above a huge marvel stairway. While the one in front of the Order house fanned out like the side of a pyramid, this one was narrow and switched back and forth four times, it ended in a straight section. The stairway did not only span twice a man's height out of the chasm to ground level but even height to the houses second floor. On the last step, Beraan turned around and took a good look at the Deretaan estate. From up here, it looked like a mosaic, the inner part filled with houses, grey of stone but adorned with woodcarvings painted in gay colors. The outer pieces filled with flowers, or at least the few that bloomed in winter. *In summer this must be quite a sight.*

The front doors of dark wood were contrasted by the golden filigree men in fighting poses. Some held swords and shield, others spears. One man stood alone in the centre holding an unrealistically large sword in his hand, facing a distant unseen foe. The metalwork on the figure was exquisite, it was only as large as a man's hand and still, the facial features were clear and expressive as if he was alive. Beraan had to stop his hand from touching it, had to suppress the impulse to feel the detail with his own hands, seeing was just not enough. *Don't bother with it, it's just another way to flaunt their money.*

"Nice," whispered Midas in passing.

"Yeah," answered Beraan in a hushed voice.

The entrance hall shone in gold and white and grey, the marvel polished so smooth it reflected Beraan's face like water. The one thing standing out was the long and narrow rug connecting the door with the next room, it was old and trampled flat in places. *I get it, look at our wealth. Oh, what? You must walk on it? No, that old rug, walk on that, it's good enough for the likes of you.*

The guard captain led them into a dining room, beautiful tapestry lined the walls, red and yellow were the prevalent colours. Two servants carried a green roll out another door. At the table set two people, one was a young man Midas' age, he wore a vest of green over a white shirt, his hair was blonde with a bit of brown. To his side sat a younger woman, she couldn't be much older than Beraan. She wore a dress of red and yellow that didn't look like something a lady would wear. It looked like a maid's working outfit. She rested her hand on her swollen belly. *That one looks ready to burst, hang on a second I know her face, Sami?* She had grown since the last time Beraan had seen her, the black hair that had reached down to her waist back then, now ended at shoulder length.

Splayed out on the table lay ledgers and parchments, the young man burying his nose in them looked up when he noticed the three newcomers entering the room.

"What is this?" the young man asked.

"Pardon me my lord, two Inquisitor to see the lady."

"No, she wished to rest, I will deal with them," he waved his hand, the captain took position behind his chair and announced, "lord Halus Deretaan and the lady Samira Deretaan born Kereston."

Midas stepped forward, "we have to ask you a few questions about the man Itan."

"Who?" Halus asked.

"He is a Guard in your household."

Halus looked at his guard captain.

"Is that the one with the lazy eyes or the one who forgot how to smile?"

"The second, my lord."

"Yes I know of the man, what about him."

"He is cursed and wanted in connection with several murders."

"And?"

"And we need to know about him?"

"And that is why you bother me? Captain, arrest the man and hand him over."

"My lord, he has fled."

Halus waved his hand again, "then he is no longer ur problem his he? Captain tell your man to arrest him on sight if he returns and informs the Inquisition."

"Yes, my lord."

Lord Deretaan picked a sheet of paper up and read it. The guard captain walked passed Midas and Beraan gesturing them to follow.

"Lord Deretaan, we need to know everything you can tell us about him?"

Halus looked around, obviously surprised they were still here.

"I don't know, he was around as long as I remember... ask my mother... better not she needs her rest. Is that all?"

Not bothering to wait for an answer he picked another sheet and read that. Midas and Beraan turned to leave.

"Wait," said the Samira, "whats you name Inquisitor?"

"Midas, my lady."

"And yours?"

"Beraan."

"Beraan? Have we met before."

"I've only arrived in the capital six days ago," Beraan said, "I'm sure I would remember meeting you, Lady Samira."

"You look familiar."

Halus looked up at Beraan studied him, shook his head and dove back into his papers.

"I have one of these faces, My Lady."

"I guess so...Good luck with your search then, master Inquisitor."

I didn't even have to lie.

Turning away Beraan saw two women walking towards them. The one behind was obviously a handmaid, eyes to the floor, if her expression had not given her away, her orange-brown dress did, a scarf covered most of her black hair. She walked behind her lady, who wore her hair bound up behind and above her head, only a few locks of

golden blond hair were left free on each side. She wore a dress of green and yellow in a strange pattern, it looked as if one fold of cloth overlapped the one under it. It reminded him of fish scales in the way they overlapped if not in form. She walked passed Midas and Beraan, they were beneath her notice. She slammed a scroll on the table.

"What is this brother?"

Lord Deretaan picked it up and read.

"That's the contract with house Berabar, what about it?"

,"Have you read it?" She leaned over the table. her face was close to his.

"Yes, it's about selling their goods in our stores. What's wrong?"

"Explain what you think section seven says."

"Recompensation for their losses if we chose not to stock one their goods."

"Do you understand what that means?"

"...That we have to stock all of their gods."

"Yes, and where is the limitation?"

"The list is under section 4."

"Yes, a list that can be added to unilaterally, that means by them without our consent."

"I know what unilaterally means."

"Apparently not! What's to stop them from adding five hundred new items to it and we don't have the capacity to stoor or sell them? I can't believe you let yourself get talked into a deal like that. It might as well say we pay for everything they don't sell. If you singe this you might as well burn the House down yourself."

"I won't," he said ashen-faced.

She took a deep breath and straightened. She looked around seeing Beraan and Midas for the first time. When her eyes fell on the red tapestry Beraan could have sworn she looked surprised for a second and that her nose twitched as if she caught a disgusting smell.

"What does the Inquisition want?" She asked her brother.

"Something about a guard being cursed, I dealt with it."

"Which guard?"

"The grim guy, to one who stood in front of our rooms when we where little."

Now she looked at Beraan and Midas, "what is your accusation based on?"

"He killed an Inquisitor," said Midas.

"Really? How?" The fake surprise didn't hide her amusement.

"Magic, lady Deretaan as I said he is cursed."

"I would hear every detail."

"I'm sorry, I can not share any information at this time."

Arg, that's what I should have told the silversmith.

"Doesn't the Inquisition usually work in groups of three?"

"Yes, lady Deretaan, our Master in currently tracking your guard."

Well, only in the broadest sense.

"So you are not even a master? I must say you do look awfully young."

"We work under the full authority of the Inquisition."

"And your superiors know you are here."

"Of course," said Midas.

Really? I didn't tell anyone we were coming here, did you?

"What proof do you offer that this guard was the man who killed that Inquisitor?"

"We have his blade," Midas showed her the ruined hilt, she spared it only a glance.

"There are dozens of blades like that only some are in our possession."

"We found evidence of magic use in this very estate."

She gaped at him with an open mouth and said slowly.

"What kind of evidence?"

"I can't tell you."

"Bullshit, there has never been a way to proof magic use unless witnessed first hand."

"I'm am sorry to have taken up so much of your time Lady Deretaan," Midas said.

"I demand an answer."

"I am very sorry, I can't provide one. After the cursed is dealt with, you may pation the Inquisition for a report."

"Who do you think you are?" There was so much venom in her voice, if she was a snake, she would have killed him then and there.

"I am a loyal servant of the Inquisition, keeping us all save from those who have been cursed with unnatural abilities," speaking in the monotone voice he got when quoting.

"Get out of my house," she hissed.

Midas bowed in respect, but just as deep as etiquette demanded and not a hairbreadth deeper.

"Very smooth," Beraan whispered when the descended the front stairs

"Oh shut up," Midas said with a grin.

The captain led them through the maze, a straight line would have let them get out of there in moments but they had to wind back and forth and back again.

"Wait," called a female voice behind them, Beraan turned around and saw the handmaid hurrying after them. Beraan had to suppress a smile, it looked quite comical the way the girl ran with her dress held up so she wouldn't trip.

"Yes?" Midas asked when the girl had caught up with them.

"I know... the man... you're looking for," she said out of breath.

"Did the lady allow you to speak to her... visitors?" The captain asked.

Midas held up a hand, "Our position supersedes any conditions of bondage your lady's serve might be in, I can quote you the statute if you insist captain."

Oh, I know that one, the second section allows us to free a serve and take them into our service if we think their masters would harm them for helping us. Just the thought one could take my servants away and I could do nothing about it. I would hate to be on the receiving end of that.

"No, master Inquisitor, that won't be necessary," the captain said.

"Please tell me about him," Midas sounded like master Kelaan.

"His name is Itan, he owns an apartment in the old dock district."

"And you know this how?"

The maid stepped back and looked at the captain.

"I... I'd rather not say."

"We don't care about your... indiscretion," said Midas.

"Thank you, master Inquisitor, it is the topmost apartment in the second house after the fishers march and the silver lady's crossing. There is a bakery on the first floor, the house is hard to miss."

"Why did you run after us?" Beraan.

"Two years ago I lost half my family to a mad cursed firestarter, every cursed you deal with is a life saved."

The ashen summer, I knew how you feel.

"Thank you," said Beraan and turned

"Don't worry," Beraan told the maid, "we will take care of him."

Interlude Itan 2

"Iii don't understaaand," whispered the Demon, "why are you serving this femaaal?"
Its honest curiosity took the sting of the creaturs insult.

You would not understand, Demon.

"Truuue, that is why I asked, Huumaan."

Itan brushed cobwebs away, these tunnels had not seen used in a while. Though, better than running on the street, where he would have been spotted, down here he was safe. Torche held beside his head to avoid blinding himself, Itan ran down the corridor, his footsteps echoed behind and in front of him.

"She is not your offspring."

No, not in blood.

"You do intend to mate with her?"

Never.

"Sooome sort of pack behavior?"

You could say that.

"Packs are dangerous: Noothing more threatening to the strong than a union of the weeeak."

What do you do with them?

"Paaack forming behavior must be eliminated. We kill them. Even if the nourishment they provide is less than effort expended."

What? You eat your own kind?

"Ooof course, how else are we supposed to grow?"

Itan didn't know what disgusted him more, the thought of eating another human or the fact that the Demon talked about it, demonstrating the Demon's indifference to the sanctity of life.

"That is a contradiction in itself."

What?

"Juuudging by the memories I have seen in you, humans must eat. How is life sacred? If you take it from animals as a matter of course?"

We have to eat.

"You kill other humans for lesser reasons."

Memories of second and third Saraton flashed by and crept back again into the depths of his soul they had crawled out off.

"Does that meeean only some lives are sacred?"

Yes.

"Who then would you not kill to feed me?"

My master.

"Out of all the human lives on your sphere, only one life is sacred to you?"

Yes.

"Then you and I are no different, only the one life I will not give up is my own."

Have you no morals Demon?

"Have you? Humaaan? I have tasted the idea in your thoughts, it is foreign to me."

Demons don't know morals, why doesn't that surprise me?

"The way I see it, morals bind the individual even if oor especially when said individual has no reason to except those Restraints. It would be better off on its own.

Whyyy should we have mooorals? I do not see a use for them."

We need morals to regulate the destructive tendencies in human nature, to hold and bind societies together. Without it, civilization would fall to chaos. At least that is what lord Malgus Deretaan had told him so many years ago.

"Your memories have not proven to me that the concepts of society or civilization to be worthwhile."

Itan stumbled over an uneven stone and caught himself.

Demons have no community at all?

"No, whaaat would that be good for? The only scale up the conflict of one hungry or territorial individual to a conflict of hungry or territorial groups against hungry or territorial groups. You want to die to solve someone else's problems, human?"

Don't you have leaders? What about families?

"There are the strong and the weak, there are the big and the small aaand there are the old and the young and everyything in between. We mate when we meet a suitable other and we leave our offspring to prove the worth of their blood. When two of us fight, the stronger one eats and becomes even stronger.

You live in the wilderness like beats?

"Whaaat you call wild, I call the natural state of things. We do hit hide from nature as you do in your hovels of stone. We do not shape it as you do. We are shaped by nature."

You can express yourself quite well for a demon.

"You speak to my kind much? Humaaan?"

No morality at all but humor?

"I snatched a bite of a scholar once when I was little, that one was drenched in Humoor."

Ah, good to know. Are you a strong or a weak demon?

"I uuused to be one of countless, now I'm one of manyyy. Thanks to you, thanks to you feeding me."

That's no answer Demon.

"Of course it is, human, youuu just did not understand it."

A wooden door blocked the way, a rusted metal bar locked it shut.

I need your strength.

"It is yours."

Itan felt the warm water like sensation flood his awareness, he felt like a young man again, before the war, before the suffering, before everything turned to shit. He felt as if he was back in the days when the world made sense. Itan ripped the bar off as if it was made of paper. The door opened to a wider corridor, it smelled of standing water and moss, humid air wafted passed him. The Demon's power left his body. Itan ached for it the instant it was gone. *Is that what junkies feal?*

Three steps took him down into the drainage canal.

"What is this... cave?"

You can't see that in my memories?

"No, meeemories are... difficult. I see much and understand little."

It's a rainwater drain, it will lead us to the old docks.

"You huumans, you change the world around you."

You don't?

"No, we submit to the rules of nature, we defy nature, we overcome it, we thrive. You huumans break systems, break the world, you are dangerous."

Are you afraid of us?

The Demon did not answer for a while, Itan felt a strange sensation he could not describe, there were no words for it. Somehow the connection between their minds allowed him to gage the Demon's thoughts. It was still thinking on his question, weighing one answer and its implications against another.

"Nooo," it whispered, "your kind does not invoke a flight response, should my kind and humanity ever meet in person, you would not stand a chance, even against a newly hatched. However, your kind's to ability to overcome limitations, to adapt is worrisome."

Wait you have a body?

"Of course, every soul needs a body, whatever form it may be."

So where is it?

"Another... sphere."

What?

"Another realm, another world. Here we live and hunt and die as you do in your world."

What's happening to your body while you are here?

"I'm lying in a cave waiting for the weather to change, a few moments ago a little one walked into MY cave looking for shelter, I ate it."

How can you be here and there at the same time?

"How can you see what is in front of you, feel what's under your feet and hear what is behind you? Some things can be done, even the scholar didn't know how."

And I thought you were trapped in the idol.

"Trapped? Nooo, it's an anchor, I heard you masters call, I stretched my mind towards her and she pulled me into this... realm."

What is this realm of yours like?

"It's beautifuuul."

Describe it.

"No, you would find it appalling, I gleamed thaaat much from your memories."

Have Humans ever visited your realm?

"I don't know how they could get here and even if they did, they would perish within moments."

Itan walked around a bend, in front of him, a diagonal grid of iron bars blocked his way. Itan stepped over the little dam of refuse had created in front of it. To his right, at shoulder height, ran a far to narrow walkway. Itan grabbed the stone and with a little demon strength hoisted himself up. The power left him with an emptiness when it receded. The walkways lead to a section where the pattern of the iron bars changed, here they were lined up horizontal and vertical, surrounded by a rusted frame. The doors handle ended in a splintered stump. Itan pulled out the key his master had given him, it fit the rusty lock perfectly but it took him a few tried to unlock it. After the first failed attempt he wanted to take the power again and rip it off. He wasn't sure if he wanted it to ease his task or just to feel the power.

Behind the iron bars, Itan saw daylight, the river carried the stink of the city. I'm lucky this drain runs mostly under the high quarter where water and refuse are separate.

"That is a very interesting ability of your mind."

What?

"Disguust."

What about it?

"I have examined it, on one level it is a clear damage avoidance mechanism and yet on top of it disgust allows you to cut off part of yourself and destroy it."

I don't understand what you mean by that.

"Huuuman, you could understand so much more if you tried harder or maybe not, maybe some things are beyond you. A pity you can't just eat a smart human to become smarter."

No doubt, you have changed, at first, you only hissed at me with a word or two mixed in.

"The more we speak and the stronger the bond get the easier it becomes for me to send thought you understand. I have not changed only my ability to convey my thoughts has grown."

I never thought demons would even know what humor is.

"Of course we do unlike you I understand what it is"

What is humor to you?

"A protection mechanism. Whenever your image of the world is destroyed by reality, humor protects the mind from injury while it forms a new picture of reality."

I have no idea what you are talking about.

"A pity, maybe you should give that idol to a wiser man, or even better a fool, I could have fun with one of those."

Give up the power? Never!

"Then you are as bound to me as I am to the idol."

Why did you answer my master's call?

"Curiosity. Few of us know of your existence, even fewer of those even care."

Itan took a deep breath of fresh air, careful not to slip in the moss covering the wet stone, he made his way up the river, walking on the rock lining the underside of the old Haber wall. Here and there the water has frozen and the little ice sheets cracked under his feet. Itan nearly slipped on an ice-covered stone the size of his fist.

"Solid water veery interesting."

No ice in your realm?

"Not where I live, the temperature here rarely allowed for liquid water."

What? What are you drinking if there is no water?

"You have no name for it, no concept."

How hot is it there?

"Who am I supposed to answer that? Your measurement of temperature using liquid metal is very interesting yet unpractical for us, I can only tell you humans would not live here long if they could even breath at all. Water is only liquid on cold days and the winds would tare the flesh of your meek bones. Is there more you wish to know off my home?"

No, no, sounds wonderful. A beautiful hell for demons.

"What you call Hell is not a place, it is a condition, one of your own making."

Itan climbed up the harbor wall, demon strength seeping through his veins. He only needed one hand to lift his body up.

I could do it with one finger, even as a young man. I have never been this strong. Up on the promenade road, he saw a carriage driving off, two men in blue robes set on the driver's bench. Down the market street he saw two more people in robes, those two wore grey robes. They stood in front of the house his master had told him she would send them to, they were talking to each other, they didn't even notice his approach.

"What is this? Good food, I could eat."

The plan was to kill them and dump their bodies on the river, if you want to be feed first, we can do that.

"Yees, food, they are good food. The little one is very good food, kill him feed me."

The Demon's power change from a tricked the cascade, flooding Itans body. The power rushed through his veins, pulsing like drummes.

"Yes kill them, fееeed meeee!!"

Chapter 12

"They were lying," Beraan said after he closed the carriage door.
"Which one?" asked Midas asked in mock disbelief.
"The guard captain for sure, the lady bitch was hiding something too."
"The lady was most likely worried unfounded accusations would damage their reputation or something... I haven't dealt with nobble enough to tell."
Sounds about right.
"You handled yourself well in there," said Beraan.
"Wow, you finally see that there are a few things you could learn from me?"
"I guess one or two things... for example what are we going to do next? Back to the Order house and hope master Kelaan is there or should we check out the apartment ourselves?"
"Just the two of us? That would be really stupid," said Midas.
"We could do both," said Beraan.
"We are not splitting up."
"We are not alone, the Blues can find master Kelaan and tell him where we are, while we keep an eye on the place, we don't go in, just watch or follow, in case he leaves."
"Hm... that is not a bad idea."

Midas told the blue driver what he was supposed to do. Beraan looked out the window, it was the same road they had come a week ago. *It has only been a few days since the forest... I killed a man, I haven't thought of it since. Good, let's keep it that way.*

The last time we came this way Midas asked about my past, he didn't have any right to know those things back then, does he now?

"I grew up here," Beraan said.
"What?"
"You asked last week, you asked if I had been to the city before, I have. I grew up here."
"Do you want to visit some family while we're here?"
"No."
"Bad blood?"
"No, they happen to be dead," Beraan said with a sigh.
"Would you like to tell me what happened?"
No... Yes...
"Have you heard of the ashen summer?"
"Sure I have, a few years ago a flame-cursed burned down half the city."
"It wasn't that bad, the tale grew in the telling, I heard versions of it in the Forge, according to those the whole city burned down twice over. In truth, just a few streets worth of homes, unfortunately, our house was one of them. So were my parents and my little sister."
"I'm sorry"
"Don't be, I got over it."
"How does one get other that?"
"One day at a time."
Having a goal helps.

"Is that why you joined the Order, to spare others your fate?"

"No, I joined because I had nowhere else to go."

"You're lucky you turned out to be amulet compatible, imagine you weren't."

I would probably have jumped into the river.. no, I wouldn't have... I would have tried to killed cursed without any power of my own... and the first one would have killed me.

"This is my life now, that's all that matters."

"I heard he burned down some noble houses too," Midas said.

"Yeah House Kessus, we passed their estate a few moments ago, I wonder why no one claimed it and made use of the land. It should have passed to one of the lord's sisters, Kalita is the oldest."

"You know a lot about nobbles?"

Beraan laugh.

More then I would like too.

"I knew their son."

"You knew a noble born?"

"Alright I knew a kid who said he was Doreel Kessus, he told me a lot about the nobles."

"Your sure he wasn't lying? We could probably find aight kids pretending to be a noble heir within four minutes."

"Maybe he was, maybe not. I believed him. I met him in a shelter for survivors, he was pretending to be a commoner."

"Why?"

"He said without his family the other houses would tare him apart. He had different plans, he wanted to join the Order and get revenge on all the cursed, for his family."

"Wait, did he go to the Forged with you?" Midas leaned forward, "is an heir to a great house secretly in the Order?"

"No, he's dead."

"What happened?"

"A week before the fall choosing a group of older boys beat us up, badly. When he was down, they wouldn't stop kicking him. After it was over he was half dead already, I watched him get worse over the next days, no one would help a street boy, no one would believe me when I told them he was a noble. He died the morning of the choosing. I joined the Order and he... the head of a noble house, killed for half a slice of dry bread."

"That's rough."

"Yeah... I can't wait to get out of this city. Too many bad memories."

"How long did you live on the streets?"

"Only the summer but that was bad enough."

"Would you like to stop at your home?" Midas asked.

"What for?"

"To find closure."

You mean to rip open old wounds and pretend they don't hurt?

"No, I made my peace with what happened."

"Still you want to leave as soon as possible, doesn't sound like peace to me."

"No, that's not it. Every bad turn life has thrown at me happened here, in this city, sometimes I feel as if the city itself hates me"

I for my part hate it.

"Now your talking nonsense, the city is nothing more than wood and stone, it can't hate you," Midas said in a far too cheery tone.

"Yeah, yeah. Stones and wood and shit."

You are wrong Midas, this city is alive, it embodies the misery of all the people and it is lashing out at everyone... and me in particular.

"What does your religion say about feeling as if the city hate you?" Midas asked.

"Good question, I have no idea. I didn't listen as well as I should have."

"A recognize a theme."

"There is probably a Virtue for happiness or a Vice related to hatred. Actually, I think there was this statue of a guy eating hot coal hoping it would kill his enemy or something like that, it didn't make any sense."

"Oh, of course, it makes sense," Midas said, he managed to hit the right balance between mocking and wise, "you young men were just not able to see the deep and profound wisdom carried through the ages."

They both laughed, Midas laughed so hard Beraan saw a tear run down his cheek.

"Isn't deep and profound the same?"

"Who cares?"

Beraan looked out the window, the had passed through a gate without him noticing. The old docks smell of shit, as usual, the building style of connected houses gave him the impression of a ditch about to close in on him. Midas wiped his eyes dry.

Yeah, this city is shit but maybe, with good company, it is bearable.

"I think this is the first time I have ever seen you smile," said Midas.

"Really? Also ever is quite dramatic, we only met what? Two weeks ago?"

"That's about right. Good to see you are not all doom and gloom."

A glowing hot needle stabbed the top of Beraan's left eye, the needle twisted and went up further into his head.

"Ahrrr!"

"What is it? " Midas asked.

"My amulet is acting up again."

Beraan rubbed his eyes to banish the pain, it everts proved unsuccessful.

"Did someone use magic?" Midas asked, "what can you see?"

Beraan looked around and unfocused his sight, that for some reason made it easier to see the colors of magic the amulet showed him. Inside of the carriage, Beraan looked around without seeing.

The stone walls didn't stop me from seeing the black smoke, the wood paneling shouldn't either.

"Nothing, I don't see any Magic being used."

"Why is it active?"

How am I supposed to know? I got that stupid thing less than three weeks ago.

"I don't know."

The carriage stopped, the driver knocked on the little window and Midas opened it. Beraan heard the driver saying they had arrived. Midas gave him orders to report to master Kelaan before they watched the carriage drive off. The snow had been piled into

two lines, one on each side between the road and the walkway. The house was exactly where the maid had told them, including the bakery.

A hand grabbed Beraan's left eyeball and seized it.

"Arr! Fuck that thing," shouted Beraan.

"Your amulet?" Asked Midas, he sounded worried.

"Yes," Beraan looked up the building, no colors appeared in his vision.

A sharp pain made Beraan turn his head to the side, a man was walking up the road toward them, he was armored in black smoke. Beraan blinked and the smoke disappeared revealing the man's clothes to be quite ordinary. A clock like everyone would wear in this weather, deep brown from countless times of washing it with that root. The top of his shirt peeked up it was only a little orange. With another sting the magic sight returned, black smoke poured out of his chest only to fall back to his body and hug it, crawling over his skin along his arms and legs where it detached and disappeared. *It was the same black smoke he had seen in the alley and the barracks.*

"It's him," Beraan said, "what do we do?"

"Run or fight?" Midas said.

I don't run.

"We fight!"

Beraan pulled a rock out of his pouch, reaching for his amulet he let the energy flow into it. *That way.*

The rock struck the cursed's shoulder, the man grunted in pain. The smoke grew thicker, his expression change from pained to euphoric. He grinned with vacant eyes, Beraan had only seen the like on a drunk. The man dropped his clocked and drew a sword out of a shive on his left side, he drew it slowly, the rasping of metal scraping metal filled the air. Midas drew his blade and stepped in front of Beraan, blocking his line of sight. Beraan step to Midas left and one step behind him, where a second should stand to cover his master, even though he was only a Third and Midas was no master.

Beraan's second rock flew past the man's head. He didn't even flinch, he lifted his sword and swang at Midas blade, not at Midas himself, no he was beating the blade. One hit, two hits, three hits, with a vicious blow that would have been more becoming of a hammer he sends Midas' blade flying of and skitter across the ice-covered road until it disappeared in the snowbank.

Blue light cover Midas, welling up out of his right-hand amulet, like water from a mountain spring. Midas was to slow before he even had a chance to use his magic, the man hit him in the face, black smoke trailing the blow. Beraan could swear he heard bones break. Midas fell back into the snowbank.

"No!" shouted Beraan and shot another rock at the man. This one went straight for his head. Only a handsbreadth in front of his face, the man caught it.

He had tho struggle with it, it kept pushing him. The rock drove him backward, his feet sliding on the slushy snow. The rock ran out of energy. The cursed studied the rock, looked at Beraan and shrugged.

"What's going on here?" shouted a man exiting the building behind the Man. He was dressed in orange work man's clothing. A young woman with long blond hair looked passed him, her left eye all colors between green and yellow. "Get back shouted Beraan."

The cursed lifted Beraan's rock and threw it at the onlookers. It hit the others head with a sickening crunch. He hit the cobblestone, his head cracked again. The girl ducked back into the house. Beraan drew his own sword and held it in a guard position, the way he had been taught. Within a few seconds, the man had batted it out of his hand as if Beraan was no more than a child with a stick. *At least no instructor is here to see me fail.*

Expecting a punch Beraan struck first, connecting a solid punch to the man's jaw. It did even bother him, he just smiles his despondent smile. Beraan rammed his head into his face, he heard bone snap. *Fuck, why did no one ever tell me how much this hurts?* Blood cascades out the man's nose. Breaking it did nothing to wipe the stupid grin away. Out of options, Beraan spit in his face.

The cursed punched Beraan in the chest, Beraan had never been hit by a horse because he wasn't stupid enough to trust the dam beasts, but this, this must surely come close to being kicked by a horse. Beraan found himself falling, remembering his training he tugged his chin in close to the chest to avoid the onlooker's fate. Beraan hit the cobblestone ass first, pain shot up his spine.

The man loomed over him, coming closer, Beraan's feet found purchase on some stone peeking out higher than others, he pushed himself away from the man, skidding over the ground. The man stepped on Beraan's right foot, right above the ankle. Beraan screamed. The cursed kneeled next to Beraan, sword in his left hand, his right hand above Beraan's chest. *I won't beg, not again.*

A hand grabbed the man's upheld right, it shone with blue light. A second hand touched the man's left shoulder. Lightning crackled and Beraan heard the sizzling of flesh on a grill. The man screamed, a primal shout of pain and anger. It echoed down the streets. If anyone had managed not to notice the fight, they did now. The black smoke grew even thicker, hiding the man's real appearance from Beraan, it swirled around the points where Midas' energy met the black mist. The man stood up, his movement slow as if he bore a great weight. The stupid expression was gone, replaced by primal fury. He looked around for the source of his pain, his eyes locked on Midas. The glow of Midas' lightning grew even brighter as the magic streaming from his amulet into the cursed. With one slash of his sword, the cursed separated Midas' right hand from his arm. The hand and amulet flew off.

Midas stared at the stump without any sign of comprehension. The Man tackled him, slamming him into the ground. Beraan watched in horror as the cursed raised his and punched Midas in the face, once, twice. Blood splattered all around them, Beraan got some in his eyes. The man hit Midas again and again and again... and again.

When he was finally done, the look of rage had left and for the first time, the man seemed to actually aware of what was going on around him. He looked at his bloody hands and down to what was left of Midas. If Beraan hadn't known the ruin of a face right next to him belonged to Midas, he would not have recognized him. His eyes, Beraan would have recognized those. The looked at him, those eyes, the looked at him without sight. No sign of the young man behind them.

"Don't worry, your next," he held his right hand up in the air, finger splayed out like a claw, black mist swirled around each finger. The hand came down like a hammer blow, the finger sinking deep into Midas chest. Something like white smoke rose around his hand and was immediately sucked in by the black smoke. The man shuttered the look of ecstasy back on his face. *He is a monster, what was I thinking picking a fight with him, he fought three Inquisitors and would have killed them all.*

How did the redhead survive? She ran away, I should have done that, too late now. No, she slowed down the motion of his clothes, trapping him in them. I can't do that but I can do something better. Beraan pushed himself further away from the man, he tried to get up but the pain in his right ankle was too great. He crawled looking back, he saw the man getting up and coming after him. *Yes, come and get me, I'm helpless, I'm fleeing.*

The cursed stoped above Beraan, his body blocking Untara's light, his hand in the air and ready to strike. Beraan's right hand shot forward, he poured all the power his amulet gave him into the man's clothes. The amulet vibrated with power. Some part of his mind told Beraan that it was not a good sign. It vibrated under the stress of channeling that much power at once, Beraan could not tell how he knew. With the command up he felt the man being dragged into the air and backward.

Beraan had not planned for the man to grab his arm and pulling Beraan with him. Beraan redirected half the power into his own clothes. down. The straps of the fabric dug into his skin, pressed him down onto the cold cobble stone. The men hung above him, desperately clinging to Beraan's right arm. Beraan lost hold of the man's chest but while he was holding on to Beraan's right arm, his hand touched the sleeve of his shirt. Beraan pored more power into it. He also increases the force pushing himself towards the ground. The man's left came out of nowhere and struck Beraan's face. His vision blurred.

Beraan looked down, or up, at the man hanging from his arm, nothing but the cloudless sky beneath him. *I am not going to die here, I still have cursed to kill, cursed like you.* With his left hand, Beraan pulled his rock pouch out of his robe and beat it over the man's head. His grip weakened, his hand slipped down the length of Beraan's arm. Beraan spit in his face.

"Die already!" Beraan shouted. The man responded with another left hook, this one hit Beraan above the eyes, a second pain exploded in his skull when the blow's force drove his head into the cobblestone. The motion and the pull upward must have been too much for the cursed's inhuman strength. That last punch cost him his grip on Beraan's hand.

Beraan was smashed against the stone, the Man dragged up and backward into the sky. Beraan saw that he had not sent him straight up but towards the river. Beraan watched the man's body arc down as the energy he had invested into his clothing run out. The body flew out and hit the river, it was so far away Baraan didn't even hear a plop.

The world spun around Beraan, stone under him would not stop moving and the two rows of houses founded in above him about to crush his body only to snap back to their original position, pretending never to have moved at all. The content of Beraan's stomach was fed up with its accommodation and decided it would rather play in the snow. The last sight Beraan saw was Midas body lieing only a few meters away from him, his eyes look at Beraan, looked unseeing.

Midas, we should have run.

Finally, thankfully unconsciousness embraced him.

Chapter 13

Beraan was cold, and hot, and cold again. When he opened his eyes his father face looked back at him. One side of his face was burned black, the other showed a young man, whenever Beraan blinked the two halves traded sides. His fathers face changed into Master Kelaan. He hovered somewhere in the air above his head, next to him hovered Beraan's little sister, her mouth wide open, frozen in a silent scream. Her face deformed and became the redhead, the girl master Kelaan had traded Beraan and Midas in for. *Midas.*

Midas on the ground, the cursed kneeling above him. The man beating down on Midas like a... like a... Beraan's mind couldn't find a comparison for that. The first master smith's anvil came back to Beraan, hammer blows raining down on the anvil, the sound drumbeats in Beraan's thoughts. *Yes, that is what that Man did to Midas, he beat Midas like a blacksmith beats the metal. Only the blacksmith is creating something.* Midas face appeared in front of Beraan's eyes, it changed. Beraan knew what shape it would take next. He closed his eyes, it did not help, he could still see Midas ruined face, or what was left of it.

We should have run, why did I not run. Because you thought you could take him, an amulet of power, a few weeks in the Inquisition and you thought you could take him. I must be the dumbest human being ever to walk this world. Yes, that's part of it but not all, why did you want to fight him in the first place. I wanted to kill him. Why? Because he was cursed. Why? What do I know why the gods curse some and not others. No, why did you want to kill him?

Someone shook Beraan, the inside of his skull felt as if someone was hammering a nail into a wall. Only the wall was his skull, the nail was on the inside and the guy with the hammer had a thousand friends. The specters of his pasted and tormenters of his present shook him again, Beraan opened his eyes. An old ugly woman had joined the other, Kelaan, the redhead and faces he did not know. They assaulted him with sound, noised that emanated from their mouths, Beraan tried the make sense of them, part of him knew it was language, the rest of him didn't care. He could not make out any words.

Master Kelaan shook him again and the guy with their nails hammer and his friends went for another round. Beraan screamed in pain though his own ears reported only a moan leaving his mouth. The stern looking face grabbed master Kelaan's hands and pulled them of Beraan. *Whoever you are, I love you. Whoever he was, master Kelaan obeyed him. Master Kelaan, you abandoned us, you were supposed to teach us, Midas would be alive if you had done your job right. Midas would be alive.*

"I killed him," said Beraan, or at least he tried to, his own words sounded like a drunk man speaking with a ball of yarn in each cheek. The heads looked at each other confused. *Good, fuck you all. What good have you ever done for anyone, for me?* The nice head shooed the other heads out. When they were gone he hovered over Beraan and said something to him, Beraan understood him as little as before. The only clue was the man's smile.

The next time Beraan open his eyes he found himself in a bed, damp sheets covered him and the smell of sweat hung all around him. Thinking back he found the memories between now and the dock street oddly blurred. A middle-aged woman in brown robes set on a chair next to the foot of Beraan's bed.

Brown robes, what was brown again? The nurses in the Forge wore brown. I'm in the healer's wing, am I? Yes, where else would they put you, dummy.

The nurse got up and left, Beraan watcher her go. She brought back another brown robe. He was in his late forties or early fifty. His beard grew wild and turned white in places. His face seemed soft and Beraan liked him immediately even though he couldn't name a single reason why.

"Good morning young man, I would like to ask you a few questions."

"Sure."

"What's your name."

The wrong name popped into his head.

"Beraan," he answered instead.

"Can you tell me where you are?"

"Kurum Adanil, the Order house Prime. The medical wing I'd guess."

"You guessed right, can you tell me what day it is?"

"Depends on how long I've been here," judging by the smell... far too long."

"You have been here for three days."

"Three days?"

"Yes, you were unconscious for most of it, you woke up a few times and stammered unintelligible nonsense."

"I don't remember any of that."

"What is the last thing you remember before now?"

Midas on the ground, that man above him, the sound of a hammer hitting an anvil, again and again.

"I... I fought... Midas, he is dead isn't he?"

Beraan knew the answer but as long as the doctor didn't say it, there was still a chance Beraan was wrong.

"I'm sorry to tell you, your master's Second man was found dead."

"Midas, his name is... was Midas."

"Of course."

Beraan sank back into the sheets, they stuck to his bare back and made a squishing sound. Beraan didn't care.

"Your master asked to be informed the moment you woke up, the grandmaster herself did likewise. They both wish a few questions answered".

Like what the fuck where you doing facing that man alone? Good question, I'll tell them when I figure it out.

"Of course," Beraan said, imitating the doctor's tone.

"Are you ready to see them?"

Fuck no.

Better to get it over with.

"Yes."

Beraan closed his eyes, he opened them again when he heard people enter the infirmary. After the silence, their footsteps thundered on the stone floor. Beraan's eyes wondered around the room, or rather the partition. A wooden construction that wouldn't look out of place in the physical training room held up white and in one case orange tinted sheets. They looked like repurposed tablecloths but what did it matter, the only had to grand privacy, not look pretty. Conscious of his nakedness, Beraan pulled the covers up.

Grandmaster Glinn stopped at Beraan's bed. She tried to keep her expression neutral but Beraan could see the anger in her eyes.

"Explain why Lady Deretaan filed a complaint with the council due to unlawful harassment?"

Is there lawful harassment?

"Grandmaster," Beraan tried to bow, which wasn't that easy sitting. "We found out that the sword the cursed used was commissioned and owned by the Deretaans."

"So you decided to walk into a noble house?"

"We could not find Master Kelaan and you were unavailable."

She stiffened at that.

"A Second and a Third without a master in a noble house," she said, "there is a way things are done. Of course, a street urchin wouldn't understand that. You should understand a little more about how the world works. You can't just accuse them of harboring a murderer."

"We did not accuse them of anything, we asked about the guard who owned the sword. I saw something in his room. This cursed leaves some kind of magic footprint behind, it looked to me black smoke. I found it in the alley where he killed that Teraan fallow. I found it in his quarter and I bet if I go to the dock street now I'll find it there too."

"Magic doesn't leave imprints, I had the library check after Kel told me about it, not a single Inquisitor holding a magic sensor amulet has ever reported anything remotely similar to what you describe. So you are either lying or delusional."

Fuck you. I did see those clouds, didn't I? Yes, I did. I saw them rising of that cursed too, he is the source I'm sure of that.

"I saw what I saw."

She rolled her eyes.

"You could have another magic sensitive check out those three places and verify my report."

"I already sent for one."

"Grandmaster, there is another possibility. This could be a kind of cursed the Order has not encountered before."

The words hung between them. She stared into Beraan's eyes until he looked away.

"The Order's records are quite thorough."

Why don't you see the obvious? Because something new is something unknown and the stupid fear the unknown. That's what father had said. I thought he was wrong back then, one must be stupid not to fear the unknown. As long as you can pretend you know what is going on you can pretend you are in charge of it, have power over it.

"Are there records of cursed with inhuman strength?" Beraan asked.

"No."

"Then the records are incomplete."

"That remains to be seen."

The infirmary doors opened again, quick steps approached Beraan bed. Master Kelaan looked ten years older than the last time Beraan had seen him.

"What happened, tell me everything."

Beraan did, he told him about the silversmith and the weapon order, about the family crest. Beraan left out the silversmith's story that had troubled Midas so much, there was no point in bringing it up.

What did it matter if it was true or not?

Beraan told him how they tried to find him, how the grandmaster's aid turned them away and went to house Deretaan alone, she got visibly annoyed at that part. Master Kelaan kept interrupting Beraan every second sentence and asked him to clarify this or that. When it came to relaying what happened on dock street, Beraan left out no detail, satisfied to watch the grand Inquisitors' mien change from angry to horrified to disgusted.

"After that, I only remember waking up here," finished Beraan.

"He attacked you without hesitation?" Asked master Kelaan.

Beraan nodded.

"Where exactly did he come from?"

"He was walking up dock street towards us. He must have come from the promenade, I can't say which side."

"Another body was found a few meters from you and Midas, who was that?"

"Just some random person sticking his nose in things that didn't concern him."

"Are you sure, why did the cursed kill him?"

"I don't know, he was at the wrong place at the wrong time. The cursed showed no regard for him in any way, he just threw one of my stones at his head as if that guy was a bothersome fly."

"Why didn't you and Midas get away and wait for me?" Master Kelaan asked.

Yeah, that's the big question master, I only got as far as I must be really stupid.

"I don't know, Midas confronted him and I backed him up."

Sorry Midas, better than telling everyone the truth.

"Who is the bigger fool..." murmured Grandmaster Glinn.

"Was the man's body found?" Asked Beraan to change the subject.

"Not yet, the water is too cold to send divers in, I went for a few dives myself but haven't found anything yet. A lot of people saw him hit the river and everyone pointed a different spot, plus the current would have dragged the body off."

"Yeah, I wanted to send him flying straight up but got confused about where up and down were."

"I meant to ask you, how did you manage that in the first place?"

"Send him flying? I remembered," Beraan stopped himself from calling her the redhead and nodded towards her, "her telling us about how she got around the first restriction by using her magic on his clothing. So if I can't use it on his body I could at least try that."

"Not bad," said grandmaster Glinn.

"Wow, master," said Master Kelaan, "don't shower him in compliments."

The old woman cracked a smile, just for a second, "Beraan, what do you know about the whereabouts of Midas' amulets?"

"His amulets? What about them?"

"They are missing," said master Kelaan.

So that's what matters most to you?

"The cursed could have grabbed them I supposed but I don't remember seeing him do that."

"Was anyone else close enough to see what was happening," Master Kelaan asked.

"Not as far as I remember, Master."

"Thank you Beraan, you should rest now, rest and recover, I insist," said master Kelaan.

"Where are you going," asked the grandmaster.

"I'm going to check out that apartment Beraan mention, I still want to know who this guy was and where he came from."

"Don't waste your time he is dead anyway."

"With all respect you know I have for you Master, a student of mine died and I have questions. I will have answers."

"Fine, it's your time to waste anyway, see if you can find those amulets, they are a bigger loss to the order than the boy."

Master Kelaan stared at her.

"Oh come on, you know what I mean Kel, we are all willing to give our life but losing an amulet mean one fewer Inquisitor for the rest of time."

Master Kelaan shook his head and left without another word.

Grandmaster Glinn let a breath out slowly, "ah that boy, after all he has been through, he is still so squeamish."

"Master?" asked Beraan.

She looked at him surprised to find him there.

"Yes, Beraan."

"What happened to Midas body?"

"He is being prepared for the last rites, his vigil begins tomorrow, would you like to take part?"

"Yes."

"I'll pass it on" with that, she left too.

Beraan was left alone in his damp and smelly bed.

"I lied to you," Beraan said, kneeling in front of the stone slab.

"Did you hear me? I lied to Midas," Beraan looked at the closed door, assuring himself his words were only herded by himself and Midas, at least he hoped he would.

"I'm Doreel Kessus or well, I used to be."

Beraan touched the painted mask someone had put on Midas face.

Should I remove it? Look at his real face? No, better not.

"The boy who died in that awful alley was Beraan, he took care of me when I had nothing and I took his name. I took his name so the nobility wouldn't come after me. I was done with that life anyway".

Beraan stared at Midas body, the air was cold, the stone was cold, the body was cold.

"I'm so sorry I lie to you. I have been lying for years. Lying about who I am turned out to be easier than I thought it would be. I told everyone a kind of truth, Beraan's story was so close to mine, all I had to do was emphasize some parts and leave out others."

Beraan wiped his face with the sleeve of his robe.

"I lied, I told them you were the one who refused to run, I told them you wanted to fight that cursed instead. I'm sorry, I blamed that on you. It was easier than telling the truth. Easier than admitting how stupid I was, I am."

"When I came to the Forge everyone made new friends, groups formed and even though some didn't get along with other, everyone had someone, except me. Well, there was Lira but she was even more messed up than me. What I'm trying to say is... thank you... for being my friend, I'll miss you, always."

Beraan sank down, his back against the massive stone altar and buried his head in his knees.

"I don't know what to do," Beraan whispered.

"It's my fault your dead."

"If I had chosen to run instead of fighting, you would still be alive."

"If I had insisted on finding master Kelaan, you would still be alive."

"If I had never thought of finding out where the sword was made, you would still be alive"

"I don't know how... I don't know what to do."

The room remained silent, Midas corps had no answers for him. *What would father have said? What does it matter, father is dead. Whatever wisdom he had did save him, did it? No, what are his words worth in the end?*

"I don't know what master Kelaan was doing while we tracked down that cursed, probably the redhead, wouldn't surprise me."

"If he had done his job right, you would still be alive."

What would he say if I asked him how to go on after getting you killed? What does he know anyway?

"If the silversmith story was true the Order failed in its one duty, to protect those without magic from those cursed with it. I see now why that bothered you so much Midas. If the Order has no moral validity then how could anyone in the Order give me advice on how to act? moral validity... virtues I sound like father."

"The virtues, maybe I should visit the temple. I never paid much attention to their words when I was little, maybe now they make more sense. Maybe I can find some... how did you call it Midas... some peace of the soul there. Father made us go there twice a week."

"I think you would have liked him Midas, my father had an answer for everything. We had a bit fight the day he died, the day all of them died. He wanted me to marry some nobleman's daughter and unit our houses. Not immediately, of course, just the contract and the marriage once we were old enough. I never met the girl."

"I don't know why I'm telling you this, I guess I have nothing else to say and the silence is unbearable."

Beraan set there, on the floor of that massive stone block feeling the warmth leaving his body. He hugged his robe close to his body, listening to the silence, suppressing the urge to say something, to banish the silence. His heartbeat sounded so loud in his own ears how could the entire Order house not hear it? Beraan's sense of

time deserted him, seconds, minutes and hours lost their distinction. The one beam of light that a glass block in the upper wall let in wandered so little, its motion might only be a trick of his tired eyes.

The door opening startled him, Beraan drew on the power his amulet held. Someone in Inquisitor robes enter, she let her hood fall back, it was the redhead. Beraan let the power flow back.

"What do you want?" asked Beraan, the dryness in his throat muddling the words.

"To pay my respect to a fallen brother."

"Oh, please, you didn't know him at all."

"That doesn't change my respect... and I wanted to talk to you."

"You don't know me either."

She set down on the altar pedestal, a meter down from Beraan, right under Midas feet.

"I have been where you are right now," she said.

Really, have you? You know what it's to lose ones Familie, be all alone and the moment you find someone you can actually trust, have that ripped away? What do you know about my pain?

"Have you?"

"Yes, I have. When Teraan was murdered I blamed myself. I went over all the thing I could have done differently, in the end, I lost count."

Midas would still be alive if our master would not have neglected him because of you.

"Your point is?"

"It's not your fault," she said.

What the fuck do you think you know about me? What the fuck makes you think you could ever understand what I am going through right now? You don't know me, you can not understand me, you can not relate to me in any way. What do you think gives you the right to tell me its not my fault?

"Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?" Beraan asked.

"What's your problem Beraan?"

"Right now? You are, coming in here, daring to speak of someone you don't know, about things you don't understand."

"Oh Beraan, I'm not going to argue with you who got it worse. All I'm saying is it was not your fault and life is a bitch, you can wallow in self-pity or grow the fuck up."

"Who is the real bitch right now?"

"Look, i came here..."

"I don't give a shit about why you came and what you want, you said your piece, now leave us alone."

She stood up and walked to the door, the redhead turned around and said, "when you finally get your head out of your own ass and need someone to talk to, you know where to find me."

"Get out!"

"Suit yourself," she slamed the door behind her.

Beraan set in silence, the only thing keeping him company was the voice in his head questioning every choice he ever made.

Chapter 14

Estra's knife hit the target, burring itself between the third and fourth outer ring. "Not even in the grey? Missing six in a row," Milisa asked, "what got you all riled up?" "I went to talk to master Kelaan's Third, the death of his Second hit him hard. I thought I could talk to him... since... you know."

"Teraan."

"Yes... so I wanted to talk to him and the little shit had the nerve to call me a bitch, can you believe that?"

"What an idiot."

"Yeah," Estra threw the final knife and missed.

"How is your proto something transcription going?"

"Oh that, some passages make no sense, at one point it speaks of transitioning from this world to the next, then about the purity of blood and later about the nature of divinity. I think they talk about a place of sacrifice, the god's passage or the divine gate, it's confusing and I lack the reference material to understand the context."

"Aha...so not well?" Estra picked her knives up and walked back to the line.

"there's something I wanted to tell you," Milisa said, "I'm seeing someone."

"Nooo. Who?"

"Sorry, can't tell yet..."

"Oh come on you tease, why bring it up?"

"She works for one of the great houses."

"Indentured servant?" Estra asked.

"Yeah."

Estra hit the outer ring, "I'm sorry Mili."

"Don't be. I'm working on a solution if she could take the Blue..."

"If you could get the Blues to take her, you mean," Estra said, "would you like me to talk to master Mira about it. When I get to see her."

"No don't, I'll manage. Her getting out seems to be the bigger problem."

Bullseye, "she doesn't want to leave?"

"No, they don't want her to leave, she says her lady was afraid she would spill family secrets."

"That's kind of understandable."

"Hey, you are supposed to support me here, tell me how evil they are and cheer me up, telling me what great injustice I suffer under."

"Oh dear what woe has the world thrust upon you..." they both broke out laughing before she could even finish the sentence.

Estra took a deep breath to calm herself when she saw a blue approach, followed by a girl in grey Estra had never seen before.

"Excuse me, Master Inquisitor," the Blue asked, "the sensor has arrived."

"Thank you, have a carriage readied for us please."

"Of course master Inquisitor, but I'm afraid it will take at least half an hour."

Estra nodded, the blue bowed and left. Milisa bowed to both Inquisitors and followed.

"What have you been told?" Estra asked the girl?

"Nothing."

"This idiot with a sensory amulet said a cursed had left some sort of footprint, you are here to confirm that."

"Understood."

Damm, she is a well of conversation, why did you have to leave Milisa?

"Half an hour to kill, what are we going to do?"

"Whatever you wish, Master," the girl said.

"Please, my name is Estra. Have you eaten?"

"Yes, master estra."

Master Estra, that sounds just wrong.

"And your name is?" estra asked after a moment of silence.

"Lira."

What am I supposed to do with her?

"So your amulet can detect magic?"

"Yes."

Can you give me more than one words answers?"

"and the other."

"Intangibility"

I guess that's a negative.

"really, me too." Estra held up her left hand, "though mine is messing with me."

"Oh? in what way?"

That hooked her attention.

"I can't infuse objects with its energy.

Lira drew two throwing knives and touched their blades together, after a second, the passed right through each other.

"Like this?" Lira asked.

Little show off.

"Yeah, I can only push my body into intangibility."

"Really? You can affect living flesh?"

"Just my own"

"How did you learn to do that?" lira asked.

"I didn't, it just happend. When they gave you your amulet, did they put you on a raised stand?"

"Yes."

"When I touched it for the first time, I drew the energy in and fell through the floor.

They had a Sentinel waiting under me just in case."

"At least you kept your clothes on," Lira murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing. But can't infuse your blades?"

"Like you just did? No, I can't do that but everyone keeps telling me it was the first skill anyone with my type of amulet learned first."

"That makes no sense. what about your clothes?" Lira asked.

"What about them?"

"Can you infuse them?"

"Yes sure."

"You obviously can infuse objects.

She is right.

"Hm... I never thought about that."

Estra pulled a blade out of the target and focused on her amulet, it responded, she pushed herself into half intangibility. The blade did not follow. Estra felt her booty where they were and pushed herself into full intangibility. the blade fell through her hand and hit the floor. Lira picked it up and stabbed her. The blade went through her without resistance.

"Hey..."

"Just checking... I mean sorry master Estra..."

"Relax, you just surprised me. Call me estra, calling me master makes me feel old."

"As you wish ma... Estra."

"Do me a favor and infuse that knife, I want to try something."

Lira did as told and held it out to estra, she could touch it. She grabbed it and threw it at the target.

Second inner ring.

"I wonder if I could use this somehow."

"I don't see how. There is something else I have been working on that might interest you. I have been practicing infusing just enough energy into my blades that they fall back into normality just before they hit."

"You want to avoid air resistance slowing them down?"

"No... well, that is a side effect I guess, but I want to be able to throw through solid objects to hit my target."

"Hm.... clever."

"Thank you, estra."

Estra and lira practiced until a Blue showed up and informed them their carriage was ready.

Two hours later Estra and Lira walked into the dining hall to grab last meal. On the first table let a grey robe, right sleeve dangling empty.

"Master Mira," Estra said sitting down across from her, lira stood awkwardly to the side.

"Estra, there you are, have you seen Kel or Beraan?"

"No, master, I was out verifying the idiot's report about magic residue. He may be dumb but he was neither lying nor delusional, we did find something, though I'm not sure what it means."

"Interesting."

"We found two..."

"Stop, I'll list when you tell Kel, he needs to know." Master Mira said, spooning down her soup.

"Did you say Beraan," lira asked softly.

"Yes, why?"

"Taller than me, hair cut so short he looks almost bald, doesn't smile a lot?"

"You know him?"

"Yes, he is here?"

Estra nodded

"Would you excuse me Master?" Lira asked

Estra nodded again, master Mira dismissed her with a wave of her hand.

What was that about?

"Master, there is something I want to talk to you about."
"What is it?"
"I'm thinking about leaving the Order."
"HA!" she barked the sound.
"Master?"
"And here I sit thinking the same."
"You...you want me to leave?"
"No, don't be silly, I am going to retire, pass my amulet on to a student, maybe even pick up teaching at the forge. We always need people with experience there."
"But you can't leave," Estra said louder than intended
"Why? have I not done my duty, what more would you ask me to give?"
"But you are..."
"Old," finished Master Mira, "a shadow of myself."

Master Mira stood up, "I know I'm supposed to mentor you and in my opinion, you turned out well, but regarding life-changing decisions, well I haven't figured those out myself. Look Estra, decide if you can do more Good in the order or out there and do what you think best."

Chapter 15

Beraan walked down the great stairs in front of the Order house Prime, three paths had been freed of snow. On the opposite side of the wise man's square stood the Temple of the Virtues. Whoever had designed the Temple lacked imagination, its lowest part was a square block with lightly inward sloping walls, the middle part was a smaller block with straight walls, topped off by a dome. It was contrasted by the dualist's cathedral on the square's side, it was an elongated building with high and narrow doors and windows, countless towers rising to each side connected to the main building. Every corner seemed to have a stone statue of a man, an animal or an artists nightmare guarding it. No stone lacked carving, all the detail overwhelming the mind and meshing together into the background. The Virtue's Temple, on the other hand, dared to be simplistic. *There is probably a message in that if only I could figure it out.*

Whoever build the temple was as fond of stairs as the guys who designed the Order house Prime, only the temple had to have even bigger stairs. I bet the is a message in that too. No fat people allowed, work it off. No more likely something like, we are above you. Atop the stairs, two rows of guards lined the temple walls. They wore the strangest clothing, Beraan remembered from his childhood visits. It looked like a strip of cloth warped around their bodies countless times, crisscrossing back and forth.

Behind the oval entrance, two lines off novices waited, ready to greet and attend visitors, or at least the noble ones. They wore the same style of clothing, just more of it. the first one on the right broke out of formation and walked towards Beraan, the others each moved one position forward to fill the empty spot.

"Master Inquisitor," she said with a bow, "is you visit private or official?"

The young woman was a little older then Beraan but surely no twenty yet. The cloth travelled up her neck and wrapped itself around her hair so tight it stood upon her head, like a tree reaching for the sky.

"Privat," Beraan said.

"Very well, do you require guidance?"

"Sure, why not."

Whatever that means.

"Please follow me," she walked the line between the novices, she went ahead without checking if he was following or not, a few quick steps killed her headstart.

"Do you come here often?" She sounded genuinely interested.

"No, its the first time since... I don't even know how long."

She leed Beraan into a grand hall under the domed roof, alcoves had been arranged along the outer walls, each one with its own statue, except the ones to the top.

"You sure like naked people a lot," Beraan commented.

"The Human form is considered holy."

While most statues varied in size, gender and accessory they also shared a few trades, they were naked, well muscled and both the male and female part were rather small.

"Well, a few of those are not very much... formed."

"Why do you suppose they should be?" She asked.

"It's not realistic."

"No master Inquisitor, they are not realistic, they are more than real."

"They are more than real? You'll have to explain that one."

"I'm sorry I can't tell you, you must discover that meaning yourself."

"You are a great guide."

"Thank you, master Inquisitor, do you know the first principle?"

"Something about being a better man than you were yesterday or last year."

"Exactly, self-improvement. Now, what does that have to do with big muscles and a healthy body, as well as other part being represented rather small?"

"I don't know."

She looked at him the way his mother did when he had done something wrong, her disappointment had hurt him more than his father's anger.

"Why are those empty?" asked Beraan pointing up.

"In case a new Saint is proclaimed."

"Aah...."

"Would you like me to recite the Saint's virtues and accomplishments?"

"Which one? There must be hundreds."

"247."

"You know all their histories?"

"Of course."

Yeah yeah.

"And what are you doing for fun?"

"What is the Inquisition doing for fun?"

Ah, the usual, hunting cursed, you know killing people.

"We don't have much of that, there are only training and meditation and not much else if we are not in the field."

Lucky she doesn't know I have only been in an active team for three weeks.

"It is no different for us, we study and we serve."

"Could you do something for me?" Beraan asked.

"If it is within my power."

"Can you drop the act?"

"Excuse me?" She raised an eyebrow.

Saints she's overacting, seen too many plays?

"Have they drilled your mind so much you can't speak like a normal person anymore?"

"We are in the Temple, we are supposed to act accordingly."

"Come on, no one can hear us."

"Fine, but first you are not gone tell anyone and second you tell me what an Inquisitor wants here."

"I told you, I'm not here as an Inquisitor."

"Why are you wearing your robes then?"

"I don't have anything else to wear."

"Oh."

"I own another set of robes if this set needs to be washed, beside that I own nothing. technically I don't even own the robes, they belong to the Order."

"I see, what is it you want here?"

"I... I'm looking for answers."

"To which question?"

"Why the world sucks."

"Ah... bashing your head against the big one, are you? Follow me."

The section right under the dome's centre went down in tiers, here stood fewer statues, Beraan counted fifteen.

"The Prime Virtue," Beraan remembered.

"Yes truth, my favoured one, because it is so simple, no double meaning, no live lesson, just pure and simple honesty. Do you know the four greater Virtues?"

"Ahm... Foresight and Courage right?"

"Yes, with Restraint and Gratitude."

"Why gratitude?"

"Patience, I'll explain when you see Saaru."

"I thought curiosity was a Virtue."

"Yes over there in the outer ring, next to her brothers patience and silence."

"Isn't speech a Virtue too?"

"Of course he is, he stands to silence's other side."

In the centre square, where the four statues looked up to Truth, two rows of stairs lead down into the Temple's belly. *Great, more of those.* Beraan followed her down, here more statues awaited them. The first was a naked fat Man, or at least Beraan judged so by his face, his manhood was nowhere to see between those folds.

On the other side stood a statue unlike anything Beraan could remember, the upper body of three women sprouted out of one set of legs. The first was young, the middle one looked old enough to be her mother. Where the first was pretty she had another kind of beauty, the last one was old and... well old. They wore no clothes and while the first was nice to look at and even the second not so bad, Beraan could have walked his lives path without ever seeing the last. Their faces shared similar features. The old one was pulling the middle one's head towards her own while the young women pushed the middle one towards the old.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Beraan asked.

"Mother and daughter?"

"What about the third?"

"Don't worry, this one is not meant for you... unless you are a daughter planning to be a mother? Are you?"

"Nope."

She led Beraan passed more statues than he could count, they varied in sizes and forms, most human with one deformity or another, some were blends of human and animal, some shapeless constructions of limbs and orifices.

"Do you know all their histories too?"

"Oh no, the Vices aren't real people like the Saints, they are a representation of people and what effect the lack of virtue had on them. Each one has a story if you want to know them just ask."

"Wait, I remember that one, my mother used to look at it often."

"As she should, it's called the mother after all."

Beraan walked over to that statue, it was of a woman in her thirties holding a boy up in the air to one side, the boy was maybe ten years old. Her arms were thick and

muscular, like those of the few female guards the Order housed. The boy's legs were thin and spindly, the marble was carved so detailed, Beraan could swear he saw the bones beneath the skin. The boy held his hand out to another statue, that of a young woman who in turn reached out for him, only the way her mother held him up, placed him away from her.

"Can you tell me their story," Beraan asked.

"Of course, but I can only tell you the story, the meaning you must discover yourself. Look here."

She pointed at three statues, the first a Man with the legs of an infant sitting on the ground, the statue looked as if he had been alive only a moment ago. He held his left hand out palm up, begging. His right raised above his head ready to throw something.

"Those two belong together, can you see how?" She asked.

"Both of their legs are messed up but in different ways."

"Yes, the artist emphasized the fragility in that one and the underdevelopment in the other. Look at their faces."

"They are the same, just older."

"Yes, this is what that boy grew up to be."

"Life dealt him a hard blow and now he has to beg," Beraan said.

"That is exactly what he would say."

"You say that as if there was something wrong about it."

"You need to look at them, think about them and then tell me what is wrong, then you avoid making the same mistakes. The same mistakes the people the vices are based on made. That's how this is supposed to work."

"Wait you just said they weren't based on people."

"Arg... that's what you focus on? Saints were real people who embodied one or more Virtues, they were elevated. Vices are representations of mistakes people make, again and again, stories repeating themselves over and over so someone merges all of them with one vice, you got that now?"

Speaking of repeating themselves...

"Yes... yes... relax. You should speak plainly from the start."

She threw her hands up in the air.

"We talked about the Saints earlier, have you figured out why they are shown the way they are, why it was decided to show them that way?"

"No."

"Then think! It is so simple."

Self-improvement is the key, she asked me about it while the statues came up, so muscles and a healthy body, they can be improved, while the other part can not.

"You can work on your body, you can change it, the other parts you are born with."

"Yes! We focus on aspects we can change while overcoming things we can't. Now, look at his feet again."

"They are crippled, he was born that way, it contradicts what you just said."

"No, the people who put this statue here had the same mindset as the ones creating the Saints, so?"

"So what?"

"So why would they focus on something out of a person's control while that runs opposite to what they believe in?"

"I don't know, because it's not outside his control."

"Yes!"

"So he should somehow overcome his crippled legs which are somehow his own fault?"

"What?! Ehm... well I guess you could take that meaning from this Vice, but you should think a bit more about the Fault part. I once listened to two priests arguing over him, they asked to which degree it was his fault."

"Whose fault was it then?"

"Whos indeed." she stepped back, allowing him to see the statue she called the mother.

"How is it her fault?" Beraan asked.

"You tell me."

"She is holding him up."

"Yes, go on."

"He looks a bit old to be carried."

"Keep going."

"I don't know what's up with the girl?"

"She comes in later, focus on the carrying aspect of the statue."

"What about it? His legs are fragile so she has to carry him, even if he is a bit old for that."

"Are you sure you go that in the right order?"

"What else would it be?"

"You look in shape, you said you have to train a lot in the Inquisition."

"Yes, every day."

"The result shows."

"Thanks."

"What would happen to your left arm if stopped practicing?"

"I guess it would go back to the way it was before, just a normal arm."

"And if you never used it again?"

"I don't know."

"You can see it in sick people, the muscles degenerate, the skin sinks in until you see the bone."

"So the boy's legs are fragile because he never uses them?"

"Yes."

"Because his mother carries him?"

"Because she always carries him," she emphasized the always.

"Why?"

"Why is she carrying him?"

"Don't say it, I have to figure it out myself."

She smiled and showed him unusually white teeth.

"Look at her feet."

Beraan looked at the pedestal the statue stood on, the marble was cut in ripples, like waves, only a few pieces that looked like dirt stood out. It reminded him of the grime that covered the old docks and the southern quarter's streets when it didn't rain for a while.

"She lives in the poor parts of the city and doesn't want him to step into that kind of... refuse."

"True on the most literal level, think deeper, what could as that dirt symbolize?"

"Shit?"

"Very eloquent master Inquisitor."

"Life."

Her jaw dropped and she closed it with a click.

"It stands for life," Beraan said, "for the pain and suffering that comes with it, she doesn't want her child to suffer life, she doesn't want him to suffer in general. You look surprised."

"Yeah, that was quick, I thought it would take you longer."

I know a bit about pain and suffering.

"You are the one dragging this out."

"You're mostly right, it is the hardship that life brings with it, not life itself. We got another vice for that."

"What do you make of that," she pointed at a ripple in the mud, Beraan hadn't noticed it before. It looked like something was moving under the dirt, a long and narrow body bending to one side and back again.

"Don't know, could be a snake."

"Exactly."

"It is a snake?" Beraan asked.

"No, it could be one."

"Ah..."

"It's not important if it really is one or not, it's important she thinks it could be one."

"Better to act as if it was one and hold the baby out of its reach rather than risking the snake biting the baby," Beraan said.

"Yes, do you know what the snake usually stands for?"

"No, can you tell me or should I start guessing."

"Na I'll give you that one, the snake is used to symbolize malevolence."

"Why?"

"Uhm.. yeah, I don't know that," she said.

Got you, not that perfect after all.

"Realy?"

"It never came up, I'll ask a priest during my next lesson. If I had to guess I would say it has something to do with poison."

"Go on," said Beraan in the same tone she had used.

"Which is the most evil animal, the wolve that hunts you with his pack, the bear that rips you apart or the little creature on the ground, hiding in the grass sneaking up on you and killing you with one single bit? The monster that goes for the weakest prey, the newborn."

"Makes sense. So the snake is malevolence and the mud is headship, the misery of life we all face. She wants to spare her son both of them, she keeps carrying him to protect him which, in turn, causes him to lose the ability to walk witch lets him grow up to become a man with baby legs?"

"Almost, rather than losing the ability, he never develops it in the first place. Now I should stir the conversation to the significance of walking but we'll do that later when you see Saaru. Of course, the ability to walk is also a stand-in for any kind of skill one would lack if not exposed to life."

"If it is that simple... way not say so and be done with it?"

She smiled at the joke and sight.

"Sometimes I wonder what the priests were thinking. Why should a statue have one meaning, if you can dump four or five on them at once."

"What about the girl?" Beraan asked.

"Another meaning added to the mother, would you like to unravel it?"

"Sure why not."

"You think she is cute?"

"The girl? Yeah."

The girls age was hard to place, her upper body was that of a young women, the artwork on her stomach showed well-defined muscles he had only seen on Lira, but her face, her face was too childlike to fit the body or at least the parts Beraan could see, he only saw her head in profile.

"Walk around her and take another look."

Beraan had to walk around a pillar to get to the three statues another side, at first he thought he got turned around and was looking at a different statue, this one was some kind of reptilian beast. The basic features were human as if she wore a mask, one eye with a vertical slit fixated on the child, in the corner of her slightly open mouth Beraan saw the poisoned fang of a snake. Beraan touched its cheek, the scales rose and fell beneath his finger.

"Hey, no touching."

"Sorry."

Beraan walked back the other way, keeping his eyes on the creature, watching how the girls features came in sight again and the snake thing vanished.

"That's a nice trick."

"The people who made them weren't call master artisans for no reason."

"Should I start guessing now what that all means."

"Jup."

"The snake mean malevolence, the fusion with her means evil in her, hidden by her beauty. No, not hidden, complimented, no human is purely good or evil."

"Oh, some priest would debate you on that, lets only say most people."

"Isn't the dual nature of mankind a the dualist's big theme?"

"Yeah it is, even they get some things right."

"You don't like the competition much?"

"Na, it's not that. I went to listen to a few of their sermon, all that talk about greater beings, an afterlife and such thing. It didn't seem real to me?"

"Afterlife?"

"Yeah, they think they get to keep living after they die."

"Ah... must be nice," Beraan said.

"Not really, they these got two places, one is a nice little garden where you live in bliss and the other is fireplace where you get tortured until the end of time."

"Who decides where they go?"

"Don't know who, I only know the way it is decided. By the good or evil you did in your life."

"Sounds fair."

"Ah, the real shocker is what happens when the last human dies, as they explained the number of human in the pretty place, this heaven and hell are counted and whichever has more the others get to go there."

"Redemption, I've heard of that. When the sum of all good outweighs the sum of all evil."

"Yeah, redemption sounds nice but think of the other option, the fall."

"Your right, getting thrown into that hell place because too many other people did wrong? Doesn't sound fair."

"Exactly, that's why I joined the Temple, not them. Imagine what happens when people really believe the action of others would dam them to eternal suffering."

"You would need to make sure they acted according to your beliefs of right and wrong, with force if necessary."

"Well done, you summed up two thousand years of religiously motivated slaughter... until the Highrule put an end to it."

"Who determines what is right or wrong in their religion?"

"Some great being told them."

"Ah..."

"Yeah, some guy heard voices speaking to him. If someone claimed that today we would send them to a sanatorium."

Or out on the streets if they can't afford it.

"I prefer the virtues, the temple makes no claim on higher power or beings, the priests studied the lives of countless people, saw what works and what doesn't and eternalized their findings. Now back to the girl, what do you make of the status placement."

"The reptilian side is pointed away from the viewer."

"Go on."

"It's pointed towards the mother, that's how she sees the girl."

"What does the girl want."

"She wants the child."

"Exactly."

"So the mother sees the malevolence in the girl who wants to take her child away while the world doesn't? No wait, it's like the snake, it doesn't matter if the girl is evil or not, it only matters that she perceives her that way."

The novice girl nodded.

"Which is it now?" Beraan asked, "the mother sees the truth or the mother imagines an evil that's not there?"

"I asked my teacher the same question, she said YES."

"Very helpful."

"Yeah, I thought so too. At this point, I'm supposed to ask you to repeat the insight you attained from those statues, but well skip that if you don't mind."

"Yes, please, how long have we been here? Half an hour and we only got three statues."

"It takes weeks to visit and contemplate every Vice and even longer for the Saints. to understand them takes a lifetime... or at least I'm told so."

"I don't have that much time."

"Yes, let's move on to Saaru."

"What is Saaru?"

"It's better to show you."

Chapter 16

The novice led him to a field of statues, the room was square and five windows in the ceiling allowed him to see the four greater and the Prime Virtue.

"We are right under the temple's centre," Beraan said.

"Yes, where else would they put the greatest cause of suffering."

The statues stood in two lines, narrowing to one line of statues towards the centre and an empty space where they met, behind the hole in the line stood a single statue.

"Is that guy Saaru?"

"Yes and no, in a way they all are. Saaru is not a person, it's an old Estralen word that has many different translations in the modern touch, so the temple kept the original."

"What are the translations?"

"Refusal to move forward, seeking pleasure, living in the day, refusal to participate in society, cowardice, isolation both from the self and the world, the one who refuses to realize his potential, that's my personal favorite, preferring the present over the future, sloth, want some more? The list is long."

"No thanks. I have to discover the mean myself again?"

"Yes."

"Ah... one could hope."

"I can point you in the right direction though."

"Point ahead then."

"Look at the centre line."

"They get older, it starts with a baby over there crawling forward, then a few children, teenagers," the last one before the hole looked far too much like Midas, "judging by the spacing it is supposed to look like that one just stepped out of the line."

"Yes."

The next one was slightly older, then a few middle-aged men and in the end a hunchback walking with a cane.

"Their faces look the same," Beraan said, "it's the same guy frozen in different points during his lifetime."

"Not frozen, rather represented, it doesn't matter if two statues show him as five or six years old."

"The theme is growth and development."

"Yes, you could call it that, the priest prevents progression."

"So it shows a person ageing, that guys didn't want to get old and stepped out?"

"Well yeah but it's not the ageing part, although you could make an argument for that as well, what do you make of the other statues?"

"They are all grown men, that one looks like an Inquisitor, that one could be a priest, a smith judging by the hammer, that could be a farmer, why did they turn their back on the growing man, boy whatever?"

"Oh that's not the intended meaning, what do you think the direction they look at means?"

"Old age... the future, they look towards the future, except the one who stepped out of line, he looks at his feet."

"Right, remember the feet, we'll come back to them, what do you make of the different men?"

"The walk beside him on his path towards the future, they are his friend, his family, they look like him too."

"That is true, on one level of interpretation they represent the community but there is so much more to them, look at the positioning remember there was a lot of thought put into it."

"There are more of them further down the line, first one walked beside him, then two, then three and fan out the older he gets, so the more friends you have the more you will get."

"I want you to distance yourself from the community level, look at their faces."

"Its the same face, that one has a scar, that one is fatter and the other ages sooner but they are all the same, they are all him."

"Yes!"

"They are all him, they are all people he could be, could become. Am I right?"

"Yes you are, they are the representation of the potential that young man holds."

"The people behind him, if this side embodies his future, then they are his past. Half of them are women, they are all the people who came before him, his parents, his grandparents and they fan out into the past."

"Yes, now look at their feet."

"Saarus feet are the only ones parallel, he is standing still, the rest are walking."

"Good what about their heads?"

"They all look forward, to the future, except him."

"What are the greater virtues?"

"Foresight, Courage, Restraint and... Gratitude."

"Now connect them to this display."

"Foresight is easy, they look towards the future."

"You say that so lightly," she said, "do you really understand what that means?"

"Looking into the future, it can't mean knowing what's going to happen, who could tell what other people are going to decide. Unless it's about bigger things, knowing the sun will rise next week, it's knowing summer will come again, its knowing winter is coming and preparing for it."

"Yes, you are getting there."

"It's preparation, Foresight is embodied by the farmer who saves seeds to plant them next season, It's every man saving money for bad times, its every one earning money in the first place."

"Well I'm not getting paid at all, the Inquisition provides me..."

"No, imagine you were a smith or a backer. Why work now and not later."

"Good question, I don't know, maybe if I put in the work now, I don't have to tomorrow, or if I work today and tomorrow, the day after I can save up even more."

"In this context what does money stand for?"

"Everything, I can buy with it, food, clothing, quality of life in general."

"Why work now instead of later, you could be lying on your lazy ass right now. So working today..." she left the sentence hanging for him to finish.

"Working today mean sacrificing momentary pleasure, present pleasure for future gain."

"What would happen if you spent all your money the day you earned it? Getting drunk for example or wasting it on worse."

"Every day would be the same," Beraan said, "there would be no improvement. That's what he is doing, isn't it? Looking down, his sight is on the present."

"Exactly," she beamed like a proud parent, "Foresight orients you towards the future, away from the past or present."

"I think I understand."

"Good, now move on to Courage."

"Yeah that should be easy, you need Courage to confront what you're afraid of."

"True, think of the relationship between Courage or the lack thereof and Foresight."

"Uff...you see the bad things coming too, you know you're going to have to work again tomorrow, eat again and the next winter is only so far away."

"All the burdens you overcame today will be there tomorrow and the day after and the day after that until your last day and you can see them all waiting for you. Waiting to crush you. That is the flip side of knowing the future exists. How can you bare moving forward into all that?"

"With courage," said Beraan, more to himself.

"With courage," the novice girl repeated.

"What's next gratitude?" Beraan asked.

"No, not so fast. Restraint, it's also next to foresight."

"I'm sorry, I don't have the faintest idea."

"It's alright, Restraint is not as obvious as the others, it is linked to Foresight and opposite to Courage, where courage concerns the outside, Restraint focuses on the inside. Other names for it are self-control or Ironwill."

"On the inside? Ironwill and self-control? It's about looking to the future instead of the present. Your will is what prevents you from wasting all your money on alcohol and prostitutes."

"Temporary pleasures of the flesh is what we call that in the Temple."

"I don't see the difference between Courage and Restraint."

"Courage helps you face the trails the world throws at you, Restraint helps you overcome your inner flaws, impulses or urges which would sabotage your life. rage, anger, jealousy, greed, lust. Restraint is that Virtue that prevents you from turning your sight from the future to the present."

"Wow, you did a lot of explaining there, are you going to get in trouble for that?"

"Not if you don't tell anyone."

"That leaves Gratitude," Beraan said.

"Yes, the big one."

"Since it is opposite to foresight in the way the statues are positioned, I guess it focuses on the past."

She nodded.

"The past is represented by all those people behind the line, they narrow towards the baby the same way the people fan out towards the future, they are all the people who came before him, right? Parents, grandparent and so on".

"Yes."

"So one should be grateful to be born?"

"Sure, a live affirming mindset doesn't hurt. But they don't only represent the people in your bloodline, they represent the guy next door, the worker who build the roads, the one who invented the roads in the first place. They represent everyone who ever lived. They represent all that was handed down to us."

"One should be grateful for the world one inherits?" Beraan asked.

That's asking much, this world sucks.

"It helps to think about what behaviour embodying a Virtue is supposed to avoid."

"Well the opposite of gratitude would be ingratitude, that doesn't get me any further."
"What would you be ungrateful for?"

The shit on the street in the old dock quarter, the way children starve on the street while nobles like my parents eat themselves fat... Well not me I got away from that life.

What would I be ungrateful for? The way live has teated me, the cursed who killed Midas, the cursed who killed my family, my little sister. The smell of smoke crept up his nose, somewhere in the distance a high pitched scream unguLATED right at that point where one was not quite sure if one really heard it or not.

"And?" Prompted the novice.

"Everything," whispered Beraan, "there is so much wrong in the world. Take your pick."

"How does that make you feel? What emotion rises in you when you examine the flaws and failing the world presents to you?"

"I hate it," he whispered to himself, "I'd like to break it down and build it anew."

Where did that come from?

"Why?"

"Because it is wrong."

"Can you find it in your heart to forgive the world for burdening you with needless suffering? For not being the way you would prefer it to be?"

"No," said Beraan to himself "No, that would mean accepting things the way they are. That would mean giving up on changing them."

"Ehm... actually it doesn't," she said. "You are supposed to let go of your resentment first, then you can begin to make the world a better place."

"Resentment? Is that what gratitude is supposed to counteract?"

"Yes, it is."

"What if I have a good reason to resent the world, to resent live itself for all the shit it has put me through?" His words came out louder then he intended to.

"No one says your reasons are invalid, only that you should think about the way you confront those reasons, anger, hate, and resentment are not the answer."

"Then what is?"

"You can start by no longer blaming the world for your situation."

"What? Who said I was doing that?"

"You did, remember the sheltered child."

"The kid the mother was carrying?" Beraan asked.

"The person he became after she was gone."

"What does he have to do with anything?"

"The first idea you had about him, was that life dealt him a hard blow."

"Yes, I said that."

"You put the blame for his situation on the world."

"You put it on his mother and himself, which I'm not sure I agree with. She carries him so he doesn't touch the mud. The fact that life brings suffering and misery is not her fault, its the world's fault."

"The fact that the world is full of pain is true, that doesn't make her reaction to it right, or his for that matter."

"He isn't doing anything!"

"Yes! Exactly... At what point is it time for him to say I want to walk on my own? At 5? At 7? At 13? At 30? At what age should he take responsibility for himself?"

"Responsibility? What does that have to do with anything?"

"You tell me."

"You know, this game of yours is getting annoying."

"What can you tell me about responsibility?" The novice asked.

"I don't know, it sure was not his responsibility to fix the mistakes his mother made, if what you saying is true and her carrying him too much cause his deficiency, then it was clearly her fault and her responsibility to fix them."

"He doesn't get to blame his mother for his condition, he chose to stay that way, using the pity he generated with his malformity to his advantage, with one hand he bags, with the other he flings his own faeces at those who turn their backs on him."

"Good, he uses the little good his bad situation grants him, also those who turn their backs on his suffering deserves punishment."

"Everyone turns their backs on him, even those who give him money walk on eventually."

"Fine, not everyone deserves it, still you are wrong about it being his fault, he is not responsible for his situation. Everyone else is, those people who came before him, those who threw him into a broken world that is covered in mud and crawls with snakes, they owe him a better life."

"No one owes him anything, it is his task to rise above the circumstances he was put in and reshape himself into a better human being."

Alright, I see it now, she is mad.

"You can't be serious," Beraan said.

"Can't I be?"

"You blame the victim for his suffering."

"I blame the victim for choosing to remain a victim."

"Where was his choice? He didn't choose to be born to a bad mother, she didn't choose the world he would live in, he didn't choose to be born in the first place."

"He chose not to learn how to walk on his own, he was comfortable in his mother's embrace and after she was gone, he was comfortable wallowing in the pity people poured on him for what cruel jest life had played him. He chose never to get away from his mother, he chose never to get out from under her shadow, he chose to never even try."

Of course, he couldn't get away from her, not with those legs.

She is wrong and I can't make her see it, there is no point in trying.

"All I can do is repeat myself again and that won't get us anywhere," Beraan said.

"We have been talking in circles."

"Gratitude, instead of resenting our forbearers for the world they left us with, we are supposed to be grateful for it."

"Yes," she said her voice calm again, "taking responsibility for your own life, finding the reason for your failings in your self rather than in other is the way of Gratitude, that and generational cohesion but that is too much for today."

You think I'll come again?

"I think I understand Saaru now," Beraan said.

"I doubt it. Gratitude connects you to the past, together with Restraint it focuses inside, encourages you to take responsibility for your life. Become a man that walks a rode he chooses, rather than a leaf blown in the wind. Restraint allows you to overcome the petty demands of your flesh. Foresight shows you the rode you can work on and Courage lets you take the first step on that road, and the next step after that."

"Why is Saaru the worst vice?" Beraan asked.

"I visited the Temple in Kurum Ebanil once, they have the same display of Saaru with one difference, "she pointed at the fan of potential people the young man could become, "They have a gap there, leave a corridor empty from the spot Saaru stepped out of his progression towards the future."

"Because after he stepped out, he couldn't become them anymore?"

"Yes, when you refuse to walk toward the future, when you refuse to become who and what you could be, you leave a hole in the world the size of your potential."

"How can that be your worst sin?"

"Because all sins, failings and immoral actions, however you want to call them, can be traced back to Saaru."

"Really, how about murdering children, explain how a man cursed with flames burning a family alive is related to Saaru."

"That depends on why that cursed did what he did, did he do it out of a need to inflict suffering, did he do it to pay back the world for wrongs that happened to him, did he give in to his resentment? Then it is a lack of Gratitude. Did his anger take him into a murderous rage? Did he fail to master his emotions, his urges, then it is a lack of Restraint."

"He laughed, his victims burned before his eyes and he laughed, he enjoyed their pain, he revelled in it."

"I am so sorry tragedy struck you. What will you do? Will you give in to your resentment, keep blaming the world for your circumstances or will you improve yourself. Will you increase the suffering in the world or reduce it?"

"Reduce it," whispered Beraan, "I will make the world a better place."

"That is good to hear. The way to do it is to improve yourself, after all. there is only one human being you have the right to change, yourself. I look forward to your next visit."

She is wrong about that, the cursed are the problem, not me.

"No, I doubt I'll come back, some of what you showed and told me sounds true, or at least useful, other parts are just nonsense."

"It's the part about gratitude, there I lost you."

"Yes, because its false, are you going to tell me it is my fault my family died in a fire, is it my fault they got murdered by a cursed madman?"

"I'm sorry you didn't understand, I'm sorry my guidance was inadequate."

"Keep your pity to yourself. I'll find my own way out."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, she wore the same look of disappointment his mother used to wield like a knife, he saw even a little sadness in her eyes. Beraan left her there, another statue among too many.

Beraan took a deep breath of fresh air under the blue sky, it felt good to walk under the sky again, that temple felt too much like the belly of a beast, made of stone and marble.

"The cursed are the problem, a cursed took my family, a cursed killed Midas, the cursed cause pain and suffering wherever they appear, they need to be stopped, the Order is not doing enough," Beraan told the sky or whatever higher power might listen or not, "I know what I have to do."

Beraan whispered, "I'm going to be that best member of the Order, I'm going to be the best me I can be. I'm going to rise in rank until I am the grandmaster and make sure the cursed are no longer just contained but eradicated like the pests they are. I'm going to make this world a better place and I will kill every cursed I can find along the way. I'm going to kill them all."

Chapter 17

"You need armor, whatever for?"

"Practice quartermaster," answered Beraan, "back in the Forge we had a range of wood and strawmen dummies to practice on. I wondered why the Order house Prime doesn't provide any of those."

"That's basic level training, everyone here is above that. I think we got some in storage."

"Good if you could get two or three out for me, I would appreciate it."

"Of course master Inquisitor."

The quartermaster waved his hand and two of the three blue boys behind him ran off, disappearing through a door on the other side of the practice hall.

"And the armor, what is it for if I may ask."

"I thought of an amulet application and want to explore it."

"Ah, do you require plated armor, chainmail, boiled leather or a gambeson?"

"That doesn't really matter, something an attacker might wear. The outfit our guard wear would be fine if you had an old set of that lying around. If not, any old armor will do, I'm probably going to damage it so there is no need to waste good material."

"I'll see what I can find for you, master Inquisitor," the quartermaster bowed slightly and hurried into a side room. Only a moment later the two boys emerged carrying the first training dummy.

The dummy was an old piece of wood, a cylindrical shape as tall as a man, cut to resemble shoulders, head and legs. A Dozen cutmarks marked its surface where unexperienced trainees failed to stop their blades.

"Brake one of my blades and you wield wood for the rest of your lives," the weapons master in the Forge had shouted at Beraan and the other recruits. "You are to learn the motion, you are not to smack your steel against the target, you aren't dusting a carpet."

The quartermaster brought two chain vests and a gambeson that had long passed its glory days. The chain mail was no better, Beraan saw at least ten broken rings on first glance.

"That's perfect, please put them on the dummies."

The quartermaster scratched his head but did as he was told, he was a Blue after all and who knew what strange requests the grey-robles made of him over the years.

Now for the fun part. Beraan touched the chainmail, reached for his amulet and let its power flow through him into the armor. It felt like warm water flowing under his skin, a sensation in his thoughts that he could only describe as a kind of tug reminded him that the amulet wanted something from him. *No, it's not the amulet, it's the energy in the chainmail that wants to be told where to move. It is motion waiting to happen, waiting to be told where to move.* Beraan told it.

The dummy fell over backward, it hit the stone floor with a clang that reverberated through the practice hall. It drew the baffled looks of the quartermaster and his underlings. The dummy itself bobbed sideways on the floor while that mail ripped off and skidded on the floor with a screech that made the hairs on his neck stand up. It ended when the mail reached the wall and pressed itself against it.

Ha, that went well. Maybe I should feed it more power. That second chain vest flew away from Beraan's hand like an arrow. It carried the dummy with it and smashed against the wall, the chain mail busted apart flinging bits and pieces everywhere. The dummy cracked open down the middle. The impact sounded like thunder, the walls shook and waves of dust rained down from the stone sealing.

Behind Beraan someone clapped slowly.

"Are you trying to bring the Oderhouse down or just ripping a new door out off that wall?" Asked a female voice.

I know that voice.

Beraan turned around and saw who he suspected.

She was as gorges as always, her long black hair escaping her grey hood. Beraan still didn't understand how she could make a bland robe look so attractive. Lira the quiet little girl who didn't say a word for the first year in the Forge and could kill with a look, was here.

"Lira? What are you doing here?" Beraan asked.

"Watching you break stuff, obviously."

"I thought you were assigned to the Order house in Kurum Umanil."

"I am and you to Ebanil, yet I find you in the capital."

"Yeah long story, the team here got either killed or wounded so my master and I were sent here to find the killer."

Me, my master and Midas.

"Meh, I was told to get here as fast as possible, my Blues were really inconsiderate to those horses... apparently some idiot claimed something about magic leaving a footprint and I was told to check it out. You got a sense amulet too didn't you?"

"I was that idiot you are talking about."

"Ha! I should have guessed that."

"So, you saw the black smoke too?" Beraan asked.

"Smoke? No. I heard something, drummers banging in my ears the closer I came, it wasn't so bad in that alley near the wall but near the riverside, I thought it was going to deafen me."

"You can hear magic?"

"Yes, you don't?"

"No, I see colors when people use magic, blue for lightning and purple for fire."

"Interesting, fire sounds like flutes to me, I haven't met someone with lightning yet."

"My master told me the amulet can't show me magic, the way a blind man can't see so it picks a sense and feeds us the information that way."

"Three hundred years and we know so little about the amulets," she looped her hair around her finger, playing with it the way she always did when she got lost in her own thoughts.

"I read half the library in Umanil and still couldn't figure out where they came from, it is as if they just appeared."

"You could check the library here."

"Na, I'm leaving first thing tomorrow, my task here is done and they need someone to accompany a body back to his family near Umanil and since I'm heading back there anyway..."

Midas, you're taking him home, good.

"His name was Midas and he was a good Man."

"You knew him?"

"Yes, he was my second."

"Oh... I talked to the priest about the amulets, I wanted to find out what they know."

Lira, you are so cute when your uncomfortable, I think I love that the most about you, too bad that you would run away screaming if I told you. No, you wouldn't scream, you would walk out silent and never talk to me again.

"Did they know anything?" Beraan asked.

"Yes, in fact, they knew too much, each one told me a different story. "

"Tell me."

"The novice in the Temple of the Virtues told me they were, what was the word, physical manifestation of a Saint's virtue, the heart of a Saint turned to gold. The Primus of the church of all-unity told me that they are worthless trinkets and the power we use came from us and not them, but later he told me that we are part of one all-encompassing being and the power came from it. After that, he told me there was no distinction between you, me, him, the world, a rock or a tree. Or an amulet for that matter so I guess the powers do come from the amulet after all. None of it made any sense what so ever."

Beraan laughed and she even smiled a little, which meant a lot for her.

"What did the dualists say?"

"They were the least useless, they even explained where the cursed come from, well if you believe it.

"Really?"

"The father of the church of two pillars told me there were two places people went do after they died."

"Heave and hell, yeah I know about that, one is nice the other... is not."

"Hash Ber, no more interrupting or I'll make you regret it later. They believe the cursed are the result of something leaving that hell place and coming here. Somehow descending into people, changing them, forcing them to commit horrible acts so their soul ends up in hell too. The idea is to tip some kind of cosmic scale in their favor."

She looked at him.

"What? Am I allowed to speak again? Go on," Beraan said laughing.

"They think the amulets are sent from heaven to counteract the cursed, they went on and on about some cosmic balance and the redemption of all souls."

"Sounds pretty useless to me."

"Well, I said they were the least useless, that doesn't make them useful."

"True, I suppose."

"You don't really care, do you?" Lira asked.

"Where they come from? No, I don't, it doesn't matter, it only matters what we can use them for."

"Speaking of use, what were you doing there anyway?"

"Nothing, just experimenting with a new way to use my amulet."

"By destroying training material?"

"Yeah, I could not use the Blues for that could I?"

"No, I suppose not, your amulet creates motion right."

"Something like that yes, Did you see those broken dummies, imagine what I can do to people."

"Your amulet works on living flesh?"

"No, but it works on their clothes."

"Show me."

Beraan fed energy into the last dummy, it was the only one with a stick through its shoulders for arms, the boys had to fuss around a lot before they managed to fit the gambeson. This time Beraan sent it up. The dummy hit the sealing, this times it didn't shake the building, the magic-infused gambeson pressed that dummy against it for a few breaths, then the magic ran out and it fell back to the floor.

"Are you going to use that trick on me the next time we spar?"

"Hm... might be fun but I don't want to hurt you."

She shrugged, "your little trick has one weakness, all I need to do is fight you naked."

"When you do that, I think we can find something more interesting to do than fight."

"Not so stupid after all."

They left the quartermaster and his boys to clean up Beraan's mess.

Beraan closed the door to his meager room behind them.

"Your desk is twice as big as mine, how pretentious of you."

Lira stepped onto Beraan sleeping mat, red-orange energy spread out from her amulet and permeated her robes, shoes and the cod itself. Her grey robes did not fall of her as much as fall through her. She stepped out of the pile of clothes with a wicked smile.

"Nice trick, how long have you been waiting to show it..."

"Shhhh... No more talking."

Chapter 18

"Good morning," whispered Beraan.

"Uhhmm... what time is it," groaned Lira burrowing her face in the tangled mess of robes and blankets they had slept in.

"First hour of Eba."

"Ah, shit... Already? I'm supposed to meet the Blues in half an hour."

"And? It's not like they would leave without you."

Lira got up wrapping the robes around her, Beraan leaned back watching her.

I wonder how long it's going take her to figure out those are mine.

"Why do you always do that?" Barran asked.

"Do what?"

"Cover yourself after we're done."

"I don't like being naked in front of people."

"Even me?"

"Even you."

"It didn't bother you last night, or any night for that matter."

"That's different."

"How?"

She shrugged, "I stop caring about it."

Lira held the robes up to her face and sniffed, "those are your robes, give me mine."

Beraan pulled the robes up to his chin, "sorry I can't. I'm naked underneath."

"Fine," Lira dropped the clothing pile in front of him, holding her arms out to each side, "Happy now?"

Beraan stood up, freeing his foot from the tangle of cloth that turned out to be her under shift. Beraan cupped her left cheek and lean in for a kiss, she pulled her head back and peeled his hand away.

"Don't," she whispered.

"Why not?"

"Remember horse face?"

"The tall blond who laughter like a donkey, what about her?"

"She is dead."

"Oh... that relates to why you don't want me to kiss you how exactly?"

"Serving the Inquisition is a dangers job, remember what the instructor said, only half of our Forge class will live to make Second and only half of them will live long enough to become a master. One of us could die at any time."

Beraan let her hand go and gave her the under shift. He watched her put it on, watcher put her on robes on and after that the grey outer robes.

"You are wrong," said Beraan when she looked at him.

"About what?"

"We could die at any times, true, but that's no reason to shut me out, we should live while we can, enjoy each others company."

"Maybe, I don't know. Next time I am here our you in Oranil, we can enjoy some more."

She walked to the door and opened it, closed it again and walked back to him, She slid her hand behind his neck and pulled him close into a long kiss. The best one she had ever given him. She pressed her cheek against his and whispered in his ear, "don't die."

I love you too.

"You neither."

After a small kiss, she left closing the door shut behind her. Beraan was left standing in his room, staring at the door. The room felt smaller all of a sudden, colder too.

Beraan put on his second set of robes, he had found them cleaned and folded on the desk. *Thanks, Blues. So what now? Morning practice or should I find master Kelaan and ask him when we get out of here. The sooner the better.*

An ice-cold needle pierced Beraan's pupil and sank into the back of his eyeball. Beraan screamed. *What the fuck.* He ripped the amulet of his hand. *That last time you did that... was near the promenade...*

"No!" Shouted Beraan and put it back on, no pain, nothing.

Beraan tore the door open and ran out, down the hallway down the stairs. The Blues who didn't make way fast enough, he ran over leaving a confused group behind. The entry hall was so wide, no one hindered his mad dash. Beraan stooped and asked the first Blue where master Kelaan was. She didn't know, the next blue just pointed at the entrance. Beraan ran across the hall, through the main door and out onto the stairs. Out there, down on the wise man's square stood a carriage, its two blue drivers waiting on the three grey robes figures standing and talking in front of it.

A guard to Beraan's left looked at him with a question expression, Beraan had no time for him, he ran down the stairs, taking two and later three at a time, frightened to fall yet not caring enough to slow. The Inquisitors turned to him, Lira, master Kelaan and the redheaded bitch.

What are they doing here?

"Beraan?" asked master Kelaan, Beraan ignored him.

"Lira, did your amulet pick something up just now?"

"No, why?"

"A headache, my amulet gives me those when the cursed used his magic."

"Hm... I can still hear faint drums," he lifted her hand and pointed northeast, "from there."

"That's the promenades direction," The bitch said.

I have been hearing the drums since you took there," said Lira, "but no new sounds, sorry."

"Are you sure you didn't imagine it, Beraan," asked the bitch.

Beraan didn't honor her with an answer.

"You said you killed him Beraan," said master Kelaan.

"I did Master."

"Yet nobody has been found," said the bitch.

"No man could have survived that."

"We still don't know where this cursed and his unique ability came from, maybe there is more than one," said master Kelaan.

"We aren't leaving today, are we?" asked Beraan.

"I'm not convinced there is another cursed," said the bitch, "he could just have imagined it."

Can't you just shut up? You aren't helping. In fact, we would be better off without you.

"If there really was another cursed using magic strong enough for Beraan's amulet to notice, Lira here would have noticed it too."

Shit, she has a point there.

A horn sounded in the distance, a few short and long blows in rapid succession.

"What's that?" asked Lira.

"Shhh... city guard signals," whispered the bitch.

After they were done master Kelaan open his eyes again, "cursed attack, norther craftsmen quarter, get in the carriage."

"Wait, shouldn't we wait for master Glinn to assign us?" Asked the bitch.

"Na, she is going to send us there anyway no need to waste time."

"But that's not the proper procedure."

"Get in," interrupted master Kelaan, "Driver you know the way?"

"Yes, master Inquisitor but we are bound for Umanil."

"Yes, yes, just drop us off along the way."

"But its the opposite direction."

Beraan and Lira climbed into the carriage, the bitch followed.

"Take the downriver bridge and it's not so far."

Beraan couldn't hear the drivers mumbled response. Master Kelaan closed the door and set down on the opposite bench, the carriage moved with the familiar rumble of wheels on cobblestone, punctuated by the rhythmic sound of horseshoes striking the stone.

No one spoke during the journey, a single bead of sweat ran down the master's forehead. The bitch exhaled long a few times in a way Beraan recognized as a calming technick the instructors in the Forge had tried to teach them. Lira, on the other hand, was calm as a kitten, she looked almost bored, her focus was on her window and Beraan saw here eye flick left to right as she watched the world pass by. It was good to be this close to Lira, if only they could be alone.

When they crossed from the first quarter to the craftsmen quarter, Beraan felt increasing pressure on his right eye as if someone poked two fingers into his eye socket and a thumb below, squeezing the eyeball between them.

"I hear something," said Lira, "there is definitely someone using magic."

"I agree," said Beraan.

"Drums?" asked the bitch, only addressing Lira.

"No, I can hear the drums behind us, they got louder at first but they are fading now. No this sounds like a violin playing."

"What kind of cursed is that?" asked master Kelaan.

"I don't know master, I'm sorry. I have only encountered of few cursed and amulets. But I can tell you it is not fire nor any sensory ability. Oh, and it's not like Beraan's motion amulet either."

What does my amulet sound like to you? Why can't I tell what kind it is from here? I have to see the colors up close. Ah well, at least it is not fire.

"Your second amulet is intangibility?"

"Yes, Master."

"Alright, I want you to stay in the carriage, keep on going to Umanil as planned."

"Understood master."

The fingers squeezed Beraan's eyeball hard, "yau!!"

"What is it?" asked master Kelaan.

Lira answered for him, "the music got loud, the cursed used a large amount of power."

The carriage stopped, master Kelaan sprang up and rushed outside, the bitch followed him like a well-trained hunting dog. Beraan got up slowly, his head still fuzzy. At least the guy with the hammer and his friend didn't pay him a visit again. He leaned in for a goodbye kiss, Lira stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"Go!" she whispered, "Ber, don't die."

"I'll be careful, don't worry."

She kissed him, then pushed him away with a smile, "go!"

Beraan nearly slipped on a patch of ice but caught himself in time. Fortunately, master Kelaan and the bitch didn't notice, they were walking towards the city guards standing in attached in front of a carpenters shop. One of the guardsmen did see him and fought to keep his face straight. If you bought I'll send you diving into the sky.

"Report," barked maser Kelaan when he reached them.

One Guardsmen stepped forwards, he was the oldest of the man and wore a few extra patches above his left breast. Beraan had never bothered to learn their ranks, what for? They all had to obey him when cursed where involved.

"Master Inquisitor, the shop owner's son was seen using magic."

"What kind of magic?"

The witness described him melting wood, he said and I quote he turned the wood soft and shaped it as if it was clay."

"Good. Is he still inside?"

"No one has left or entered as far as we can tell master Inquisitor, except the man who called us of course. Master Inquisitor, we heard a loud disturbance a few minutes ago. We did not enter. It has been quiet since."

"Alright, keep your men outside, let no one come close."

"Understood."

The bitch shot Beraan a disapproving look as he took his position, two steps behind and one to the right of master Kelaan. *She has taken Midas' position, how the fuck dare she do that?. True she is a second but not his, that's Midas' place.*

"Estra, Beraan stay behind me and don't get close to the cursed."

"He has Master Miras power, doesn't he," asked the bitch.

"Yes."

"Then he can't hurt us, her amulet only works on inanimate objects."

"Never presume to know what a cursed can do," hissed master Kelaan at her.

Yeah, you put that bitch down master.

"It will get you and those who depend on you killed. Do you understand that?" He stepped closer, his voice low enough so the guards wouldn't overhear but Beraan was sure if they had been alone he would have shouted. There was not only anger in his voice but pain as well. *Who did you lose master? Ah well, doesn't matter now, does it?*

"I understand master."

"You are not completely wrong, Mira is bound by the first limit and yet you yourself are not. All limits can be broken, either with skill or raw power. Stay behind me and be careful."

Master Kelaan handed them a small ball of solid gold, Beraan held it between his thumb and index finger, countless lines and markings had been edged into its surface.

"Each of you take one of these and keep them in your poked, just in case."

I have seen those before, back in the forest Midas gave it to master Kelaan, or had he given it back to him?

Master Kelaan pulled out a third sphere and threw it away, it disappeared in the snow bank beside the road.

"Everyone ready?" Asked master Kelaan.

Beraan and the bitch nodded.

"Follow me."

Chapter 19

The carpenter's shop smelled of sawdust and oil with a faint note of vomit. Mast Kelaan walked in front of him, the bitch to Beraan's side. She held two knives ready, Beraan a stone, only master Kelaan refused to arm himself. Beraan bent sideways to peek around his master, the room had been plunged in utter chaos. A workbench had split in half, countless tools lay strewn around on the floor and every single shelf holding the carpenter's creation had been smashed. A strange mass of wood and dirt covered the floor. At least Beraan assumed it was wood, it looked like wood at first glance but on closer inspection, he saw it was bent and twisted. He picked a pick up and with his free hand and rubbed it between his finger, it was smooth as glass.

Master Kelaan surveyed the room then his eyes locked on the sealing. Beraan followed them to the hole. Beyond it, Beraan saw another workbench in the room above them. The odd part were the holes edges, they should have been sharp breaks with splinter standing out. That's not the way wood was supposed to break, this wood apparently disagreed. *The cursed destroyed the floor and all that stuff landed down here.*

Master Kelaan knelt over a body, the woman lay right below the hole's centre. He touched her face, laying two fingers over her lips, he closes his eyes and waited, after a few breaths he shook his head. *So the cursed has killed, we don't have to be considered.* Beraan got a closer look at her face, one side was fine the other... Beraan blinked twice to make sure he was actually seeing what he thought he was. Her skin looked molten as if she was a wax doll that had come too close to a candle. Her face looked eerie, the skin on her cheek hung too far down, her cheekbone bend up and outward. Her fingers had even left an imprint as if she had touched it in disbelief and found it pliable.

"He can affect flesh," mumbled the bitch.
Yeah, we should have let you go in first, imagineing this could have been you, too bad we didn't.

"Never asume," wisperd master Master Kelaan.
Master Kelaan stood up, eyeing the room weary, his eyes fixed on the door in the shops back. Beraan knelt down where he had been and brushed some dirt away, dust and small droplets of wood that had once made up the first stories floor. His initiative earned him the bitch's scowl and a questioning look from his master. The shop's floor was made of cobblestone, like the rodes outside. *It may even have been one long ago, father once ranted about people blocking off side streets to build more houses.*

In the nooks between the stones pooled dark blood. Beraan dug his finger deep into her light brown hair to feel the back of her head, his hand came back stick and red. "She fell throught the hole, the impacted killed her... not... that," Beraan gestured towards her melted face.

Master Kelaan examined the hole again.

"He injured her face first, then shocked by what he did to her, he lost any semblance of control over his abilities and softened the floor."

Or he turned her face into that and dropped the floor out from underneath her feet, only speculation master. Beraan, of course, didn't say it out loud, he only nodded. Halfway between the woman's body and the back door, they found the source of the vomit smell, a bile mass of indiscriminate color pooled around junks of... well whatever.

Master Kelaan opened the door slowly, behind it a corridor led to three other rooms. On the far side, sunken down on the floor, a young man leaned against a closed door. Beraan could hear him sob, guessing the boy was in his early teens, fifteen at the most. He did not look up, he kept his head pressed against his knees and covered it with his hand as if he wanted to keep the world out. It doesn't work like that. His right leg was dark with blood and to the side, a pial splinter peeked out of his trousers. *That must hurt, how did he even drag himself back here?* Be wear of injured prey, when they can't run the will fight, if they know they will die, they will take you with them.

"Hello, what's your name?" Master Kelaan asked in the same mild tone he had spoken to the cursed in the Forest. The boy didn't look up.

"I'm Kelaan, what happened here?"

The boy mumbled something.

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear you, could you say that again?"

The boy finally looked up, his eyes red and his cheeks wet with tears.

"I said I killed her," shouted the boy.

"It's alright, everything will be fine."

Ha, not for you, you will spend the rest of your life locked up in the refuge where you can't hurt a human soul, unless you give me a reason to kill you, please give me a reason.

"Go away, I'm dangerous."

Master Kelaan raised both hands, "I won't hurt you, don't be afraid."

He took a step towards him.

A flash of yellow-brown light emanated from the boy, the pressure behind Beraan's eyes grew stronger.

"Stay away."

"He is using his magic master," shouted Beraan, "I can see it."

A bubble of glowing air expanded out in front of him, while Beraan's magic sight saw it as such, his real sight showed him waves in the floor and walls. Where the light touched the wood and stone its surface rippled as if they were made of water. The solid materials acted as if they had decided they would rather be liquids.

"No one is going to hurt you."

I will if he brings down the house on us.

Master Kelaan lean his back against the wall just outside the magic glow and sank down to the boy's eye level.

"Do you understand what is happening to you."

"I'm cursed."

"That's right, do you understand what that means?"

"You are Inquisition, you kill the cursed."

"Only if we have no other choice. There is a place for people like you. Where You can't hurt anyone. Would you like me to take you there?"

"Do I... do I have a choice?"

Yeah, you can choose to die right here and now as you deserve, you and your kind. Cursed for five minutes and already someone is dead, no the only mercy you deserve is a quick death.

Master Kelaan looked at him and Beraan saw the sympathy he had for the poor boy written on his face, sympathy the cursed didn't deserve.

"No. You don't have a choice."

The cursed swallows visibly, "how do I make it stop."

"Breath. In the nose, out the mouth. Can you feel the power inside you?"

"Yes."

"How does it feel to you?"

"It wants out, it wants to change."

"Change what?"

"I don't know, anything, everything."

"Look at the door to your left, focus on it, let the power change the door but only the door."

Beraan saw the glowing air move towards it like a cloud of pipesmoke. No, the air didn't move, the energy moved from one bit of air to the air adjacent. That makes no sense air is nothing, isn't it?

The yellow-brown glow grew so strong, Beraan couldn't see the door anymore. His magic sight vanished and with his normal sight he saw the wood dripping, small parts formed drops and fell off the door only to hit the floor and retake solid from leaving the wildest pattern Beraan had ever seen. When half the door had turned to liquid that way, the rest crumpled into dust. Beraan stared at the dust pile. *He could do that to a human being. The only good thing about the cursed is that most powers can't affect living flesh or at least the living flesh of other people, this boy, this cursed, he is too dangerous to be kept alive.*

"Did I do that right?" asked the cursed.

"Yes, yes you did well, Beraan you getting anything from him?"

Beraan closed his eyes, connecting to his amulet, his magic sight returned with another eyeball squeeze.

"He is still glowing a little but nothing around him is. But master, he could do that again at any second to any of us."

"What happened to that women, was it an accident?"

The boy sniffed, "yes, I didn't mean to... it just happened."

"It's alright, you can feel the power now. You can direct it, can you keep it inside?"

"Yes, I think so."

You think? Not good enough, when a stray thought could kill us.

"That's good enough for me. Master Kelaan stood up and held a hand out for the cursed. He grabbed it and pulled himself up, he winced when he put weight in his injured leg.

"Careful, we'll have to have that looked at."

Didn't he see the ripple that just when through the house when the boy feel the pain? This is too dangerous, to risk the lives of three Inquisitors just for you to coddle a cursed.

Master Kelaan draped the cursed's arm over his shoulder to help him walk. Beraan backed up slowly, the bitch was smart enough to keep her distance from them too. The cursed winced with every step, master Kelaan tried to lead him around the section of debris but the boy's eyes fixed on the dead body in the middle.

"I'm so sorry Mother... I didn't mean to..."

"Hash it's all right," soothed master Kelaan.

"How? How can anything be ever right again? "

Beraan saw the magic in his body grow from a dime glow to a bright shine, just short of the brightness it was before he had extended it outward.

"Breath," master Kelaan said, "focus on that power, keep it inside, you can't change what happened, all you can do is make sure it won't happen again."

I can make sure of that too.

Shouts outside drew Beraan attention.

"You can't go in there," was the only one he could hear clearly. The door flew open and a tall man burst inside. He wore a kind of apron, his arms were as thick and muscled as the Order guards, although he lacked the air of readiness for violence those guys radiated. His beard was short and looked well trimmed, only a few grey hairs hid among the raven black. His eyes fell on the women.

"Sira!"

He ran over to her, dropped on his knees, his right hand went behind her neck to lift her up.

"Sira," he whispered, pressing her forehead against his own.

The Man looked up, noticing Beraan and the others for the first time.

"What happens here?"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"You did this?! You killed your own mother?!"

"I..."

"Shut up! She wanted you, begged me to give her a son and this is how you repay her?"

"Father please."

The magic pulled in the boy's body.

"I am no father to a thing like you, I never wanted you. I reject you, I renounce any blood ties between us, please master Inquisitor, take that cursed away."

Finally a reasonable person.

"You!" The cursed pointed at his father, his magic filled the air between them, like a hand of glowing mist it moved towards him, "You! You are right, you are no father of mine."

The boy's magic enveloped his father, Beraan saw different shades of yellow-brown. Where the cloud touched the floor the cobblestone fractured into dust, the father's skin began to peel, his face looked like dry backed soil. Little flakes fell off. The blood stayed liquid for some reason. His clothing fell apart revealing a skin like an old oil painting. Deep and ever-growing furrows widened as Beraan watched in horror. All

that had taken place in less than two or three heartbeats but to Beraan it seemed like an eternity.

"Please stop!" Beraan heard master Kelaan shout.

"You are not my father, I reject you."

The man let out a gurgling scream, the boy tightened his outstretch fist, his magic shone brighter for a moment, then dimmed. The man's body fell over, hitting the ground, it shattered into a thousand little pieces. Only the blood bore witness that this mess has one been a living soul.

"I wish you hadn't done that," said master Kelaan.

"It's too late for me..." The boy whispered, "and for you."

Glowing air shot towards master Kelaan, even though he could not see it as Beraan did, the boy's intent was clear. To Beraan's eyes, master Kelaan was enveloped in a yellow-golden glow that spread out from his left hand. The cursed yellow-brown wave hit master Kelaan, he vanished. The shelf behind where he had been standing, turned to liquid. Another yellow flash beside the bitch announced master Kelaan. His outer robes had a few holes in them, his left eyebrow was half gone and two patches in his beard made him look ridiculous.

The bitch did even notice him appear behind her, she was still staring at the shelf and space where he had been. She blinked and her face changed, from surprise to disbelief to anger. She drew one of those knives Lira was so fond of and hurled it at the cursed. What she didn't see, couldn't have known, the knife's path crossed the magic-filled air between them. The knife splashed against the cursed's throat, the metal bent on impact. The blade's tip seemed to have lost all substance, flowing along his skin in an expanding circle. The knife's body hit after the blade, it split on impact, creating two large waves that flowed to each side around the boy's neck, little droplets were scattered all around.

The cursed pointed at the bitch and master, yellow-brown light flowed towards them as he gestured. Beraan pulled a stone out of his bag, it was round and smooth. The quartermaster's boys had picked it up on the river bank, it was just the size of Beraan's palm, it was perfect. He drew on his right-hand amulet and let the power flow through his hand into the. It vibrated with magic energy, it wanted to move, to become motion, it wanted a direction. The cursed's magic cloud moved towards the two Inquisitors, where it touched the ground the stones liquefied. One more heartbeat and it would hit them. *I could just let it happen. Oh, grand master glinn I'm am so sorry I was to slow, there was nothing I could have done to save them. And why should I, he neglected my training, Midas is dead because of his absence and the bitch, who cares about her?*

The bitch wasted two more knives. *Did she think the next knife would be more effective, this time the outcome would be different?* Master Kelaan pushed her to the side, out of the magic's path. He again vanished in a flash of yellow golden light, only to appear next to Beraan. The cloud of glowing air moved on towards the fourth Inquisitor, the girl standing in the doorway, Lira.

No!

That way. Beraan pressed the thought into the rock, directing it towards the cursed head. It flew off with a bang. The sound of thunder shook the room, something in Beraan's ears felt as if it had been hit with a sledgehammer. He stumbles to one knee, dust rained down on Beraan. The world around him returned to normal. Someone put a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you alright?" Master Kelaan's voice sounded as if he was far away, inside a cave shouting to him from deep within.

"Yeah... what did I do?" his own voice sounded strange to him, literally it sounded like a stranger's voice.

"You really need to learn how to adjust the conversion rate," Master Kelaan said coughing.

"I... What? Lira?"

"I'm fine. Are you always making a mess like this?" Answered her sweet, sweet voice.

Beraan looked around, dust filled the air around him. The cursed lay in a puddle of blood and some grey stuff, here and there Beraan recognized white pieces as bone fragments. He lay only one step away from his mother and what was left of his father. Behind him Beraan found the source of all that dust, the stonewall had a hole in it, the size of a grown man. While some stone could be seen behind the hole they looked to be too few.

"Your projectile went straight through his head and pulverized a stone over there, the wall collapsed partially without it. We are lucky you didn't bring the house down on us" said master Kelaan.

It was hard to understand him over that insistent tone in his ear, it sounded unlike anything Beraan had ever heard. Striking a triangle came close only longer and a constant sound.

"What was that thunder?" The bitch asked.

The first one was his rock accelerating too fast, as I said you need to learn how acceleration is regulated. The second was your stone shattering on impact, releasing its stored energy."

What the fuck is he talking about?

"I don't understand Master," Beraan said.

"Ah.. all in due time. Now I would like to know why you disobeyed orders."

"My apology master Kelaan," said Lira " after you all entered and we were about to leave, another signal was given. Apparently, there was another cursed incident in the old harbor district."

Another one? Oh great.

"Why didn't the city guard send someone to tell us."

"You gave orders to let no one in, they included themselves in that order."

They let that fool in, poor guys, raised a son for 15 years, only to be killed by him.

"Also none of them seemed eager to come close to any cursed," Lira said.

Smart people.

"So you came in to tell us something we would have been told the moment we came out?"

"Ehm, yes Master. Also, that guy forced himself past the guards so I thought it might be a good idea to follow him."

"Really did you? Just stay behind us, I don't want to lose another Inquisitor for no good reason."

"Understood master."

"Estra, Beraan, playtime is over. We are needed."

Chapter 20

"Did you come back for me?" asked Beraan. Master Kelaan was talking to city guardsmen and the bitch played at being his shadow, leaving Beraan and Lira a little privacy.

"Don't be silly."

You're lying.

"Really, you would have walked into cursed's arms for any and every other Inquisitor?"

"Of course I would, its call professional courtesy."

Courtesy my ass.

"I can tell when you're lying, you know that right?"

"I'm not lying, alright I may have walked a little faster because you were in there."

"That's sweet of you."

That made her look even more uncomfortable.

"It was a bad idea, next time wait outside, I don't know what I would do if something happens to you."

Lira grabbed his robes above his chest, she squeezed so tight it hurt. She pulled him close until her face was next to his ear, her breath hot on his neck. She spoke with venom in her voice.

"If you ever treat me like I am anything less than an Inquisitor, I will make you regret it."

"I only mean."

"I know exactly what you meant, stay back little girl, your amulets are passive in nature, nothing useful in a fight. I still got my sword and my blades if it comes to that. I was top of our class with those, remember. I have earned my robes and despite what we are to each other, you will pay me the respect I deserve, do you understand that?"

"Yes, I do."

"Good, and don't forget it."

She stepped back and smiled as if nothing had happened.

You are even crazier than I am, aren't you?

"Beraan! We are leaving," shouted Master Kelaan, a second carriage pulled up next to them, the city guard and the onlookers they were holding back let it pass.

"Ber, don't die," said Lira before she climbed into her own, Beraan did his best not to look at the box lashed to its roof, as with an itch he didn't want to scratch, the more it itched. The more he tried not to look at the box, the box just large enough to hold a man, a certain man, the more his eyes wandered up there. *Midas, I'm so sorry.*

You will pay me the respect I deserve. Lira's words echoed in his mind as he watched her carriage disappear around the corner, he had chosen to ride backward just so he could watch her for a few more seconds. Master Kelaan and the bitch set in silence. The respect an Inquisitor deserved. *Have I been paying them the respect they deserve? I can tell what those two deserve? He deserves no respect, if he had done his job Midas would still be alive.* Beraan looked out the window again where he had seen the carriage last. *The bitch is no better, acting as if she was his second, inserting herself where she is not wanted. The way she came into my vigil, telling me it wasn't my fault,*

of course, it wasn't, she was only trying to convince herself after she got her boy-toy killed. If Lira hadn't been there I would have watched that cursed dispose of them.

You will pay me the respect an Inquisitor deserves. *They have earned their robes, haven't they? Whether they deserve it or not I should respect them as Inquisitors, if not as people. Killing the cursed was the right choice, when is killing a cursed ever the wrong choice? I do want to make this world a better place and the cursed are the first to go. Saving them was the right thing to do. Could they have managed without me? Probably not, seeing how she wasted her knives. She had no chance to get close enough to use a sword without it melting like ice in the sun. Master Kelaan would have tried to talk some more, trying to talk him down until the second his skin dripped of his bones. No, they would have died without me, by the way, where was my thanks for saving them?*

"What are you thinking Beraan?" Asked master Kelaan.

"What?"

"You seemed lost in your thoughts, this is the second cursed you were forced to kill in two weeks."

Yeah, forced to...

"I'm fine master, thank you for asking."

See, I can be respectful, asshole.

"Estra, how many cursed are normal for the capital."

"One every week, sometimes none and sometimes several at once."

"Really, when I was your age we had one, two if it was a bad month."

So the cursed problem is getting worse?

"Who many are you sending to the refuge?"

How many are you failing to kill?

"One in four, master."

"What? So few?"

"Yes master, grandmaster Glinn gave strict orders to avoid unnecessary risks."

Maybe the old hag is not that stupid.

"I see," said master Kelaan.

"She had good reasons."

"There are always good reasons," said master Kelaan.

"Master, in the three years I have been in the capital, we have lost 13 Inquisitors."

Fuck me.

"The Order houses compliment of three teams is down to one. Well, zero with master Mira retiring and Teraan..."

"Yeah, I wondered about that. Still harsher action on our part is not the answer."

What? Of course, it is, I'd say our orders aren't harsh enough, kill them on sight if I had anything to say about it. Someday I will.

"What do you mean by that, master?" Asked the bitch.

"What happened when you first touched your amulet."

"I don't see what that has to do with..."

"Just answer," interrupted master Kelaan.

"I fell through the floor."

"And you Beraan?"

"The world exploded into dozens of colors with all the sentinels and amulets around me, of course, it hurt."

"And the acceleration amulet?"

"It would obey at all for the first week."

"Neither of you had full control over the abilities the amulets provide, no Inquisitor or Sentinel has. It can take weeks to unlock them and it takes years to master them."

He leaned forward.

"Imagine you were cursed, burden with those abilities, you as Inquisitors had one advantage, you sought those powers, you knew what was happening to you. Almost every cursed I ever met when the curse was still new said the same word. I did not mean to. Imagine you were burden with the power of a stray thought killing the people closest to you. Do you honestly believe pulling out a knife and throwing it at his throat was the right response."

"I followed the Grandmasters orders, he had killed, the moment a cursed murder his life is forfeit."

The bitch is right, dam you, hating you is so much easier when you don't make sense.

"She is right master, we watched him kill his own father and there was no doubt he intended to kill you," said Beraan.

"We could have talked to him, clam him down. We forced him to fight."

Are you too soft for this line of work Master? Are you so far removed from reality that you can't see how dangerous the cursed are?

"No master," said the redhead, "I'm sorry but you are wrong, Beraan was right to kill him."

Thanks.

"Sure we could have tried none lethal force but that involves greater risk to us and an Inquisitor's life is far more important than a cursed."

Master Kelaan smiled like a spider closing in on a fly caught in its net, well if spiders were in the habit of smiling that is.

"That is exactly what disgusts me about Glinn's orders, all human lives are worth the same, a cursed is worth no more and no less than an Inquisitor, a noble, a whore or a bricklayer."

"No master, you are wrong," said Beraan, "the Cursed are a plaque on this world."

"They are still people."

"Are they?" Asked Beraan.

"Are you seriously asking this question Beraan?"

Beraan nodded.

"Of course they are."

"No master," Beraan said, "they are monsters."

The smell of burned hair, desperate hammering against a locked door, the heat of fire all around him and the laughter of a mad man. Beraan pushed his Demons back into the dark.

"They are monsters master, we are the only ones capable of protecting those who can not protect themselves."

"I'm am all for protection Beraan, but murdering them only because they have been cursed is wrong, they are still people, they still love their families, they still enjoy life."

"They love the families they murder?" Asked Beraan, "the instructors told me nine out of ten cursed kill one of their closest family members with an hour. Is that incorrect master?"

"No it is not but we fair no better when we get our amulets and unlike them, we are prepared."

The bitch chimed in, "that does not excuse murder, if a man picked up a word for the first time and killed someone within seconds, is it not a crime."

Is the other guy less dead?

"Of course it is," master Kelaan said.

"So why would it be different for a cursed? I agreed that they are still people but they are dangerous."

"Yes, they are a danger to others and themselves. When we come in with a reputation of killing cursed they have no other choice but to defend themselves," said master Kelaan.

"So it is our fault now?" Shouted Beraan.

"Yes it is, we escalate the situation, they fight, we kill them. That is how it always goes."

Are you insane or did live as Inquisitioner wear you out?

"Midas would disagree!" Beraan watched his master face for the reaction, it came and went in the blink of an eye. Pain, anger and a lot of shame. Beraan pressed on, "Midas did nothing to escalate, that man killed him in cold blood, even worse he enjoyed it."

"All I'm saying is that killing the cursed just because of their condition is wrong, that approaching the situation playing to kill after the slightest provocation is wrong."

"What would be the alternative master Kelaan?" asked the bitch.

"Talking to them, helping them understand what is happening, helping them control their ability."

"We saw what the carpenter's son did the moment he was able to direct his magic Master, he used it to kill," said the bitch.

"That was unfortunate, he lost control."

"No master, he was in control of his ability, he used them too well for it to be otherwise," said Beraan.

"He lost control of himself, you heard what that man said to him, can you blame the boy for his anger."

"Not for is anger, only for his action," said the bitch, "and those were inexcusable."

"What else should we have done master?" Asked Beraan, "should we have left him there alone in that house, should we have run away the moment he killed his father and wait until he calmed down? We can't tell how many people he would have killed. You asked us to imagine ourselves in his position, you imagine what he could have done unchecked? How many houses could he collapse by simply walking past them? How many people would he have buried under them?"

"I don't know," said master Kelaan, "I'm so tired of leaving bodies behind and calling it a success."

"Master, if we only leave one body behind, it is a success," said Beraan, "Better to kill one cursed then risk him killing a hundred innocent people."

"I have been where you are right now Beraan, that calculation leads you to a terrible place."

"What are you talking about?"

"Are you sure you want to know?"

"Yes," said Beraan, the bitch nodded.

"You met master Mira, she had a twin sister Elisa, my wife."

Had?

"Back then Master Glinn, Mira and I were stationed in the capital, we were called to a fire, a woman cursed by flames had set her house ablaze. I, of course, was the first to go in. I got her brother out unharmed but the sister, I had no choice but kill her. I spent too much time working, caring too little for my own wife and children. Why spend time with three people when you have a city of half a million to take care of. The girls older brother found out who I was and where I lived, turns out he had been the cursed, not his sister. He killed the girls quickly. Elisa... what he did to her..." Master Kelaan looked away.

"I spent the next year tracking him down, when I finally found him I repaid him back with interest. From then on I killed the cursed on sight. Glinn even reprimanded me for it, which makes her current orders so ironic. I wonder if she remembers the women she was in those days. Gods, I may even have inspired her current stance. When they needed a senior Inquisitor to lead a new team in Ebanil I jumped on the chance. Truth is I wanted to get away from Mira, seeing her face every day was too much."
I would rather have me that Kelaan, not you.

"Six years ago we found out about a secret village in the eastern mountains, a hidden community of cursed living out their lives."

"What?" asked the bitch, "why have I never heard of that?"

"You don't need to know, strictly speaking, I should not tell you about it either but... too late. We sent some inquisitors to get them to relocate to the refuge. The only survivor was a blue driver, they let him live to tell us never to come to their village again."

"Why don't we send people there instead of the refuge?" asked the bitch.

"The story isn't over, the council was furious, allegations were thrown around, worst of all were the dualists. Thou shall not suffer a cursed to live. That was one of their commandments and they held a lot of power, at least that's what Glinn told me. So the next summer nine of every ten inquisitors, sentinels and trained Order guards marched on that village. It was a massacre."

"How many people did we lose?" The bitch asked.

"We? Oh, we lost only a few. It was the villagers who were slaughtered, three hundred men, women, and children, healthy, stink, infants and elderly, no one was spared."

Good, they were cursed, they deserved it.

"So many?" asked the bitch, "how long had they been gathering there?"

"They weren't all cursed, only around forty had abilities, the others where their husbands and wives, parents and children."

"That's horrible, how can the Order do something like that."

Maybe that old silversmith's story was true.

"Simple, they believed the life of a cursed was worth less than the lives of everyone else. They believed that the existence of that village posed a threat, or in some cases,

that their mere existence could not be tolerated. You only find out if one of them has the power to burn off your skin the moment he does it, so we didn't take any chances."

"That's horrible but I understand the reasons if all of us get killed who will protect the people tomorrow," said the bitch.

"That's not the only reason, how could we be sure none of those who didn't show their power, had none? What if we spared them, let them go and in a few years they would show their true colors and murder innocent people?"

"Better to kill them now than risk them killing later," repeated Beraan.

"Beraan, a village of corpses is where that calculation lead me. Do you understand now why it is wrong?"

Yeah, maybe you went too far there. If we kill people only suspected... where would that end?" The bitch asked.

"Those people may have been cursed or not," Beraan said, "I was talking about people we knew were cursed without a doubt. Also killing people who might be cursed one day is nonsense, master, by that logic we had to kill anyone or everyone"

"Well, at least we found some common ground," Master Kelaan said.

"Still it was right for me to kill the cursed," Beraan said, "he was definitely cursed, he has murdered and we were defending yourself."

Master Kelaan shook his head, "every death is one too many."

"The rules are clear," the bitch said, "as long as the cursed has not killed they are to be taken to the refuge. If they show any sign of hostile intentions they are to be killed without hesitation. I will not risk my life or that of any other Inquisitor on the mere chance a cursed may change his mind."

"You don't understand what."

"I do," she interrupted, "Master, you don't want us to kill them and you believe our actions force them to defend themselves. You attribute our orders to act without hesitation to a lack of regard for the cursed and value of their lives. Does that sum it up?"

"Yes..." he leaned back.

"Master, your argument is incoherent, at one point you say they are overwhelmed and need help so they don't kill inadvertently and one minute later you say our actions force them to use their power to defend themselves, an action that proofs a modicum of control."

Damm, she's right.

"Furthermore it doesn't matter if they are still human or not, the second they become criminal using their power they need to be treated as such by people who can deal with them. Same as a man with a sword would be treated by the city guard. We are the best equipped for that task so we need to do it, who else could? Sure there are more of them than us, compare it to the guard's duty, I value a guardsman far higher than an ax murderer. The only difference between us and them is that they are easier to replace. That's why we have more freedom to use deadly force."

They are more than just criminals they are monsters, they are inhuman. The only solution is to kill them.

"They are people like you and me, I have seen parents protect their children, I watched them beg for their lives, they love their children as much as we do. They deserve the same respect we give to everyone."

They deserve a slow and painful death.

"Sure they do master," she said, "and when ordinary people commit crimes, they are treated as such, this is no different, just on a far more dangerous scale."

"The order treats the cursed like rampant murderers," Master Kelaan said.

Yeah maybe because most of them are.

"In that village, I have seen them master their abilities, they could be productive members of society, they don't have to be killed."

Oh, I got a question for you.

"Master," said Beraan, "what happened the last time magic was legal?"

"This is not about the Highrule," said master Kelaan a bit too heated.

"Sure it is, that's what will happen if you let people with power loss on those without, they will subjugate them. Implement themselves as the ruling class and put everyone beneath them."

Beraan remembered those word from one of his father's many tirades against the cursed. Another sign of the worlds twisted humor that he was killed by one.

"The order has that kind of power, I don't see any of us overthrowing the council," Master Kelaan said.

"There are strict rules against amulet use against anyone but the cursed."

Girl, you are naive if you believe that would stop anyone...

"Do you really think the kind of people who would subjugate the population care about rules?" Beraan asked.

She shook her head, "I guess not."

Hehe one point for me.

"Also that rule is not as stringent as you might think," said Beraan.

"What are you talking about?" She asked.

"What do you know about the end of the Esallen war?"

Master Kelaan looked away.

"We won."

I hope the silversmith story is true or I'll make a fool of myself, better to phrase it as a question.

"Master, has the order ever taken part in that war?"

He didn't answer, he stared out the window, Beraan saw his right fist clench and release.

"Master, what was third Saraton?" Beraan asked.

"That's where our armies won," said the redhead when he didn't answer.

"How many Inquisitors fought in that battle," Beraan watched him very closely, he could see the two bulges of muscle next to his eyes expand as he bit his jaw

"None," said the redhead, "as I said, we are not allowed to use our amulets against ordinary people. No Inquisitor fought in that nor any other war."

Master Kelaan finally broke his silence. "That is not correct."

The redhead looked at him confused.

"The Order did fight in the last battle."

"The Instructors never told us of anything like that, are you sure?"

He laughed without joy, a mix of bitterness and regret in his voice.

"Oh yes, I am sure," he looked left and right to people only he could see.
"I am sure, I was there."

"But we are forbidden to use our amulets against civilians unless it's self-defence," protested the redhead
Master Kelaan took a deep breath, "rules can be changed as needed."
When he said that, he didn't sound like himself, he sounded as if he was repeating words he had been told.

"But that's... that's wrong," said the redhead.

"Is it?" asked master Kelaan, he snapped out of his reverie, "why?"

She blinked, "master, you just argued that every death was one too many, now you're asking why?"

"That was regarding the cursed, people we by our approach force to defend themselves, people we drive to attack us. The Esalli, on the other hand, chose to declare war on us, they chose the attack us for their own reasons."

What reasons?

"Why did they attack us?" Beraan asked.

Master Kelaan shrugged.

"Who knows? Maybe they thought we were too weak to defend ourselves, they probably never imagined we would use magic to defend us, they thought wrong."

The redhead shook her head in disbelief, "but normal people... using our power against normal people... that makes us no better than the cursed."

Master Kelaan snorted.

"Nobody is any better or worse, worth more or less than others."

"No," Beraan said, " the fact that the order committed atrocities has no bearing on our approach to the cursed if we don't stop them, they will murder and rampage."

"I'm sorry you see it that way Beraan, maybe when you are my age you'll think differently about it."

I doubt I'll live that long.

Chapter 21

An icy needle pierced the back of Beraan's right eye and exited through his pupils. Beraan winced and rubbed his eye. *We must be close to the place Midas had died. No, where he was murdered.*

The carriage stopped, Beraan opened the door for his better as was his place as the Third. A breeze of river air greeted him, they were on the promenade in the old dock quarter. I was right, that place can't be far. Beraan looked around if he could recognize the buildings but had no luck. *We must be upriver from there.*

Master Kelaan walked over to the city guardsmen. They stood in a loose circle around a body, none of them showed a tension or anticipation of a fight, the way their colleges had done back at the carpenter's shop. One guardsman even leaned against his spear looking bored. One Man snapped to attached as master Kelaan came close, two more made meek efforts and the other five didn't seem to care. Eight more guardsmen formed a half-ass perimeter around the scene, keeping the few citizens away who had nothing better to do than gauge at this attraction.

"Report," commanded master Kelaan, focusing on the one proper guardsmen. "A man matching the description you people gave us was seen throwing that girl into the river. The killer was gone when we arrived. We recovered the body." The guard stepped aside, Master Kelaan kneeled next to the body. Beraan and the redhead followed to get a closer look. The woman looked to be little older than the redhead, her long black hair was bound behind her head, except a hand full of strains that manage to escape. *She looks familiar, have I seen her before?*

The redhead gasped next to Beraan and covered her mouth. She wore a simple dress the kind servants would wear, it had come loose around her chest revealing a fist-sized hole where her left breast was supposed to be. *No, it can't be, I killed him, I send him off into the sky and saw him hit the river, no one could have survived that, not even that cursed.*

Master Kelaan circled the hole with one gloved hand. White bone fragments rimed the wound like angry teeth, ready to bite off the hand of anyone foolish enough to come close.

He must have killed her and dumped the body in the river. Yes, yes that's the only explanation.

"Her heart is missing," said master Kelaan.

No, the guard said someone was seen killing her. It was a different woman, yes some random person killed some random women and the guard found this body instead of her, this old body. Yes, that's the only explanation.

Her skin was pail and blood oozed from the wound, fresh blood.

"How old is that body," Beraan heard his own voice ask.

Master Kelaan considered his question, apparently not bothered by Beraan speaking out of turn, he lifted her arm and let it drop to the cobbled floor.

"Not old," he stuck his finger into the wound again, "yeah she is still warm, guardsmen, when did this happen?"

"No more than an hour, master Inquisitor."

"Beraan, you said you had magic use induced headaches when we were still at the Order house?"

"But... but that was the carpenter's son..."

"Could you tell that difference?"

Midas killer is dead, he has to be.

"No, No! I killed him," shouted Beraan.

"How sure are you of that" asked master Kelaan.

"He is dead, he is dead. No one could have survived that, no one," the words flowed out of Beraan.

"If he is still alive then," said the redhead, her voice was flat and matter of fact but her eyes, her eyes burned with anger, "then we will just have to kill him again."

Oh yeah right, she had a thing with the guy who was killed before we got here, I can't imagine what I would do if a cursed killed Lira. He killed Midas, that's all that matters.

"Don't jump to conclusions, it could be a cursed with the same power," said master Kelaan.

"I find that highly unlikely master," said the redhead, "an ability that has never been seen before or at least never been recorded in the last three hundred years appearing twice without a connection."

"Fair point," said master Kelaan.

*No... it can't be, I killed him... I killed...
Could he still be alive? Did I fail, he murdered Midas, the first friend I made in years, possibly the first true friend I ever had, except Beraan.
The redhead is right, if this cursed is still alive, then I will kill him again, and this time I will make sure he stays dead. I have to find him first.*

Beraan knelt on the body's other side and examined her face. The small chin, her tiny nose with a furrow in the middle that made the tip look like a butt. Her eyes had such a deep brown they appeared almost black.

Beraan took in a sharp breath.

"I have seen her before, I know how this is. She was a maid serving lady Deretaan. She was the one telling us about the missing Guardsman Itan and him owning a room not far from here."

"So she is the one who set you up?" asked the redhead.

"Set us up?"

"Did you think you ran into that cursed by chance?" Asked the redhead, "You said yourself he attacked the two of you without hesitation, he had known he would find you there."

"I.. I haven't thought about it."

Shit, she is right, how did I not see that. We thought we were so clever figuring out where he might be, we never even wondered if we could be walking into a trap.

"That's pure speculation," said master Kelaan, "although I must agree the circumstances are suspicious."

"Yes, master. However, all leads point back to this house Deretaan, their cursed guardsman killing people, including one of their maids."

"Could still be coincidence, cursed often hurt those closest to them," said master Kelaan.

"They were lovers," said Beraan.

"What?" said the redhead and master Kelaan at the same time.

"The maid told us the missing guardsman owned a room but got embraced when we asked her how she knew. Maybe he found out she talked to us and killed her for it."

"Your theory has a little hole in it," said master Kelaan, "there is no room in that building, the drivers had told us about it and we checked it out while you were taking your little three-day nap. The landlord had never heard of a man matching the cursed's description and I question every single tenant."

"So that's why you think she set us up."

"Yes," said the redhead.

"What are we supposed to do now master?" asked Beraan.

Master Kelaan stood up and wiped his hand on his outer robe.

"First, I need a better picture of what happened here. Guardsmen! Bring me everyone who has seen what happened here."

The next hour felt like an entire day, master Kelaan listened with inhuman patience to every single account, then questioned it and asked for clarifications. Beraan fought to keep his frustration down, Midas' murderer was out there and master Kelaan was wasting time. The redhead kept her impatience hidden, her mask slipped a few times showing Beraan that she was as impatient as he was.

After the last witness master Kelaan walked over to the place from where they had seen the man throwing the girl into the river. It was only a few meters down the street around a corner. Beraan froze when he rounded it. There, in the middle of the sidestreet hung a cloud of black smoke.

It is really him, I don't believe it, it is really that cursed. He is still alive.

Good, he killed Midas.

I'm going to kill him slowly.

Chapter 22

Grand Inquisitor Glinn smeller her tea and put it down again. She clutched it with both hands, like a peasant. Mother would be appalled if she saw me do that. Well, Mother doesn't have to worry about etiquette anymore, does she?

"Tell me again what happened on the promenade," said the Grand Inquisitor, she leaned back in her chair. The chairs Beraan, master Kelaan, and the redhead had been given were the Orders bleak standard, her chair was luxurious in comparison. Nothing his parents would have tolerated in their house but here, it gave the impression of a throne and the Grand Inquisitor, that of a queen. *With rank do come privileges, on the other hand, she is old and the cushions are a kindness, but did they have to be red?*

"The cursed, a man named Itan," master Kelaan said, "killed the girl in the same manner Inquisitor Teraan and Midas were killed. The witnesses description match." The redhead bit her lips when he mentioned the name Teraan. Beraan could imagine her pain, he himself feel a gut-punch when he thought of Midas.

"How are these death related to housing Deretaan?"

"The man Itan was a guard in service of house Deretaan, the girl was the handmaid of lady Deretaans daughter. Beraan and Midas were attacked after leaving house Deretaan, lured by false information provided by her."

"Provided by said girl, not by a member of house Deretaan."

"Yes, Master," said master Kelaan.

"What are you hoping to gain from questioning Lady Deretaan and her staff?"

"The guardsman history for one, his habits his character. Any information that might grand us some insight into his motives."

"Motives, he is cursed, they don't have motives."

"Master, something is wrong here, the pieces don't fit. This cursed in not acting like the usual cursed, he is killing in the exact same way every time. He doesn't have any of the known cursed abilities. There is more going on here than a simple cursed killing people. I can feel it."

What the fuck is he talking about?

"I admit there are oddities in this case."

"You see why I have to speak to the lady and anyone who knew the man, I can not do my job without more information, if you don't let me summon them officially, you may as well send me back home."

No! We can't leave, not as long as that cursed is still alive.

"It is not that simple, Kel."

"Master?" asked the redhead, master Kelaan nodded giving her permission to speak.

"Are we not within our mandate summoning any citizen or subject to demand answers."

"Yes my dear we are, but..."

"Politics," finished master Kelaan, he spat the word out as if it leaves a bad taste on his tough.

"Yes, Kel, politics."

"So they might refuse to obey the summons," asked the redhead.

"I thought the Order had supreme authority in the matter of the cursed," said Beraan, earning him an eye roll from the redhead for speaking unasked.

"We have in theory," said the Grand Inquisitor. "However, some council members have expressed... disagreement with those laws."

"So?" asked Beraan.

"That's is the polite way of saying they fight tooth and nail against the Order and take every opportunity to restrict or undermine us," explained master Kelaan.

"So you did keep up with local politics Kel?"

"No I haven't, some things just never change."

"Ha, true."

"Master," said the redhead, "what would happen if they really did refuse our summons?"

"That is the part I'm worried about, if they do we would have to enforce it. Assaulting their estate and dragging them here."

"Isn't that a bit extreme?" asked the redhead.

"Yes my dear, but the alternative would be doing nothing, if we do not enforce our law given authority we might as well not have any."

"How would the council react?" asked master Kelaan.

"The churches will stay neutral, I'm sure of that. Some noble houses will condone our actions but the greater number won't. The Deretaans do have friends especially considering the recent marriage alliance with house Kereston."

"Say we were to enforce the summons, what exactly would we be obligated to do," asked the redhead.

Go in, drag them out, fight anyone in our way, are you stupid? Didn't you listen... oh... you want her to say it out loud, hear it from her own lips.

"You Inquisitors would be the first to go in, your mere presence might discourage any armed resistance"

Translation, we might scare the living shit out of the mundane and we don't have to kill people who ran away.

"What if the house guards defend their Lady?" Asked the redhead.

"Then you will defend yourselves," said Grand Inquisitor Glinn, the grandmotherly smile she adopted when speaking to the redhead was nowhere in sight.

"We are supposed to use our amulets against mundanes?"

"If you have no other choice, my dear."

"We are not supposed to..."

"We are supposed to protect the powerless, to do that we need to find this cursed and to do that we need more information which someone in the Deretaan household might have."

"That's a very big might," said the redhead in a soft tone.

"I seen no other choice, do you?" said master Kelaan.

"No," whispered the girl.

"Alright, I will take care of the necessary paperwork. Go get some rest, all of you. Kel, please stay a moment."

Beraan and the redhead stood up and left her office, he held the door open for the Second but she didn't even notice, she was too busy watching the floor in front of her feet.

Ah well, time to hit the baths again, they are the one good thing in this joy forsaken city.

Memories of the cursed beating down on Midas' face tormented Beraan's dreams, in one of them Beraan managed to kill the used only to watch his own fists beating down on Midas instead. He could not tell why he had taken the cursed's place or why he was playing his role, nor could he stop his hands. All he could do was watch himself like an actor in a play.

Beraan woke bathed in sweat, his hands hurt. After pulling down the cloth sheet covering the window, the faint sunlight revealed the blood on his hands. He had clenched them shut with such strength his fingernails had dug into his palm. Beraan wiped his hand on the rug and hung it back in its place. Looking up at the sky Beraan saw the sun approaching Untara's curves. The midweek eclipses were the only times they good a good few of that stares. Judging by the distance it will take another day until the eclipse is full.

Memories welled up from some deep place, eclipse parties his parents had held for the occasion. Thoughts of his parents lead to the smell of smoke creeping up his nose, screams in the distance, baning on a locked door. NO! Beraan closed his eyes to banish the unbidden memories. Sleep did not come easy, the two nightmares haunting Beraan fused in his dreams, that cursed was beating his father with a burning wooden beam, Midas trapped behind the door, screaming like a little girl. In the few lucid moments between dreams, Beraan thought that none of this made any sense.

"I'm sorry," he whispered to the night, "I will be better in the future, I will do better. I'm going to make sure no people will die the way you did," he said to Midas and his family, "Not as long as I can do something about it. I will find every single cursed and will kill them."

That didn't ease his sleep but it stopped the screaming and worst of all the smells. When the first hour of Eba came around Beraan felt as if he hadn't slept at all.

Running around the gardens cleared his mind. The Blues working the fields and tending the animals didn't mind him. The guards ran the rounds as well and Beraan swore to himself not to stop before they did. In the end, they stopped for water and Beraan accepted the ladle gladly. Truth be told the was exhausted, seven rounds were all he could handle. *Tomorrow I'll run eight. Master Kelaan must have been joking when he said he ran one hundred at my age.*

Beraan made his way to the practice halls after grabbing his other set of robes, a bath that was worthy of a king and an ample breakfast that somehow tasted better than usual. Strange how running oneself to exhaustion does that. The redhead stood in one corner throwing knives. Beraan thought about talking to her but there was nothing to talk about, she was not important, what was she doing anyway? She was practicing with two round straw targets but one blocked a clear line to the other. *Was she trying to curve her knives around the first? Crazy bitch.*

One of the quartermaster's boys approached and asked if he needed the more again. The boy could not have been older than ten and spoke in a very polite manner so Baraan forgave him his forwardness and sent him off to fetch to wooden rings and some

rope to hang them up with. *I still haven't mastered the first lesson master Kelaan has given me. How long has it been? Ten days? Twelve? It feels like years.*

The rock went through the first ring and came nowhere near the second. I'm doing something wrong. *There is more to this, I can almost feel it.* Beraan let the energy flow from his amulet into his hand and then onward into the rock. It waited, it bagged to move, to become motion. It wanted a direction. Beraan closed his eyes and focused on that need. It was something beyond words, the rock was not asking, it had no mind to ask, neither was the magic energy inside the rock.

Exploring the sensation Beraan's mind tried to make sense of the connection, an image of a rock in a river stream came to his mind. The rock wanted to be swept away, it was the energy, waiting to be released. Beraan got the impression that the state this energy was in was not natural to it. His every first impression, that of motion waiting to happen had been closer to the truth than he had realized. This precursor state to motion was somehow wrong or undesired, Beraan knew, of course, the energy didn't desire but it was the closest his mind came to understand it.

Beraan listened to the rock's demand for a direction, there was more. Another question the energy asked, it did not demand it with the same vehemence, it gave the impression of saying, I don't mind if you tell me that. Beraan pulled out another rock and put it beside the other on his outstretched palm, he poured the same amount of energy into it. He had an intuition for the amount, he somehow thought the amulet itself gave him. Even if he didn't, the brightness of the red glow in his other amulets sight would have told him.

Beraan focused on the other question, it wanted an amount, without any hint on how much a unit of whatever it wanted was, Beraan told one rock a lot and the other almost nothing. The first rock wooshed away faster than a crossbow quarrel, it hit the wall and shatter into a dust cloud with the sound of a thunderstrike that turned all head toward Beraan, all escaped the redhead, she didn't seem to care, she was busy throwing knives and glowing orange-red. Beraan lifted his hand above his head in apology. True, he was above them but startling them like this demanded an apology.

After a moment spent looking around Beraan found the second rock, it had fallen off his hand and skidded slowly across the floor towards the wall. It reminded him of a mouse scurrying away. Beraan watched it on its way when it reached the wall, it pressed against it, the stone had a dent in it, for which Beraan was not responsible for a change, its shape was like a bowl. The rock skidded from one side to another and back again. In his magic sight, Beraan saw the brightness dimming, or was that just a trick his eyes played on him?

Beraan pulled out a new stone, it was flat and almost a perfect circle. He let his amulet's magic flow into the stone and told it to move straight up and gave it the impression one, wondering if it could understand numbers. When he told the stone to move, nothing happened. Beraan checked with his magic sight, the stone was glowing red, it had energy. *What went wrong?*

Beraan let go of the stone and it hung in the air, drifting slightly to one side. *What the fuck?*

Make it hover, that's what he said, I did it!

Beraan gave it a gentle push with two fingers, the rock had still weight, Beraan pushed stronger and it began to move towards the wall, tumbling along every axis all the while. Before it reached the wall, the red glow faded and the stone hit the floor. *Conversion, yeah that's what master Kelaan called it, didn't he? It makes sense, that's why the slow stone is still glowing and the fast one stopped immediately, this conversion tells the energy that wants to become motion, how fast it is supposed to become motion.*

Yes! I did it. Hm... what happens if...

Beraan pulled out another stone, filled it with energy and told it up at a rate of 2. The stone fell towards the sealing, hit one of the pillars arcs and slit up along its curve and came to rest in its centre. *Well if it works on a stone it should work on clothing, shouldn't it?* Giddy with anticipation Beraan let the power flow into his robes. *A master can make the sand dance, sure. If this works then I can fly, show me someone who has done that before master wiseass.* Beraan closed his eyes, connected to the energy spread out in all three of his robes, told it to move straight up with a conversion of 2.

Beraan felt a slight pull up, his robes instead of hanging down hung up, he crossed his arms so they wouldn't slip off, all that did was make them fold and cover his face. Hm... why is it not working?

Maybe I need more. Beraan pulled the powers out of his clothes into himself and back into the robes again, this time he told them up at a rate of twelve.

Beraan scream in pain and surprise as the fabric of his underclothes dug into his groin, squeezing his privates like ripe grapes. *Fuck! Stop! Down!* Beraan hit the floor harder than he should have, his robes pinning him to the ground before he could reabsorb it the red energy disappeared on its own. Beraan lay on his back cradling his privates, they were still intact. It wasn't only them, his shoulders got new bruise and his arm injuries welcomed the new company with waves of pain. On top of that everything from his groin to his kidneys hurt like hell.

Beraan kept lying there, not caring what the others occupants of the training hall thought of him. After a few hours, it could also have been minutes but when in pain, time does strange things, Beraan found master Kelaan looking down on him.

"Are you alright?"

"Yes master," his voice sounded rough, "I never wanted kids anyway."

Master Kelaan looked puzzled then shrugged and waved the redhead over. She didn't react, his expression grew annoyed. That boy from earlier with the strawy blonde hair had seen him wave, saw his expression and ran over to her. When she didn't react to his voice either he tapped her on the shoulder, he tried to at least for his hand went right through it. The kid to his credit didn't let that phase him, he stepped in front of here and waved his armed high above his head. Beraan laughed at how ridiculous it looked and got rewarded with another wave of pain. Even master Kelaan cracked a smile.

"Master Kelaan," the redhead said when she arrived.

"I have news. The Deretaans answered, long story short, they said no."

"They really dare to disobey the Order?" the redhead asked.

"Yes."

"What now?" Asked Beraan.

"The Grand Master has given them an ultimatum, every member of their family and household will appear in the Order house for question within 8 hours."

"Or?" Asked Beraan.

"Or we will come and make them."

Chapter 23

"They are doing what?" asked the redhead, her eyebrows raised. *If mother would have seen those bushy things on a noblewoman, she would have gossiped about it for weeks, if she had seen them on a family member, she would have died of a heart attack. A heart attack would have been a kindness.*

"It's called an eclipse party," said Beraan.

Beraan, master Kelaan, and the redhead stood in front of the Deretaan estate, the wide gate granting them a good few of the festivities inside. Their carriage had outrun the guards and sentinels on foot, they were just rounding the corner.

"They know we are coming for them and they throw a party?" the redhead shook her red head, "I'll never understand what's going on in those noble heads of theirs"

We can be wired sometimes... they... they can be weird.

Before Beraan could say anything master Kelaan nodded towards them, "You two are missing the obvious."

"They want witnesses," said Beraan.

"Yes that too, look at the guards."

There were a lot of them, the largest portion was wearing the Deretaan colors but they were outnumbered ten to one by the mostly mix of uniforms belonging to other noble houses.

"They called in their Soldiers?" asked the redhead.

"No, that would be considered treason, those are guards, not soldiers," said Grandmaster Glinn behind them, Beraan turned around in surprise, he had not heard her approach.

Sloppy of me.

"What's the difference, master?" The redhead asked.

"In reality, nothing, but soldiers are forbidden from entering the city while armed or even encamping within a days march. To defend their property within the city every major and minor noble house is granted a contingent of 32 Guards.

"Oh I see," said the redhead, "they invited their noble friends who brought their fighting men along to get around the limit."

"I count 21 houses," said master Kelaan.

"23," the Grand Inquisitor said, "the Norenen and Orsetaan Uniforms look nearly identical and the Borelis guards haven't had time yet to change their sigil and colors since the twins split their house in two."

"That means almost one thierd of the council is here," said Beraan.

"Very observant of you, young man," said Grandmaster Glinn, her kindly smile making up for the sarcasm.

"So Master, what now?" asked master Kelaan

"Now? Now we talk, then we shout and after that, we drag them out screaming."

Grand Inquisitor Glinn walked towards the entrance, her steps long and purposeful. She is making a show of it, half of this is going to be theater. The Sentinels took up position to her left where a Second would be. Master Kelaan, the redhead and Beraan walked behind them, the guards formed two lines to there right and left with a Sentinel in front of each. The last Sentinel covered their backs.

"Stop," said a nasal voice, a little man blocked their way. His Uniform shared the Deretaan colors but no the Guard's style. He raised his right hand for emphasis, "you are not on the list."

He was one of the countless functionaries every noble household needed, his father called them weasels when he was in a good mood.

"Out of my way, you hinder Inquisition business," barked the Grand Inquisitor. The men looked from her to the parchment in his left hand.

"No, no Inquisition on the list. I must ask you to move alone," his high voice was so annoying. Apparently, Beraan wasn't the only one who felt that way.

Grandmaster Glinn flicked her finger, the Sentinel let his black robes fall back, Beraan could only see the back of his head, sparsely covered in thin tufts of white hair. Judging by his wrinkled skin, the man must be as old as the Grand Inquisitor.

Beraan's hand shoot up to his left eyes, it felt like an ant was crawling on the top of his eyeball. Beraan's magic sight showed him purple light gathering in his outstretched fist. He brought his thumb and middle finger together, a faint purple line formed between the sheet of paper and his fist. *What was purple again? Oh yeah...*

With a snap of the Sentinels fingers, the parchment burst out in flames.

"Showoff," muttered master Kelaan.

The weasel dropped the paper, his sleeve had already caught flame. He ran to the nearest table and stuck his arm into a water bowl.

"Master? Whispered Beraan.

"Nothing, using fire on range is a rare talent. Old Jonder never lets anyone forget that."

Beraan looked up at the sun disappearing behind Untara's curved edge. The sun was almost fully hidden behind the red and grey disk where it would stay for the next eight hours before reappearing on the other side. Untara itself was clad in thin clouds where the sunlight still illuminated her, the rest was lost in shadows.

The Inquisition troops walked onto the lawn, to each side the rows of tables form a channel towards the maze. The elevated gardens housed the tables and pavilions where the noble guests had found their seats and entertainment, Servants rushed over the bridges like workers in a disturbed anthill. Far behind them, Beraan saw the stairs and the great gate to the main house.

"Are they having two different parties?" asked the redhead, more to herself than to him, he answered anyway.

"Yes, the lower party is for friends or acquaintances, not so special guests or servants they want to reward for something. The upper part is where the real fun begins, trusted friend and honored guests. Though the Deretaans have taken the idea of a lower party for the lower people a bit too literal."

"I see."

"It's also quite useful to insult people by limiting their invitation to the lower party when they actually deserve a seat of honor."

"Nobles and their petty games, the more I learn about them, the less I like them," hissed the redhead,

A group of guards formed a line between the food of two plateaux, behind them he saw a familiar face giving orders, the guard captain he met only a week ago. "Stop," shouted a woman, the guests fell silent, all eyes wandered up to her. On the first plateau stood a middle-aged woman in a long dress of Deretaan green, her hair was bound up behind her head in a ridicules spiral only a noble could have come up with. Two golden locks framed her sharp face. She might have been pretty, once. She raised her hand and gestured over Beraan and the others in slow and exaggerated motion. "You are not welcome here." "You, your children and your staff have been summoned before the Inquisition," shouted Grandinquisitor Glinn, her voice was loud and clear. "Can't you see I'm busy," she waved her hand lazily, "come back another time and I may consider your request." "There is nothing to consider, you have been summoned, compliance is not optional." "Our written statements have been delivered, we fulfilled every obligation the law demanded." "Your statements were not satisfying," said the Grand Inquisitor. "Well," lady Deretaan shrugged, "The law says we must answer you, where does it say anything about your satisfaction?" "Hagala, be reasonable, all we want is to find that guard of yours and stop the killing. He murdered five people already, including two Inquisitors and that servant girl of yours, do you care so little for your people that you want their murderer go unpunished," master Glinn turned to the gathers servants while saying the last part. "That former guard of ours. Of course, I want justice done. What I can't stand is you and your people walking in like they own this place," her voice grew in volume while speaking, "you and your little grey robed puppets. Innocent citizens of this country should not bow or scrape before freaks like you. You are no better then Highrule. We should put you all in that prison of yours or better still, put you down like the rabid dogs you are."

"Lady Deretaan by the authority invested in me by the grand council, I Glinn Grand Master of the Inquisition, charge with willful obstruction, what say you?" "I say..." she paused and smiled, "fuck off." "As you wish." "Guards, don't let those trespassers proceed any further on my property. When threatened, you may defend yourselves accordingly." The captain nodded and gave orders to his men, the first line kneeled behind their shields, the second row brought their speers in place above and between their shoulders. "This is a party, it far too silent here," Lady Deretaan turned to a group of musicians in a pavilion, "you play something light and happy." The musicians did as ordered, lady Deretaan turned away from the Inquisition below her, a clears sign they were no longer worth her attention, they no longer mattered.

"Kel, get her," hissed the Grand Inquisitor. Master Kelaan produced two golden spheres like the one he had given Beraan the day before. Beraan felt in his pocket for it and found it empty. *Did I lose it? No, maybe it was in the other robe, shit if he wants it back...* Master Kelaan dropped one on the grass. *Sure, it's not like it wasn't pure gold or anything.*

Before Beraan realized what was happening, master Kelaan threw the gold sphere at the noble Lady. She was walking towards her son Halus and his wife Samira when it missed her head by less than bandwidth. The sphere landed in front of her. Master Kelaan vanished in a flash of golden light and Beraan heard a little pop like a cork being pulled from a bottle. He reappeared right in front of lady Deretaan in another flash of golden light, this time Beraan's amulet decided to spare him any pain.

The music stopped as abruptly as it had begun.
"Lady Deretaan, I must insist you accompany me," said Master Kelaan
She stumbled backward in surprise, backward towards the edge of the plateau, for a moment Beraan thought she might fall off. Then caught herself and pointed her finger at his face.
"You!" she hissed, "how dare you intrude like this, don't you know who I am? A freak like you would remove itself from the company of its betters if it had any sense of decency."
I could be up there in a heartbeat, yeah crush my balls again while I'm at it.
"Yeah, yeah. I have heard it all before. Do you see that gate behind you? You are going to leave by it within five minutes, your only choice is if you walked upright or if I carry your unconscious body of my shoulder a sack of grain."
"Gurdas! Remove this... man."

Three guards in Deretaan green came running, they surrounded master Kelaan.
"Master Inquisitor," said the one behind him, he looked to be a little younger than master Kelaan and somehow thought a mustache was a good idea, he was wrong.
"We will escort you off the property, I recommend you do not offer us any resistance or we will use force."

Master Kelaan lifted his bare left hand. Accompanied by the feeling of his eyeballs being squelched, Beraan saw purple light gather in his master's hands. Flames blossomed from his finger, enveloping each like a burning branch. The flames didn't seem to affect his skin, Beraan squinted, he wasn't quite sure if he could see a silver sheen of light between the fire and his master's flesh.

"I recommend you three step aside, your Lady is coming with me," said master Kelaan's in the same soft yet firm tone he had used on the cursed in the woods and the carpenter's boy. The man drew his sword, his fellows pointed their spears at Beraan's master, they stood ready to run him through. Beraan couldn't see lady Deretaan's expression for she stood with her back to him and the others down on ground level, her voice sounded gleeful.

"What are you going to do freak? You, that bitch and her order have no business here and you damn well know it. Be a good boy and vanish again."
Master Kelaan looked down to Grandmaster Glinn.
"Get her down here," shouted the Grandmaster.
"Not going to happen," said the noble Lady, each word announced clear for all the guests to hear. Master Kelaan took a step closer to her, she stretched out her flat hand

towards him in a clearly over acted manner. "Touch me and you lose the arm, I've heard that's all the rage among you freaks right now."

The flames around his armed flared, bright as the summer sun. Lady Deretaan took another step back from him. Her foot found no ground beneath it, for one heartbeat time seemed to slow down for Beraan. Lady Deretaan hung in the air, toppling over backward, her left hand stretched out frantically reaching for pitches. Master Kelaan reaching forward with his still burning hand but only grabbing empty air. The Sentinel on the left side dashing forwards.

Time resumed its normal flow, the body hitting the lawn with a sick crunch. The Sentinel coming to a stop right in front of her. A scream drew Beraan's eyes to another plateau, Samira stood there right next to her husband, eyes wide and a hand clutched in front of her mouth.

"Mother!" shouted the young man. The Sentinel knelt next to her, putting two fingers to her lips. *It's only what, two meters? Two and a half, she could still be alive.* The Sentinel stood up and shook his head. The Grandmaster mutter some curse to Lord Beraan to understand.

"Murderer!" shouted another figure behind Halus Deretaan, his sister stepped forward and pointed her finger at master Kelaan and repeated with a quavering voice, "Murderer!"

"Sice him!" commander Halus Deretaan. One guard grabbed master Kelaan's shoulder, he freed himself with a twist and pushed the guy away, the second guard to his left side got a burst of flame licking at his beard. It caught, the man stumbled backward, he was either away of his direction or just lucky for he managed to stumble to the plateau's centre and out of sight. The sensation of a cold wind behind his pupils gripped Beraan as golden light radiated from master Kelaan's amulet and permeated his body. He grunted some inarticulate scream of pain as the guard he had pushed away rammed his spear through his right leg, he put his own weight behind it and the spear dug deep into the ground.

The leader of the three put his sword to Master Kelaan's throat.

"One wrong move and I take your head off, none if you understand. Good, now lose the fire," the purple light vanished and the flames with it, "Bedaan, get some rope."

What that guardsman couldn't see, what only Beraan could see was the golden light still spreading, slower than earlier but persistent. Centimeter by centimeter the energy move forward like clouds filling a blue sky, it even colored the spear stuck in his leg.

"Grandmaster," asked the Sentinel his master had called Jonder.

"Everyone, break through those lunatics and find a way up there, we will get him back one way or another."

"Wait," whispered Beraan, "he got this."

Grandmaster Glinn looked at him confused and more than a little disdain for the novice who had spoken unasked, then she seemed to comprehend what he meant, her eyes searched the ground for something. Beraan nodded towards the golden glowing sphere, one heartbeat there was grass and air, one heartbeat later master Kelaan knelt

there pressing a hand to each side of his wound. The redhead gripped the spear as if she wanted to pull it out.

"Don't! He'll bleed to death if you do that," said the Grandmaster, "unless you know a smithy nearby?"

The redhead shook her head.

"Inquisitor!" boomed Halus Deretaans voice "I, Halus of house..." he paused and looked around to his sister how gave him a nod, "Lord of house Deretaan charge you with murder! You Grand Inquisitor whatever your name was, I charge you with conspiracy to commit murder! Guards since them."

The captain and his men moved forward in formation, the gap between the plateaux had lent their position its strength, out in the open they would lose their advantage.

"Guards!" shouted another voice, it belonged to a young man wearing the same red as Samira, Beraan remembered him from the times their parents had made them play, Marius Kereston, Samira's older brother and heir to the Kereston house. "Assist them, justice for lady Deretaan!"

Shit.

More nobles picked up the call, their guards down on ground level hurried to surround Beraan and the others.

We are so fucked.

Chapter 24

Nobels on the plateaux broke out in a cacophony of shouts and orders, how the guards down here were able to make out which voice belonged to their lord or what they said, Beraan could only imagine.

One in three guards drew side swords, the rest rushed towards the outer wall after a second wondering what was going on, Beraan saw the wracks holding countless spears and poleaxes, longswords and even a few axes. The rhythmic stamping of feet drew his eyes back to the estate, Deretaan guards advancing in formation towards them flanked by the Kerestan men on each side, guards of every crest and color to their side. Beraan noticed that the motley men walked slower, less sure of themselves, some stealing glances over their shoulders to their master.

"Master?" asked Jonder the Sentinel.

"Orderly retreat," commanded the Grand Inquisitor.

The iron gate behind them closed with a bang, it reverberated through the metal for a heartbeat. Next to the winding mechanism stood five servants in orange cloth and of course, the weasels from earlier. He wore a smug expression. *That face is begging to be punched.*

The first men freshly armed took a position between Beraan's group and the gate.

"Lay down your weapons and surrender!" shute the new lord Deretaan.

On the Grandmaster's order, the Sentinel Jonder released a gust of flame. He moved it in a half circle between them and the approaching shield wall, melting the snow and burning the grass underneath black. Beraan had hoped it would leave a burning trench but to is dismay the burning grass went out immediately.

"Cross this line and die!" shouted the grandmaster addressing the men, most heads went up to their superiors, seeking new orders. *I bet every single one of them is praying right now, bagging their lords to change their minds. To be honest I'd shit my pants if I was one of them.*

"Master," said master Kelaan, grinding his teeth, "we can't win this."

"Of course we can, those are just men."

"We can't get out of this... without killing more of them. Fight and everyone loses."

"If we let them take us prisoner, the Order appears weak."

"So what? Better that then killing our way out," crocked master Kelaan.

Grandmaster Ginn turned away from him shaking her head, "You still don't understand how this game is played Kal. The Order has a mission and we can't fulfill it if the nation thinks us weak. Estra, can you turn the gate permeable?"

The redhead bit her lip.

"Not for all of us, but I can do one better, I can remove it."

How?

"Good, well get you to the gate and you open it."

"That won't be necessary Grandmaster, but if you could distract them."

Grandmaster walked towards the Deretaan guards, stopping at the line of Order house guards. She whispered something in a Sentinel's ear. He walked to the nearest guy with a spear, the man's clam impressed Beraan, he could have been out for a stroll. Orange-brown light emanated from his hands, permeating his black Sentinel robes. The

men he passed kept their eyes fixed on him. The one with the spear clutched it so hard Beraan saw his knuckles turn white, he stepped back when the Sentinel came close, pointing its steel tip towards his chest. The Sentinel showed his empty hands, touch the spearhead with his fingertips. Beraan saw the magic flow into the spear, down its shaft and passed the man's hand. The Sentinel stepped back. One bead of sweat rolled down the man's forehead. The spears shaft turned into water. It still looked like wood but it moved the way water would the metal fared no better.

The men gaped at him, the guy only stared at his hands, they were covered in a sheen of liquid wood. When the light dimmed the wood grew hard again. The man broke off the pieces enclosing his hand.

"That! could have been your face!" shouted Grandmaster Glinn.

Really? Can this guy affect living flesh? well, The carpenter's boy could so why not him too?

"You threaten ordinary men with your unnatural power?" shouted Halus, "you betray everything the Inquisition is supposed to stand for."

Hm... he is kind of right there.

"You are no better than the Highrule,"

Ouch.

A murmur rose among the noble guests, too many of them seemed to agree with him.

"Halus," she shouted, "we are leaving."

"Oh no, you are not." said Kalisa Deretaan her voice firm, she stood to her brother right and rested a hand on his shoulder, "we are way past that."

She nodded to her mother's corpse. Beraan saw his eyes wander the to the body, saw his expression change from enraged to mad.

"You!" hissed Halus, "you come into our house, murder our mother and expect to walk free?"

The redhead was doing just that. She glowed in red-orange light, Beraan winced under the pain of a needle poking his left eye. The light was the color Lira had used. *If she dropped her robes... that might be fun.* Unlike Lire the redhead had not only infused her robes and boots but her whole body, even though her boots seemed a different hue. Maybe a little more orange than red.

"Stop!" shouted Halus Deretann.

The redhead stopped and looked over her shoulder, she winked and continued walking.

"Stop her!" commanded lord Deretaan. The mixed Guards hesitated, there were no Deretaan men around them.

"You heard my husband," shouted Samira.

A young man in the Red Keresten Uniform barely older than Beraan left the line, walking towards the redhead. When he was three steps away he twirled his spear around, swinging its butt towards her face. Beraan could hear the wind's whistle where he stood. The redhead made no move to block or dodge. The wood reached her head... and passed through it. The guards gasped, some murmured curses, some stepped back, some traced ancient signs of warding over their chests. The redhead ignored them all walking on towards the gate.

The Keresten guard tried again and a third time, his spear found the redhead as elusive as air itself. Beraan smiled at the redhead's display. For the fourth he uses the spears sharp end, stabbed her in the back, the redhead stopped, judging by the tilt of her head she was looking at the spear tip judging out her chest, she shrugged and walked on. A few guards stepped back when she came close, more held their line, all of them pointed their spears at her. She walked through them, first the spears, then the men, always careful where she stepped. She made her way to the gate. The guards she walked through panicked, one fell to his knees praying, another ran away, a third rammed his spear through her only to injure a man in the second line.

"Ignore that one," shouted Halus Deretaan, "size the rest of them!"

The Deretaan guards crossed the blackened line. They advanced slowly, every step in the same rhythm, the ground trembled with every step. It would have been an impressive sight if they had not been pointing their spears at Beraan and his people. The Sentinel Jonder stretch out his arms wide as if to embrace the men, holding a blazing flame in each.

"Who among you is old enough to remember third Saraton?" He rasped, his voice sounded as if he spoke out of his throat. *Maybe he is sick or just old.*

A few of the older men looked at him, eyes wide.

The two fires flared, sending flames towards the sky, they blossomed in a large ball and drifted upwards in the shape of a mushroom.

"I remember," rasped Jonder, "I was there, I remember what we did to those Esalli."

Beraan watched the reaction, most of the younger men didn't seem to know what he was talking about, some of the older did, Beraan watched their faces turn white. *Oh yeah, they remember.*

"Look at that," shouted Kalisa Deretaan, pointing at her mother's lifeless body, "they come into our house and murder your lady, they believe themselves above the law, they and their unnatural powers. They pretend to be better than you, they pretend they can't be killed. But they are not above the law and they CAN BE KILLED. Justice for lady Deretaan."

"Justice," parroted her brother.

"Justice for lady Deretan," shouted Samira.

The other nobles joined in, first a single one, then another and within a few moments the entire company up on the plateaux shouted, "justice."

A guard in an ugly blue-brown uniform just to the right of the Keresten men picked up the call. Shutting justice he lifted his sword high above his head and charged an Inquisition guard. The guard stepped into the young man's clumsy attack and ran him through. The young man stopped dead in his tracks, the Blue pulled his sword out and stuffed him, by the time his body hit the ground the Inquisition guard was back in formation. Silence fell, no one made a single sound. Beraan was sure he could have heard a squirrel fart half a kilometer away.

He looked around himself, ten guards ringed him, master Kelaan and Grandmaster Glin, the Sentinel who had melted that spear was still outside the ring to Beraan's right. Jonder stood inside the ring illuminating the scene with his fire show. The eclipse was full by now, the stars appeared one by one, no one had paid it any

attention. To Beraan's left stood another Sentinel, a woman by her narrow frame, Beraan had no idea what kind of amulet she wore and how useful she would be. In front of them, the Deretaan man stood in a row of ten men three deep, two shields protected each row. Beraan counted twenty Keresten men and maybe forty or fifty guards of other houses surrounding them.

They have to know that they will die if they attack us? Right? On the other hand, they have the numbers on us. If there is any kind of god out there, if you can hear me, please don't let them be stupid enough to attack. The silence that seemed to stretch for eternity was pierced by Kalisa's voice, "Justice!" The men echoed her shout, they all charged.

Chapter 25

"Spare as many lives as possible," shouted the Grand Inquisitor.
Yeah, easy to say. Beraan pulled out a stone the size of an apple looking for the best target. Maybe I should kill the guard captain or even better Halus himself, he has always been a prick. *No, he is a civilian I can't just kill him, or... hm no I can't.*

Beraan looked for the captain but couldn't find him under all those shields, the Deretaan guards were locked in place by a constant stream of fire. To Beraan's right, the Sentinel glowed in orange-brown light, Beraan watched his robes dissolve revealing his hairy back, it was covered in countless scars. The man threw himself into the onrushing men, they clumped together and prepared their spears. The Sentinel ran right into the spear tips. The Men stopped as their weapons turned into liquid the second they touched his skin. Beraan saw with his magic sight how the glowing skin shared its magic energy with any object touching it. So many objects at the same time, infused in just an instant, that guy really did master his amulet. *Well, he looks like he did have a lot of time to do it.*

The Sentinel did not kill a single opponent, instead, he grabbed every weapon in reach and liquified it. The Men behind them had not joined the charge, they were busy trying to stab the redhead. She had reached the gate by now. Between those men and the one the Sentinel disarmed, four men were running towards Beraan, two Inquisition guards observed every step they took. The guards were only armed with swords, the men had the range on them, but so did Beraan. He filled the first rock with energy, enjoying the tingling sensation the energy made when it moved along his skin. Searching for the part of its thoughts that wanted to know how fast it should become motion, he told it to convert all of its energy at once. Then gave it the direction of the men and set it free.

The rock hit a man right in the chest, a cry of pain went up behind him. Beraan expected him to be flung backward, but he stood there not comprehending what just happen. The man touched the hole on his chest the size of his head. He fell over hitting the snow face first. Behind him another man fell to his knees clutching his right arm where a junk the size of his hand was missing, blood welled out the wound and streamed down his hand. One of the other four attacked stopped to stare at his two fallen fellows. The last man didn't even notice what had happened to them, he reached the guards and stabbed at the bigger man. He, in turn, danced backward as much as the limited space allowed, the attacker stabbed three, four times only piercing empty air. With his attention focused on the tall guard so skillfully eluding him, he did not notice the second come close enough to strike, her blade flicked in and out his chest like a viper biting its prey. The Man stabbed two more times at the big guard before he collapsed, the big guard picked up the spear and took his place in the line again.

Grunts of pain made Beraan turn around, on the left side knelled an Inquisition guard, a spear protruding from his back, the man who had run him through had paid for his success with his life, his body lay two steps away, a sword sticking in his chest. The Sentinel had dropped her outer robes, they lay forgotten in the snow. Beraan guessed she was master Kelaan's age, Beraan had ever seen anyone fight like that. She seemed to

know exactly what each of her attackers was about to do. The big guard a second ago had avoided each attack, she took that to another level. Beraan saw a deep purple haze around her right hand, her single amulet was doing something but he had no idea what. She caught a spear that should have skewered her like a pig, under her left arm and snacked her hand around it, a quick cut at the man and the spear was hers. She stabbed a man harassing another Blue guard in the side, spun the spear around, battered a sword away with it and stabbed its owner in the chest.

"You got some more of those," asked the Grand Inquisitor.

"Master?"

"Rocks boy."

"Of course."

"Good, let's find out how hard those shields are," she said with a wicked grin.

Beraan chose three rocks a little smaller than the first one and got in position to Jonder's right, he was still keeping the Keresten guards away, they had no protection against his flames, the Deretaan guards, on the other hand, came closer. *One after the other or three at once? That Sentinel infused dozens of spears at the same time, I can manage three.* Energy stream into the projectiles, like the last one he told them to use all their power at once. He gave them each their own direction one straight forward and the others angled off to each side.

The stone on the right went too high, it scratched the green paint off the shield held above the second man to the right. The one to the left went too low, it took the lower right corner of a shield. The rock must have wounded someone for the last shield and the spear to his left were dropped. The rock Beraan had shot towards the middle struck the round nob in the shield's centre. The man holding it was thrown backward taking the two men behind him down with him. The rock splintered spraying shards in all direction. Shields were dropped and men collapsed. Beraan was shocked at the sight revealed to him, the men were drenched in blood, the side facing the rock was littered with tiny wounds where rock shards had dug themselves deep into their skin. Every piece of the rock must have kept some of its energy. *Imagine what I could do if I used sand that way. A million tiny rocks ripping holes in flesh and bone. I would make them dance.*

Jonder released them from their misery, they screamed as a gust of flame washed over them, but only for a moment, then they fell silent, their body crumbling to ash. Beraan had created a hole, Jonderd widened it to a cleft. The orderly line the Deretaan man had advanced in broke into two clumps next to the Keresten guards. Another scream on the left side, another Inquisition guard went down. That left eight.

When Beraan found a second to look for the redhead he saw the wing of the iron gate glowing red-orange. When the glow reached up to the top, the gate fell. Beraan needed a moment to understand what he was seeing, the enormous iron mass moved towards the ground, the giant rusted hinges didn't have any effect anymore. In fact, he saw the metal fall through the hinge. They should have touched but they didn't, not even the ground itself could hold it. As the top of the gate's wing vanished below ground, Beraan shook his head. *Not bad, not bad at all.*

"The way is open, move," ordered the Grand Inquisitor. They were still twenty guards between them and the gate, half of them failed to bother the redhead, the rest tried and failed to protect their weapons from the bare chest Sentinel, he had disarmed half the spearmen and was making his way around towards the incredible Sentinel, dancing between her attacker's weapons like a leaf in the wind. The big guy with the spear and the viper discussed the unarmed men from any foolish acts of bravery.

On the left side, another Blue fell. "Oh shit," murmured master Kelaan. Beraan followed his gaze to four orange servants carrying something that looked like a bundle of sticks. "Johnder! Javalines!" Shouted master Kelaan. "I see them," rasped the Sentinel. The closest man vanished in a sea of fire, Johonder could only spare him a moment of fire, whenever he didn't batter one of the Deretaan shield blocks they advanced, the red Kerestan guards behind them. The servant's black corpse lay beside his burning bundle. The other three had been too far away, to their credit they didn't flee, they waited for a chance to deliver their packs.

We need to get out of here. Beraan felt in his big rock pouch, five left, in the smaller one he found twelve. Six in each hand he let his magic stream into them, gave each its own angle but this time he was careful to keep them on one level and told them to accelerate as fast as they could. He hesitated for a second, the beer back Sentinel was in his way. *Never mind, if I hit him he'll just dissolve the rocks. Beraan let them fly.*

Most of the men never had a chance to see what hit them. One moment twenty men stood, a heartbeat later they lay on the ground, some groaning some, desperately trying to stop their blood from spilling out, but most of them were silent. Only one man got lucky, he still stood spear in hand, blood spattered over his no longer white and blue uniform. He starred at Beraan, took three steps back, dropped his spear and ran out the main gate. He didn't even notice that he had run straight through the redhead.

"What the fuck was that?" Asked the half-naked Sentinel. "Me, let's go," Beraan helped master Kelaan up, he screams when he put weight in his wounded leg. "Boy! You did hear what the Grandmaster said about keeping fatalities low?" "Yeah, yeah, I did. Give me hand?" Beraan nodded towards master Kelaan the Sentinel kneeled down and grabbed the spear run through his leg. "Don't pull it out," Beraan said. "Shut it, boy." The Sentinel grabbed each side and before Beraan's eyes, the wood became as malleable as butter on a summer day. He removed both sides while the piece in master Kelaan's leg remained. "Kal! Sphere," barked the Grand Inquisitor, he handed her one and she threw it over the redhead's head onto the street. *Not bad for her age.* "Kel jump," master Kelaan vanished in a flash of golden light only to reappear on the street outside the Deretaan estate. "Alright, let's go"

"Javalin," shouted Jonder, Beraan turned his head and saw the Kerestan and what was left of the Deretaan guards throw a volley of what looked like smaller spears. The ones thrown by the men Jonder harassed flew in all direction, the others found flesh. One javelin passed through Jonder's flames and hit him in the chest, the tip stuck out the other side, it had a row of three back curved hooks in front. Beraan had only ever seen something like that to hunt large fish. Jonder fell to his knees, for an instant Beraan thought the old man was dead but he rose up again and with a Primal scream of pain and fury bathed the guard in burning winds.

The redhead had gotten lucky, or had been smart to keep her amulet active, three javelins stuck in the snow behind her in a way, that meant they would have hit her if she had been normal. The one stuck in her foot seemed to bother her somehow because she removed it very carefully. The big Blue guard pulled the Grandmaster towards the gate. She was reaching for Jonder shouting something Beraan could not understand. The shirtless Sentinel collapsed, out of the corner of his eye Beraan had seen him shield the Grand Inquisitor. In front of him puddles of wood and metal solidified again, his chest red with blood, Beraan counted seven holes that looked like an animal had taken bites. "Why didn't you melt them?" asked Beraan.
"Too fast, run boy."

Ha, lucky I didn't hit you with a rock. Jonder shouted something to the Sentinel women who had held their left side, she was carrying two of those throwing spears. Had she picked them up or did she catch them?
She retreated towards the gate with two Inquisition guards flanking her, one of them was the viper, the rest lay dead or dying all around him. A second later Jonder flooded the ground where they had stood with hungry fire. Beraan ran, he reached the gate before them. He had made it, he was out and off the Deretaan property. Halus Deretaan did not seem to care, his voice carried over the men's shouts.
"After them!"

Chapter 26

"Bring them to justice," shouted Halus Deretaan.

I bet you and would disagree on what exactly constitutes justice.

Estra turned around, looking over the field of corpses the idiot had sown. *This has to stop, if no one stops this we'll die or worse, we'll be forced to kill all those men. This lord Deretaan is not going to, is he? Someone has to make him stop.*

Estra looked around, a tall Blue guard was dragging the Grandmaster towards her carriage, the idiot was helping master Kelaan and the last Sentinel stood on the great gate's threshold flanked by two guards holding the line. *They don't have a chance. Someone has to make them stop. No one is going to. Then I will.*

Estra took a deep breath and pushed herself and all her clothes except her boots into full intangibility. With a pop, the world fell silent. Estra ran, passing the three defenders she darted between the guards of all colors. Most of them swung at her with no avail, they injured their fellows instead. Some men never even reacted to her except with a confused expression. *What was this girl doing in the middle of a fight, running the wrong way no less? I bet that's what they think.* Careful with every step not to let her feet touch anyone, they were the only way those men could do her any harm, the only part of her they could touch. Like that pesky javelin a moment ago which had nailed her shoe to the ground.

I doubt I will ever get used to walking or in this care running through another living person, it is just not right. People are not meant to be inside other people... a well... except in the fun way. Her cheeks felt hot, her lungs screamed for air. *Not yet.* Bursting out of the running guards Estra found herself right back where they had stood when everything went from shit to worse. Some servants in orange stood around the high lady's corpse. Her chest convulsed, sucking in air without her will, at least trying to fo no air would enter her chest. *Drop back to normal? Not, yet.* Six javelins hit her, Estra didn't feel a single one they passed through her and dug themselves into the snow. Estra found the bewildered looking men who had thrown them. *Now.* Estra releases the intangibility and gasped for air, took two deep breaths and became wind again.

Estra sprinted down the narrow corridor the guards had blocked when they first arrived. After three dead ends, four quick stops to breath and countless turns she came face to face with a locked gate guarded by two men in Deretan green. She saw the ground on the other side of the little portcullis was free so she ran towards it, gathered her momentum and jumped. Mid-air she pulled her shoes into full nonreactivity so they would pass through without hindrance and pushed them back towards normality after clearing the metal bars but before hitting the cobblestone again. Years of practicing move like that paid off. *If I had fucked that up I'd fall forever, into the deeps of the earth, me and that gate-door I sent there.*

A stairway behind another gate led Estra up, the gardens looked like little islands some connected by narrow stretches of earth, others by wooden bridges that arced up high in the middle for no apparent reason. Only two guards in sight, everyone else wore the orange of servants or their house colors, a motley assortment that put the wildest

flours beds to shame. Estra spotted her target, the couple in a mix of Deretaan green and Keresten red. The high lord and his wife, only the sister wore pure Deretaan colors.

Several servants tried to block her way, they were but smoke and shadows to her. They couldn't have known the only way to stop her and they didn't find by chance. Nor did they strike her when she dropped back to normality to take a breath, Estra was very careful about that. She made her way over one bridge, then another. The high lord and his wife never even saw her coming. Estra pulled out a knife and pushed it and her gloves halfway to normality. She grabbed Lord Deretaan's collar and pressed the knife to his throat. Through her left hand, she infused his clothes with inertial resistance. The wife tried to grab her but like the others failed.

When she was done trying Estra fell to normality so she could speak, and breath.
"Tell your men to stop."

She saw his mouth move but it didn't as if he was complaining.

Looking around for the nearest threat Estra judge the wife's brother and his decorative sword far away enough.

"Tell your men to stop!" she repeated.

"How dare you lay hand on me."

Estra looked over to the gate, to the two figures holding the line, no sign of the other Inquisition guard. The idiot shot another rock into the crowd, it cut the men in half.

"You will end the killing or I will end you, it is that simple!"

"You and your kind will pay for every life you took today," said the lordling.

Why can't you be reasonable?

"Do you want them to die?" Estra asked "all of them?"

"This is on you."

"Who cares who is at fault, they don't have to die, you don't have to throw their lives away."

He looked at her for the first time, there was only hate and bitterness in his eyes. Who could blame him, he just watched his mother die for no reason.

"You don't get it, Inquisitor," he spat out the title "I won't let you get away with this. first, my men will hunt down every single one of your accomplices, then I will call in the Deretaan troops."

"And the Kerestan army," his wife added.

"All our allies and we will crush your cult," his face was red with anger and a single tear ran down his cheek.

"The council won't allow that," said Estra.

"The council?" said the sister, all heads turned to her. Der voice dripped with disdain,

"look around you, a third of the council has just witnessed the Inquisition murder the Person speaking out against them the loudest. The inquisition has always waxed the council, after this, "she gestured to her mother's corpse, "you will find no support there."

"What about the cursed, how will you deal with them once we are gone,"

She shrugged, "one problem at a time."

"Get your peasant hands off me," hissed the brother, Estra ignored him.

"You can't be that stupid, unchecked cursed will burn this country down within a year."

"We will see about that," said the sister.

If reason doesn't work, force might. She looked the young house lord Deretaan in the eyes, they were blue like Teraan's, this boy could have been pretty if his behavior didn't make him so ugly.

"Tell your men to stop or I'll slit your throat right here and now."

"No don't please," pleaded the wife.

"Sh Mira, she is bluffing."

Am I that obvious?

"Are you sure, the Inquisition killed one Deretaan house lord today, why not make it two?"

"That was an accident, this would be murder," said the wife.

"Thank you for acknowledging that, the council will be pleased to hear that when we sort this misunderstanding out," said Estra.

"There is no sorting out," said the sister, "this only ends one way, with every single Inquisitor dead."

"Then I have nothing to lose by killing him."

Estra felt as if she should star him down or his sister to see who would flinch first. The problem was that she wasn't sure which one of them she had to focus on. The boy was house lord in name but something about the sister told her she was in charge here, or at least she wanted to be.

"Guard!" shouted the wife, Estra had almost forgotten her, "let them go."

The Keresten guards stopped advancing, the Deretens still moved towards the great gate but the mix of guards slowed down with the loss of momentum.

"Mira that was unnecessary," said lord Deretaan.

The Keresten men formed a defensive line, weapons aimed at the retreating Inquisition. The officers look back and up to the wife and her brother in red, he held up his hand and shouted, "stand down!"

Without the Keresten guard, most of the remaining men didn't seem too eager to face the last remaining Sentinel and the idiot.

"There, you happy now?" asked lord Deretaan, he sounded like a petulant child.

"Yes."

"What now?" asked the wife.

"Now lord and lady Deretaan are coming with me, they were summoned before the Inquisition and will testify to the action of the guard name Itan."

"Why are you still babbling on about that old drunk," asked lord Deretaan, shaking his head, "we all know he was just an excuse for this power play of yours."

"No, lord Deretaan, we really are here because of the cursed."

Well, at least I am, can speak for the grandmaster though.

The look on his face was priceless, he shook his head like a wet dog trying to dislodge an unwanted thought.

"You are lying," the certainty was gone from his voice.

Estra leaned forward and looked him straight in his blue eyes, pretty blue eyes.

"I watched that man rip my master's arm off, I watched that man reach into another man chest and rip his hear out. This man, Itan, is a monster, a cursed deserving of that name. I will not stop until he is caught or dead."

"I believe you," said lord Deretaan, "gods of old, I do. Hold the line!"

The remnants of the Deretan guard stopped.

"So that is the pretense the old hag gave you and your kind to kill her political opponents?" said the sister.

"Politics has nothing to do with it."

The sister laughed, a short and bitter laugh, "everything is politics in this city."

"That's enough Kalisa," said Lord Deretaan, "I'll go with them."

"You can't be serious, they killed Mother."

"That was an accident."

"No it wasn't, that Inquisitor drove her off the cliff, she would be alive if it weren't for them."

He looked down at the corpse again, anger flickered over his face but didn't find purchase.

"None of this should have happened. Mother should have..."

"Have done what?" she interrupted her brother, "bowed down to the Inquisition, come running as they call, like a good little dog? We are better than that, for one moment I thought you had a spine, I thought you had what it takes to lead this house, I see now I was wrong."

"You forget your place, sister," said Lord Deretaan

"Do as you please, Lord Halus," she spat, turned around and walked off the way Estra had come

"Where do you think you are going, you are coming with me," shouted Estra

"Let her go, she wouldn't be of help anyway."

"I told you she'll be trouble," said the wife.

"Not in front of others Mira," he watched his sister leave.

"Fine, let's go," the wife said.

"Go?"

"I'm coming with you," said the wife hands on her hips and chin up high, daring him to challenge her.

"Fine," said high Lord Deretann and looked at Estra again, "Inquisitor, you can remove your knife, there is no need for it."

Estra shifted her knife and let his clothes return to normal, he hadn't even noticed what she had done. Imagine his face when he found out he couldn't move.

Lord Deretaan led her back to the maze stopping here and there to apologize to his guests for leaving or issuing commands to the guards and servants. Estra kept a polite distance but overheard something calling for an emergency council meeting.

Crossing the maze took only a few minutes this time. Helps when one knows where she is going.

The many colored guards looked at her with unmasked hatred. A look around removed any doubt why. The dead were impossible to count on just a glance. There were the men killed by the idiot, those who had fallen to the Sentinel and the Blue guard's blades and of course, those who had been burned by the Jonder. Estra didn't know the men though Master Mira had spoken fondly of him once or twice. She picked up Jonder's amulet as she passed his corpse. No need to lose more of them, we have too few as it is. She also got the other Sentinel's amulet, it bestowed the same ability Master Mira wields or rather used to wield.

The Idiot, the Sentinel, and Grandmaster Glinn waited on the gate's threshold, a few guards still threatened them with spears but they looked more weary and watchful than aggressive.

"What did you do?" asked the idiot sounding amazed.

Estra smiled and shrugged, "nothing, just my job"

As everyone found their way into the carriage Estra looked back to the many colored guards surrounding the red field of snow.

They are alive because of me, they would be dead if I had left the Order. This is why I can't leave. This is why I have to stay. This is my place in the Order.

Chapter 27

"That is all I know about him," said Halus High Lord of house Deretaan, he leaned back in the comfortable chair without losing the pose of a noble. The chair and couch that had been brought in for him and Samira while Beraan only got a blank chair. Beraan had tried to keep his eyes off Samira, she had nearly recognized him, the first time they had met since his return to the capital. When their eyes met by chance hers linger longer on his face than he would have liked. *I can imagine how she feels, I look so familiar but she can't place how or why.*

"He served in your household all your life and you know this little about him," asked master Kelaan. He was lying back on the couch, his injured foot elevated on a footstool. *Is that red smudge on his bandages bigger than five minutes ago?* When they got to the Order house master Kelaan was rushed to the infirmary. It had taken five hours until the Grand Inquisitor and lord Deretaan finally set down to talk. Before that the Order house was in chaos, messengers run in and out, apparently, every sine noble house wanted to know what was going on, the merchants partitioned for lord Deretaan immediate release only to apologize for the misunderstanding and then demanding his release again.

Beraan and the redhead got a front row set to the hole play keeping the Deretaan's company, or guarding? They kept themselves busy writing letters as fast as they received them, the Grand Inquisitor was probably doing the same. When they finally got all together master Kelaan appeared on the couch in a golden flash of light with an accompanying headache. A furious brown-robed surgeon came five minutes later to bring him back since master Kelaan had been prescribed bed rest. The Grandmaster sent the Brown away since master Kelaan was resting and technically did not move.

"Yes master Inquisitor," Halus said, " he was one among hundreds of servants if I picked the first blue robe outside, could you tell me his or her life story?"

Ouch, he got you there master.

"Why would he kill your sister's maid girl?"

"I don't know master Inquisitor, why is he killing people in the first place?"

Malice, the joy of killing, he certainly did enjoy killing Midas, maybe he just does what cursed do.

"If we only knew... thank you lord Deretaan," master Kelaan.

Halus, Samira and grand Inquisitor Glinn stood up, she had been silent throughout the meeting, letting Master Kelaan speak for the Order. *We could have finished this hours ago if we hadn't wasted so much time waiting for her, or weren't we waiting for her at all? Maybe she stalled so Master Kelaan could be present.*

"The council meeting begins in an hour, is there a place for us to freshen up?" asked Halus.

"Of course" she waved the two scribes who had written down every word spoken. They looked bewildered at the order to show them to the bathrooms as if they were some lesser servants but when the Grandmaster says the Blue dose.

"All those death... for nothing," said master Kelaan the instant the door was closed.

"You really don't understand Kel, do you?" Asked the Grand Inquisitor. The redhead looked at her confused but Beraan knew what she meant, growing up in a noble house he had no chance but to learn how they think and apparently, how the Grandmaster thought.

"We have demonstrated the Inquisition stands above the noble houses, that Deretaan cow has been undermining us for years, all that lost ground we recovered in a single move. You did well Estra, capturing him and forcing him to come here in submission, I am proud of you."

"Ehm... thank you, Grandmaster," said the redhead.

"How many guards did we lose?" hissed master Kelaan, "what about Jonder and Milraan?"

The Grandmaster closed her eyes and spoke in a soft tone.

"Eight guards, I should have brought more, I made a mistake."

"So they could have been killed too?"

She looked at master Kelaan, the kindly expression she wore when talking to him was replaced by anger.

"Every life spent today was worth it. Those noble respect the Order again, even fear us. We made sure the next time two Inquisitor come knocking, looking for a cursed, the noble cooperate."

"Is that all you think about Glinn, the Order's image? It's power?"

"Of course it is, we have one job, only one, to keep the civilians safe, to protect them from the cursed. The more power we hold the better we can do that. It is for the good of all."

"I know ten people who would disagree. And those guards Beraan killed, I'm sure they would disagree too."

"The boy demonstrated the Order's power, no one will forget it anytime soon."

Neither will I.

"All he demonstrated was that we are no better than the cursed... or the Highrule."

"That's enough Kelaan, you forget who you are speaking to."

"I'm sorry, Grandmaster."

"No your not, jump back to the infirmary and stay there. Thak that sphere with you."

Master Kelaan nodded and after a second vanished in golden light, this time Beraan's amulet spared him any pain.

"What about us?" Asked Beraan.

"The proper way to ask that question young man would be, any further orders Grandmaster or ask if you are dismissed," said the Grand Inquisitor, the kindly smile back on her face.

"Understood Grandmaster."

"You both should freshen up, you will accompany me to the council meeting, just in case."

"Yes Grandmaster," said Beraan and the redhead.

He got up, bowed slightly and left the room when Beraan was about to close the door she added, "The two of you did well today, a sledgehammer and a scalpel."

Beraan couldn't tell what was so funny about that for it made the old woman laugh.

Half an hour later, after a way to short bath Beraan found himself sitting in a carriage again. Grandmaster Glinn sat between him and the redhead, Halus and Samira set on the other side holding hands. At first, Beraan thought they were presenting an act, just like his parents did in public but he saw the tension leave her shoulds and a little smile embellished his lips. You will marrie that Karasien girl once you are old enough. Father said that the day he died before the laughing man burned him alive. *Looks like you didn't get married off only to strengthen an alliance Samira, good for you.*

"Have we met before."

It took Beraan a moment to realize Samira had asked him a question, Halus looked him up and down, obviously curious.

"Last week, Lady Deretaan. I was one of the Inquisitors visiting."

"Yes I remember, I meant before that."

"I believe I would remember that."

Ha, I didn't even lie.

"Where are you from Inquisitor?"

"Actually I grew up not far from here," Beraan said gesturing out the window, they were passing through a particularly narrow set of buildings in the old harbor district on their way to the council meeting in the first Quater. Well, Beraan grew up here and the high quarter is not that far either.

"You have always been a terrible liar Doreel."

Oh shit.

"I'm sorry Lady..."

"Oh don't play dumb with me or I'll throw you in our pond again."

"Love?" asked Halus.

"Halus met Doreel Kessus. I never mentioned him before because he used to be dead."

The redhead broke out laughing, "you think the idiot is a dead nobble?"

"Not so dead after all how did you survive that fire and how did you end up in the Inquisition?" asked Samira.

"You can't seriously believe.."

Grandmaster Glinn silenced the redhead with a raised hand.

"I would like to hear that answered too," she said in her fake friendly voice.

"Grandmaster i..." Beraan began.

"Chose your next words very carefully young man, I don't enjoy being lied to."

"This is a miss under..."

"Stop Doreel," she said, "you should have realized that sooner or later someone might recognize you."

"You knew?"

"Of course I knew."

"How?"

"They day you were tested, the Inquisitor administering it was one of my best pupils, Mira. She felt shame from you and a great relief after I told you and the new students that they began a new life that day. It was not hard to figure out you were running from something and with a little digging Mira reconstructed the previews six months you spent on the street."

"Yeah, I remember that," said the redhead but fell silent when she earned a glare for the interruption.

"But why would you do that?" Asked Beraan.

"Do you know how many times the nobility, the clergy or the merchants tried to get someone loyal to them into the order? What did you think why an empath is present at every testing? Mira said you stuck out like a cow in a cornfield."

"I see," said Beraan he felt a headache setting in.

"Why would you throw your heritage away?" Asked Halus.

Beraan looked up at him, "you know what we are like, what would have happened to a fourteen-year-old heir of a greater house?"

"They would have torn you apart," said Samira, "as they did with your house's allies."

"Are you aware that there are two young men being presented as Doreel Kessus," said Halus.

"No, I was not," the headaches grew worse, "my beloved aunts fighting over my parent's wealth by proxy?"

Halus and Samira nodded.

"Let them have it, may the choke on it. Dorel Kessus died two and a half years ago in that fire. My name is Beraan."

"Why the Inquisition?" asked Samira, the grandmaster and the redhead followed the conversation with interest but kept silent.

Beraan shrugged, "they took me in when I had nothing."

"So you didn't do it to get revenge on the cursed who killed your family," asked Samira a tone that made all too clear that it was not a question.

"That too I guess."

"You know, if you want to reclaim your title and lands, we would support you."

"We would?" asked Halus, Samira squeezed his hand, "yes we would."

So that's what you are after Samira, placing me in a position of debt to you. reinstalling me as a head of a house as your ally, the puppet would be a better name for it. Sealing the alliance in marriage, I'm not going to marry his cunt of a sister.

The headache grew worse, it felt as if Beraan's head was too small for his eyes. Mother and father would have been proud to call you their daughter.

"No, thank you. I found my place in the Inquisition, I can do more good as an Inquisitor than I could ever have as a nobleman."

"I understand," said Samira.

Do you? Do you understand that I'm sick and tired of all the games and power plays, guarding every word, always wearing a mask, never allowed to be me?

"I'm glad you do. I can count on you to forget this conversation?"

"Of course," said Samira and Halus nodded.

They are both lying, they will wait until the knowledge of who I was is useful to them and then they will use it. They care nothing for me, I'm just a piece on a game board to them. I was supposed to become like that, would have been like that.

An ice-cold needle slowly drilled its way forward from the back side of Beraan's left eye. *For fuck sake, the last time I had a headache this bad...*

"Stop the carriage !" shouted Beraan.

"What? Why?" asked the Grandmaster.

"Driver! Stop! Right now!"

The clatter of hoofs slowed down before Beraan could speak the carriage side wall slammed into his ribs. Someone screamed, several someones. Wood broke appeared, the sound like thunder. An inhuman scream came from somewhere in front of them. *That could only have been the horses.* Beraan hit his head on the roof of the cabin.

The first thing Beraan could identify was the body of Grandmaster Glinn under him. It was far too bright in there. Looking up he found the roof missing. No, not the roof, the right side. The carriage rolled over and someone had removed the side. One moment later Beraan recognized the man standing on the carriage, holding a large piece of wood in his hand that had been a wall before and throwing it away like garbage. Black smoke that he could only see thanks to his amulet welled out from the centre of his chest and flowed along his body like morning mist over a lake. *Midas murderer.*

Chapter 28

"Help please," groaned Samira. She was lying on Halus, he must have hit the sidewall hard for her hand came back bloody after touching his head.

"I'll help you," said the cursed, "give me your hand."

"No, don't," Beraan wanted the shout but his words as an incoherent rasp followed by coughing.

He grabbed her arm, with one jerk he pulled her up to eye-level. Samira winced in pain. While standing on what remained of the carriage's sidewall, holding her up with one hand like a newly caught and still floundering fish, he reached out with his left hand and cupped her cheek.

"Oh little Kalisa, you little brat. I wanted to do this since you were born."

"Kalisa? I'm not..."

Crack

The sound ended her words. The man held her body over the side, her head turned the wrong way and let go. Beraan heard the sickening crunch of bone hitting cobblestone. She was less than an arm's length away, behind the carriage floor, gone forever, like Midas.

Beraan fumbled for his rock pouch, only two left, two big ones. He hadn't had time to go to the river and fill them again. He found one and got it out. The man saw the rock and smiled.

"Are you the one I met at the promenad? Yes, I remember, I gave you those hickeys. Have you come for more?"

Beraan let the rock answer for him, he poured a massive amount of power into it and told it to release it all at once. Whether by anticipating its trajectory, insane reflexes or sheer luck Beraan could not tell but the man moved his head out of its path just in time. The rock vanished into the eclipse black sky.

This can't be happening, not again. No! This time won't be the same. Beraan drew his sword. He had been practicing with it since he got to the Forge, he even had a few lessons before that but his parent didn't think it necessary, fighting, after all, was for the servants. There was no way he could use his sword to any effect in this enclosed space but that was not the point, it was still a sharp weapon. He held it up towards the man as the Motley men had held their spears only a few hours ago. If the man wanted to kill him, he would have to enter the passenger cabin and impale himself on it.

The cursed eyed him and his sword, he must have come to the same conclusion. He jumped off the carriage and out of sight. Beraan heard his heavy footsteps as he walked around it. He used the time luck had given him to check on the Grandmaster, the old woman was unconscious, he put two fingertips to her lips and nose. She was still breathing. Halus was too far away to reach, the question of his condition answered itself when he opened his eyes. They darted around without settling on anything, his face a pure expression of confusion. Another shard of ice drilled itself into Beraan's skull, this time through the right eye. The smoke rising from the man's hand grew thicker. The man's hand appeared up above at the carriage door, for a moment Beraan considers striking at his hand. The carriage shuttered, the wood around him moved again. *He is pulling it upright again.*

When the carriage was pulled halfway back to normal its own weight did the rest. Something broke as it righted itself. Probably an axis or both. The cabin came to rest at a slope with a jolt that threatened to throw Beraan outside the hole in the sidewall. He had grabbed a curtain out of instinct and held himself and the grandmaster where they were. Halus wasn't that fortunate, he was hurled out the hole and hit the street. The cursed didn't even notice, he stood there, hands to his chest, head towards the eclipse, eyes rolled back in his skull and a wide grin on his face. Spasmodic tremors shook his body. The black smoke around him diminished in thickness. When it was back to the amount it had when he killed Samira, his eye returned to normal and his stupid grin faded.

He recognized Halus, knelt over him and put both hands around his neck. He lived his head as if he heard someone speak, instead of breaking his neck he ripped his shirt in half. Halus eyes focused on his face, Halus murmured something Beraan could not understand. Whatever he might have said had no effect. The cursed man's right hand hit Halus' bare chest like woodsman's ax. Halus screamed, the smoke billowed out from him, flowed into and around the wound, everywhere around his body the smoke curled in little whirlpools.

Now! Now is my chance. Beraan pulled out his final rock, his last chance to kill this cursed. For Midas. The rock shot forward, whatever had warned him before warned him again but this time he had been busy, this time he was distracted. In one motion the man threw up his left arm to protect his head while ducking down. The rock struck the man's arm below the wrist, taking the hand clean off. Blood erupted out of the stump, the white bone stood out and two skin flaps hung loose around it. The cursed looked at it as if he couldn't understand what had happened. Smoke streams into the flesh, his eyes went off into the distance again, the blood flow ebbed and the skin under the smoke fused together to seal the flesh off.

What the fuck? Beraan touched the door on the other side and let his amulets power flow into it, with a thought the door ripped off its hinges and hit the building wall where it broke in half. He pulled Grandmaster Glinn out after him, the cursed still kneeling on the other side. Beraan looked around. *Where is the redhead?* Further down the road, he saw the driver in his blue robe holding one of the horses, the second horse lay dead in the street, it looked worse than Halus. A pang of betrayal went through him, Beraan was fighting and that guy had run away. No, who could blame him, he is just a Blue, that cursed would kill him in no time. *What now? I'm out of rocks. Hm...*

Beraan pushed both hands against the carriage side. Reaching for his amulet he let more power flow into an object than he had ever done before. The armored dummies didn't come close to the amount the carriage held. The cursed looked up, while Beraan's magic sight told him smoke was whirling around the remains of his left arm to his eyes the stump looked as if it was an old wound. An injury suffered a lifetime ago and long since healed.

This is for Midas. The carriage flew towards him, he held up both arms to catch it, no way to tell if he really thought he had a chance. When the carriage hit the man it

didn't even slow a little. It caught the man and swept him with it into and through the wall of what looked like a warehouse. A dust cloud streamed out of the hole Beraan had ripped into the building. Plastering crumbled off the wall where time had still left any. For a moment Beraan thought the hole stone wall might come down on him.

Beraan pulled Grandmaster Glinn over to the meager remains of a snowbank and rested her against it, not much had survived the last four days of sunshine but more would fall as soon as night fell again, spring was still far off. Putting her in the cold for too long might not be a good idea but at least it was soft. He waved the driver over to take care of her. *No idea if he can do anything useful but at least she not my problem anymore.*

Beraan walked over to the warehouse, the pain in his eyes did not vain it fact it grew even stronger. *He can't still be alive, can he?* He heard something like a grunt in the warehouse. Beraan peered around the holes edges, the room inside was empty, whoever owned this place was not using it. The scattered wood pieces that had been a carriage lay scattered everywhere with one big pile at the other wall. Beraan recognized the large sandstone blocks. That was the old city wall, the one the divided the first quarter from the old docks, this warehouse had been build against that city wall. There was no sign of the cursed's body. The pain in Beraan's eyes faded. He stepped into the warehouse, something hit him in the chest, hard. He stumbled backward, his foot caught on the little wall fragment still standing below the hole and fell. The impacted knocked the air out of his lungs, Beraan breathed deep only to be assaulted by more pain. *My ribs. Beraan touched his chest only to cause himself more pain. Yeah, at least one is broken.*

The cursed towered over him, he held a roof or support beam in his hand as if it was a wooden practice sword. His clothes were shredded, nothing remained below his knees and above his waist. Even worse was his skin, it was more white with scars then its normal color. While there was still bloodstains on his clothes the wounds themselves looked as if there were old as if they had heald a long time ago like the stump of his left arm. To Beraan's magic sight the man was clothed in black smoke, it erupted from a point above the man's sternum and flowed like mist along his limbs only to disappear at his feet and fingertips. Without the man's clothes, Beraan saw the source of the smoke, it was a silvery metal sphere with the rough shape of a human face. Beraan could see it in his magic vision, the smoke hid it. *Is that an amulet? Is he one of us?*

Chapter 29

The carriage shuttered, Estra felt herself being lifted off her seat and thrown towards the sidewall. Without thinking she reached for her amulet and let its power flow into her body and her clothes. All sound vanished with a pop, the wall hit her face and she passed through. Before her legs had even passed the wooden wall the cobblestone shot up. Esta pushed herself towards normality but her legs were still inside the wood. While air and water let her switch back to normal, solids did not make way for her. As long as even one part of her was in a solid, she was stuck wherever it was she went when using the intangibility.

She held her hands out to brace the fall and pushed her gloves halfway back so they would touch the cobblestone. She was too slow, her hands disappeared in the cobblestone. *Oh shit.* Esta saw the stone come closer, she pushed her hands towards normality but the stone would budget, one heartbeat later, her head dove into the ground, leaving her in darkness.

I am dead this is it, how will I die? Suffocate? No, it gets warmer deeper down, ill burn, or boil? Does heat affect me when I'm intangible? I need to test that, yeah right I'll suffocate first. She was still trying to push her gloves back to normal when her right hand hit a pocket of air or water. She balled her fist inside the glove. The glove hit the ground and yanked her to a painful stop, she almost slipped out of the glove. In darkness she reached up with her left hand, the energy in her left glove reacted, it also went half way back to normality. *I used to love the high bar when I was little, this is no different, except if I fall I die.*

Her breath running out, she swung her leg up and sure enough, when her foot entered the pocked she managed to push her boot half way to gain another point of purchase. With that, she heaved herself upward, the instant her body cleared the solid rock she shut the intangibility amulet off. Her outer rube still hung down in the ground below her, she let it drop off and fall down forever. *Maybe it finds that door.* Estra tried to breathe and got a mouth full of disgusting tasting liquid instead. She pushed herself off the ground in the direction she assumed was up, there was no way of knowing if there was air but what else could she do. *Lay down and die, fuck no.*

Estra broke the surface, hit her head on the ceiling and took a deep breath. She regretted it instantly, it stank of shit and piss, but it was air. I'm in the sewer system, the one under the old docks that has been broken for years. *I fell no longer than a few seconds, how deep can I be? Two or three meters? Also, I must be above the rivers water level or this would flood. How incredibly lucky of me to hit a sewer line. Maybe there are kind gods after all, or maybe they were built on purpose under the roads? Girl focus, how the fuck do I get out of here?*

Estra swam a few meters one way until an unidentifiable mass blocked her way. Maybe tunnel caved in and blocked the switch off. She touched it and felt something slimy, she pulled her hand back. *I hope that was moss.* She turned and tried the other way, the further she went the higher the ceiling rose, after another minute she felt the

floor under her feet. She waded through the muck, breathing through her mouth, the few times she got a wif into her nose she nearly threw up.

Estra felt her way forward by touch, the stone walls were smooth with a regular pattern of larger and smaller blocks. She rounded a corner, the sewage reaching up to her knees when she saw a shimmer of light reflected in the "water" surface. The light came through a shaft just wide enough for both elbows to touch the walls with a rusted ladder set in the outer wall. Estra gripped a rung and pulled. Looks stable. Halfway up the metal shrieked, Estra climbed up the next rung, another shriek. Very slowly Estra grabbed the next rung and put her weight on it, it held. The earth around her shook and groaned, from above her she heard a sound like thunder accompanied by a deep rumble. Dust trickled down the shaft. When the disturbance was over Estra climbed up to the next rung, the ladder broke. Her hand and feet shot out to the side, slowing her descent. She came to stop hands and feet pressed against the sides of the round shaft, down below her she heard the clatter of the iron ladder. *Close one.*

Estra pushed and pulled herself up, crawling upward meter by meter. She ignored the ladder when she reached it. I'm not trusting you again. She had to, in the end, to get enough levered to push the metal plate covering the shaft up, she had to put her feet and weight on the ladder. She tested the rung carefully before risking it. She pushed against the covering, it didn't move. *Fuck. I'm an idiot too, who am I to let a solid object stop me?* Just like before gloved hand first and then the rest. With one great push she heaved herself through the plate, starlight welcomed her back to the land of the living.

Estra crawled onto the cobblestone road. It was still covered with a little snow, even though it was an insult to call that substance snow, to the snow at least. Estra looked around, there was a sheen of dirt and... other things and the cobblestones, it was not as pronounced as it was in some alleys since this was the main road but the muck of the old docks street was unmistakable. *So I'm not that far away from the other.* Estra heard some commotion from somewhere down the street and around a corner, some people dressed in orange or brown Raggs came running from there. *What has the idiot done this time?*

Rounding the corner Estra saw the idiot laying on his back right in front of a building with a giant hole in its side. Above him stood a barechested man Estra would never forget, his graying hair and grazed beard were burned into her memory. Teraan's murderer. *I'm going to kill you.*

Chapter 30

Beraan watched the cursed raise the wood piece far above his head, it would have taken two or three men to carry that thing, he held in one hand like a club. "I would have let you live but you had to piss me off. And he says you are good food."

Beraan was out of options, he had dropped his sword for all the good it would do him now. He was out of rocks and nothing was in reach to shoot at him. I'm dead. No, I'm not going to die here. *If I could get close I could put all the power the amulet can give into his clothes and sent him straight up, let's see him come back from that. ... If he ha clothes left, those strips are going to rip off if I try that.*

I have to get away and find something to kill him with. I can't use it on him but I can use it on me, just not the pants this time. Beraan let the amulet's energy flow into his shirt and glanced down the road. He pressed his arms against his chest so the shirt wouldn't peel off and fly away. It worked, Beraan has dragged down the road behind him he saw the oversized club hit the place where he had just been. It broke apart, the crake echoing down the streets. Splinter sprayed from the fracture, two hit the man in the chest. He pulled them out and the wound sealed itself, leaving only a line of blood and a white scar.

The energy Beraan had put into his clothes ran out, its glow faded. Beraan stood up and dropped his outer robes, they were wet from his slide. His little trick had carried him twenty or thirty meters from the cursed or whatever he was. When the last scar closed and the black misted stopped whirling around the wound, his eyes focused on Beraan. The lock of stupid ecstasy left his face. He picked up Beraan's fallen sword and started running, toward Beraan.

In the corners of his eye, Beraan saw people running away in panic. He couldn't spare them any attention. The cursed was coming. *Come on there must be something I can use.* There was nothing, the street was empty except the blue dragging Grandmaster Glinn into an adjacent building, the living horse trodding away and the dead one on the street, right next to them the bodies of Samura and Halus, his hand reaching for her. Beraan hadn't noticed that before. *I can't use my amulet on living flesh but ... no, I can't do that.* The cursed was halfway to him, Beraan took an involuntary step back, the wet robe squished under his foot. The word of his weapons instructor back in the Forge came to him, everything is a weapon if you know how to use it.

Beraan picked the robe up and pushed the power of the amulet into it. The robe shot away towards the cursed. He didn't even try to dodge it, after all, it was just a piece of cloth to him. The robe struck his chest and belly, driving him back for a moment. He dug his feet in and pushed against it. Beraan's robe slowed down, the black mist grew stronger and the robe stopped. The cursed held makeshift projectile in place while its glow faded.

Behind him, Beraan saw someone walking up on the cursed, careful to make no sound. Her hair was a dirty brown and just a little red stuck out on one side, her robes

didn't show a single square of the grey they were supposed to be. *Where the fuck have you been? At least I don't have to deal with him alone anymore.*

"Hey, you!" Beraan shouted, "why don't you just die?"

The last glow faded and the cursed threw Beraan's robe away, now only the cloth it was made of. He didn't answer, his gaze was far away. *Did he even understand me? What is this? The darker the smoke gets the dumber the guy looks?* He walked towards Beraan and stopped, the smoke receded and he seemed to recognize Beraan.

"I would have let you live but you had to piss me off and it is hunger."

The redhead came closer, she pulled a knife out. Not even Lira could hit him at this distance. *Buy time, distract him.*

"It? What it?"

He didn't answer instead he attacked, sword in his one good hand he stabbed at Beraan. Beraan jumped back and let a little energy flow into his shit and sent it backward. His magic assisted jump bought him a few seconds. *I can't keep doing this, I lead him away from the redhead, on the other hand, what can she do?* The last time she faced this guy her master lost an arm and her Third got killed. *I could keep doing this, he would never catch me, I could run like a coward as I should have done at the promenade. No, I'm not running. Last time I was angry, last time I wanted to kill that cursed. This time is different if I don't kill this guy who else will? I am not running.*

Sideways then. Beraan jumped to one side and let his magic push him further. The cursed ran after him. *Saints he is fast.* When Beraan's feet touched the ground he pushed himself off again to his right. *This is it, redhead, I hope you're ready.* The power in Beraan's shirt faded, the motion stopped, Beraan landed on his feet and fell into the ready stance his instructors had drilled into him. *This is it!*

The cursed came close sword up high as he had held the club, Beraan's instructors would have called that a mistake, leaving himself open for attack but this guy knew Beraan posed no threat. Beraan got ready to punch him, pushing energy into his glove and swinging in his direction. Beraan punch at his face, the sword cut down at him. Beraan's fist was yanked towards his face, the pull so strong he could not keep his finger closed, the glove peeled off and kept on flying towards his face, passing under his descending arm the glove hit him in the jaw. Beraan heard the bone crack. In pain or surprise the man let go of his weapon, the blade hit the cobblestone behind Beraan after passing only finger's width above his head.

The cursed stood still, smoke whirling around his jaw, Beraan saw the dent his gloves had left behind, as he watched the bone bent out and his normal face was restored. *What does it take to kill you?! How about I cut off your head? See if that does the trick.*

The one moment standing still was exactly what the redhead needed. One knife passed behind the cursed head. *He didn't even notice it.* The second dug itself deep into his side above the kidneys. *He definitely noticed that one.* He grunted in pain and ripped the blade out. *Knifes redhead? That's it? To be fair she can't know they are useless.* As with even injury before the mist swirled around it and... no, this time it didn't heal.

Instead, a red circle around the wound grew. Instead of closing the wound crusted over and bulged out until it broke open and green-yellow pus bubbled out.

Redhead, what the bloody fuck have you done? The cursed fell to his knees screaming in pain clutching the wound while ever more puss flowed out of it. The smoke grew darker and he fell silent, more smoke whirled around the wound and seeped into the angry flesh but the wound grew even bigger. *The more the black smoke tries to heal it, the worse the wound gets.*

Beraan turned away, the redhead was walking toward him, sword drawn. The wind blew a wif of her his way, Beraan gaged, biting his teeth to keep his last meal in. "What's wrong?" The redhead asked, keeping her eyes on the cursed.

"It's disgusting."

"Yeah, so much puss, I have never seen anything like it."

I was talking about you.

"Where have you been?" Beraan managed to keep the accusation out of his voice.

She shrugged, "jumping out of carriages, diving in stone and swimming in shit."

"I see."

And smell.

"What did you do to him," asked Beraan

"I saw him heal those two splinter wound, I hoped an infected wound would refuse to head but this..."

"Smart move."

"Where is the carriage?"

"I hit him with it... it didn't kill him though."

She nodded and walked around the cursed. He was still looking towards the sky, eyes rolled back into his skull. Expressions of pain, bliss, and sorrow took turns. The redhead wiped her sword twice each side on her stained robes, coating the blade in... coating it. She set its tip to the back of his neck, he didn't react.

A tear rolled down her check.

"For Teraan," she whispered. Her hand trembled, Beraan waited for her to push the blade down, to give him a quick death. She didn't, every time she took a breath Beraan thought this time she would push, she didn't.

"What wrong," he asked.

"This is wrong, I can't do it."

"He killed Midas and Teraan and who knows how many others, it is alright, you can kill him."

This world a better place without him.

Her grip tightened around the hilt.

"He killed Teraan, he took him from me," she whispered to herself and for a moment Beraan thought she was going to do it, then her grip softened.

"I'm sorry Teraan, I can't do it, not like this, not unarmed, not in cold blood."

Beraan reach for her shoulder, she flinched when he touched her but let his hand settle.

I'm so gone burn that glove.

He squeezed a little, "It's alright, I understand."

Beraan took the sword hilt and she let go if it. She pulled up her left sleeve to wipe her tears away but after seeing it, thought better of it.

Beraan rammed the sword into the man's back.

"You shouldn't have done that," whispered the redhead.

Just because you can't kill him, doesn't mean I can't.

"Maybe but you saw what he can do, there is no way we can risk bringing him in alive.

You know I'm right."

"Yeah... maybe... But..."

"No but."

Beraan pulled the sword out, it left a gaping hole in his shoulder. That black smoke tried to heal that wound but it festered like that knife wound in his side.

"What does it take to kill him?" Asked Beraan.

Beraan swung the sword at his neck, it cut deep but didn't sever the head as he had planned. The cursed screamed without waking, his eyes glazed over. Beraan swung the sword again, this time infusing it with a little energy and released it the instant the sword hit. The head came off and the sword moved on, ripped itself out of Beraan's hand and hit the building. The body toppled over forward and the head flew a few meters landing in the pile at the rods side, blood spilled out of it creating a patch of red snow.

Epilogue

"I think its an Amulett." said the idiot.

"Are you sure?" asked Master Mira, her face was finally getting its color back.

They all set in Grandmaster Glinn's office.

She should keep the couch.

"Yes, master or at least something like one."

She held the orb in her left and closed her eyes.

"I don't feel anything," she handed it master Kelaan on the opposite end.

"I can't feel anything either if it is an amulet, it doesn't respond to me." said master Kelaan, to her surprise, he handed it to Estra. She tried to connect with it the same way she did with her two amulets, while they shared their power willingly, almost eagerly, this thing was just a ball of metal. It had as little magical properties as the table or the chair she was sitting in.

"No, nothing, no response, not even the faintest hint of power," she gave it to the idiot.

"No thanks, I tried it already, it's not working for me either."

"Then what makes you so sure it is an amulet?" Asked master Mira.

"Master I have a sensors amulet attuned to magic. When I see one of our amulets in use, it looks to me like you are bathed in colored light. This thing, on the other hand, took the form of black smoke, it emanated from that amulet the same way light spreads out from an amulet."

"I see," said master Mira.

"And his injuries heald at an incredible rate," said Estra.

"Spead up recovery is normal for amulet users," said master Kelaan.

"It is?" asked the idiot a second before Estra could.

"Yes," said Master Glinn, "we don't advertise that to outsiders, some people might get it in their head that they need one. You never heard about it either, understood!"

They both nodded.

"You will find that bones heal in three months instead of six, cuts depending on how deep they are, heal within a week and your face looks better already. But not to the extent you described."

"The two of you see the implications," asked the Grand Inquisitor.

"There could be more amulets out there," said master Kelaan, "in the wrong hands..."

"All hands but our own are the wrong hands Kel," finished the Grandmaster for him.

"Only if this even is a kind of amulet, if not it means there is a new kind of cursed emerging," said master Kelaan

"As if we hadn't trouble enough."

"Master?" Asked master Kelaan.

"The Deretaan girl or should I say the new Lady of house Deretaan has called a council meeting to discuss the events of last eclipse and the death of her brother. Quote,

"Validity of the account of her brother and sister in laws death provided by the Inquisition," end quote. That little bitch. There are rumors going around saying we killed him and blamed it on that cursed."

"House Deretaan, it all leads back to them," murmured the idiot. *Maybe he is not so dumb after all, just maybe.*

"We will keep an eye on them," said grandmaster Glinn, "for now Mira, your carriage is ready."

"Master?" asked Estra.

"I told you a while ago, I am leaving for the Forge, the doctors cleared me to travel and I'm taking the amulets of the fallen Sentinels with me and pass them on to the best students, as well as my own."

"I see," murmured Estra.

"Have Midas' amulets been found?" Asked master Kelaan.

"No, no trace of them," answered the Grandmaster.

More wrong hands.

"How many are left?" Asked master Kelaan.

"Enough. What we are missing is people to use them."

"Are the recruiting numbers dropping again?"

"Not again, they are still dropping. They have been declining for the twenty years. The numbers of cursed incidents have risen. Which leads me to the next point, Kel you won't be returning to Ebanil, I need you here."

Master Kelaan closed his eyes in silent resignation, the idiot groaned. *Master Kelaan seems competent enough but that also means the idiot is sticking around.*

"I suspected as much, I'll need a second."

Grandmaster Glinn looked at Estra.

"Fortunately I got a lonely second to spare."

The idiot as my Third, do I have to. I'll be instructing him, combat training... hm... this might not be so bad after all, he does deserve a harsh training session for the way he sniffed when I sat down. I bathed three times until I got the smell out of my hair and another two for good measure and still I sometimes think I catch a wive of that repulsive smell.

"As you wish, master."

Grand Inquisitor Glinn rose and the rest followed, master Kelaan used a cane that threatened to break in half every time he put weight on it. After they said their goodbyes Estra accompanied master Mira to her waiting carriage.

"So this is the last time we are going to see each other for a while," she gripped the door handle but didn't open.

"Probably," said master Mira.

"Are you finally going to tell me?" Estra asked.

"No."

"Why not?"

"How many times did we have this conversation? Your mother is dead, she died in the Orders service. That is all you need to know, that is all that matters."

"How did she die? When, where, what was she doing? I have so many questions."

"Oh Estra, let the past be passed, the present is all you need and the future, that is most important of all. Why keep looking for something that will only bring you pain."

Because she is my mother and I love her, loved. I will find out what happened to her.

"In a few years I'll make Master, will you tell me then?"

"No, but you will have the right to read the reports and see for yourself. I assume you decided against leaving the Order then?"

"I have decided to stay, you were right, I can do Good here."

She smiled and under all frustration, Estra couldn't help herself but smile back.

"Keep an eye on that Beraan."

"The idiot, why?"

"Kel says the boy has potential and when Kel says that I believe him but he worries me," said master Mira, "there is something in his eyes that reminds me... well it reminds me of worse days. He kills too easily."

"I checked the rules and regulations, he acted within the Orders rules."

"Of course you did."

"Also Grandmaster Glinn commended him."

"Yeah she would, those two are too alike, watch her too. And keep Kel safe, he is a good man and a competent Inquisitor, you can learn a lot from him"

"How well do you know him?"

"Estra, what are you implying?" she asked in mock outrage, then her expression turned bitter, "he was like a big brother I never had, then he married my sister and became my brother in truth. And after that... everything went to shit."

A horse neighed and Estra opened the door for her master.

"Take care of yourself," said master Mira and waved her to close the door.

"I will, master."

Thank you for everything.

Walking up the stairs Estra found master Kelaan and the idiot waiting. They stood there in silence, watching the carriage cross the plaza. After it disappeared among the buildings the idiot said, "so we're stuck here."

"Yeah," said master Kelaan.

"I hate this city."

"Me too."

"Why?" asked Estra.

"Too many painful memories," said master Kelaan.

"Same," said the idiot.

Master Kelaan took a deep breath and released it with a soft snort

"None the less we'll make the best of it, Beraan your training has fallen short since you were put into my care and that is unacceptable."

"But my ribs are bruised, the surgeon said..."

"Ah, you'll be fine. Estra do your duty as my second and go practice with him, I'll join you later."

"Yes, master," he ground and looked her up and down.

"If you think I go easy on you... you're wrong," said Estra.

He grinned a stupid smile Estra wished she could wipe off with her fist, "Let's see who has to go easy on whom."

"Your face has such nice shades of yellow blue and green, shall we match your arms?"

"You can try, as long as you stay downwind from me."

"Arms and legs."

This is gone be fun.