

## The Corpse Row

by

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Sitting on the floor in a small chamber with no other furniture than a simple straw mattress, Kithred stared at the locked door, waiting for his judgement. Running sweat painted lines on his dusty, bruised skin. Pain throbbed in the hundred wounds he had acquired under Father Maldrax's torture. These bastards were truly dedicated to the art of pain, and for a while Kithred had believed the monastery to be a place he could call home. After all, it was pain, and only pain, that kept his mind from drowning into the whispers of ghosts that always came to remind him of his failure to stand up and fight for his loved ones. Pain muddled the voices of insanity and gave him clarity to function like any other man for a while, but like the most vicious addiction, he always yearned for more.

"Liars and pretenders," he mumbled, coughing up droplets of blood that sprinkled on the dirt floor and the front of his ragged robe. Something must have broken inside during the extensive

beating he was given before they threw him into this room. The grating ache in his chest brought a faint smile on his face.

*Perhaps today is the day when it all comes to an end...*

The lock rattled, and the sudden noise pulled him back from the hazy state he was so comfortably wallowing in. Two men, wearing similar robes to his own, came forth and pulled him up from the ground.

"Come, brother," one of them said. "It is time."

"Ogar," Kithred grinned, revealing his bloody teeth. "You spineless dog. You sold me to save your own skin," he growled while leaning against the bulky man's shoulder. With his injuries, it would have been unlikely for him to stand on his own.

"It was either you or me, my friend," Ogar whispered. "We were spotted by the night guard. I did what I had to do."

The hollow excuse did not warm Kithred's heart. Instead of accepting the consequences of their deeds, Ogar had ratted him out to stay in good terms with the abbot, stabbing him in the back like a slippery snake.

Torgas Monastery was a maze of corridors, chambers, dark chapels and small inner courts for the monks to rejoice their suffering of burdens and wounds. Through this seemingly endless structure, the two brothers dragged Kithred toward the main nave where the altar of Calmor marked the heart of the monastery. Here, every day at sundown, the monks gathered to have their sacred hour of misery, cutting and lashing themselves until they could feel the touch of their deity.

This time, however, the sacred hour would be significantly different. This time only Kithred's blood would spill.

A fearsome man stood by the altar. Behind him rose an elegant statue of Calmor, stained by dark blotches of blood long spilled, innocently holding a lantern and shepherd's staff. It was his task, after all, to guide the departed souls to the great beyond. The calmness and serenity of the

figure certainly did not match the harsh and wicked impression upon the abbot's face, who stared at Kithred over the crowd of monks with wrath in his burning eyes.

"Ogar, my brother," the abbot said, surprisingly softly, countless scars gleaming in the soft light. "Bring our fallen brethren to face the judgement of Calmor Almighty."

The crowd turned to see the approaching sinner with malice and prejudice. They all had made up their minds about Kithred, purely based on the word of their leader like a pack of well trained hounds. Caught by keen excitement, they waited impatiently, knowing a joyfully morbid play was about to begin.

Staring back at the abbot, Kithred shamelessly defied his authority, earning silent cheers from majority of the gathered monks, for they knew his behaviour only fueled the flames of anger within the somber leader of this dark congregation.

"I was wondering if you would face me again after having your henchmen maul me, my dear Maldrax," Kithred said with a smile, a smile so sincere it momentarily rendered the abbot speechless. "I know you like to have your vassals doing the dirty work for you, so consider me pleasantly surprised."

"I know what you're trying to accomplish, Brother Kithred, and brother you still are, albeit a sinner," Abbot Maldrax said, his voice still soft like silk, but the stirring rage gave out a grim undertone that could not be ignored. "You were witnessed cutting throats of the enlightened. That is a cardinal sin in the eyes of our shepherd and savior."

Kithred laughed, but the blood in his throat gurgled, making the sound that came out resemble a raven's caw. "I came here to suffer," he hissed, "I came here to die, but that's not the way your precious order works." Giving a condemning glare at the audience, he continued, "You seize travelers, innocent folks, who have no wish to be a part of your so called savior's plan. You capture them, you torture them, then you hang them on the monastery wall to die. You call yourself righteous as the vultures gnaw away their flesh while they're still clinging to the last shreds of their

lives. They pray to their Immortals; they pray to their own Atars. That's not enlightenment, brother. That's ruthless murder, a meaningless sacrifice. I killed them, and I would kill them again given the chance. They belong with their own Immortals, not your tainted image of a savior."

Maldrax remained silent for a while, making a grand play of the moment when he supposedly lost one of his loyal followers. Pretentious sorrow upon his scarred face, he turned to the monks, who were watching in silence.

"I'm afraid Brother Kithred doesn't understand what we are doing here. We're not saving lives but souls, and each and everyone of those seekers of light that we have given the freedom of death are now celebrated and ascended by Calmor, our father supreme. Through pain, all those poor souls earned their places in the netherworld, but those who died too soon are forever lost to damnation. This is the weight of your sin, Brother Kithred, and only through anguish you may receive forgiveness, and still claim your rightful seat at Calmor's table." Then he turned back to Kithred, who was now hanging his head, seemingly too tired to care anymore. "Do you have anything to say before we allow you to make amends by suffering not only for yourself, but for the souls you've so foolishly doomed?"

Spitting out droplets of blood, Kithred was going to ignore him at first, but then he changed his mind. Raising his head, grinning wickedly, he croaked three words.

"Do your worst."

Secretly, Maldrax had been hoping that once facing such an abysmal fate, Kithred would have broken down and begged for mercy, so it was quite disappointing. In a flash of rage, he grabbed a metal-tipped rod that was used for caning and smashed it on the side of Kithred's head, causing a loud crack as the bone gave in. Blood filled his eye socket, dripping down like a crimson tear. Kithred refused to make more noise than a muffled grunt. Throwing the rod back on the table, Maldrax nodded at the monks standing by the bleeding man as a sign to begin, then he retreated to the shadows of the chancel to watch the torture.

The monks stripped and tied him to a wooden rack that left him stretched upward, feet barely touching the floor. A crude whip began to dance along his exposed back, peeling skin and flesh with every lash. From the selection of tools, Kithred could tell that he would lose nails, teeth, perhaps even fingers and toes during the hour of suffering, depending on how long he remained conscious.

Closing his eyes, Kithred smiled again. The shocks of pain ingressed his already wrecked body, shattering the images of his burned home, blurring the beastly grins of the Myrdin warriors as they hacked down his father, muffling the helpless screams of his mother as they ravaged her. One by one, the merciless strikes drove the cloud of nightmares away, leaving a bright and brisk mind to cherish the pain like a true monk of Torgas should.

Whether it was fifty or hundred lashes, he could not tell, but eventually he began to slide into darkness. After everything he had suffered through that day, his body was slowly failing in the natural task of clinging to this world.

He welcomed death— gladly.

#

A grunt and a hiss, followed by a series of mumbled curses to all Immortals dwelling in the stars, Kithred attempted to move, but sharp pain flashing in his wrists made him give up instantly. A cold breeze licked his naked, battered body. Struggling to open his swollen eyes, he cursed the Immortals again. After a lengthy struggle, one of them barely cracked. The blurry vision before him revealed dunes of sand disappearing into the darkness, and as his consciousness gradually returned, he realized how cold he was, trembling like a leaf of an aspen tree.

The foremost feeling was utter disappointment, for he was not dead, not with the amount of aches he was sensing. Every single inch of his body protested against any kind of movement, yet the lack of circulation in his arms demanded him to move.

Carefully glancing left and right, Kithred knew where he was now. He saw the row of corpses hanging on the monastery wall, including the ones he had personally killed.

*The corpse row*, he thought with a tired grin, silently applauding Maldrax for his twisted sense of humor. *Looks like I didn't last long enough for them to take a single nail or tooth. How disappointing that must've been for that old goat*, he smirked.

The sky was a veil of blackness, covered with clouds that had been there for over hundred years, hiding what had become a bundle of myths by now—the sun, the moons and the stars. The freezing desert wind continued blowing, causing Kithred to shiver uncontrollably, invoking an entirely new set of pains and throbs. The desert made sounds. Crawling and slithering animals, sand rustling against the monastery wall, the distant purl of River Lumbor, but one particular sound caught his ear above everything else. A higher-pitched rattle and crunch that lacked the randomness of others, and it was quickly approaching.

*Desert roaches*, he thought. *Perfect. A little too slow way to die for my taste, but I'll take it.*

During the years of darkness, many animals that used to be harmless developed disturbingly great appetite for meat, and they did not care whether it was another animal or a person, as long as the prey was helpless enough. Fresh meat was in high demand.

His blurry vision could not focus enough to see, but he heard them coming. There were closer to ten corpses hanging on the wall, some of them less than a day old, but they would not be enough to satiate what sounded like an entire colony of roaches. They would come for him as well.

But then another sound pierced through the existing ones—a pair of boots thumping against the sand. No, not just one pair but two, and they were coming straight toward him.

A few well placed, stronger stomps sent the roaches fleeing into every direction until their rattling could no longer be heard. Kithred listened them retreating, feeling rather saddened by the turn of events.

Two figures, one tall and bulky, and the other one smaller, thinner, feminine.

"Who goes there?" Kithred groaned, barely able to produce a sound.

"It's me, Ogar," he heard a quiet response. "Be still. I'm going to help you down."

He felt the bulky man working with the ropes, slowly gnawing them with a knife that was barely up for the job.

"Why are you doing this, Ogar?" Kithred whispered. "The guards didn't see you last night, yet one of those poor bastards died by your hand."

"I did what I had to do, my brother," Ogar replied, "but it doesn't mean that I'd suddenly doubt our cause or reasoning." Cutting the last rope, his eyes met with Kithred's as he continued. "In a way, you are a true monk, an honest follower of Calmor, which is something most of these murderous halfwits are not, and Abbot Maldrax is the worst of them all. I want him gone, and I'm absolutely sure I'm not the only one."

Kithred was not sure if he believed him, but grudgingly he accepted the help. Changing subjects, he asked, "Who's with you?"

"Sundras Harari," Ogar said, supporting the tormented man as he stepped down and nearly collapsed. "She lives in the Whitedust Heights, a place where you can hide until you recover. She owes me a favor or two for all the bits and pieces of the deceased I've supplied for her powders and potions."

"A healer?" Kithred asked, astounded.

"Not exactly," Ogar corrected, chuckling under his massive black beard. "More of a poison brewer and a magister, but she can certainly make a tonic when needed. Let us get you out of here, Kithred. You have a few miles to hike, and I'd rather you make it in the dark."

He did not respond, for a simple step took all of his strength and focus. The woman remained silent, but stepped forward and lent her arm to offer additional support. Together they wobbled out into the desert, steering toward the jagged hills east from Torgas.

When the fires of the monastery were just a distant flicker in the dark, Ogar wished them good luck and turned around. He had to make it back before dawn or his absence would be noticed. Night was the time of the dead, thus holy and precious for the monks of Torgas. Any wandering monks outside the walls faced a fierce punishment, possibly earning their place on the corpse row with the rest of the innocent and disobedient.

#

With tireless care from Sundras, Kithred's wounds began to heal. Along with the healing came the ghosts of his past, laughing at his miserable existence. They bore a different kind of pain — pain he desperately tried to avoid.

Kithred turned his head, lying on a fairly comfortable mattress of hay and sand. Looking at the woman, who was working on another one of her strange potions, he tried to distract himself as well as he could to keep the madness away. She was quiet, a quality Kithred appreciated, although in this situation he would have not minded some noise. While he was unable to look at women the same way most men do, it was easy for him to admit that Sundras was beautiful. Her dark complexion made her blend into the darkness, but her eyes, sparkling in the light of the small fire, had peculiar kindness in them. She was a hermit, living alone in the middle of the desert, which was enough to tell that she was not helpless or weak, but a strong and able survivor despite the deceiving softness in her gaze.

"What's that?" Kithred asked quietly, pointing at a stack of random equipment in the far end of the cave, close to a similar mattress that he was using— her sleeping berth.

Smiling faintly, Sundras never looked away from the mortar, but she was instantly aware of what Kithred meant. "Finders, keepers; losers, weepers," she answered, then continued her work without offering further explanation.

Frowning, Kithred attempted to see better, but he could not make out what all was piled up in there. Grunting, he tried to get up for the first time since he was brought to this cave dwelling, but his body was not quite ready yet. The fact that he was barely able to see with his damaged eye did not help at all.

The unexpected sound of his pain got Sundras abandon her work and rush to his side. Placing her hands upon his chest, she forced him back down, gently yet firmly.

"Not yet," she said, making sure Kithred would not make another foolish attempt to move. "Big man, Ogar, will return soon. Then you may walk."

Kithred shrugged and relaxed, letting out a tired sigh. He needed more sleep anyway, but the nightmares kept him awake. They came every time as surely as the tide, lurking right behind the false pledge of a dream.

"No sleep," he croaked, earning a meaningful glance from the mysterious woman.

*Was there a glimpse of pity in the depth of her eyes,* he wondered, slightly amused.

"I'll bring medicine," she said and returned to her table where she had chests and boxes stored underneath.

The medicine she referred to was something Kithred eagerly wanted, for it made his mind and body numb, caused the cave walls to become out of focus and waver brilliantly. The sleep that would follow was absolutely dreamless, potent enough to repel the nightmares. To Kithred, it was the most amazing liquid he had ever tasted.

"Here," Sundras said, offering a clay mug full of murky substance, "reversed venom."

Kithred could not comprehend what reverse venom exactly was, unless Sundras meant it as some kind of antidote for the venom of mind. In any case, he took the mug with great enthusiasm,

gulped it down with one swig and lied back down, smiling like he just had a glass of the finest Calathmarian red wine.

"Rest now," Sundras urged, returning to her work.

#

Three days later, Ogar returned at nightfall, walking through the dunes of sand like an unwanted pest that comes without calling.

"Brother Kithred, you look better. Not that you ever looked particularly good, but better," he greeted, sitting down and setting his weapon against the table. "Already hard at work?" he then asked, seeing how tenaciously Kithred was browsing through the stack he had been leering for days.

"Looking for something I can use for a weapon," Kithred muttered without bothering to take his eyes from the pile.

"So you can kill Abbot Maldrax, right?"

The question brought Kithred to a halt as if he considered it for a while, but then he resumed, scoffing.

"It's a long way to Waylon," he grunted.

"You're not going back to the monastery?" Ogar sounded disappointed. "They have three new men hanging on the row. All of them captured and sentenced by our dear abbot."

Kithred shook his head. "I'm not going back," he said. "There's nothing for me at the monastery, nothing that I should care about."

"There could be," Ogar said carefully, nervously stroking his bushy beard. "Perhaps a different abbot, one that understood you better. Someone who would be able to offer you what you desire."

For the second time, Kithred halted. This time he straightened his body and faced Ogar, a feverish gleam in his otherwise cold, empty eyes. Maldrax had once called him a man without soul, and now it was Ogar's turn to feel the disarming effect of that stare.

Despite feeling uncomfortable and exposed, Ogar stared back, forcing a calm demeanor. Many casual conversations with this man had painted a fairly clear picture of his wants and needs, and in this situation, where Kithred was just going to walk away from it all, Ogar chose to play the one card he knew would appear attractive.

"Give me your weapon," Kithred said.

"My staff?" Ogar seemed shocked, instinctively grabbing hold of his dear possession.

"If you want me to kill Maldrax, I'll need a tool and a way to get inside," Kithred blurted as if he had made the decision long time ago.

Ogar sighed, reluctantly conceding to his demand. "Meet me by the duct along the River Lumbor tomorrow at dusk," he said, waving at Sundras for goodbye, then he headed for the mouth of the cave— unarmed.

"Debts are paid?" Sundras hollered after him. Ogar continued walking, ignoring her question, unaware of a shadow that followed him.

The spiked ball of steel, attached to the head of a lengthy staff with an iron chain, the very same weapon Ogar had handed over a few moments ago, slammed hard into his back, tearing through clothing and skin.

Falling to his knees, Ogar frowned, unable to feel his legs. The dreadful ball of death had cracked his spine, rendering him helpless with one heinous strike.

"You've listened me well, Ogar," Kithred pointed out. "But you missed something important, something that might have saved your worthless life tonight. Remember how I told you many times over that all I really wished for was peace of mind?"

Ogar, even if he wanted to, could not answer. The massive internal damage was making him cough out blood, sprinkling it over the dark sand.

Another furious blow landed on his back, flattening his body against the ground.

"Do you remember?" Kithred insisted. "I said, I hate life more than I hate the Myrdins who killed my family, but even more than that, I hate spiteful pigs, wanting to use me for their own advantage. Maldrax tried to do that, and now you're trying the same, Ogar. Not once but twice you've offered me the sharp end of the dagger. Time has come for the vultures to pick on your bones instead of mine."

Kithred prepared to deliver the final blow.

"Not the eyes!" he heard Sundras' hasty voice through the haze of his anger. "I need them eyes!"

Grinning wolfishly, Kithred aimed for the upper torso. He had grown to like this mysterious yet delightfully straightforward and practical woman. He did not know for what kind of potion she needed Ogar's eyes, but she would get them. As a payment for all the care he had received, she would get the eyes. That seemed only fair.

Third strike cracked Ogar's chest cavity, crushing his lungs and heart, sending him to the great beyond ahead of those poor souls still hanging on the row.

The dark monk leaned against the flail and kicked the body to make sure he was dead. While standing there, he gazed at the dark silhouette in the distance—Torgas Monastery—the one place where hope goes to die.

*Well, my dear abbot, I guess it is time to have you replaced,* he thought to himself. The brisk night wind felt good. Breathing deeply, he watched the shadowy structure for a while before returning inside. Tomorrow would be a long day. He needed to rest before bidding farewell to Sundras and her cozy cave.

The sudden change of heart to kill Ogar and the abbot sparked from anger. Kithred was sick and tired of being used. Yes, he wished to die, but he would never do that under someone else's influence. Ogar had to pay, and now Maldrax would pay as well.

Sundras seemed satisfied with his grim deed of killing a fellow monk, but she never said a word about the debt she had owed to Ogar. The man, who now lied maimed in the sand, had never gone any deeper about the subject either. Going through the stash in the cave had not revealed anything peculiar other than a simple iron plate with a crowned skull carved on it. Unsure of what it meant, Kithred had shoved it into one of his pockets, knowing that asking Sundras would never yield a clear answer. She would only throw another rhyme and riddle at him, and that would be all.

*The only question that truly bothered him was: would she betray him for some other unpaid service from her past? Perhaps he should kill her too before leaving.*

#

In the dark of the night, a quiet tinkle marked the march of one man. Heading toward the banks of River Lumbor as instructed by the man he had slain, Kithred kept a good distance to the monastery. He did not want the night guard to spot his figure in the desert.

Keeping the radiant torches of Torgas to his north, he knew the dark, cool water of the river would eventually wash over his feet. The stars were not visible; the stars had not been visible for over a hundred years. The dark, withering world was slowly dying in the clenching fist of the Ironcrown, but that was not Kithred's concern.

He approached the river. He could smell it— not the water, but what was in the water. The duct, as mentioned by Ogar, was a large, wooden chute running downhill from the monastery, used to dump all their waste into the river. The stench was suffocating.

Covering his mouth and nose partially with the side of his robe's hood, Kithred stepped into the chute without hesitation and began the long climb up. It was the only unguarded entrance to the monastery. Ever since his own induction to the ranks of Torgas, he had suspected the real reason for having guards at all was to keep an eye for careless travelers rather than keeping the monastery itself protected. A place full of murderous lunatics was not exactly on the wishlist of any thief to enter.

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Maldrax sat peacefully in his quiet chamber, holding a crude mace on his lap. Sundras Harari had paid her debt by sending a well trained peregrine falcon to bring him a message as soon as Kithred had departed.

*Most useful little desert flower, Maldrax thought silently. I will have to come up with a new favor in order to keep her loyal to the monastery.*

Feeling safe, he waited, knowing Kithred was on his way. The chamber was enchanted by none other than Sundras herself, the only person who could draw glyphs from Tiraki Desert to Ashaba.

*Such a valuable yet dangerous ally.*

There were no guards outside of his chamber. Why would there be? The monks of Torgas sought pain and suffering, ways to become closer with their beloved and feared deity. Using such vile measures as magic would have earned him the title of a coward and sinner if the secret of his chamber became known to his fellow monks. But Maldrax was not like any other monk. He used pain and torture to grow in power and riches. Every single one of those aimless wanderers he picked to hang on the row carried something of value. Eventually, he would have enough to conquer

himself a small piece of Waylon from the thief lords. Eventually, he would turn Torgas Monastery into lucrative business.

The door opened with a quiet creak. Maldrax could feel the presence of his adversary without looking.

"Welcome back, Kithred Caine," he said calmly. "I've been expecting you."

The door closed. A slight jingle of the flail was the only sound breaking the otherwise deafening silence.

Maldrax sighed, straightening himself up and turning to face the visitor, meeting with Kithred's soulless stare.

"You came to kill me, brother," he stated colorlessly as if speaking of weather.

Kithred nodded, and without further notice, he lifted the flail for a strike. The spell woven into the walls of the chamber activated, turning his limbs unnaturally heavy— so heavy he could barely hold up the weapon. He flashed a wicked smile.

Maldrax would have felt comfortable, but that knowing smile made him nervous. What did Kithred know that he did not? Without thinking further, Maldrax took advantage of his little enchanted space and attacked, punching the mace into Kithred's face with such force that his teeth jiggled while shredding the interior of his mouth. Kithred spat out the seeping blood and tiny fragments of bone, his smile never fading.

"Sundras," Maldrax then scoffed, now certain the woman had shared his secret, but there he was— bleeding. If he knew, he had foolishly come to die without a chance to fight back. And for what? To impress the woman?

Without further delay, Kithred stopped approaching the abbot and instead slammed his flail to the wall, breaking some of the carved strings that held the spell together, considerably weakening the effect. Maldrax felt the tingling surge in his arm as the tattooed glyphs, excluding him from the area of effect, responded to the faltering enchantment.

"I was going to kill her, you know," Kithred said softly. "I was going to kill her just to make sure she wouldn't add unnecessary problems along the way, but I quickly came to realize that she served anyone with something to trade, keeping her most peculiar currency of favors flowing. I was able to appreciate that as it turned out she wanted you dead as well, so we made a deal."

Maldrax smirked. "It seems that I have to pay a visit and remind her of how valuable favor it is to be allowed to hold on to life. But first, I will see that you're returned to where you belong. I'm certain the monks will appreciate your suffering that paves the way back to the hands of our lord and savior."

Moving incredibly fast, Maldrax delivered another crushing blow, aiming at Kithred's head. This time, however, Kithred was prepared, dodging by dropping down. Keeping the staff firmly in his hand, he swiftly used the weight of the flail to jam the chain around Maldrax's ankle, then he pulled as hard as he could. The tight loop caused a cracking sound as the abbot lost his balance and fell, twisting and fracturing the ankle.

Now, having enough time, Kithred yanked the chain free, stood and repeated his aimless slam against the wall. This time he targeted the opposite side of the chamber, further breaking the structure of entwined glyphs. Maldrax was right. Sundras had told him about the spell. She had also revealed that she was not very good at spellweaving, which came as no surprise. The time of true mystics had long passed. What was left were amateurs at best.

After the spell was properly defused, Kithred raised his staff to parry Maldrax's further attempts, directing the main force of the attack away from him. It was easy now that the abbot was barely able to stand with his broken foot. Using the momentum of his continued motion, he slammed the tail of his staff into Maldrax's face, causing him to stumble backward.

That was all he needed, approaching with his flail raised. Maldrax never had enough time to recover from the bursting pain his blasted, profusely bleeding nose provided. He saw the dreadful ball of spiked steel scudding through the air. Without a chance to prevent the impact, he closed his

eyes a brief moment before the flail splintered his skull, splattering blood over the glyphs on the wall behind him.

The dark monk approached his former master, tilting his head slightly to the right, giving his good eye a chance to see better. Lifting the robe's sleeve, he could see a tattoo, the trigger that made him immune to the spell that was carved around the walls— now broken and useless. He also noticed his necklace, carrying the emblem of a crowned skull. With a sly grin, Kithred ripped off the bauble and stuffed it into his pocket.

Picking up the mace that had dropped from Maldrax's lifeless hand, he looked for any coins lying around. It turned out that the abbot did have quite a few of them stashed around his favorite chamber. Hanging the mace on his belt, he spat on the corpse, a final gesture of deep despise he had for the man.

Kithred was gone before the monks realized what had happened, driving the monastery into momentary disorder. They would debate and they would fight, and in time, they would have a new abbot, but that was not any of Kithred's concern. He headed north, hoping to find something new to numb his pain, and who knows, maybe a way to extinguish it for good.

The end