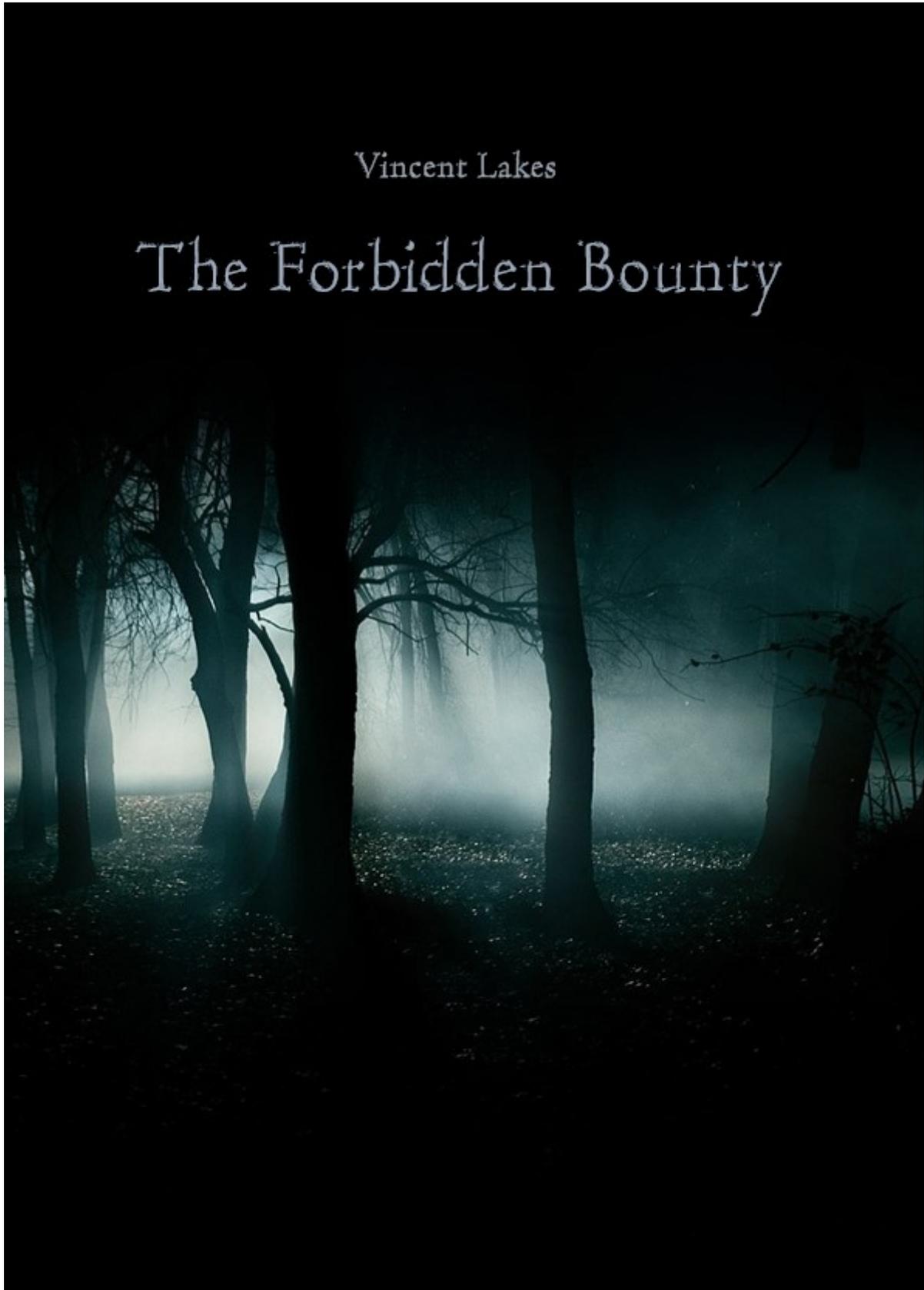


The Forbidden Bounty by Vincent Lakes



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by

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1

The Tale of Drua Cardioval

The cozy softness of the crackling fireplace together with the dreamy candles created a mesmerizing atmosphere in the main hall of the inn. But instead of the usual busy chatter, there was only one voice talking that night. A lore teller had arrived to amuse the people of Crisval, bringing the tales and legends of old for his audience to enjoy. It was a rare opportunity, for such traveling entertainers had disappeared almost entirely since the beginning of the darkness that gnawed the land of Valdor, just like the rest of Belmora. This old man, however, was still rambling, still passing the riddles and mysteries of old through skillfully built thrilling stories.

The crowd, about thirty people altogether, listened intently. Some of them enjoyed the self-made dark beer of Master Kendraf, the Darfin innkeeper from Khaldur, who brewed it by using an ancient recipe of his ancestors. Those who did not care for the beer had a mug of rich and nice honey mead, also made by the master himself. Nobody really knew why Kendraf had arrived to Valdor, for it was quite rare to meet a Darfin around those parts. Everybody liked Kendraf in Crisval though, and not least because of his unmatched skill in smithing. Whoever needed their tools, bridles or weapons fixed, Kendraf was the Darfin for the job. But despite the more than adequate skill in smithing, his true love was the Two Moons Inn, the gathering place of the villagers since the day it was bought by this tenacious man who possessed a flaming desire to renovate the old and rotten warehouse into a comfortable and flourishing roadside inn. Needless to say, he did an amazing job with it. And because of his open and cheerful nature, no one really cared about his past, not even the lurkers who always sought reasons to betray others for coin or bread. He was simply too popular to be touched by filthy rumors and accusations.

"The leader of the Unseen, none other than the great Drua Cardioval, ordered the other three mystics to act quickly and hide the grimoires they had in their possession, for if they did that successfully before the Inquisitors arrived, they could have a slight chance of staying alive a little longer." The lore teller glanced at his audience and noted how deeply concentrated and well captured they were by the story. Smiling cunningly, he continued.

"But their time had ran out. The wooden gates of the cavern came down as the pale wraiths broke through without facing much challenge. The small cavern offered no safety for the terrified mystics who knew the fate that waited for them if the dreadful hand of the Ironcrown could catch

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them. They had to run, but there was nowhere to run to. And like being mere air for them, the Inquisitors ignored the weak defenses Drua had been able to carve on the cave walls during the short time they had dwelled at the hidden cove. Their attack was swift and ruthless. Figures in grey robes and cloaks, cold blades exposed, ashen and cracked faces frozen in colorless grin - the Inquisitors - the undead servants of Azaron the Fallen. And quickly they overwhelmed the lesser mystics, but Drua Cardioval was stronger than most mystics of her time. She fought with the flare of her enchanted staff, but the shining of the crescent-shaped jewel could not harm the dead as the light of Awen flickered and died before them. Finally, after a furious battle, the Inquisitors defeated and captured Drua, but it took four of them - four of ten to bring her down. A strong and powerful mystic she was, and so much more she could have been had the times been better for those with the secret knowledge." The old man paused for a while to have a sip from his mug, then he coughed lightly and turned his grey eyes at the silent crowd.

"She was wrecked!" he suddenly exclaimed, causing the people to sigh in imminent excitement. "The Garkin guards raped her over and over again in the dungeons at Sannath, for she was a woman in her prime, and once they were done with her, a stake was built in the middle of the town square where she was purified by fire. And slowly she burned, able to smell her own reeking blood, hear the crackling of her skin, feel the immolation of her limbs. And as she screamed out her bottomless pain and distress, the people of Sannath cheered and laughed. They threw rotten vegetables at her, for they were too scared to show compassion, too scared for their own hides. While the horrid atrocities took place in the middle of the town square, the Inquisitors watched from the shadows, silently like mist that rises from the river in the morning. When the fire finally died out leaving nothing but a pile of ashes and blackened bones, they left quietly without anyone even noticing. The people refused to see or hear the insanity in the actions of the Ironcrown. The Garkin invaders have secured absolute control over the land, and even the good King Praed Arnan is strengthless against the ongoing oppression." Smoothly the lore-teller had changed into present tense, which had not gone unnoticed by everyone in the room.

Restless murmur rose among the people as they were beginning to wake from the mesmerizing effect of the lore-teller's voice, realizing that what the old man had just said was considered treason by the current law. But the lore-teller did not seem overly worried. Keeping a mysterious and sly grin on his face, he raised his hands, momentarily silencing the room with this dramatic gesture, which gave him enough time to speak.

"I'm almost finished, but please, hear the last words of the story and make what you will out

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of it. Drua Cardoval was burned at the stake on that dark day, but the Inquisitors were unable to recover any writings from Thorncove. Does this mean that all hope has been buried forever, or that it's merely waiting to be discovered? I will let you all be the judge of that."

"Traitor!" someone from the crowd yelled daringly, and many others answered with accepting hollers. Chaos took over the Two Moons Inn as most of the people, confused and startled by the disturbing tale, were glaring around nervously in case there were lurkers around.

Master Kendraf was glad that no Garkin soldier happened to wander into the inn while the old man had been telling his story, for it would have been certain imprisonment, and he did not think a man at such high age could bear it very well.

"Lorinel, take your children and come with me," he said firmly to a woman who had been sitting in the back, listening to the story with her son and daughter. She was an old friend of the innkeeper, a harmless farmer who had been selling Kendraf a lot of their produce over the years, thus helping him greatly at keeping the inn running smoothly. But now there was trouble on the way, and he did not want his friend to get hurt in the heat of it. And as he guided her and her children toward the kitchen, he happened to glance at the fireplace where the lore-teller had been sitting, but he could not see the old man anymore, almost as if he had vanished away like a puff of smoke rising from the chimney.

"Come Celenth, Sarakin, we must follow Master Kendraf," Lorinel rushed, herding her children impatiently in front of her.

"Why we're in such a hurry, Mom?" Celenth asked while they sneaked out of the backdoor into the dark, drizzling night.

"I will tell you later. There could be serious trouble here soon, and I don't want you to get hurt."

The girl knew better than that, she knew of the law and how the tale she had just heard violated it shamelessly, but in her sudden, fearful state she had trouble connecting those two things. Celenth wiped the ravenblack hair off her face as she followed Kendraf through the backyard and into the bushes standing in between the yard and the narrow village road. The boy, wearing a thick black cloak with a deep hood leaving his face completely in the shadows, never spoke, but followed closely in the footsteps of his sister.

"You should be able to get home from here," the Darfin said quietly.

Lorinel nodded moderately. "Thank you, Kendraf. Are you going to be safe?"

"I think so," he pondered. "There were no Garkins at the inn, but I don't understand what

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that old man was thinking; they're not supposed to tell stories of the darkness we live in."

"Whatever the reason, we must live with it. I pray dearly that no evil falls upon you because of it," Lorinel whispered and waved quickly at the Darfin as she guided her children through the bushes and disappeared into the night.

"Yes, me too," Kendraf muttered silently to himself before returning back to the inn. He would have a lot of work ahead before he could smother the unrest, and the guards of the nearby outpost were probably on their way by now, which just made the situation even more complicated. The old Darfin sighed deeply as he opened the backdoor of his inn and walked inside to meet the restless crowd.

"Are you all okay?" Belgar asked worriedly when the door of their small house opened a lot sooner than he had expected. He had finally finished the tasks for the day and was relaxing in his large, comfortable chair by the fireplace when he saw his wife rushing in with the children.

"Yes, we are," Lorinel assured. "But the lore teller might not be, for his tale was not about the heroes of old or the legends of other ages, but instead he went on about the Unseen and their hiding place right around here!" She was clearly upset by the lore teller's strange decision, but Belgar comforted her by wrapping his arms around her.

"Don't worry, Lori. The main thing is that you all got safely back home. Now, let us have some tea before it's bedtime, it'll be good for all of our nerves." The warm smile on his face washed Lorinel's worries away, and eventually she returned the smile.

"You're right, my dear. I'll make us some, and maybe some biscuits for the children?"

"That would be great, Mom," Celenth answered for him, her grey eyes beaming excitedly. Sarakin, on the other hand, showed no signs of interest, but that was nothing unusual. The boy took his heavy cloak off, revealing how slim he really was. The dark hair with odd natural copper highlights that formed a flaming pattern around his head hanged down to his shoulders, covering much of his sickly pale face and the stinging, ice blue eyes. With his long, thin and extremely nimble fingers, he hanged the cloak on a hook by the door and walked toward the back of the house where his and Celenth's rooms were located on opposite sides of the corridor.

Lorinel turned to her daughter and sighed. "Please, make sure he eats a little, too."

"I will, Mom," Celenth promised, sitting on his father's chair by the fireplace. Staring into

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the fire, she was already thinking about the book she could engross in once she was alone in her own room. Even the most harmless works were kept away from the public, the times were such when no one wanted to take unnecessary risks by having books carelessly lying around, not to mention it had always been fairly rare to have books in farmhouses.

It was highly unusual for the commoners to have the skill to read, but Belgar, who had learned it from his father, made it an utmost importance to teach his children, and his work had paid off with both having deep passion for the written word.

The book she so eagerly hungered was about the Immortals that were almost forgotten since the church had faced its demise a hundred years earlier, but for some reason Celenth found great comfort and calmness in those writings. She shared this passion with her brother, but the content they were interested in could not have been more different. Celenth enjoyed anything historical and religious, specifically all books about the ancient Immortals, the old legends of their deeds and teachings; but Sarakin had taken a far more dangerous road by studying the writings of the mystics, the deepest and darkest secrets of Sul'Awen - the secret language, and because of that his parents shared a mutual concern for him. He had not been able to lay his eyes upon a true grimoire as of yet, only some lesser books of general knowledge about mystics and the structure of the writing, but they would have been plenty enough to sentence him to death instantly should the Garkins or some filthy lurker discover any of it. But everything had changed that night.

2

The Temptation of Sarakin Shadowheart

The rain was drumming on the roof of a small farmhouse. The sickly boy sat on his bed, sipping cold tea his sister had brought him some time ago, which, based on the temperature of the drink, must have been hours. The hard biscuit with gravy was slowly drying on top of the nightstand. It had never been touched. The long, nimble fingers browsed through the worn and partially broken books impatiently. There was nothing new for him in those books, nothing more than general descriptions and some very basic symbols explained. Sarakin had memorized every single word a long time ago, and now he yearned for more. He wanted to dive into the secrets of true grimoires, books that would help him to develop into something they used to call a mystic before the darkness fell over the world. Last year had been extremely frustrating for him, and Celenth had surely received her fair share of that misery. But now new hope had rekindled like glowing embers in the night when he heard the words of the lore teller, a true grimoire that just waited to be discovered, almost as if it was handed to him on a silver platter. A faint smile appeared on his colorless face as a plan formed in his complicated mind.

Celenth Shadowheart was troubled by the events that took place at the Two Moons Inn. Yes, the appearance of such a story in times like these was dangerous at best, but she was more concerned over her brother, who would be a lot more enthusiastic about his studies now that a place where an actual grimoire was hidden away from the eyes of the Ironcrown was so blatantly revealed. Afraid that her brother might do something inconsiderate to advance his studies, she browsed the pages of the book rather nervously while processing the events of that evening. Celenth loved Sarakin as much as a sibling can love another, but she knew how desperately focused he was on the secret writings, and why he would not be? Awen was everything he had. She suspected him getting the same kind of comfort from the secret language as the old writings and teachings of the Immortals granted her, but Sarakin's obsession was deeper - darker, like a black hole that was constantly attempting to draw the very essence of his soul in. When she heard a sharp knocking behind her door, she knew her fears had just begun to realize.

"Hey, Sister," the sickly boy said as he closed the door behind him. "I must ask you something, something you probably dislike very much."

Celenth sighed, but said nothing. Deep in her mind she knew what this visit was all about,

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and just a couple of minutes later her premonition turned into reality.

Completely aware of why her brother came to visit her so late, she still found herself outraged by the fact that he had the nerve to ask.

"You can't be serious," she gushed. "You wish to sneak into Thorncove and find the grimoire of Drua Cardioval, even though it's almost certain that the place is not completely deserted. How did you plan to do that?" And as Celenth continued speaking, a slight shade of mockery appeared in her voice. "My dear brother, I knew this would happen, but you can't expect anyone to help you with something so crazy and dangerous. What would our father say about this?" But by the time she finished talking, the irritating echo of her own conscience was already bothering her, croaking at her judgementally. And just as fast as she was to anger at the inconsiderate thoughts of her brother, she felt compassionate about his shortcomings in life, which quickly melted her anger away. The disappointing look in her brother's eyes was the last straw to turn her around and instead of upset she found herself putting some thought on how it could be done. Sarakin did not realize his sister's mind would work quite that fast.

"My father would say the same to me as he would to you should he become aware of everything that goes on in the abbey," Sarakin said angrily, pointing at the fact that Celenth visited the small church to read and pray almost every day, which was not downright illegal, but still very much frowned upon, but his tone softened with every word. "I must recover that grimoire!" he then declared, eyes suddenly burning with such passion and determination that it made the rest of Celenth's defenses tremble like decayed trees in a storm. "You have your ancient spirits, your Immortals, and what do I have? Nothing! I need that grimoire to become something, I hunger it more than life itself!"

Knowing exactly what Sarakin meant, she gave out a drawn, yielding sigh. Celenth was a gentle soul, she did not have the heart to resist her brother, whom she saw as a victim of fate. Sarakin could have done great deeds during the glorious ages of now ruined Palantheon, times before mystics had been outlawed and doomed to demise. He was still unable to write a single spell, but the progress he had made by just studying general descriptions of the secret language was astonishing. How far he could get with teachings of a real grimoire, and what was her right to deny that fulfillment from him. She would have to help, she knew that already. The real question was:

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when they would go, and who they could ask to join them? The chance of brigands, or what would be even worse, Myrdins, dwelling there could never be taken lightly. While it was also very much possible that the place was completely abandoned, there was no reliable information at hand to tell them anything certain. They had to assume the worst.

Sarakin was sitting quietly on the edge of Celenth's bed, his head hanging, the long, dark hair covering his face. "I will go alone if I have to, Thorncove is not far from here," he whispered.

"Don't be a fool," Celenth snapped, but as fast as she angered, the storm calmed and she sighed. "I will come with you," she then said submissively, "but we need more help," she continued. "We can't fight against robbers, smugglers or Myrdins by ourselves. Let me ask around quietly, the Garkins can't get a single clue about what we're doing."

"I will reward you for this," Sarakin whispered and walked out of the room, thus abruptly ending the conversation. This had happened so many times before that it did not really surprise Celenth. As soon as the goal was reached and he had achieved what he wanted, the boy seemed to completely lose interest and simply focused his mind on the next matter at hand. After sneaking back to his own room, he sat down in front of the small collection of books he had spread on the table and grinned with gleaming eyes as he shuffled through the all too familiar works. It was far and beyond time to get immersed into something new - something real. Something that would grant him true power.

Celenth had almost unlimited access to the library of the abbey, which contained an extensive selection of religious writings, more than enough for her to study. Of course she did not take them as seriously as Sarakin did his, even though faith itself was more important to her than anything else. It was the thin lifeline that kept her so positive and supportive toward everyone. When she sometimes saw a good dream or felt a strange tremor in the depths of her inner self during a prayer, it was almost like the long gone spirits of the Immortals tried to reach her, and she found that faint feeling very much like a tiny droplet of solace among the ocean of despair that surrounded her in every direction. The secret language was Sarakin's life that must give something similar to him, she realized that. No matter how many times their parents had told him not to reach too far, for it might draw the attention of the Garkins upon them, Sarakin's thirst for more was ever growing. It was like medicine for the disease that was gnawing a void inside of him, and as it was pointed out once again, he was becoming quite abrupt with his methods to satisfy that thirst.

The rain continued drumming, the wind kept humming, and the darkness of the night enclosed their small farm into hopeless gloom. Amid all that, Celenth lied awake, trying to figure

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out who would be trustworthy enough, and most of all brave enough, to come with them on a crazy journey to find an artifact that may or may not be there.

3

The Promise of Theron Rushford

The next couple of days were not easy for Celenth Shadowheart. The task to find a suitable companion to escort her and her brother into the depths of Thorncove required utmost subtlety. The lurkers were everywhere, ready and willing to expose anyone they suspected having illegal books in their possession, hoping to earn whatever crumbs available to make life that much easier. The rewards varied from a dried loaf of bread up to as much as a piece of copper, which bought them a mug of mead at the inn – a fair price for a life in these days. The times were harsh, and many people who were thought of being kind and respectful turned into lurkers faster than a crow steals a silver penny if given the chance.

Eventually she sought up the one that was least likely to be a backstabber, their neighboring farmer - Theron Rushford, who was keeping his farm with his veteran father, Arkane Rushford. He was two years older than Celenth and thus physically more than capable of holding a sword. Theron's mother had died of plague in the epidemic that shook the western settlements of Valdor almost twenty years ago. Arkane, who served as a city guard in Sannath at the time, was one of those unfortunate soldiers who had the job of restricting the movement of people in order to keep the disease from spreading uncontrollably. He had to burn his own house, and his wife along with it, for plague rarely left survivors, and at that point it was more important to isolate all sources of the disease than taking the unlikely chance that it would be his wife who could fight it off.

Arkane did not cry, for the Northlanders never did, but he did mourn the death of Candrine deeply. But even though he drowned his sorrow in mead, he raised their only son to be upright and honorable - someone who would have a bright future in the city guard if he chose to walk that path. The days of Theron Rushford were mostly spent in the fields together with his father, but every night they would have an hour or so solely dedicated to practicing swordfighting, and Celenth knew this, for Theron had been her friend since very young age. It would not be easy though, as his alarm bells went off right away when Celenth presented her plea. Theron had seen Celenth developing her womanly curves in the late years, and as a healthy young man, of course she had been a part of his nightly fantasies, but this might be a little too far-fetched for him.

"You do realize that's pretty much a death sentence?" Theron asked, glaring at her with horrified expression of disbelief on his face.

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Celenth nodded without blinking her ravishing eyes. "But only if we get caught. Thorncove is less than ten miles south from here, we should make it there and back before the sunrise," she explained in a soft tone.

"You forget the Myrdins," he reminded, but Celenth smiled at him sweetly. She hated to do that, for it was not who she really was, but to make things fair for Sarakin she was willing to go that far and beyond. All rational thinking was far from it, the injustice her brother suffered from being unable to practice what he loved most had to be made right, even if it meant taking an insane, life threatening chance like this one, and somehow she had to feed the idea to Theron and gain his support.

"It's been years since the Inquisitors attacked that place, and the Myrdins are nothing but a legend in these parts. Why would they stay in a place like that? Why they've never assaulted Sannath, or any other village along the river?"

"Are you saying there's nothing dwelling there anymore?" Theron sounded vastly suspicious, but there was a shade of surrender in his tone, which Celenth instantly noticed.

"No, my dear friend," she said, "I cannot promise anything, but I seriously doubt something as fierce as Myrdins could be found from there. As far as I know, no one has ever seen a Myrdin in Valdor for real, just rumors and whispers in the dark."

Theron knew he would lose this battle. Celenth's ravenblack hair lining her kind face, falling on her shoulders in rich wisps; the bright grey eyes like two pools of liquid, shining silver he could just drown into, the perky shape of her breasts underneath the simple gown, the very same ones that starred his sweetly restless dreams at night. All these things had effectively removed his defenses before the battle had really even begun.

"Fine then," he sighed, "You win, Celenth." But the wide grin on his face declared that he was not nearly as reluctant as the words made it sound.

"Thank you," Celenth whispered soothingly into his ear as she wrapped her arms around utterly surprised Theron, who, after the first second of confusion, responded by capturing her into a clumsy bear hug. Her slender body pressed tightly against the astonished, young man, leaving him blushing deeply while desperately trying to calm his wildly beating heart.

"We'll see you tonight then?" Celenth ensured as she slowly receded from the man, who was desperately trying to shake off all the inappropriate thoughts wandering through his chaotic mind.

"Yes," he huffed heavily, "at the southern crossroads, preferably before midnight."

"We'll be there," she promised and smiled warmly at him.

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Theron watched as the girl walked across the stunted fields toward her home behind the tall, withering willows standing at the border of their farms. Sighing deeply, he picked up his shovel.

"That girl is going to get me killed someday," he muttered to himself as he returned back to work. But as he hit the shovel into the dead ground, he already missed the alluring sway of her hips and the warm smile that turned even the darkest day into sunshine for him. However, no matter how much he loved and desired Celenth, he could not understand the relationship between her and the creepy brother. This was not the first time he had clearly manipulated the girl into helping him, but it was by far the most daring attempt. The way that rotten apple used his gentle sister for his own shady goals was absolutely infuriating, but of course he could not do anything about it, not as long as Celenth was being so overly protective of him. She would have to see how twisted and evil her brother was with her own eyes, anyone else trying to tell her that would just cause a defensive reaction leading nowhere.

4

Through the Starless Night

The darkness of the night was impervious. The pouring rain had weakened into a light drizzle that seemed to come from everywhere, soaking their clothes and building cold and uncomfortable coating upon the bare skin. A lonely lantern hanging on a pole that was erected by the road was there to give out enough light to keep the worn signs visible. The city guard of Sannath traveled every evening fifteen miles from the town to replace the candle. The crossroads was an important link, connecting Sannath to Falchrin in the West and the kingdom capital of Pelgarth in the East, and that was why it received regular upkeep even in the harsh times like these.

Two figures stood silently amid the pine trees and withered rowans, waiting patiently for any sign of their protector's arrival.

"Do you think he'll come?" Sarakin asked with a voice that just barely rised above the humming wind.

"I'm sure of it," his sister answered firmly, "something might delay him for a bit, but he'll come." Celenth made her words sound as assuring as possible, but deep beneath her porcelain skin, the mixed emotions of doubt and fear swirled as she peered into the darkness to catch a glimpse of the familiar figure. But the darkness remained solid, like a heavy curtain surrounding them in every direction, impossible to see beyond.

"I sure hope he finds his way here before the wolves do," Sarakin hissed impatiently, trying to cover his own fears under a veil of anger, but Celenth saw through this and sighed tiredly. She would not offer her sympathy at this point, not after everything she had done to make this madness become reality. The scorn was targeted at her as a prelude of what would come if they failed at this insane attempt, and while it made Celenth feel wrongly accused and upset, it also made her very nervous. Sarakin was still young, wading in the middle of his teen years, but his sister had learned not to toy around because of the seemingly insignificant age. He would find a way to make her pay for a broken promise, as much of a forced promise as it had been, in Sarakin's eyes it was all the same.

A sudden rustle behind them startled her so badly she ceased breathing for a moment, but as Theron's friendly face appeared in the dim light of the lantern, an almost overwhelming feeling of relief washed over her. A deep sigh escaped her lips as she wrapped her arms around the man.

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"Thank you for coming," she whispered with her misty eyes closed tightly.

Theron seemed slightly surprised by the sudden sign of affection, but he returned the hug by pressing her nimble body against his. Sarakin's eyes gleamed dimly in the dark as he watched them intertwined around each other, but there was no visible emotion on his frozen face. It seemed more like he was impatiently waiting for this unnecessary ritual to reach its end so they could return to the task at hand. Theron refused to turn his eyes away, and for a while those two were locked into hateful gaze that pushed the boundaries of all awkward and uncomfortable moments, until Celenth stepped back and smiled warmly at Theron, forcing him to refocus.

"Are you ready?" she asked softly.

"Sure am," he replied briskly, "we should move ahead." And as he took the lead of the party, he gave one last cold stare at Sarakin, who glanced back like it meant nothing to him. If Celenth would not have been there, Theron would have loved to teach this arrogant brat a lesson or two, but as it was, he could not do anything but shake his head and move on, vexed by Sarakin's arrogance and self-centeredness. Repositioning his father's old two-handed broadsword that did not feel comfortable on his back no matter what he did, Theron stepped through the dripping rowans.

While it looked rather clumsy, Theron had practiced with the sword ever since he found it hidden away in the barn. It had not been more than three years since he had begun, but the tenacious work was paying off and every day saw his skill improving. Although still far behind of his father's skill and obvious experience, Theron was more than able to stand his ground in a duel. After a long debate over the matter, his father had eventually agreed to teach him how to use the sword, and those had been the happiest hours of his life. Arkane Rushford was a stern and rugged man, but he loved his son more than anything, and the excuse that he gave himself was that the learned swordfighting skills might eventually earn Theron a better life than that of a poor farmer. But at the same time he feared that the way of the sword would bring the same kind of sorrow and heartache for his son as it had brought for him, but after a lengthy internal struggle, he had reached the conclusion that it was not his place to decide such things. Theron needed to find and forge his own path.

Celenth had no deeper feelings for Theron than a close friendship. While her blooming body had created confusing urges and desires lately, she had continued to view the son of their neighbor

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as a dear friend, not as a potential taker of her virginity. Celenth's days were filled with hard labor around their family farm, and whenever she had a moment of free time, she walked half a mile to the small Crishold Abbey by the road, which was a former landlord's keep that was restored into a small monastery. The library there was not overly large, but the basic selection of religious principal works had kept her well immersed. The Book of Ages that describes events of old and how the Immortals taught and guided the people in the First Age was absolutely captivating and intriguing for the serious mind of the young woman. It was also, despite her firmly denying it, a perfect measure to keep her mind from wandering off to more restless thoughts.

"We should see the River Norlune in a few minutes," Theron's calm voice said quietly from the front, interrupting Celenth's thoughts and bringing her back to the moment.

"Those mounds to the west beyond the road are the Stonehew Hills, Thorncove is near as soon as they meet the water," she heard Sarakin's croaking reply and saw Theron giving back a sharp nod as a sign of agreement.

At least they agree on something, she sighed silently, for the earlier cold stare between the two had not passed unnoticed. And of course Theron had mentioned before that he felt uncomfortable around Sarakin, and that really seemed to be the case with most people. There was something about her brother that got everyone on their toes - something dreadful and grim that made people feel uneasy whenever he was near.

The sound cut through their ears harshly like cold, sharpened steel, ceasing their breaths momentarily; a soulless howl that filled the landscape with its freezing terror.

"The wolves are coming," Celenth whispered fearfully.

"Hush, we must hurry" Theron snapped quickly, scanning the dark woods tirelessly while increasing his pace.

Like a welcome song of homecoming, they heard the purling water in the distance - the river was close. And as they glanced to the west, they saw the shadowy hills much closer than they had been just a few moments ago, but they were not there yet.

A faint, undefined shadow, darker than the dark surrounding them, darted from the bushes accompanied with overwhelmingly loud growl, like the creature had materialized right next to them out of thin air. Sarakin fell over by the strength of the sudden impact, unable to defend himself at all. Before even reaching the ground, a hungry mouth of shredding teeth attempted to tear into his throat, but Sarakin's natural reaction was to push away from the attacker and protect his vital arteries, which in this case ended up saving him by a margin of an inch. He heard its teeth snapping

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together, followed by a frustrated bark as the animal could not taste blood on its tongue, but the wolf was not ready to give up.

These hungry predators of the Stonehew Hills had developed a new way of hunting during the dark years. They searched for prey as individuals instead of a pack, and once they found something, the scouting animal alarmed the rest of the pack and guided them back with a howl. Theron was aware of this new feature because his father was a friend of some of the hunters of Crisval. And because of this knowledge he ran toward Sarakin, drawing out his large, two-handed broadsword as fast as he could. The wolf would stop for just a second to give out the chilling mark for his entire pack; Theron knew he had to prevent that from happening if they wanted to live through the night.

"Crawl away from it!" he huffed at the boy, who was already kicking himself further away from the fierce beast.

And there it was, the wolf froze before proceeding and lifted its nose to the wind. But where there should have been a clear, ice cold howl, was a suffocated grunt and a disgustingly moist slam as the wide blade punctured the animal's neck, slaying it almost instantly. Celenth covered her mouth and fought fiercely against the vomit in her throat. A gush of black blood bursted out on the ground as Theron pulled his weapon free from the falling beast.

"Are you hurt?" he inquired, trying to get his adrenaline-fused body to calm down while carelessly wiping the sword to the nearby leaves.

"I could have lost my eyes," the boy answered briefly, staring at the fallen beast. Sarakin would never admit it, but he had been momentarily stunned by fear when the wolf was preparing to tear him into pieces. Now, however, he was once again in complete control of himself, calmly cleaning his clothes from needles, leaves and dirt. His words sounded thick and emotionless; Theron felt upset by the fact this arrogant boy lacked the least bit of appreciation for what he did, but once again he swallowed his anger. It would have been pointless, he knew it well from various earlier experiences.

"I can hear the water clearly now," Celenth pointed out quietly, and received an approving nod from Theron.

"The wolves hunt scattered, but the rest of the pack is not far away. We must hurry." With these words Theron assumed leadership again and headed toward the water's edge, which was like a living, vacillating black mass under the starless sky.

5

The Ruins of Thorncove

The shallow water felt abysmally cold as they waded through the darkness. Counting out a few slippery steps, the descent along the steep riverbank had been uneventful. The ruined door, crushed by the undead Inquisitors, seemed like a giant maw waiting for them, ready to wrap the dark veil of oblivion around the party of doubtful adventurers. The rusty hinges were firmly mounted in the solid rock with pieces of rotten wood still hanging from them, a sign of a battle that was fought there many decades ago. They followed the staircase, carved to the rocky shore of the river, leading straight up to a small stone platform in front of the door, only a few steps remained above the gloomy water as the heavy rain of the fall had raised the water level near flooding point. The place seemed silent and empty - abandoned. The constant sound of the rushing water filled their ears, creating a nervous atmosphere among the party.

A hungry owl hooted somewhere in the woods above the high wall; the cries of the wolves had finally died away, which was something they all gladly noted.

"It seems empty," Celenth whispered wishfully, but received a cautionary glare from Theron.

"Things are rarely what they seem," Sarakin's breathless voice replied quietly behind her. His weak body was on the verge of forfeiting the struggle it was forced into. After all the effort they had put into wading through the dark waters of the river shore and then climbing up the rocky steps, every single muscle was reminding him of their existence. It was his sheer willpower that kept him standing on his feet without a moan or complaint.

Theron, still silent, stepped closer with his sword out and ready. The others followed as close as they could, for none of them felt too eager to dawdle behind. The dread was apparent in both directions, and even ever confident Sarakin seemed a bit leery to step into the shadows of the grimacing mouth. The boy was terrified to the bone, but there was nothing that could have stopped him from entering. It was his future that presumably lied somewhere in the depths of that cave.

Once they made it past the wincing opening, the cave turned into a roomy hallway that extended beyond their limited vision. Theron halted as soon as he realized it was too dark to proceed safely, but before he could warn anyone of his sudden standstill, Celenth bumped into him and struggled furiously to stay upright.

"We need light," Theron explained, and at the same time grasped Celenth's robe to prevent

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her from stumbling any further, which would have caused more unwanted noise than they could afford at that point. He grabbed a wooden stick from his belt, which had some kind of a bundle tied to the other end; a sweet, musky scent of tar spread in the hallway as Celenth recognized the item being a prepared torch.

"Do you have flint?" she asked, ashamed by the fact that she had not even thought about such things when preparing for the journey.

"Leaving something like that home would have made it a bit silly to carry these torches with me, don't you think?" Theron answered mockingly, but his voice carried no malice. It was just a playful remark to lighten the mood. The girl smiled in the dark, once again glad that Theron had agreed to come with her.

The sparks were brighter than lightning against the pitch-black of the cave, and when the torch caught fire, the crackling and humming of the flame seemed stunningly loud after the brooding silence. The ability to see ahead; however, was more precious at this time than the complete lack of noise. Now that the darkness had yielded, they were surprised to see how carefully and skillfully the interior of the cave was finished. The walls and the ceiling were carved perfectly straight, heading into a wooden stairway beyond the sphere of light at the end of the hallway, a clear sign of this cave being much more than just an old bear nest. Undoubtedly, they would have had an inevitable accident coming without the wildly flaming torch if they had wandered blindly into the dark.

"Very good," Sarakin complimented Theron's wit coldly. It was impossible to say whether he was really being friendly or if it was just another sarcastic throw at the person he did not really care for. The loathing between them had not been one-sided for quite a while, and it had only grown greater during the last year or so as the boy's irksome nature had begun to emerge from the restless riptides of childhood. Sarakin knew exactly what Theron thought of him, and despite his young age, he was aware and understood the reason why the young man had decided to help. It had nothing to do with him and everything to do with his sister, but such matters did not bother the boy. He yearned for more power, and if this fool drooling after his sister was able to help him in achieving this goal, then fine. Sarakin saw his tolerance toward Theron as a mandatory payment for the knowledge waiting in the depths of the hideout, and he accepted that.

The stairs creaked sharply as Theron stepped on the first one. He had to feel about the next one carefully before shifting his full weight on it, but the stairs were still in relatively good shape despite the years they had been rotting in the humid hall. Escorted by a series of more creaks, the

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entire party made it all the way down, where they found themselves in a roomy space that seemed to have been some kind of a storage room for food and other supplies. It made sense. Thorncove had been a hideout of the mystics, who cared for nothing more than their precious writings. If there were any books left, they must have been stored further down in the musty maze, as far away from the water as possible.

A worn looking oak door at the end of the room was well sealed, which enforced this impression further. The flooding river could not get past this man-made blockage, a known problem in the lowlands of River Norlune during the spring. An observation such as this brought a content smirk on Sarakin's face as he carefully reviewed the door's condition from the distance.

"That should keep whatever paper stored in there dry," Theron pointed out Sarakin's thoughts.

"But is it empty?" Celenth's question echoed worriedly, reminding them all about the chance that there was more than molded rock lurking in this cavern.

No one had the answer to her haunting question that refused to leave their troubled minds as Theron carefully reached for the door, an avalanche of dried mud rolled down from the old sealants as it opened with a drawn wail. The door revealed another staircase leading down, once again made of wood, but it also brought something else to their attention: a low hum, like strong wind blowing in the corridors below carried from the darkness, a sound that made their small party hesitate. It was impossible to define the exact source for the strange echo as it seemed to come from everywhere.

"Take this," Theron urged the girl, handing out the flaming torch. Celenth grasped it firmly in fear of dropping the only thing that held darkness at bay in this forsaken place. The steel blade made a ghastly sound in the silence as Theron drew his father's broadsword.

"I certainly hope this is worth it," he said, glaring darkly at Sarakin as he led the hesitant party deeper. The boy clad in loose, black cloak showed no signs of marking the words, his eyes gazed past Theron's shoulders, almost as if he could distinguish a glimpse of the grimoire he was craving so badly far in the flickering shadows. The ice blue eyes with enlarged pupils were fixed on the hallway ahead, focused on the might he could almost feel on his fingertips.

After a short corridor they arrived to a stone bridge crossing a bottomless crevice in the rock, or so it seemed for they saw nothing when glancing down, as if the bridge had been built over the shadowy core of the world itself. A comforting purl of rushing water carried from below and the hum they had heard before seemed much louder there, which strongly indicated a presence of an alternative opening somewhere along the riverbank allowing water to flow in.

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They moved over the bridge, Theron at the front grasping the sword tightly in his hands. Celenth followed closely behind, leering around nervously, trying to keep the torch up high where it would give out most light. Sarakin remained further back, wandering forth at the edge of shadows like a silent ghost. They left the bridge behind and followed the corridor into a steep curve that left them blind to what lied ahead, and it was only a matter of seconds before they would have exposed themselves, for they surely were not alone in the ruined hideout. The fire of the torch overlapped with the light coming from around the corner, keeping them effectively from noticing it.

"Wait," Sarakin whispered with a voice that penetrated everyone's mind; they followed that barely audible command by instinct before they could even realize what exactly was happening.

"Put out the torch, I hear someone talking," the figure shrouded in black continued.

Without arguing or presenting questions, Theron grabbed the torch from the girl and struggled for a while to smother the fire. And that was when they saw it, a lightly flickering glow coming from the left, turning the corridor into an eerie spectacle of dancing shadows. The chatter was there, now clear as the air after a nightly storm, whispering out their doom.

"We must get out of this corridor," Celenth hissed intently. Theron did not respond, but as a sign of hearing her, he guided them to the right into a small alcove, straight across the corridor from the lit doorway. It was far from perfect, but at least they were out of immediate sight.

"They're not Myrdins, are they?" Celenth asked quietly with a shade of raw fear in her shivering voice.

"No, they're not," Theron replied in a muffled manner, unable to hold back a faint smile. "They're men, but what is their motive and nature, I do not know. My guess would be some sort of treasure hunters," he added.

Celenth found herself breathing a little easier. She had almost managed to drop the idea of Myrdins around her beloved home, but as soon as they had stepped into the underground keep, it all had instantly returned to play with her imagination, and the sudden warning of her brother had driven her on the verge of a panicky scream, which fortunately never happened as a result of her immense internal battle to control her nerves.

"How we continue from here?" she then asked, unsure how they could pass the men without being seen.

"I'm open for suggestions," Theron grunted, completely clueless about how to deal with this situation, even though somewhere in the back of his mind this possibility had already emerged more than once, but he had continued hoping for the best. Now, however, when that possibility had turned

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into reality, he did not know exactly how to proceed safely, or even rationally. The chance that something like this would cross their path had always been high ever since they began planning this journey, but the irrational fool's hope had blocked their minds from dealing with that chance. Now that the unlikely option had come true, just like when the wolf had attacked Sarakin in the woods, they were forced to see and understand the real danger of their attempt. It required a lot of restraint from all of them to keep their spirits high and not sink into the treacherous waters of despair.

"I found something," the voice belonged to Sarakin, who had kneeled against the back wall of the nook, studying the rock in the dim flicker with great interest. "I believe there's a door here," he informed them.

"A door?" Theron seemed suddenly alert. A door would mean an alternative way to proceed without having to take the incredible risk with the unknown band of men. They did not even know how many of them were in the other room, which made Theron even less willing to try that route.

"The wall has Awen marks carved on it; I think it's a lock mechanism."

"Do you think you can open it?" Celenth asked wishfully.

"I don't know," Sarakin said and glared at the others with his strangely gleaming eyes. "I need more light to see," he then said, speaking out the fear they all shared. They would have to take an enormous chance to do something that may or may not help them to escape this threat.

"Light the torch," Celenth whispered to Theron who was struggling with hesitation. "It's either that or we walk out with nothing."

"Light the torch," Sarakin hissed as well, for he did not want to leave with empty hands, not even if it meant gambling with his life.

"So be it," Theron muttered as he took out the tinderbox as quietly as he could. The strikes of flint against the steel caused a very faint echo, but as the torch flamed up again, there was nothing that could prevent the men in the other room from seeing the sudden additional light shining from the corridor. They heard the chatter that suddenly escalated into higher tone and sounds of restless movement, and they knew the time was running out.

Sarakin turned back to study the wall as soon as the light of the torch revealed the entire script. The agile fingers followed the faded signs to figure out correct combination to open the secret door before the strangers would make into the nook. It was the first time Sarakin truly had to interpret the secret language under real pressure, but he progressed quickly, for he had done nothing but studied the structure and learned the basic signs during the last five years.

"Who's in there?" they heard someone exclaiming from the corridor at the same time as

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Sarakin began to sing.

It was something neither one of them knew to expect and stared at him dumbfoundedly. Not just because he was singing, but because he was singing perfectly. The cold voice grew stronger and rose higher, following the complicated signs on the wall, one by one.

Celenth remembered, for she was not completely unaware of how Awen worked, that it was a language of melodies, grammar so difficult that it was simply amazing that a boy of that age was reading the complex spell structure like it was merely just a children's book to him. Theron was looking at the boy, not quite sure what was going on, too perplexed to do anything about it, and that was most fortunate for them all. It would have been devastating if he had tried to interrupt the boy while he was firmly focused on the spell, completely stepped out of this time and place. Celenth knew this, and without saying a word she moved in Theron's way, for she did not want to say anything that might distract the boy. And she felt something, something she had not felt for a long time since Sarakin had turned so cold and distant when he had found the ancient writings. She was so proud of her little brother that she did not even realize the wide smile on her face while watching him unlocking the secret door - the first actual spell she saw this incredibly gifted young mystic reading - seemingly without problems.

When the four men appeared from behind the corner, they were just in time to see the wall closing in front of them. No matter how hard they tried, the door would not open, for the lock mechanism had been reset and required new decoding to work, but none of them had a slightest clue how to read the mysterious signs on the wall.

6

Death Draws Near

The hallway led down in a steep angle. The ceiling seemed much closer than before and the strictly confined space made Theron grind his teeth tightly together. He did not want to show the high anxiety the concise corridor brought upon him, but the ever narrowing passage caused him to perspire uncontrollably; his hands twitched from time to time as he struggled against the growing fear. Throughout his entire life the open sky and widespread fields had been his home, not the dark caverns or ancient, underground mazes. When the corridor finally straightened as they arrived into a sizeable room they could not see entirely in the poor light of the flickering torch, Theron sighed audibly as the increasing agony inside of him finally loosened and faded away. Celenth touched his arm gently as a sign of encouragement, clearly sensing the unease beneath his sturdy figure. Feeling weak and embarrassed by this, Theron turned away to grow some distance. He wanted the girl to adore him and look up to him like he was someone to be trusted and leaned on when the times got dire, not to show how deeply horrified he was by a mere dusty chamber that seemed to have nothing in it. The fact that such behavior was hurtful and insulting for the girl was completely of no importance to him. After all, Celenth was a girl - weak and fragile girl, whose main concern should never be to comfort grown men.

"What's this place?" he asked, still uptight by the recent experience.

"I'm not sure, but it could be exactly what we're looking for," Sarakin whispered. "Show me the light," he then urged. Theron offered the torch to him and followed closely behind, hand resting calmly on the hilt of the sword.

There were a number of shelves attached firmly to the walls with old, decayed books laying randomly here and there, but the main object in the room was definitely a stone platform against the back wall. Rising up to Sarakin's waist, it looked like a massive tombstone or a memorial monument. Behind the platform, rotten curtains that seemed to have once been colored royal red were hanging still; old paintings hanging on the walls, depicting matters that had been practiced in the chamber, a lot of people reading and writing, but also other more mysterious and vague things. There were decayed chairs that, without a doubt, had been comfortable to sit in their time. Every little detail indicated them being in the right place, but they had not found any significant books yet. Who knows, maybe there simply was not any. Perhaps the mystics had sealed their secrets by the

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silence of their graves, leaving the world to dwindle without chance of redemption.

"There's some writing at the bottom of the platform, near the spot where it meets the floor," Celenth pointed out, but the signs were in even worse condition than those on the wall, making it almost impossible to see them in the dancing light of the torch.

"Hand me the torch," Theron said, pointing at four rusty lanterns hanging on the walls on both sides of the platform. "Let's see if we can arrange some more light."

At first it seemed as if the wick would not catch fire, the oil had either run out or the wick was somehow damaged, but then a small, withered flame appeared. It licked the wick for a moment before slowly growing into a solid fire casting its welcome light around the room. After repeating the same on the other side of the platform, they now had a steady source of light for Sarakin to use – and he wasted no time to get started. Even though he had already done it once, it struck them all by surprise again when the clear, hauntingly beautiful voice escaped Sarakin's lips as he began to sing the faded markings on the stone. He was not sure what exactly was the nature of this spell, but assuming it was more advanced version of the one that had been carved on the wall, he continued steadfastly in order to keep the spell unbroken. All he was concerned about was his own ability to read it through, but he faced no substantial problems as he progressed through the faded lines. At the same time; however, it was becoming clear that the spell was more than just a lock mechanism. It grew more complicated and layered, demanding more and more from the caster, but with fierce focus and determination, Sarakin forced himself to concentrate, preventing the spell from dissolving and breaking apart.

Small blue flames lit in a circle on top of the platform as the boy reached the latter part of the spell. It was the first one of this magnitude, and far from safe. Sarakin, who had never written a single spell on his own yet, should have not taken on a task to render one of such difficulty. It was his sheer willpower that helped him to somehow stumble through, leaving him exhausted and senseless. But the blue flames were now burning brightly, forming an unknown pattern on the platform. The worn curtains were swaying in a sudden ghostly wind that made the lanterns on the wall to flicker and die, and such was the fate of Theron's torch as well. The blue glow took over, entrancing them all, and alongside with the eerie light came coldness like no other.

Something was forming in front of the platform.

"Sarakin, get away from there!" Celenth cried in distress, but her brother was still swaying at the edge of consciousness, unable to see or hear what was going on around him. It came down to Theron to drag the inert boy away from the wisp of fog that had appeared, and which was now

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forming into a shape of a transparent woman wearing a long, misty robe around her.

"An apparition," Sarakin whispered with his eyes half open, breathing laboriously.

Celenth had heard of these wraiths, similar to draugars who sometimes guarded the ancient tombs, but there was no tomb in here, or at least she could not see one. Of course it was possible that the one who sacrificed himself to become this apparition was buried somewhere under the stone tiles of the floor. But all that was meaningless now of course, for the apparition, just like the draugar, strived to keep their sacred ground untouched, whether it was a crypt, church, or any other place of special meaning. They protected in death what they came to love in life, and this apparition was no different, it guarded something. In a strange, senseless way, realizing this gave her sudden hope she had lacked throughout the entire journey before this precise moment. Perhaps, after all, there was something hidden in this haunted maze that could help her brother to progress with his calling.

Theron, on the other hand, had never heard of an apparition, and his reaction was the most primal a man can have – he urged to destroy it before it could get to him. He had drawn his sword before Celenth could do anything to stop him from threatening the ghostly figure, who now turned its black eyes at Theron and raised its hand ready to defend itself.

It was impossible to say what exactly happened. There was a sharp flash and a brief cry of terror accompanied by the clash of steel as the sword hit the stone tile. The apparition seemed completely unharmed, but Theron had fallen to his knees, holding his right arm with the other, staring at his suddenly numbed hand and then at the ghost, whose eyes had twisted into a terrible gaze. A howl that predicted Theron's fall radiated from the apparition's gaping mouth, striking chilling fear into everyone's heart, driving their minds into disarray and panic.

"Please," Theron sobbed, face ashen from utter fear, still holding his useless hand, fighting the immense pain that gnawed his flesh all the way up to his shoulder. "I don't want to die, please —" But the wraith felt no mercy or pity, for its task was to keep all intruders away from the sacred ground, and this fool had dared to defy it with a sword – death and damnation were the price of such insolence.

But seeing that Theron would not be a threat for a good while, the apparition turned its wavering face, vacillating between frozen beauty and grimacing dread, toward the one it considered being the worst threat among this party of trespassers – Sarakin. He had completed the spell to call forth the guardian of the platform, for whatever reason it was built there, and now he would have to suffer the consequences before anything else.

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That was too much for Celenth to swallow, she could not watch from aside as the ghost approached her little brother, who was still lying on the floor, although slightly more conscious than before, but still unable to crawl away. The coldness radiating from the wraith was paralyzing, but bravely she stepped in between of Sarakin and the apparition, willing to give her life if necessary to save her brother. The ghost hesitated for a second and gazed deep into Celenth's eyes, then it reached out with its misty hand to remove this sudden obstacle in its way to get to the foolish boy lying on the floor.

Celenth saw her death coming, and she was ready. She had nothing to fight with, only her fragile body covering Sarakin from sight, not enough to prevent the wraith from doing what the Awen signs on the platform obligated it to do.

Closing her eyes, Celenth waited for the freezing touch and inevitable demise, and while waiting, she began to follow the words of an ancient prayer to comfort herself. Those nearly forgotten lines that asked for protection against all evil at night were once a popular evening prayer that was performed before bedtime with the children of the house. Celenth had repeated those words every night for the last four years, and every time it had had a calming and soothing influence helping her greatly to fall asleep, but this time something was different. While it was expected that no prayer could comfort in the presence of an undead, it did something most unforeseen: it strengthened her.

Like little sparkles in her body, the prayer brought her warmth, like an aura that protected her from the chill of the ghost. She smelled fresh grass and fragrant flowers drenched in morning dew, and when she opened her eyes in wonder, unsure of what had happened, she saw the apparition right in front of her, but it made no threatening gesture. The misty face of the ghost had calmed into an unrecognizable cast of a woman, who looked at her with no malice but respect and acceptance, and she heard the words.

"You walk with the White Deer," the apparition whispered with tremoring hiss, "the dead must respect the presence of the one who gives life, and thus you may enter." And then the apparition began to vanish in the air, and as the misty figure disappeared, so did the blue flames on top of the platform and darkness took over the chamber again.

"Theron!" Celenth cried.

"Hold on," he answered. "I'm trying to rekindle the torch."

After seconds that felt like a lifetime, the wildly dancing flame of the torch reappeared, and even Sarakin sighed lightly. The numbness was leaving their limbs and hearts as their eyes followed

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Celenth with great curiosity, and maybe even fear.

"What was all that?" Theron finally asked, but before Celenth had a chance to speak, Sarakin struggled himself up from the floor and gazed upon his sister.

"She's a vicar," he said abruptly, like acknowledging a dry fact more than being stunned by amazement. "An Immortal has answered her prayer." The words floated around, electrified. Even Celenth was unable to fathom what exactly it meant. When she had prayed before at home, the odd feeling of something being close had occurred from time to time, but she had never ever, not in her wildest dreams, guessed it could have been a spirit of an Immortal answering to her, bestowing a blessing on her. The whole idea was so absurd that it made her head spin, but at the same time, without her realizing it in her dizzy mind, it solidified her faith for the rest of her life so that even the most ferocious storm or the sharpest blade could not break it.

"Look," Theron exclaimed, breaking the silence, "the platform has opened!"

They saw the almost invisible rails the platform rested on, covered in a thick layer of dust. A narrow staircase disappeared down into the dark.

"Whatever is in there had an apparition guarding it, so stay alert!" Sarakin hissed, but at the same time he had difficulties to refrain himself from rushing in. Theron sighed in disgust at the thought of another cramped stairway, but then he gathered his courage, raised the torch higher and entered the tunnel first, understanding that the longer he waited the more hesitant he would become.

The Grimoire of the Prophet

The staircase ended to a smaller chamber that was full of books, but there was one particular book that caught Sarakin's attention as soon as he set his foot on the dusty tiles. The air was musty but dry, the walls were sealed with a layer of clay bricks to ensure the safety of all the works by keeping the water from breaking through under any circumstances. At the back of the chamber, on its own pedestal, lied a heavy grimoire with exquisite embossed decorations on the cover. Celenth saw the same book and gasped loudly, for she had a good hunch of it being much more than Drua Cardioval's book. The grimoires were always decorated with complicated patterns and usually carried something personal from the writer, like Drua's known affection for illusions, which meant that her spellbooks were usually decorated with abstract designs to trick the eye and make very little sense to a commoner. The only mystic that was generally recognized as even more skilled in the art of illusions than Drua was Zethran Sharkiel, who worked with Belderan Red to create the aethergate that was the sole reason for the cursed darkness that had vexed the world for the last hundred years. However, Drua's grimoire was nowhere to be seen, and the one in front of them was yet to be recognized, but their hopes were sky high as the depth and details of the cover led them to believe this grimoire was written by someone unmatched in skill. The book seemed much older than a hundred or two hundred years. In fact, it looked like it could easily be thousand years old.

"I believe this is why we came here," Theron announced the unspoken thoughts they all bore.

"Go ahead, Sarakin, the book is yours to take," Celenth encouraged her brother, and while he needed no further encouragements, somewhere deep down in his mind, he actually appreciated her words.

Sarakin approached the grimoire, reaching out to touch his dream, like making sure it was not just a devious illusion created by his mind, but a real object he could feel on his fingertips. As he got closer to the grimoire, he was able to see the thick leather cover better than before; the fine art made in fluent patterns, the metal enforcements of the spine and the worn but sturdy paper that was certainly older than Drua Cardioval's book could have ever been. But still, while it seemed very old, even ancient, the grimoire was in excellent shape. It was quite large book, but Sarakin had prepared for it as he had learned about grimoires from the few pieces of text he had at home. His

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robe had an inside pocket reserved for a spellbook, and while this grimoire was definitely larger than most, it would still be easy to carry – unnoticed.

Then he concentrated to take a closer look at the cover and his eyes dilated in pure amazement and excitement that made his usually so steady and firm hands to shiver notably. There was a large stream depicted running through an enormous underground cave; a small stone quay was placed on the opposite shores and a line of skeletons awaited for the ferry that was sailing in the middle of the stream. A dark, hooded figure steered the ferry towards the waiting dead, and from this image Sarakin figured instantly what this book was. He had wished to find Drua Cardioval's personal grimoire with all of her studies during the years of darkness, but as it appeared now, he had found a whole lot more. But to make sure he was not celebrating his victory too early, Sarakin quickly opened the cover to see the first page and gasped sharply. There was black writing on the stained page that said:

"I was given a task to write down the knowledge of Awen for those who walk through the starless night, for those who yearn for deeper insight, and for those who cannot see the light. I bring this knowledge from the lap of the sea, the mists of the unknown and the secrets of the unseen. In the name of Sardius I have bent his language onto these pages; in these words dwells the wisdom of Malnara and Nardiel. Heed them well to serve him who walks in the shadows, remember them to reveal might hidden from others. - signed, Mezranon Orreth."

"Mezranon," Sarakin whispered to himself, but loud enough for Celenth to hear the name, and her eyes widened in fear and wonder.

"The Valkyrie of Sardius?" she insisted incredulously. Sarakin glared at her, visibly irritated by the interruption.

"Yes, Sister," he snapped to shut her off, but after studying the page for a while longer, he then spoke further. "Mezranon was Sardius' prophet at the dawn of the Second Age. He wrote one of the first ten grimoires given to the peoples of Aradea – this grimoire." He raised the book as to put more weight on his words.

After a rather uncomfortable silence, during which Sarakin gave his sister a lengthy, icy stare, he continued, apparently to make sure this pointless discussion would be assured to end.

"And yes, the legend suggests that Mezranon was indeed one of Sardius' most trusted servants, or Valkyries as you suggested," then he turned back to study the complicated letters on the first page.

And slowly even Theron understood how magnificent discovery lied in front of them, but

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only Celenth had a faint clue how incredible source of power her brother had just acquired. Sardiuss was known as the Guide of the Dead, an immortal spirit who collected the souls of the dead and escorted them to their appropriate realms in afterlife – the Ferryman who sails the rivers of the Underworld.

When Sarakin lifted the grimoire from the table in order to see better, a bright chink sounded in the chamber as something sparkly dropped off from between the pages and fell on the floor. It was a single gold coin, which Sarakin quickly picked up. He had never seen a coin quite like it before: on one side of it there was a picture of an eye, surrounded by stars, clouds and the sun; on the other side a boat floating on an uneasy water into dark unknown. The boy studied the coin for a good while, then he flipped it in the air and caught it with a sure hand. Once this little demonstration of agility was over, the coin disappeared away to one of the many folds of his robe, then he picked up the grimoire again and carefully placed it in its own large pocket. It was impossible to tell if he was carrying anything unordinary from the outside.

”We're finished here,” Sarakin then said.

”That's wonderful,” Theron snarled, ”but how we're going to get out?” he asked mockingly.

”Through the secret door,” Sarakin answered without blinking an eye, pushing Theron slightly off the track.

”What—,” he started, but the boy interrupted him abruptly by walking away and ignoring his question before he even had the chance to present it. Usually this would have upset Theron greatly and yelling was the least that came out of it, but this time he chose to remain quiet. Sarakin's sudden reference to a possible escape route without going back to where the unknown band of men could still be waiting sounded awfully tempting.

Celenth looked around, confused. ”I can't see any other door than the one we came in,” she wondered. But Sarakin was already walking toward the right side of the room and stopped in between two worn book shelves. Now that the spot had been pointed out, it was relatively easy to see the outlines of the door.

”Here,” he said and felt around the wall, looking for a tiny lock mechanism. With his nimble fingers, it did not take too long before the fake wall slid off revealing another set of steps leading down.

”Further down? Well, I suppose it's worth a try,” Theron uttered thoughtfully.

”Unless you want to go back the same way,” Sarakin reminded him with a mocking grin on his thin lips. Theron said nothing as they followed the silent figure down the steps. There was

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nothing to be said. Now that the goal had been achieved and the reward was finally in Sarakin's possession, they all wanted to get out as fast as possible.

The cool breeze of the night felt heavenly on Celenth's face as she walked up the last steps from an extremely well hidden crack on the rocky riverbank that served as a backdoor to Thorncove. They were able to see the front steps to the hideout a short way south, submerged in dark water, but they could not see or hear anything but some forest animals hooting and hollering in the distance. The soft wind caressed Celenth's jet-black hair and eased the anxiety she had felt back in the cave. But the one who was most relieved was definitely Theron, who had to struggle through the narrow tunnels and fight back the constant panic until they made it out. Sitting on a large stump of a tree, he sighed deeply while gazing at the dark sky, breathing in the cold air to clear his mind. The only one who did not seem to be affected the slightest was Sarakin. Keeping the mysterious, gloomy expression on his face as always, he leered around in the night, but showed no particular signs of relief or joy for finding a way out.

"We must get on our way back home," Theron spoke first. "The morning light rises in a few hours and I don't feel like explaining to my father where I've spent an entire night."

"Ah, but you still might have to," an unknown, rough voice stated from the darkness. A man who had been hiding behind the bushes of the riverbank, any possible noise muffled by the purling water, stepped out for them all to see. They stared at the man, stunned by his sudden appearance, but as Theron noticed almost instantly, he seemed to be alone.

"You're one of the men from inside?" he asked, gaining a lot of confidence after making his critical observation.

"Yes, from the city guard of Sannath. We're here to search for illegal literature," the man said loudly, so loudly in fact that it was clear he wanted to guide his comrades toward this direction. "And what are you young fellows doing in the ruins of Thorncove in the middle of the night?" he then asked with an angry tone in his voice while peering around nervously for his friends.

"We're from the upstream," Celenth said quickly, avoiding from revealing the exact location of their home, "looking for anything valuable really."

"Treasure hunting? Such a pretty girl in the middle of the night!" the guard laughed, and his innocent remark about the girl did not go unnoticed. "There's no treasure in Thorncove," he then

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said, becoming all serious again. "But we saw you fellows disappearing through a secret door, and I must ask you to take us there in order to make sure no forbidden writing is stored in there."

"We saw no books on our way out," Theron argued.

"Be quiet," the guard ordered fretfully. "Let's move along then." The man's eyes wandered eagerly on Celenth's body, but so far he had kept his hands to himself. Theron realized how dangerously the situation was sliding out of their control, but so far he had been unable to come up with anything to turn it around.

But then a sizeable rock, picked in a hurry from the water's edge, flew through the air with amazing precision, hitting the guard in the middle of the face and breaking his nose with one loud crack. It might have not been the smartest move ever, but it certainly seemed to solve the problem for the time being.

"Run!" Sarakin's voice lashed sharply in the night. They needed no further persuasion, for they heard someone approaching fast through the bushes. The man who had questioned them was on his knees, holding his broken nose that bled like a shaken bottle of mead.

"Go after them!" they heard someone yelling and then more rushing steps in the woods, but they had already reached the top of the riverbank and headed back toward Crisval in a hurry. The guards could never catch them unless they had a horse somewhere nearby, which was not very likely since their camp had been inside the hideout. But even if they did, it would be impossible for them to determine which way they ran exactly.

"There are plenty of villages along the river," Celenth tried to reason. "What are the odds that they could find us later?"

"We'll just have to see what happens, but I would keep all books in a place where they can't find them for the next couple of months – just in case," Theron advised them both.

"What if they bring an Inquisitor?" Celenth asked, and this time even Sarakin glanced at her with a slight gleam of worry in his blue eyes, but he chose to keep his mouth sealed for the moment.

"Even more so, don't keep anything illegal in places that are too easily accessed, it's said that those Ashen Riders can even smell the might of the writing." Theron's remark sparked no further discussion, but it surely remained at the back of their minds, haunting them with the promise of an ill fate if even a small piece of the secret writing was discovered by the dead servants of the Winged.

The wolves howled somewhere in the distance, but this time the dreadful northern hounds did not appear to haunt them. The houses formed in the fog as they approached the sleeping hamlet

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only a few moments before the dawn. Avoiding the immediate range of the center, they headed toward their home farms and separated at the gate of the Shadowheart house.

"Thank you for everything you did," Celenth said and reached out to press a light kiss on Theron's cheek, but the young man had something else in mind. Grabbing Celenth tightly in his strong arms, he kissed her bravely on the lips despite her slight resistance that quickly melted into almost lustful intensity.

"That's enough of a reward for me," he said smiling, then he winked at the blushing girl and walked on toward his father's house that glimmered faintly in the distance among the thick mist.

Celenth sighed quietly, and together with her brother they walked up to the house, sneaked inside in silence, but halted for a moment before entering their rooms.

"Thank you, Celenth," Sarakin said barely audibly while opening the door to his room, and without waiting for an answer, he stepped inside and closed it behind him. Celenth smiled lightly, her tired legs begging for rest, but she was glad for what they had achieved that night. The grimoire of Mezranon would be exactly what her brother needed to take the next big step to become a true mystic.

8

The Ferryman's Apprentice

Months passed and winter crawled to the northern woodlands, and little by little Theron and his peculiar neighbors were able to breathe a little easier. It seemed like their adventure in Thorncove would not have any unwanted consequences, even though some restless rumors reached their ears from the downstream. But then, a few days after the first snow had landed and covered everything in white, a group of guards arrived from Sannath with the garrison commander leading them and everybody knew what it was all about – a raid to find illegal writings. A Garkin ambassador was riding with the commander in his black and red outfit that most Garkins used. The red eyes gleamed faintly in the dusky morning, ready to fulfill his master's will by rooting out every last piece of the old magic still hidden in the homes and barns of the quiet countryside.

All residents were called to the village square where the commander spoke to the people. "It has come to my attention that the people of Crisval hold forbidden literature, and it would be in everybody's best interest if the guilty were turned in or they confessed and relinquished their grimoires in orderly fashion. The sentence for possessing forbidden knowledge is death, but if the sinners come forth and show repentance, Lord Arawald of Sannath has promised to show mercy on your poor souls. I will give you ten minutes to reveal all hidden books, after which we shall proceed with our given task."

"Do you think they know?" Celenth asked from Theron, who leaned against the fence at the edge of the square.

"I doubt it. Otherwise they would have shown up earlier. My father heard that all villages along the River Norlune have been raided and no such thing as mercy was ever shown. People have been hanged based on lurker statements without clear evidence, so I'd say his idea of mercy is rather fickling. Just stay put and let them do what they came here to do. They couldn't pinpoint their search to just one village, and that means the man who saw us couldn't give good enough description." His words did not offer much comfort, but surely placed the commander's speech in a different light.

No word about the prophet's grimoire was said, for in a public place like the village square, lurkers wandered everywhere. They could not take such a chance, but Theron trusted fully on Celenth's discretion to make sure it could not be found. Sarakin stood silently a few steps away

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from them, following the guards as their horses moved around restlessly. The entire village was in panic; even the most mundane piece of text could lead to execution if it dealt with the Immortals despite whether it actually had any secret language in it or not. The Ironcrown took this matter very seriously and allowed no exceptions in its procedures, which is why people did not believe in any sort of abatement during disciplinary affairs.

The people were kept in the middle while the guards searched every house in the vicinity of the square, including the Shadowhearts and the Rushfords. Belgar was giving his daughter long, meaningful looks to stay completely calm and detached from everything that was going on around them. The girl appreciated the worrying of her parents, but there was no need for it. All their illegal writings were stored in a secret cellar at the village church, and there was no city guard who could find the entrance there. They had seen it as more secure way to continue studying their secret crafts than keeping everything stored in their rooms. Lorinel was not as nervous as her husband, but even she could not help from glancing around from time to time in fear of seeing the guards coming toward her.

The day went by at excruciatingly slow pace as the guards continued their search. The findings seemed meager and as the pale grey of the day began to gain darker hues, the garrison commander called for his men. Without bothering to say anything further, he beckoned his men to follow and rode out of the village toward Springdew Pass and the northern wilds. The Garkin officer did not look too happy about the result, giving a long spiteful glare at the villagers before finally following the commander along the trail into the woods.

"Looks like there will be no hangings tonight, and that dogface didn't like it at all," Arkane muttered quietly as he turned away to return to the inn.

"True words if I ever heard any," Theron approved with a deep sigh. His eyes followed the girl he had helped to commit a crime that could send them all on a gallows, but he found himself wanting her more now than ever before. Perhaps this winter she would finally allow him the sweetest reward that made all the hardships worthwhile, perhaps there was a way to convince her into thinking there really were no options.

A dark grin appeared below his dead eyes as he forced himself to turn away and return to his house. There was still a lot to do before the farm was ready for its wintry struggle.

Celenth felt sick in her stomach for the series of events their deeds had caused, events that had apparently costed lives. She was leering around for a friendly shoulder, but everybody was sunken too deep in thought to offer her any solace. No one was able to see the storm behind her

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eyes.

The snowflakes floated around creating a dreamy white veil that tried to cover the rotten forests with its soft and pure brightness. The cold and brisk air made breathing turn into a mist, and people inside threw more wood into the fireplaces to get comfortably warm and cozy, but this was not the case for Celenth Shadowheart. She was sitting in the cellar of the abbey, reading the Book of the Immortals, which was one of the basic works in the field of theology. Trying to educate herself on what exactly had happened in Thorncove, where she had felt a presence of her closest Immortal, she attempted to learn everything she could about the power of prayer and the vicars in general. It had been such a strong revelation that had momentarily scared her, but now she was hungry to learn more about it. Celenth had never, even in her wildest dreams, thought she could become so close with an Immortal, for the divine spirits had left this world ages ago, and yet, she had just received a clear sign of them still existing on Aradea.

Concentrated so deeply on the events of late that she completely missed the entrance of her brother who walked the steps silently like a ghost before stopping behind the chair she was sitting on. It still took a few moments before she realized someone was standing behind her. Startled by the sudden appearance, she jumped up staring at Sarakin like a scared deer for a while before sighing relievedly.

"I really wish you wouldn't do that," she muttered while sitting back down.

"I'm sorry," Sarakin said, and it almost sounded as if he really meant it. "I brought you something," he then added. Celenth noticed the small leather pouch he had hanging between his fingers. "I made this for you," the boy denoted, handing the plain pouch to her.

Celenth opened the pouch with great interest, for she could not remember a time when her brother had given her anything as a gift. Frowning slightly as she pulled out a small glass cube, not larger than a regular dice. Observing the smooth, reflective surface very closely, she realized there was very thin, elegant writing on it; almost like silky, most complicated spider web imprinted on all sides of the glossy cube. It required high skill to accomplish something so eloquent and accurate. The item was clearly enchanted, but the exact purpose of it remained a mystery.

"What's the use of it?" Celenth asked curiously, flipping it back and forth in her hands.

"Chant the key and let it reveal your path in the dark," Sarakin said abstrusely, a faint smile

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playing on his thin lips. "Let me show you," he then offered.

After taking the cube from his sister, Sarakin brought it close to him and sang a single word: *hallaith*. A tiny spark appeared in the middle of the cube, shining so brightly that the entire cellar bathed in eerie white light. Celenth gasped frightfully at first, but then she was completely mesmerized by the beauty of this incredible item.

"It's so beautiful," she whispered.

"It's yours," Sarakin said and closed his fist around the cube - the light died instantly, restoring the golden candlelight that had prevailed before his entrance. "Wrap your hand around it to deactivate it, or simply put it back into the pouch." And as he was saying this, he dropped the cube back into the pouch and gave it to his sister.

"Thank you," Celenth said bemused by her brother's sudden generosity. It certainly was not in his usual traits to do something like that, and it brought Celenth to tears, for she saw that even someone as uncharitable as Sarakin may still carry kindness in his heart. But Sarakin was not there to see it.

"I said I would reward you for your help, Sister," he reminded her dryly while he was already far on his way climbing back up, most likely heading for some good hiding place to study his precious grimoire again. It had been only a few months since the discovery of the grimoire of Mezranon, and already the boy was showing remarkable gift with his writing skill. Celenth had always known her brother being smart, but the extent of his ability still came as a surprise for her. Now she could only hope and pray that the path of Sardius would not lead her brother to ruin but gives his life a purpose – a way to forge his path and become a mystic. It was a gamble because Sardius did not represent the goodness or light, but dark, mysterious, ever winding paths among the mists of secrecy that no one really knew, and what it could do to a mortal soul. But if anything, Sarakin's gift for his sister showed that there was hope for as long as there was strength and determination despite in which form they manifested themselves. Perhaps Sarakin would be able to overcome the traps and pits that lied along the way to pass the Ferryman's apprenticeship and master his craft without losing the dangerously flickering flame of goodwill in his heart.

Smiling to herself, Celenth pressed the plain leather pouch against her chest as she picked up the heavy book once again. Shifting her weight to attain a better posture, she continued reading until the daylight faded into deeper dark than the light curls of her black hair.

9

The Ambassador's Decision

The garrison commander of Sannath, Fernan Oakbridge, walked into the Sannath town hall, glad to get off the snowy streets for a while. After a lengthy conversation with one of his captains of the guard, Jarrad Windmore, who had broken his nose in an incident near the notorious ruins of Thorncove, Fernan was eager to present the details to his superiors. The raids along the River Norlune had yielded very poor results, but he trusted on the judgement and story of his guard he had known for a long time, it all sounded intriguingly plausible. No grimoire was found in the raids, but he was sure that the children meddling in the ruins had discovered something. That was the sole reason why he entered the town hall to meet Lord Arawald Greyton, the mayor of Sannath and the lord of the entire central Valdor. His adamant intent was to persuade Lord Arawald and Grizban, the Garkin ambassador of Sannath, to consider the possibility of calling an Inquisitor to Valdor and let it investigate Thorncove, as well as all the villages along the river. It was said that no secret writing was safe from the Inquisitors, for they were sensitive beings able to smell the might of Awen nearby. It could turn out to be priceless for the purposes of upholding the law, and also to boost his position higher in the eyes of the mayor and the Garkin officers. If everything went well enough, he could get as far as to the city guard of Pelgarth, the capital city of Valdor, which would not be a bad advancement at all.

The guards at the door greeted him by raising their hands to a formal salutation over their chests as he passed them with a slight acknowledging gesture of his hand. Fernan had no time for formalities, for he wished to get to the point as quickly as possible.

He found them both, Arawald and Grizban, from the library, focused deeply on a pile of documents laid on the table, discussing in a low voice about the matters at hand. The guard at the door announced Fernan's arrival, and they both raised their heads to see what the captain of the guard had to say.

"Good day, my lords," Fernan began shortly, appreciating the immediate attention he received from both men.

"Greetings, Sir Oakbridge, what brings you to see me?" Lord Arawald inquired. Grizban did not speak, but observed intently.

"I'd like to talk about the recent series of raids we performed along the River Norlune," he

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began steadfastly. "After having a lengthy discussion with Jarrad Windmore, the group leader responsible for Thorncove investigation, I approach you with a firm belief that we have missed something."

His words left Lord Arawald frowning discontently, but before the mayor had a chance to reply, Grizban intervened. "Good sir, sit down and speak of your concerns," he said with his red eyes shining curiously. He, like every other Garkin officer, never allowed a potential clue of Awen writings slip by too carelessly. The small horns on his dark-skinned forehead, the dark mane that reached beyond his shoulder blades and the disturbing, striped eyes made him, just like every other Garkin in the world, appear very intimidating. Fernan could not help swallowing hard before he was able to open his mouth again.

"Sir Windmore keeps telling me, and after closely considering his statement, I must admit that I agree to a point that these kids who were reported snooping around in Thorncove did indeed find something valuable – possibly a grimoire."

Grizban sat down to a chair opposed to Fernan and stared at him straight without blinking once. "Tell me everything, every little detail, and let me be the judge of what he saw," he urged, emphasizing the calmness in his tone. Grizban was very good at his work, and little by little, Fernan noticed himself relaxing and gradually it became easier for him to talk. Instead of a brief, official report from the town guard, Arawald and Grizban received long and detailed description of events that took place in Thorncove as reported by the group leader Jarrad Windmore. Grizban listened seemingly unconcernedly, while Arawald's face darkened and turned grim.

"And you think there was something worth investigating behind the wall?" Grizban then asked sharply, showing that he was not by far as unconcerned as he made it look. Following Fernan's facial expressions very closely, he laid back in his chair, but his eyes never wandered away.

"I do, my lord," he assured, "I can't think of any reason why Jarrad was attacked other than the obvious one – they had forbidden literature hidden beneath their clothes or in their bags."

"Jarrad Windmore was with us when we searched the entire river. Why he couldn't recognize the attackers?" Arawald presented his question reluctantly, barely covering his lack of interest toward this matter. Arawald was a good man, unwilling to bring more misery upon the poor villagers than they already had. Also, he had difficulties to stomach Fernan's behavior. Selling the people of Norlune Vale to the Garkins in favor of his own personal career seemed utterly disgusting and dishonorable, but he was in no position to say anything in front of the representative of the Ironcrown. In reality Grizban was able to deal with this matter as he saw best while Arawald had his

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hands completely tied.

"So you failed to dig out the criminals who assaulted one of your officers," the Garkin noted, "and now you're asking our help, but what can we do to redeem your failure?" he then asked, silencing the commander momentarily, not quite sure why Grizban could not see the obvious resolution.

"Well, my lord, I—," he stumbled and coughed a couple of times to reorganize the pieces of this conversation in his head before suggesting what he found simple and the most effortless answer to the problem. "We could call for an Inquisitor to come here and help us to dig out contraband."

Lord Arawald sneered at the garrison commander. "You'd like to summon an Inquisitor all the way from the lands of Borrea, from the other side of the continent, and take on the unlikely task of actually finding something meaningful. Dear Commander Oakbridge, have you gone completely insane?" the last words roared in the library like thunder in the fall, but Grizban raised his hand as a sign for the mayor to quiet down.

"Don't judge his words so hastily," he urged promptly.

"You cannot take his plea seriously, my lord," Arawald insisted. "It'll take months upon months to travel from Astaroth to here, not to mention the exhausting and drawn voyage over the sea."

"Hold your eager tongue, Lord Greylon," Grizban said emphatically. "While it indeed is not an easy task to get an Inquisitor to Valdor, it's most certainly not an excluded option."

"So you are seriously considering it?" Arawald could not believe his ears.

"I'd say that based on what we've heard here today, there is a significant chance that a small group of villagers is hiding forbidden writing somewhere in their huts and houses, and it's our duty to bring it out together with the sinners; the literature must be destroyed and the criminals punished – to me it's as simple as that." The entire time he was talking, Grizban did not turn his eyes away from the mayor, making sure he understood to keep any unwanted protests to himself.

Arawald wanted to shake them both for the madness they were stirring up, but with incredible self-control he swallowed all the anger that was building up inside and sighed deeply. It would have been useless to continue, useless to argue. The Garkin had made his decision, and there was no way in the whole wide world to turn his head around. Arawald could just as well submit to it and make the day that much easier for himself. Alongside with King Arnan, Arawald was one of those few men in charge who still cared for the common people despite the situation being less than hopeless. He did not wish to see an Inquisitor – an undead servant of the Ironcrown – to ravage his

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beloved homeland. Only the Immortals alone knew how many lives would be lost during such an endeavor.

"I will send a peregrine to deliver the letter to Lord Velnard Gharn with a request for assistance with this matter. Those are the fastest birds in Belmora, so I assure you it won't take too long. And if you're not aware of this yet, the Inquisitor doesn't require rest, food or any other nourishment, so one will not stop along the way – at all. It won't take too long for one to arrive and I believe it's about time to set things right here in the North, and discipline those who have lived in sin." With these words Grizban reached for the inkwell and a quill, grabbed a rough paper sheet and began to write with determined, precise draws.

"You may both leave now," he said without bothering to raise his eyes from the paper. The conversation had ended, and Fernan was feeling very enthusiastic about the result. The entire meeting had progressed beyond his most wishful thinking. Lord Arawald, on the other hand, did not attempt to cover his despise toward the garrison commander.

"I sure hope you know what you just did, commander," he said to Fernan as they walked down the steps from the library.

"I'm perfectly aware of my actions, my lord," Fernan replied without noticing the dark tone in mayor's voice.

"Even what it means to your family; they live in Ardan if I'm not entirely mistaken, less than ten miles upstream from here?"

"Yes, that's absolutely correct, my lord. What is it that you imply by all this?" he then asked, wanting to cut this mindless chatter short.

"The Inquisitors are known for delivering the will of the Ironcrown, whether it is Raghtar Tarathiel's or the Fallen One's will, and that is not always the same as simply finding hidden contraband. Sometimes they're just setting an example, which means any man, woman or a child - or an entire family - may see their end coming." The words of Lord Arawald dropped slowly like hundred ton boulders, crushing all delusions Fernan had about his noble deed and service. It was very much a possibility that by summoning an Inquisitor to Valdor, he had summoned demise for his entire family, and the thought of that made him squirm inside. But he resisted furiously from showing any signs of his inner storm on his frozen face.

"I don't have time for this nonsense!" he snapped and turned away from the mayor, who halted his steps for a few seconds and gazed after the receding man. Although the garrison commander had brought doom upon the land, Arawald had sympathy for him. During the last

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minute or so, Fernan had fully realized the consequences of his deeds, and he would have a long winter to ponder what it meant for himself and all his loved ones. Arawald had no reason to go any further with his hatred, for the man would probably punish himself harder than anyone else ever could.

10

Winter's Icy Hand

The large cellar was almost empty. Only the ages old wine casks were still standing against the walls, slowly rotting away as the years crawled by. The once open hatch had been replaced by one that resembled a floor tile, keeping the underground room very effectively a secret. The kind Father Kinnan had put out all the other candles but one before returning to his humble hut by the Bridgeport Road. What Celenth was doing was not exactly illegal, but even the religious books without actual Awen writing in them formed a threat, which is why the modest library in its entirety had been stored on rough shelves at the back of the cellar.

The girl was deeply concentrating on one of the books, completely unaware of her surroundings, which is why she nearly screamed when she suddenly realized that she was no longer alone. A figure behind her had appeared like a ghost out of thin air.

"Hey Celenth, it's just me," Theron tried to calm her, but it took another brief moment before she really understood who was standing in front of her.

"Oh Theron, I'm so sorry, I—," she sputtered, but the man raised his hands as a peaceful gesture and smiled.

"It's okay, I just wanted to see you. We haven't really met since the day the guards came," he explained, and the girl finally relaxed.

"I've been busy—," she began, but the man stepped closer and pressed his finger on her lips, still smiling.

"You've been busy with your books, I know," he whispered with strange sadness in his voice, "but I've missed you and I had to come look for you." The barely noticeable change in his tone chilled her skin and made his touch feel very uncomfortable. But as she attempted to push herself away from the man, she felt how his fingers tightened around her arms and cold steel appeared in his eyes. The chair she had used was kicked furiously against the wall where it fell over from the mere force of the impact.

"Theron! What are you doing?" she tried to wake him from his loss of sense of reality, which was getting out of hand very quickly.

"Something I should have done a long time ago, my dear girl," Theron hissed into her ear while forcing her to sit on the sturdy table behind her. "I've been thinking about it, and I think you

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owe me a little reward for everything I've done for you.”

”I love you, Theron, but not in the way you want me to,” Celenth explained, trying to grow distance between them, but the man had her caught tightly against the table. ”Stop this madness before you destroy the good friendship we've had.”

”Friendship!” Theron mocked her. ”Running errands and doing favors for you and your freaky brother, that's not what I would call friendship,” he growled. ”I want more - so much more!”

Celenth did not reply, she was struggling to keep the man away from her. Theron used his greater mass to press the girl against the table while trying to haul her pants off under the long, woolen skirt. It could have destroyed her life, and in a way it already had, for she could never look at her friend again feeling the same. Nothing would ever be the same again, the irreversible damage had already been done. Now the question was, how devastating damage Theron was ready to inflict on the subject of his formerly innocent fantasies.

”That's enough,” a new voice whispered from the stairs, cutting the scene like a crusader's sword. Sarakin's dark figure had appeared in the cellar as silently as ever, causing Theron to recede from the girl. The conditions had drastically changed, and now there was a witness, which required a moment or two from him to reconsider, perhaps find a way out without completely losing face. But he was reluctant to do that, unwilling to let Celenth's stunning figure slip out of his hands.

”What could you do?” he spat out jeeringly, glaring at the boy without slightest attempt to cover his scorn. ”The hour is late, the church is empty - what could you do?” The tone of his voice was overly challenging, trying to throw the boy off balance, and any normal boy of his age would have probably reacted like Theron wanted, but Sarakin's mind had already gone through much worse stress than threats of a bully. He gazed at Theron calmly, blue eyes lightly glimmering in the soft candlelight, patiently waiting until he was finished. Then he spoke, and his voice was colorless and dry.

”I could turn you in,” he said slowly, like explaining the difference of night and day to a degenerate, and before Theron could respond, he continued. ”There are no nobles involved in this, which speaks for a harsh conviction. Yes, my sister would suffer for being marked dirty and stained since you could undoubtedly finish off before the guards arrived, but you would most likely end up hanged, for the authorities of Sannath have no sympathy for peasants, and in that regard you're nothing special.”

The grin on Theron's face faded into complete aghast as Sarakin's words penetrated the foggy veil of lust and fury. By the time he had finished, Theron had stepped away from Celenth,

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looking rather nervous about what he had done. Then, all of a sudden, he gave up and stormed toward the stairway, wanting to get out before being embarrassed any further. In an overwhelming rush of blind rage, he shoved the boy out of his way with one scathing swipe. Sarakin was unable to maintain his balance against the superior mass that pushed him irresistibly and unexpectedly off his feet.

Attempting to avoid the sharp-edged leg of the chair that was kicked against the wall earlier, and which now laid next to Sarakin's feet, he bent his head backward, but could not quite evade the impact completely. Instead of crushing his neck onto the fallen chair, his throat dashed against the wooden leg, cutting a bleeding wound and latching his breath as the rest of his slim body crashed on the floor.

"Sarakin!" Celenth cried in terror, but her cry received no response. Without looking back, Theron rushed out and slammed the hatch down behind him, leaving Sarakin and his panicky sister to deal with the situation on their own.

"Don't worry, I'll take you to the cleric. I'm sure Father Kinnan can help you," Celenth was comforting her brother while supporting his head to see how badly he was injured. But Sarakin grasped her hands and pushed her away, coughing and gagging while attempting to get up. It was now obvious that the wooden leg had not pierced his throat, but gashed a deep bleeding wound on his skin. Celenth could not tell for sure whether the vital arteries had been damaged or not, and there was another concerning matter at hand: Sarakin was coughing out large droplets of blood.

* * *

Kinnan was examining Sarakin's throat, amazed by the luck that had prevented the young man from acquiring lethal damage to his neck area. The wounds healed, and after a while he regained his ability to speak as well, but his voice had forever changed. Suffering from very severe hoarseness of voice, Sarakin was almost certain his ability to sing the secret writing would be lost forever. Of course he could still write and read it, but being unable to trigger the spells was a devastating setback, as even the slightest attempt to sing caused immense pain in his throat. Father Kinnan comforted him by saying it was still possible to fully recover, but that it might take a long period of time, time what Sarakin did not consider himself to have.

They never said a word about the incident that had taken place at the abbey. Instead they went on explaining that Sarakin had tripped in the woods and injured himself there. They did not

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want anyone to go near that cellar or the library at the end of it, for all the books there were more valuable for both of them than life itself.

During that winter Theron never spoke to his neighbors again. Whether it was because of the shame or hatred, the outcome was the same; the once close friendship of him and Celenth was forever shattered and wasted. Celenth never told anyone about the incident, and Sarakin being himself, never spoke to anyone about anything. However, despite the extensive attempts to brush it off as something that did not really happen, the awkward glances and uncomfortable meetings on the village road kept reminding them about it. What took place in the cellar of the old abbey could never be completely forgotten by those involved in it, and on his own behalf Sarakin made sure that Theron would not forget. During a cold winter evening when a large part of the village had gathered to Kendraf's inn to enjoy some food and beverages and listen to a wandering bard that had been touring the riverside hamlets lately, Sarakin stopped casually by Theron, almost as if just for a polite greeting, but the words he whispered into Theron's ear would haunt him for many nights to come.

"All debts must be repaid," he said quietly with a crackling voice and walked over to his family like nothing had happened. That voice would always remind him of his dirty deed, casting shame upon his once honorable name.

* * *

That winter brought a lot of snow, so much that many people were already expecting a famine next summer, for the darkness prevented snow from melting very fast, and thus considerably delaying the sowings of the spring. It was another burden the folks of Crisval had to bear, but it was far from the worst. The people of the village were not aware of the pale rider that was dispatched from the unholy city of Astaroth as a result of Grizban's letter; the Inquisitor was coming, and no one was safe from its wrath.

Clad in faded white shroud like once pure innocence stained by the sins of the world, the ashen man with blackened eyes and dry, parchment-like dead skin, spurred his rotten steed to gallop faster, for this mount would not grow tired or hungry. The dusty grey cloak around him fluttered wildly in the freezing wind of the night, signaling any animals and people to seek cover and stay out of his path, for nothing good came to those standing in the way of this somber rider.

Grave times hanged upon the sleepy villages of River Norlune as the burdensome winter slowly trudged on, the people by their fireplaces and hot cups of tea blissfully unaware of the full

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extent of the disaster coming toward them at the speed of wind.

A faint echo of the lute lingered upon the snow drifts as Master Kendraf played a tune of old for his customers sitting by the familiar fireplace. The song told a tale of ancient heroes who fought in the battles of history to win the freedom for their kin. It was about sacrifice and fallen friends who become an immortal verse in the hymn of victory; the deeds that would be required to save this forsaken land from the darkness that gnawed the very foundations of it. The people listened, but did they truly heed the message - only time would tell.