

Author's Note

While the majority of the details portrayed over the course of Chapters One through Three are purely fictionalized, the background circumstances are, alas, entirely factual.

On July 15, 1099, the “pilgrims” of the First Crusade—led by, among others, the Duke Godefroy de Bouillon of France—collapsed portions of the defensive walls of Jerusalem, putting an end to the siege of the city. The next twenty-four hours were among the bloodiest in the history of the Crusades, as seemingly-maddened knights and soldiers slaughtered an enormous portion of the Holy City’s population: Muslims, Jews, and even some Christians; men, women, and children. Nobody was spared the violence and anger of the crusaders; and while historical accounts claiming the soldiers waded in blood up to their ankles are almost certainly exaggerations, they still represent a chilling view of what happened that day.

This is not fiction, much as we might wish it were. This is history.

And if there *are* Dark Powers, scouring the many worlds for those “worthy” of their embrace, surely such horrors committed in the name of God would be exactly what they sought.

Prologue

They moved through a world of endless mist, and the mist moved around them in turn. It cradled them like a mother guarding an errant child — or a cyst forming defensively around an intruding splinter.

The *vardos* of Clan Hanza, late of Barovia, originally of gods-alone-knew-where, appeared single-file from the sea of white. Gypsies, they were called by some; Vistani by others, who pretended to know them. They trod the Mists via paths invisible to other mortals, heard the deep secrets of the world whispered on the winds, and Saw truths to which others remained blind.

Today they followed a road—if road it could be called—well known to them. Each of their great wagons swayed, the wheels running across divots and potholes unseen in the heavy fog. The bright paints that rendered each wagon distinct from the next were muted, as though viewed through cataracts. The creaking of the wheels and the jingle of the harness bells were muffled, barely audible from one *vardo* to the next. Even the scent of the horses seemed to waft from afar, as if carried by some distant wind, rather than from the animals a mere few feet away.

The horses shivered, and not just from the clinging cold and damp. They wore blinders so they might not realize that they moved through the proverbial kingdom of the blind. Before each team of two walked a young Vistani girl, one hand on her horses' halters to guide them. Blouses and skirts of white blended perfectly with the surrounding haze. The girls went barefoot, that they might feel the path beneath them, and many walked with eyes firmly shut. It made no real difference in the Mists, and besides, these were Vistani. The Hanza always traveled thus, and they needed no eyes to See.

Atop the second wagon, with a bright red and purple shawl wrapped about her shoulders, Viola sat on a wooden bench.

She cast the driver, Milosh, irritated glances with every bump and jolt. He, watching from behind the traditional long mustache of the clan, ignored her; his full attention was focused on the horses under his direction and the young girl who currently guided them.

Before her last birthday, Violca would have been down there with the other girls, one hand on the horse's bridle guiding the wagon through the unseen byways. Now that she had come of age, however, her aunt had decreed it time for Violca to train her Sight toward other pursuits.

And so she sat, her long hair tied back from her face with a blood-red ribbon. Parchment and charcoal were spread across her lap. She sketched design after design, waiting for inspiration, for that one image out of a dozen—or a hundred—that resonated within her soul. Since time immemorial, every Vistani seer had crafted her own *tarokka*, her own little window—blurry and indistinct as it was—into the future. Alas, Violca might well be on the road to becoming a gifted Seer, but as an artist, she found herself sorely lacking—and the constant shifting of the wagon was not helping. She'd hoped the disruption might be less up here beside the driver, but if anything it was worse than it had been inside beneath the impatient gaze of her aunt. Violca couldn't even form an acceptable tower to represent the Prison; how could she hope to produce the Hangman, the Dark Lord, the Mist, or any of the other major arcana?

A frustrated exhalation, somewhere between a sigh and a grunt, muffled the dull *thump* as Violca slammed the sketches down on the bench beside her. That, at least, was enough to draw a sidelong glance from Milosh; evidently he was not *completely* oblivious to her presence. In answer, Violca muttered, "Why don't *you* try it for a while, and *I'll* pretend to drive the horses?" The driver snorted and turned away once more.

Violca closed her eyes and breathed deeply, taking in the damp scent of the Mists. To most who dwelt in the domains through which the Vistani often passed, the Mists were a source of fear and awe, the mother of nightmares, bringer of death. To the Vistani.... Well, to the Vistani they might sometimes be the same, but the seers knew enough, Saw enough, to traverse the Mists. The Vistani understood them—in their blood and in their souls, if not in their minds.

Or so they had always believed. Today, the Hanza learned otherwise.

It began with the wind, gusting without warning, tearing through the caravan, sending hair and shawls lashing out like whips. It howled in their ears, shrieked through the narrow windows of the *vardos*—the agonized cry of a world in pain. Reins fell unheeded to the earth or the drivers' wooden benches as the Vistani clapped hands to ears in a futile effort to escape the hideous sound. Horses reared, snorting and whinnying in panic.

It was not a cold wind, but the warm breath of a fevered cough. Sand and grit, hot enough to burn exposed flesh, rode the air like a swarm of hornets, and stung as viciously.

The Mists themselves did not move at all. Never so much as a single swirl, an eddy of haze, formed in the howling tempest.

Violca half-stood against the driver's bench, leaning into the wind. Her eyes blurred, stung by the grit and the force of the gale, so that all she could see were the vaguest of shapes. Frantically she rubbed at her face, trying to clear her vision.

Over the voice of the wind, she heard another sound: soft, -sporadic. It seemed to build gradually, though it must, in truth, have taken only a few seconds.

Hoofbeats.

The lead wagon lurched into motion, its horses spooked into flight, fading into the Mist even as Violca watched. Her jaw dropped in horror as she heard a faint scream, silenced by the clattering hooves almost before it had begun. Her cousin Simza had walked as guide to those horses, had stood before them when they broke into a panicked gallop. Violca wanted to call out, to scream her cousin's name, but her voice froze in her throat, leaving a lump of ice. She swore that she could smell Simza's blood upon the road even through the gale, spilled by sharp hooves and unforgiving iron-sheathed wheels.

The lead *vardo* faded until it was little more than a deeper darkness in the Mists. But it did not simply vanish into the unending white: instead, at the very limits of vision, it *lurched*, shifting violently to the left. Horses shrieked, wood splintered, and the entire wagon began to topple out of sight as though plummeting down a steep incline. But the Hanza

had driven this pathway many times before, from domain to domain. There was no slope anywhere near!

Violca's eyes, unless they lied to her, told a different tale. She watched, her face numbed by the wind and the horror of what she saw, as a faint shape—the driver, it must be—attempted to hurl itself free of the teetering wagon. For an endless instant, he hung in the air as the *vardo* turned upside-down beneath him; then he fell, his feet snagging in the wheels as they rotated. His legs bent in unnatural directions, and he was dragged out of sight, flailing, along with the wagon itself. Violca could only offer her thanks that the howling wind drowned out the sound of screaming, the splintering of wood and bone.

In the days afterward, Violca could never remember actually making the decision to slide down from the driver's bench. She remembered the sudden thought that her own *vardo* would be next over the incline. She remembered the crunch of grass under her feet—Grass? But the road had been dirt and mud!—as she landed. She remembered the stink of the horses, at least one of which had evacuated its bowels in fear, and the pink-tinged froth that covered the animals' mouths. She ducked beneath a hoof even as the horses reared, and leaped for the harnesses, dragging them down with her own weight. The young Vistana who guided this team—a simpering girl named Aishe whom Violca had never much liked—hailed on the harness as well, as much to keep her feet as to control the beasts. The pair of them, along with the driver's tug from above, accomplished what the poor souls on the first wagon could not: they kept the horses from bolting. The *vardo* remained in place, the wind whipping around it. Its presence prevented those behind from charging to their doom as well.

Leaving Aishe and Milosh to tend to the horses, Violca crept forward through the Mist, her steps tentative. She stretched out her hands to warn of any obstacles and maintain her balance. Still, she stumbled when the ground suddenly dropped away beneath her. She pitched forward with a sharp cry, and it was only the sudden clasp of a hand on her shoulder that prevented her from following the first wagon down the slope. She looked back, her expression a comical mixture of terror and gratitude, into the deeply lined, old-

leather face of her aunt: Madam Tsura, *raunie* of Clan Hanza.

“Patience, child. I would lose no more family today.”

The old woman shuffled forward to stand beside her niece; her heavy shawl and skirt hid her movements. Yet even those thick fabrics danced of their own accord in the powerful winds, giving Tsura the appearance of an inkblot spilled across the image of the world. Behind them, Loiza and Pesha, Tsura’s eldest nephews, clutched heavy cudgels to hand and glared about for any threat to their family.

The arrival of her aunt calmed Viola greatly, as did the realization that the horses no longer snorted and screamed behind her. Whatever Madam Tsura had done—or perhaps it was merely her presence—the beasts were as thoroughly relaxed as Viola herself.

“We will go together, and we will go with care,” Madam Tsura announced.

Viola glanced meaningfully at her cousins, then looked away. All three were in agreement. Tsura was too old, too precious, to be risking herself by clambering down steep hills in search of answers to the mysteries of the Mists.

But not one of the three was about to try to tell *her* that.

Pesha silently offered up his cudgel as a walking stick—his only suggestion that the hillside might be too much for the *raunie*. Tsura took it with a smile of thanks—her only concession that he might be right. Then, with her nephews on either side to support her if she needed it, and Viola before her to warn of holes or slick terrain, the old woman proceeded after the lost wagon.

Two steps down the hillside, the shrieking wind ceased with as little warning as it had begun. Viola, braced against the constant pressure, nearly toppled forward once more, wrenching her back as she caught herself. Wincing against the pain, she glanced behind.

The wind still blew across her aunt and cousins.

Skirt, shawl, and shirts flapped like sails at sea; hair stretched back as though reaching for something to which it might cling. Most disturbing of all, the gale that buffeted them clearly came from the direction in which they now walked. Yet despite the evidence that she could see, and the logic that the wind *could not* simply have stopped where it did, that it *had* to come from in front of her, Viola felt no trace of any

breeze.

Turning, Violca saw that the Mists, too, abruptly stopped. For a long moment she stared at the clear view of what lay ahead, oblivious to those who traveled with her.

She did, indeed, stand on the incline of a steep hill, one covered in grasses beaten brown by a heavy, petulant sun. The land stretched out before her: rolling hills eventually gave way to wide plains of similarly scorched grass and shrubs. The sun, settling down beyond the horizon, stared her in the face, making her squint. But she thought she could see the burnt grasses smooth themselves to sand farther west, and the faintest hints of a forest in the distant north.

It was a land like any other—nothing special, nothing abnormal. Except that it couldn't be here. It *hadn't* been here! The Hanza had passed this way a dozen times—Violca herself on three or four occasions—and she knew that it should be many more miles before they reached the nearest domain. Here, there should be only the Mists.

Crunching dying grass beneath her feet, Madam Tsura was at her niece's side. Even the simple effort of traversing a few feet of hillside had the old woman panting, and a few gray hairs had come loose from her scarf and were caught in the wrinkles of her face. For silent seconds she glanced about her, even as Violca had done, and then shook her head.

"It's impossible, Aunt Tsura." Violca didn't even realize she'd reverted to her childhood method of addressing the tribe matron. Tsura didn't bother to reprimand her for it. "This cannot be here," she added.

"And yet it is, or so your eyes tell you And mine tell me. But forget what you see, child. Tell me what you See."

Violca drew in a deep breath and held it, taking into her a piece of the land's essence. The air was warm, fragrant, thick with the scent of distant greenery and more distant sand. She knelt in the brown grass, reached out, and let the blades run through her fingers like a lover's hair. Her eyes fluttered closed. The Vistani called it the Sight, for that was how best to describe it to outsiders, to *giorgios*. But the Sight was no more limited to a seer's vision than were her dreams. Like them, the Sight traveled along whatever bridge of the senses it chose. Violca opened them all, waiting for this strange realm to speak to her in whatever language it might prefer.

It spoke in Silence.

Had the ground dropped away, the sky turned black, and all the world faded into oblivion, Violca could have felt no more alone than she did in that moment of open empathy. She felt nothing but gusts of heat, and a warm trickle on her face that reminded her disturbingly of blood; both were gone almost before she knew they were there. She tasted smoke, sand, and bile before her tongue went numb. Images flashed before her eyes. She Saw desert oases, rich green vales between parched mountains, a great city that reached for the heavens with debased, smoke-stained towers, while catacombs beneath it ran with blood. But the images held no substance, no depth. They were paintings on a flimsy canvas, masquerading as reality. And she heard....

Nothing.

It was not merely the wind that stood silent here, but the land itself. If a bird sang, a dog growled, a woman whispered, or a man laughed, Violca could not hear it. The land was empty. The land was hollow.

The land was *waiting*. The wind that marked its birth, howling through the Mists, was absent here because the land itself held its breath. And waited.

Violca shivered violently and opened her eyes. Her vision wavered briefly before the hillside snapped harshly, painfully, into focus. Only when she saw Peshia did the young Vistana realize that he held her upright, had clearly lifted her when she was not aware. Her skin was numb, as though she had danced naked through a snowstorm; she could not feel his touch.

"This place...." she whispered, staring at her aunt.

"Yes, child?"

"It's empty. It has no—no...."

Tsura nodded slowly. "No soul."

"It has no people, then?" Loiza asked. Violca felt herself jump; she'd forgotten he was there.

"Oh, it has people," Tsura replied. "And it does not. The land stands before us, as real as we, and yet it is not."

"I do not understand, Madam Tsura."

"No, you wouldn't. I am not certain I do, either. The land is here, but it is not... complete." The old woman stared into the distance, then turned her attention back to her niece. Violca

brushed her cousin's hand from her waist to stand, albeit trembling, on her own. "What else did you feel, Violca?" her aunt asked.

The younger woman had not been consciously aware of anything else, but once asked, she recognized precisely what her aunt meant. "Distance," she replied without hesitation. "Even as I felt the grass under my feet, it felt somehow far away. It is not like any domain I have ever entered."

"No, nor I. And I had almost come to believe I had seen all the Mists had to show us." Tsura gestured sharply with her free hand and began the trudge back up the slope. "We must discuss this with the others. These questions are beyond the wisdom of any one of us to solve."

Violca glanced back once, and once only, as they returned to the Mists. Even that single glance, though it revealed only the same rolling hills and the same grass-covered plains, was nearly enough to send her tumbling. She had seen into the heart of the land, and found it hollow. Now she feared plummeting into endless depths from which she might never emerge.

Hours later, when she finally had time to catch her breath, she remembered why they had departed the Mists in the first place. And she realized, her palms sweating and her flesh shivering once more, that from her vantage point, she had held a clear view all the way to the base of the hill.

As far as the eye could see, there had been no trace of the fallen wagon, its team of horses, or the poor Vistani trapped within.

"You are mad!"

His name was Yoska, and as the oldest male Hanza, as well as Tsura's brother, he was perhaps the only member of the clan who would have dared to speak to the *raunie* thus. He was certainly the only one who could do so without consequence. Nevertheless, the other Vistani who had gathered round each took a step or two back, as though denying that they had any part in his disrespectful outburst.

"I am not. Though after what I have seen, I might wish I were." Tsura looked sadly at her younger sibling. His snow-white hair was matted and tangled by the winds that had finally died down moments after she had returned from the hill-

side. His cheeks and beard were wet with tears. Already he had changed from the traditional bright tunic to one of gray, partly hidden beneath an old black vest.

Behind him, wrapped in scraps of white linen and placed ever so gently beside the family *vardo*, lay the reason for his mournful garb.

The drivers had circled the *vardos* while Tsura, Viola, and the two brothers had briefly explored the land beyond the Mists. At first they had intended the circle to provide some feeble shelter against the monstrous winds, but when those had finally faded, the Hanza chose to leave the wagons as they stood. It was, in part, an effort to defend against any danger that might take advantage of their confusion, but primarily it was for the sense of community. If the Hanza had ever needed to be a single extended family, surely it was now.

Viola stood at a respectful distance from the arguing elders; the clan's other sons and daughters did the same in myriad groups and clusters. Her teary eyes continually strayed from the debate to Simza's linen-wrapped corpse, and the trio of simple wreaths that substituted, however poorly, for the Vistani lost in the missing wagon.

"I have lost..." Yoska broke off with a sob, followed by a choking fit that rocked him back upon his heels. Had it not been for the steadying hand he braced against the *vardo*, he might well have fallen. Several of the younger men rose to assist, but he angrily waved them off. "I have lost my beloved Simza," he said, his voice made hoarse. "I have outlived my youngest child, Tsura. This place.... This place should not be. It is an evil, a curse upon us. Why, by all we hold dear, would you have us *stay*?"

"Because it *is* a danger, Yoska." Tsura gestured at the wagons that stood around them, the borrowed cudgel still clasped in her fist. "Because we are Vistani, and we are supposed to know the ways of the Mists, and yet..." The *raunie* stepped slowly forward to place one gnarled hand on her brother's shoulder. He stiffened briefly, then slumped.

"I grieve for Simza, Yoska, and for Marko, Emilian, and Nadya as well. Even for the Vistani, the Hanza are not many. It will be many years, I think, before we recover from this dark day.

“But”—and here she turned to address not merely her brother but all the elders, and indeed all the assembled Hanza of every age—“that is precisely why we *must* understand this new domain. We must learn how this has happened, so that we will know if it can happen again. We must know this domain, as thoroughly as we know Barovia, or Darkon, or Kartakass, lest some threat to the Vistani arise within and catch us unawares. To speak with the Wailing One or seek audience with the Devil Strahd carries great risk, but we are better for having done so. Can we afford to leave this realm behind without attempting the same?”

The elders muttered to one another, but Violca was only half listening. She knew that her aunt need not convince anyone of anything. She was *raunie*; she could simply order the Hanza to do as she wished, and though some might argue, inevitably all would obey. The weight of tradition was a heavy burden among the Vistani, but not one that any of them would willingly set down. Still, she understood why Madam Tsura sought some modicum of concurrence among the tribe: never had they faced a mystery such as this, and each needed to know that the Hanza brothers and sisters stood firmly together.

As though reading her mind—and who knew, perhaps she had been—Tsura appeared beside Violca. “Our oldest tales,” she explained to her niece, “suggest that many of the lands of the core emerged from the Mists, just as this one seems to have done. I must confess, I dismissed such tales as legend; the land is the land, is it not? It cannot simply change.”

Violca forced a smile, barely a quirk of the lip. “And yet....”

Tsura nodded, her gray hair falling in her face. “And yet. Besides, even if those tales are true, this is different. Never have I heard of anything so sudden, so violent. So tragic.” As one, they turned to look again at Simza’s wrapped body. It looked smaller, Violca decided, and her cousin had never been a large girl to begin with. She feared that Simza’s remains would be whisked away if the wind kicked up again.

“They will argue for a while longer,” Tsura said, yanking Violca’s attention back to the living. “They will rant, and debate, and wield guilt against one another like cudgels, and in the end they will come to me and agree, reluctantly, to what must be done. Thankfully, that offers me a bit of time.”

“Time to do what, Aunt—that is, Madam Tsura?”

“I will Read, child. I would know all I can about this new land before I ask any of my family to set foot in it again. The *tarokka*, I hope, can provide me that knowledge.”

“Are you sure...?” Violca bit down on her tongue. She knew a true reading of the cards could be taxing, and the day had hardly been restful—but it was hardly her place, a Vistana barely of age, to question the wisdom of her elders.

Tsura only smiled, rather than upbraiding her niece for the breach of propriety. “We cannot bury Simza here in the Mists, Violca. Even if I would prefer to rest, time is not our friend today. We have too much to do.”

“Please wait by my door, if you would,” the old woman continued as she mounted the three short steps to her *vardo*. “If I need you, I shall call, but otherwise please see that I remain undisturbed.”

Violca paled at the notion of turning Yoska or the other elders away should they attempt to enter, but nodded. Tsura disappeared, her heavy shawl blending with the shadows inside the *vardo*, and the door slammed shut.

The young Vistana needn’t have worried—not, at least, about anyone interrupting her aunt. Mere minutes had passed when the air was rent with an ear-piercing shriek from within the wagon, followed by a terrible clatter.

Instantly the menfolk were up and running toward Madam Tsura’s *vardo*, cudgels and staves in hand, but it was Violca, her eyes wide but jaw clenched in determination, who was first up the steps. Calling the old woman’s name, she threw wide the door and stepped inside.

Violca knew the interior of her aunt’s wagon as well as she knew her own. Without so much as a conscious thought, she brushed aside the curtain Madam Tsura hung before the door to muffle the sound of conversation. She ducked beneath the bundles of medicinal and spiritual herbs that dangled from the *vardo*’s ceiling, and stared numbly at the sight before her.

The small table that normally occupied the center of the *vardo* lay on its side, one leg propped against the bed along the left wall. The cards of the *tarokka* deck lay scattered across the floor like autumn leaves, and the old woman herself huddled in the corner, a wooden stool clutched defensively to her breast.

“Aunt Tsura?” Violca knelt beside her, even as the doorway filled with the shapes of the Hanza men. “Aunt Tsura, what’s wrong?”

A single finger, shaking visibly, pointed toward the floor. It took Violca a moment to realize that Tsura indicated the nearest *tarokka* card. Seized by a sudden dread, Violca stared at it. Had it been a snake or a scorpion, she couldn’t have been more reluctant to reach for it.

But then, it was only a card, was it not?

Even if it *had* put a nightmarish fear into the one woman Violca had always believed fearless.

With a sudden lunge, determined to act before she could change her mind, the young woman lashed out and grabbed the card. Holding it in hands that suddenly trembled, she flipped it face-up.

She stared at the shape of a man hanging crucified atop a hill. His features were hidden by the locks of hair that fell across his face, but his body was gaunt, bruised, and broken. Blood—pictured richly despite the limitations of charcoal and ink—trickled from his wrists and ankles, poured from a great wound in his side, and matted his hair where his scalp was pierced by a wreath of thorns. Beneath the great cross on which he hung, two men, both covered in his falling blood, gutted one another with wicked knives. She could almost hear the grunts of pain and the patter of falling blood, could almost feel the dry heat of the day.

It was not a pleasant image, to be sure, but it was not the picture’s content that had sent the powerful Vistani seer to the corner, quivering like a frightened child, nor that caused Violca herself to tremble so fiercely she had to struggle not to drop the card.

No, it was the simple fact that Violca knew that neither Tsura, nor any other seer in the long history of the Vistani, had ever crafted such a card.

One

Even the ambient dust was bloody. It coated tongue, throat, and nostrils like bacon grease, refusing stubbornly to be dislodged. Every painful cough, every sip of precious water teased relief—relief that never lasted longer than a heartbeat.

There was always more blood.

The sounds of battle, the sounds of slaughter, echoed in his ears; but for a few blessed moments, the street around him was wonderfully free of violence. Diederick de Wyndt, vassal to Robert the Second, loyal subject of King Philip the First, and soldier in the pilgrims' army of Pope Urban the Second, staggered a few more steps and collapsed gratefully against the nearest wall.

Dirt, sand, and worse flaked from the links of his hauberk with every motion; sweat and the blood of many men caked his brow. Diederick landed hard in the mud—mud formed by no water, mud with a horrible crimson tint—uncaring of the stain it left on his already-sullied tabard of blue. With a grunt, he pulled his helm from his head, wincing at the pain and the ringing in his ears. He scowled over the dented steel, staved in by a blow from a Saracen axe. The helm had done its job well enough, shielding his skull from the heavy stroke, but it was certainly unsalvageable now. A second grunt, and the misshapen metal flew spinning into the street.

The missing helm revealed a face grown older than its years. Eyes that had once shone blue with the enthusiasm of youth and faith now appeared a lifeless gray; the surrounding skin was lined from constant squinting against blinding sun and spraying blood. Hair the color of dark sand, darkened further by constant sweat, stuck out from beneath a chain coif. Features that might generously be termed sharp—and more accurately dubbed hatchet-like—were partly hidden by a scruff that was less a formal beard and more a sign that its owner had simply given up regular shaving.

Diederick leaned his aching head back and shut his eyes,

hoping for just a moment of respite, but there was no respite to be had here. He could not shut his ears to the shouts and screams and grating of metal on metal, or metal on bone. He could not guard his face from the pounding of the sun, as fierce and unrelenting as the city's most zealous Saracen defenders.

And always, always, the smell and the taste and the *feel* of blood; so much blood that surely God Himself must have lost count of the dead and dying.

Sighing, Diederich opened his eyes and forced himself to his feet, leaning on the chipped and battered axe that he felt had become a permanent extension of his arm. Alert for any danger, even more so now that he had lost his helm, the weary knight trudged down what had once been a market lane in the heart of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem. The Holy Land. At Pope Urban's call, Diederich had crossed a continent, laid siege to cities, spilled the blood of countless Saracens (and perhaps a few Jews and Christians as well), all to reclaim a "Holy Land" whose holiness had been washed away in a sea of red.

Diederich's steps carried him to a main thoroughfare, where corpses and parts of corpses lay sprawled haphazardly. He stepped on a severed arm without noticing, his boot driving the limb deep into the mud at the elbow. The forearm jutted upward, the hand wobbling limply as though to wave farewell. The shadows of the Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock joined into one, stabbing across the street like a blade: God's own blessing on the fallen—or an angry wave as He washed His hands of the whole sordid affair.

The endless shrieking rose to a crescendo, or perhaps Diederich merely drew nearer its source. He could no longer hear the squelch of his own footsteps in the muddy street, or the clatter of his mail. A trio of horsemen plowed past him at a gallop, forcing him to the side, where he stumbled over another corpse. He barely heard the staccato beat of the animals' hooves as the riders swept by.

Putting a hand out to steady himself, Diederich took a step forward. Something in the heap of bodies below clutched furiously at his ankle.

Had such a thing occurred in his first battle, he would have lashed out blindly, desperate to get the "dead thing" off of

him. Had it occurred in many of the battles since, he would have delved into the corpses, determined the survivor's identity and intentions before choosing whether to render aid.

Now, with a weariness that leeches into his bones, his heart, and his soul, Diederich simply struck the hand from its wrist with his axe and moved on.

Another corner, then one more, and Diederich walked into the midst of a nightmare made manifest, no less horrifying for the fact that it was intimately familiar.

Nor for the fact that he, despite the better angels of his nature, was a willing participant.

None of the pilgrims, from Godfrey of Bouillon and Robert of Flanders to the lowest footsoldier, had expected the battle to end the moment they breached Jerusalem's walls. Whatever else one might say about the Fatimid Saracens, they were a determined lot, zealous and fearsome. They would not easily or swiftly surrender the Holy City, no matter how badly they were overmatched once their defensive ramparts fell.

But this? This past night and morning? This was not battle. Diederich knew it; his fellow knights and pilgrims knew it, even as they did nothing to stop it. This was butchery.

A fever had settled over the minds and souls of the pilgrims, a haze of fury that blotted out all other sights, all other sounds.

Old men cowered in the streets and were run through. Children fled from armor-clad invaders and were ridden down, their bodies mangled beneath steel-shod hooves. Women sought shelter within the mosque atop the Temple Mount, begging for their lives and the lives of their families. The floor ran slick with their blood.

Nor was it merely the Saracens who suffered the pilgrims' ceaseless wrath. Jews and even native Christians felt the bite of the invaders' steel. Home and storefront, synagogue and church—all crypts, now, and perhaps never again anything more.

A man appeared from an alleyway, hands flailing at Diederich, and Diederich cut him down without breaking stride. A trio of knights tossed a battered Saracen warrior back and forth between them, his bones breaking at every impact. Across the street, a woman shrieked pitifully as her infant son was thrown hard to the ground, to drown facedown in the clinging

mud.

It was enough—finally enough—to shake Diederich from the murderous reverie in which he had wandered, half-blind to the world around him, since he had clambered over the broken walls yesterday afternoon. For the first time in hours, the taste of blood in his throat was finally and truly washed away, replaced by the acrid burning of his rising gorge. Was this why he had marched across Christendom, why he had taken up arms in the name of God and country? *This?*

With a shudder of revulsion, Diederich allowed his blood-stained axe to fall from his grip. The mud it splashed across his calf as it landed was warm and wet, but dried instantly beneath the heavy eastern sun. His shield would have followed his weapon into the muck had it not been strapped so thoroughly to his arm.

No more of this! “No more!” He was aware only afterward that he had spoken the thought aloud. It didn’t matter, since nobody could have heard him.

Diederich didn’t know what it was that had turned him, and far better men than he, into merciless butchers. He knew only that it could not be the will of the God in whose name he fought, and in whose existence he only halfway believed any more. Perhaps he would never know, and perhaps he could not stop it, but he would be damned—assuming he were not already so—if he would be part of it any longer. Diederich had seen other men, some with wounded bodies and some—he realized now—with wounded souls, making their way back to the gaping holes in the walls. He would join them, waiting outside for the massacre of Jerusalem to run its course. And if his fellow pilgrims would count him an oath-breaker for that, then let them.

Had he been asked afterward, he could never have honestly said what it was about the corpse that drew his attention. He had passed by—and over—literally hundreds of bodies from the moment he threw down his weapon and set out for the city walls: corpses clad in the hauberks and tabards of knights as well as more numerous bodies in the steel-and-leather of the Saracen warriors, or the simple garb of peasants. He had ignored them all with equal aplomb, focused on nothing but removing himself from this hellish “holy” city with

all haste.

Until this one. Something about *this* body, lying slumped over in *this* alley, called to him as the others did not. Diederic tried to continue, to disregard the corpse as he had all the others, but his footsteps faltered of their own accord. Reluctantly, begrudging every wasted second, he turned and knelt beside the body.

It was one of his brother pilgrims. He could tell that much by the bits of blue tabard that showed through the mud, blood, and other, even less pleasant stains. He had not lain here long, perhaps a handful of hours; the mud splashed over him by passersby was not thick enough to account for any longer.

Tugging against the grip of the mud that greedily refused to surrender its prize, Diederic pulled the corpse's shoulders up, hoping to glimpse a face. Despite the clinging filth, his wish was granted.

"*Jesu!*" Despite himself, Diederic allowed his grip to slacken, returning his fellow knight disrespectfully to the muck. "Poor Joris...."

Joris van den Felle, a baron of Flanders and distant cousin to Robert the Second, was not the first of Diederic's countrymen to have died in the last years—not by far. Of all the men Diederic had known before Pope Urban's call, however, Joris was the first whose dead body Diederic had observed with his own eyes. Diederic, who had not only seen but had delivered enough death for any dozen lifetimes, found himself shaking.

"I'm sorry, Joris," he whispered softly to the corpse. "I wish you had gotten out. Perhaps we...."

Diederic's eyes locked, of their own accord, on a bloody bit of bone, laid bare and visible when Joris's head had fallen again to the ground. It was a narrow wound, deep. No axe had ever inflicted such a wound, nor a sword. This was the bite of a poignard or a dagger, snuck in between helm and hauberk. A bite that came from behind.

Slowly, his jaw set, Diederic rose to his feet. Death in war he could accept; even the ongoing massacre of Jerusalem's weak and innocent, while now abhorrent to him, he tolerated as an evil he could not prevent. But the base murder of a friend and fellow knight—murder that, at least by his initial scrutiny, could only have come from a man Joris trusted—

that could not be allowed to stand unanswered.

Diederich chided himself for discarding his axe so hastily. His sword, not much more than a long and heavy knife, would fare far worse against Saracen leathers (or a pilgrim's chain, for that matter), but it would have to suffice.

With no clue to Joris's murderer beyond the direction from which the knight had apparently come, Diederich shouldered his shield and set off into the winding streets of Jerusalem.

He was on the right trail, at least. The body of Heinric, Joris's squire and manservant, slumped in a doorway and marred by stab wounds similar to his master's own, was more than sufficient evidence of that. Diederich stalked down endless alleyways, hewing as nearly as he could to a straight line. Stone walls the color of sand hemmed him in on either side. Doors were narrow and locked tight against the violence in the streets; windows were shuttered. Here, the shadows grew so long that even the sun's slenderest fingers could not poke and prod. The screams grew distant, the overwhelming scent of blood more faint, and Diederich began to feel as though he walked through some distant canyon, rather than the heart of the most coveted city in creation.

And then, it seemed, he *was* somewhere else, if only for the span of a single heartbeat. From one step to the next, the horrific slurp of mud beneath his feet yielded to the crunch of drying grass; the shadows of the buildings smoothed and rounded into the silhouettes of rolling hills. A single hot gust of wind, shrieking madly as if it carried all the cries of every man, woman, and child the pilgrims had butchered, descended upon him like a funeral shroud.

Diederich staggered, his shield raised instinctively to protect his face. But the wind was gone as swiftly as it had begun; by the time he blinked the grit from his eyes, the mud road and the building façades had returned to normal.

He blinked once, twice, glaring about him, daring reality to show him anything beyond what he expected. It did not oblige.

"This damned city is driving me as mad as everyone else," he informed the empty doorways around him. His hand perfectly steady—he knew it was not shaking, because he re-

fused to let it—he reached down and took hold of his waterskin. It sloshed softly as he raised it to his lips, complaining that it grew dangerously near empty. He raised it to his lips, and—

Dear God!

With a high-pitched, almost womanly shriek, Diederich hurled the skin from him as far as it would fly. It landed with a wet slap against the wall of some Saracen's home before sliding down into the mud, spitting forth the last of its precious water with the impact.

It was flesh. Not tanned and treated leather, but true, honest-to-God flesh. He'd tasted it as it had slithered warmly between his lips, covered in a salty patina of dust and sweat. It had *quivered* at the touch of his tongue.

Diederich, his gorge rising once more, fell to his hands and knees and retched into the mud, though he had little enough in his gut to purge. But even as his body shook, his gaze was drawn to the waterskin. And it was, indeed, just a waterskin: soft leather and heavy stitches, lying abandoned in the mud.

God and *Jesu*, he really *was* going mad!

Staggering to his feet, leaving a wide berth between himself and the waterskin, he continued on. His determination seemed to have left him along with the minuscule bits of food and drink he'd vomited up. If he didn't find Joris's killer soon, or at least a clue as to whom he might actually be hunting, he would give it up as just one more tragedy of battle, and depart the city for good and all.

The world grew quieter as he continued, as though he had found a single oasis of peace in the ongoing violence. Suspicious eyes glared from between closed shutters, mostly belonging to women and children who still hoped to hide from the murderers who had fallen upon them. Diederich's hand fell to his sword of its own accord. He didn't think peasants much of a threat—women and children even less—but he had never lost his respect for sheer numbers.

Approaching a T-intersection of back roads, with little indication of where to go next, Diederich determined that this was the end. If one of the two paths ahead didn't offer some solid evidence, he would turn about and leave.

To the right, nothing: more buildings, a few more corpses scattered about, covered in mud and a growing horde of flies.

To the left....

Diederick could only stare. If he was, indeed, going mad, then Jerusalem itself was doing the same.

Wedge*d* impossibly across the narrow street was a wagon, the likes of which the knight had never seen. High wooden walls and a solid roof were painted an array of bright hues. They, along with the heavy door at the rear, suggested that the enclosed chamber might serve as someone's living quarters, and the clothing and bedding scattered about the wreckage seemed to confirm that assessment. Large wheels with wooden spokes had been reduced to little more than kindling. Three human and two equine corpses lay mangled and broken amid the wreckage. The couple and the boy, a family presumably, had features that could possibly have been Saracen. But their garb—colorful adornments over simple white and black—was as unfamiliar as the wagon itself.

They could have been foreign travelers, Diederick supposed, attempting to flee the city. Yet there were two details around which he simply could not wrap his mind: the wagon was far too wide to have driven down so slender a thoroughfare, and there was no way to explain the shattering of wood and bone—no obstacle into which the wagon could have crashed, no height from which it might have fallen.

His curiosity piqued, Diederick approached the wagon, nudging the splintered wood with his foot. It creaked softly, but revealed no secrets.

Or had it truly not? Not from the wagon itself, but around the next gradual bend in the road, a low voice carried on the hot and charnel air. It was a voice Diederick could never have heard anywhere else in the city where the screams of the dying rang loud. Even here, in the deathly silence, he had to strain to make out the words.

“...et suam piissimam misericordiam, indulgeat tibi Dominus quidquid per visum. Amen. Per istam sanctam unctionem et suam....”

Latin had never been Diederick's strongest subject of study, but every pilgrim who had marched on the Holy Land would recognize that utterance. Stepping softly across the shattered wood, he continued down the street toward the source of the voice.

“... tibi Dominus quidquid per odorátum. Amen.”

In a small courtyard, little more than a widening of the intersection of four streets, blood stained the roadway—blood so fresh it hadn't fully seeped into the mud. In one of the many doorways facing the yard, a man knelt beside the bodies of two others. All three were clad in the armor of pilgrims from the west, and it was the kneeling man whose prayers Diederich had overheard.

His tabard covered in mud sufficient to hide whatever standard he might have worn, his hauberk as battle-scarred as any other, the praying man could easily have been mistaken for just another soldier of the Church, had Diederich not heard the words, not watched as the man even now anointed the fallen with oil. His conical helm sat in the mud beside him, leaving uncovered his long brown hair grown gray at the roots. He had the same slack features and loose jowls Diederich had seen on other priests and noblemen among the pilgrims, men well-fed and accustomed to plenty in their lives back West, whose skin had not caught up to the weight they'd lost in their travels.

“... tactum. Amen. Per istam sanctam unctionem...” He moved as he worked, swiftly and expertly applying the holy unction to the fallen soldiers, asking God's forgiveness for any possible sin.

Diederich drew breath to hail the priest, but his greeting swiftly became a wordless shout of warning as shapes rose up in the opposite alleyway, behind the kneeling man.

With reflexes that were, if not those of a warrior, certainly impressive in a man of the cloth, the priest shot to his feet, bringing to hand an ugly mace that was hardly more than a heavy lump of steel on a shaft. It was a common weapon among the pilgrim clergy, a means of sidestepping the Church dictum that clergymen should not shed blood. It was sophistry at best, if not true hypocrisy—but under the circumstances, Diederich was glad of it. Better a hypocritical priest than an unarmed one.

Two men emerged from the alley, both clad in the light armor of the city's Fatimid defenders. One hefted a thin-bladed sword, the other a bronze-colored axe not terribly different in design from that which Diederich had so recently discarded. They strode together in lockstep without a word or glance

between them, expressions unchanging, eyes unblinking.

Diederich slipped and slid as he ran across the muddy, blood-slick courtyard, desperate to reach the priest before the enemy did. Under other circumstances, Diederich would have been supremely confident in their ability to handle a pair of opponents. But for one, he lacked his axe, and for another, this silent, mechanical advance was dramatically out of character for the Saracen warriors of Jerusalem, normally passionate and fanatical defenders of what they believed was theirs.

The soldiers reached the doorway in which the priest had sheltered when Diederich was only halfway across the courtyard. Mace held in a two-fisted grip, the clergyman retreated a single step, placing his back to one edge of the portal, limiting their angle of approach. The Saracen with the sword struck first, a stab meant to impale armor and flesh alike, possibly pinning its victim to the door.

The priest's counter was stiffly formal but nonetheless effective. The mace came crashing down across the flat of the Saracen's blade, knocking it harmlessly aside. Even as the momentum turned the priest partway around, he thrust out with a kick, staggering his attacker back a few paces and granting himself a moment to recover his balance.

Except he didn't have that moment. Still moving in absolute silence, the second Saracen stepped into the first's place without a second of hesitation, his axe raised for a killing stroke.

From three paces away, Diederich threw finesse to the winds and hurled himself bodily at the axe-wielder's legs, leading with the edge of his heavy shield. His tabard tore across his chest, and he felt sun-warmed mud ooze into his hauberk, but his momentum was more than a match for the tug of the ubiquitous muck. The deafening crash as Diederich's armored form slammed into the Saracen's shins was not quite enough to drown out the grinding crack as the rim of his shield reduced the man's anklebone to so many splinters.

The Saracen toppled like a felled tree, landing on his stomach atop Diederich. Anticipating at least a moment of shock, the pilgrim almost didn't react in time as his enemy twisted his axe and tried to run the blade across the back of Diederich's legs. Thrashing wildly, Diederich kept the Saracen from press-

ing hard enough to cut or drawing back an arm to swing until he was able to kick the man off him and roll to his feet, drawing his sword as he stood.

Lying face down in the mud, his right foot hanging limply from his ankle like ripened fruit ready to fall, the Saracen....

Giggled.

It was a loathsome, high-pitched thing, a eunich's delight at contemplating past perversions. Spittle bubbled between the Saracen's lips, slowly descending to the ground in long strings, and his eyes rolled back in his head. First his chest, then his entire body shook, as the giggling erupted into hysterical cackles.

Using his axe as a makeshift crutch, the laughing Saracen slowly stood. Utterly oblivious to the agony, he took a single step and collapsed to his knees as the shattered ankle gave way beneath him. He rose again, took a step, collapsed. And again. And again. And all the while, he laughed.

His lips pressed together in a line of bloodless white, Diederich waited until his foe collapsed once more, and then he struck. His hands shook, but his aim was true. The Saracen crumpled, his throat pumping even more blood into the courtyard. He had finally stopped laughing, and he did not rise again.

As if in a dream, Diederich turned slowly, the world tilting around him. In the doorway, his eyes wide, the priest stood over the body of the second Saracen. The dead man's ribs and skull had both been staved in by the holy man's bludgeon. The priest's attention was not on the foe he had just slain but on the far side of the courtyard. A raised finger pointed over Diederich's shoulder.

Another turn, and the knight saw a third man emerging from the street that had spawned the pair of Saracens. This was no Saracen, though, but a fellow soldier of the Church, who nonetheless approached with the same inhuman silence and mechanical fluidity of his predecessors. Behind him, and from every other visible street and alley, followed a fourth man, another Saracen; a fifth, clad in the simple garb of Jerusalem's peasantry; a sixth, another knight-pilgrim; and others beyond. While they all boasted the same inhuman gait, they did not move in unison. Each was ever so slightly out of step with the next, creating a discordance that was subtly but pro-

foundly disturbing to the eye.

Diederick glanced from his blade to the mail worn by the pilgrims amid the approaching throng, and unconsciously shook his head. Grunting, he heaved the blade as hard as he could, sending it spinning toward the head of the leading man. The knight deflected the awkward attack, as Diederick had expected he would, but it halted him—and thus, those who approached behind him—for a span of heartbeats. It was long enough for Diederick to snatch up the Saracen axe and move to stand in the doorway beside the priest.

“What in God’s name is happening here, Father?”

The priest raised his free hand in a half-shrug. “I think God has little to do with this, Sir Knight, though I thank him for delivering you to me in this moment of need.”

Diederick could not help but scoff, staring at the slow but inexorable approach of the mob. “God seems to have underestimated your need for aid, Father.”

“Indeed so? Then perhaps you might consider wielding that rather sizable axe against the wooden door behind us, rather than the approaching maniacs?”

Diederick blinked once. “Can you hold them off?”

“Let us try not to find out.”

The knight spun and raised the axe, bringing it down with a loud crash.

The approaching mob erupted in a cacophony of moans, shrieks, and gibbers, some pointing accusingly at Diederick and the priest.

A second crash. The wood by the latch splintered but held, locked in place by the bar behind it. The lunatics broke into a shambling run, the faster ones bumping into the slower and shoving them aside.

A third. A crack appeared from top to bottom, the entire door bowing inward, but still the bar refused to yield. A fourth. The air in the doorway grew acrid with the sweat of a dozen men; the approaching shadows blotted out the light of the sun. A fifth, and Diederick heard the priest grunt as he raised his mace to parry the first incoming blow; then the lunatic babbling drowned out all other sound, and the spittle of a dozen madmen soaked his back and neck like an autumn shower.

A sixth—Dear God, who had constructed this infernal

door!—and a seventh, and finally the wood parted completely, the bar dropping to the floor with a pair of thumps. Diederich reached back and hurled the priest past him into the exposed chamber. With a strength born of desperation, he turned his shield lengthwise and shoved hard. The three madmen who had already crowded into the doorway staggered back, and Diederich took the opportunity to dash through the doorway after his new companion.

They raced through the small house, hurdling or bowling over what furniture they lacked the time to circumvent, a shrieking wave of maddened, armored flesh lapping at their heels. Diederich spared a moment's thought to the family that dwelt here—he hadn't seen them, and hoped that meant his pursuers would not either—and then he squeezed through a window after the priest, and there was nothing but the pumping of his legs, his heart, and his lungs as he drove himself onward.

In the end, he wasn't certain how they managed to outrun the mad and tireless mob. He knew only that the horde was behind them, alley after alley, corner after corner. And then the priest suddenly turned and dragged him into another small doorway, pressed tight against the wall. When Diederich finally rallied his breath and his spirit sufficiently to look behind, there was no sign of pursuit.

As if to confirm what Diederich's eyes already told him, the priest said, "I believe we've eluded them, Sir...?"

"Diederich de Wyndt, Father."

"Ah, a fellow Frenchman! I am Father Lambrecht. You have my undying gratitude for your timely arrival. Surely, you saved my life."

"But from what? What's happened here, Father? I've seen men go wild with bloodlust and battle-frenzy. I've seen it in *myself*; I know how potent it can be. But this?"

Lambrecht nodded thoughtfully. "This is not the first such incident I've seen, though I'll admit it was the largest. Ever since we breached the walls, it has been thus. Soldier and peasant, Christian and Saracen, man, woman, and child alike. It seems confined to a select portion of the city, much as the blood runs to pool in the lowest spots, but I confess myself ignorant of the cause. It was this that my companions and I sought."

“Companions?”

“Yes. I fear you saw me anointing the last of them when you arrived.”

“Then it was good luck I arrived when I did. Or”—he added quickly at Lambrecht’s raised eyebrow—“God’s grace. In either case, I should be able to see you safely out of Jerusalem.”

“A generous offer indeed, Sir Diederic. But I fear I must decline. My work here is incomplete.”

“I’m certain there’s plenty of call for a priest on the outside, Father. The wounded—”

“Have others to care for them. I *must* find the source of this unnatural plague, before it claims the lives, or the minds and souls, of any more of our brothers. It is why God put me here, allowed me to witness and survive these maddened mobs when others have not. And whether this be madness, fever, or witchcraft, who better to stand against it than a servant of God such as I?”

“And if the next band of lunatics throws you down and tears you limb from limb?”

“Then that, too, is God’s will. Of course, such an outcome would be far less likely if I had a skilled knight at my side, to replace those good men who have fallen.”

Diederic wanted to refuse, to tell this suicidal priest that he was as crazy as the giggling Saracen. As far as Diederic was concerned, the only reasonable course of action was to find the nearest exit and make for it with all haste.

But then, for all the sense of duty and faith that had been beaten and leached from him over the years of toil and turmoil, could he truly refuse such a request from a priest? And there was the question of Joris’s murder to consider, even if he hadn’t the slightest notion of how to pursue it any further....

With a sigh, Diederic nodded. “As you wish, Father.”

Two

Lambrecht seemed to have some notion of where he was going, so Diederic followed along and swallowed his questions. Their footsteps carried them past more scenes of bloodshed, as knights and other pilgrims slaughtered citizens where they stood. But at least it was a normal madness, so to speak, rather than the twisted mania they had confronted in the courtyard. Diederic, who had been so revolted by the slaughter mere hours before, found himself inured to the crimson spatters, the screams of the dying, the meaty thud of blades biting into flesh.

Eventually the mud gave way to true roadways paved with stones as they progressed into more affluent districts of the city. Storefronts and tents had once made this a bazaar, but the doors were now splintered, the stone façades blood-stained, the pavilions torn down and reduced to shreds. Bodies lay scattered, their humors pooling on the paving stones.

Diederic wished the roads had remained dirt. The spilled blood might not transform these streets to mud, as it did in the poorer quarters, but at least that mud helped to cover and absorb the miasma of decay. Elsewhere, the stench was merely horrific; here it was near to overpowering. It set the eyes to watering, the gut to churning.

“Whatever you do,” Lambrecht ordered suddenly, “make no attempt to help anyone without my express consent.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Trust me, Sir Diederic. Most of these poor souls are well beyond your aid.”

Diederic initially had no idea what the priest was talking about.

And then he merely *wished* he didn't.

It started with a giggle, barely heard. It was not like that of the axe-wielding Saracen, falsetto and false. This was truly the laughter of a child. She lay cradled in the arms of her young mother, who sat beside the road gently rocking her back and

forth. Two rivulets of blood ran down the child's face from red and angry eye sockets. The young woman hummed softly to the mutilated, giggling girl—hummed rather than sang, because her mouth was full of something round and ripe. Jackdaws and vultures circled above and pranced in the streets, their calls high and piercing, but they ignored the dead in favor of the wounded and the dying. From some nearby building, in tones so deep it carried through the paving stones, an unseen congregation chanted guttural nonsense. It was only after several moments that Diederick recognized a familiar prayer, and realized that the words were Latin and Hebrew, sung backward. Down the road, a naked man stood facing a doorway, his head thrown back, his voice hoarse from screaming. Every few seconds, he slammed the door on something unseen, leaving an ever-growing stain on the wood below the level of his waist, and each time his screams grew louder.

The Saracen axe fell to the street with a clatter. Diederick followed it a moment later, crashing to his knees. Someone inside his head was screaming, but he hadn't the presence of mind to realize it was he.

His eyes were shut, his hands clasped tightly over his ears, and still it continued. He heard a horrific clatter up ahead, and somehow he knew it was the sound of teeth falling on the paving stones. From an unknowable distance, Diederick heard the voice of his long-dead mother, speaking to him of lewd and carnal acts.

"Sir Diederick!" Lambrecht's voice seemed a distant thing, scarcely heard. He did not recognize the priest's grip on his shoulder. "Diederick, you must focus!"

Wings flapped above him, and even through closed eyelids he saw the day grow dark as carrion birds blotted out the sun. A newborn wailing streets away went suddenly silent as its mother pressed her knees together, crushing the life from it.

"This is what happened to the others, Diederick! To the men who attacked us! Would you be like them? Be strong! 'The Lord is my shepherd....' Speak it with me, Diederick! Speak it! 'The lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down—'"

"...maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters." Diederick found himself repeating the words instinctively, though he could barely hear himself

over the sounds in his head.

“He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.” It was not the sacred meaning of the psalm to which he clung like a drowning man; his faith in God, already shaken, had only further diminished in the past moments. It was the familiarity of the words, the sense of ritual, in which he found his focus. His voice rose with each breath, until he was shouting over everything else.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear—I will fear no....”

His tongue cleaved to the roof of his mouth. He could not finish it, could not bring himself to say the words. For he *did* fear. As never before in a life of violence and danger, he feared.

Slowly, pale and shaking, Diederich opened his eyes. The horrors he had seen continued on the street before him, engaged in tableaux snatched directly from Hell. But everything else he had seen and heard from afar was gone as if it had never been.

And perhaps it hadn’t. Perhaps it had been his horrified imagination, or the beginnings of the madness of which Lambrecht had warned. Diederich hoped it was that and no more, that what he had heard had no basis in reality.

For there at the end, before his mindless recitation of the 23rd Psalm had pulled him back from the abyss, it had changed. Those sounds, the whispers, the call, the squawks, and the screams, all began to blend together into a single hideous voice.

It had promised him respite. It had promised to wipe the terrible things from his eyes, to ward his ears against the mind-rending sounds, even to cleanse his memory of the waking nightmares he had just experienced.

And all he had to do to earn that respite was to kill, and to kill, and to kill....

It had taken Diederich but a few moments to recover his wits and to catch his breath, and it was fortunate that he had done so. For when it became clear that the knight was not to become one of the gibbering madmen, the madmen came for him.

Diederich abandoned any attempt to guess where they were headed, or to remember the route they had traversed. With Father Lambrecht at his back, shouting directions and the occasional warning, Diederich focused simply on maintaining his footing, on taking the turns he was told to take, and on cutting down the next in the seemingly endless river of lunatics intent on slaughtering the both of them.

Turning a corner, Diederich caught the barest glimpse of light: the sun reflecting off an upraised blade. His head jerked back as the razor-edged steel passed within inches, hacking a tiny white divot into the stone of the wall beside him. Diederich slammed the rim of his shield into the blade, pinning it momentarily to the wall. Twisting about, he chopped over the top of the shield with his axe. It was an awkward strike with little power, but he felt the blade connect with his attacker's skull. A minor wound, but sufficient to stun the seemingly pain-impervious maniac long enough for a second stroke to finish the job.

Diederich stepped over the slumping corpse and dropped suddenly to one knee, scarcely avoiding the thrust of a wicked spear. A woman, Saracen by her features even if she wore the bloody chain hauberk of a Christian pilgrim, wielded the weapon clumsily but with great vigor. She pulled back and thrust again, and it was a simple matter for Diederich to grab the shaft with his shield hand and yank it from her grip. Undeterred, she hurled herself at him, nails raised to rake at his eyes, and he drove the butt-end of the spear into her chin. She collapsed at his feet, reeking of fevered sweat.

It had been thus for the past half an hour, and showed no signs of letting up. Had a wild mob attacked all at once, they would have been long since overwhelmed by sheer force of numbers. But true to Lambrecht's implication, the lunatics seemed unwilling or unable to gather in sizable groups. Diederich had first thought they simply lacked the coordination, but more than once he had observed them turning on each other, much as the Church soldiers had vented their rage on the city's citizens. Perhaps their unwillingness to congregate was simply a residual survival instinct.

Metal crashed against metal, against wood, against flesh, as the two pilgrims slowly worked their way across Jerusalem's districts. The paved roads grew ever more slick with

blood, so much so that Diederic again wished for the relative stability of the clinging mud. Sometimes he faced off in battle against a true opponent, a Church or Saracen warrior whose skill at arms showed through his madness. At other times he simply carved a path through obstacles of flesh that, though armed and eager to tear him down, posed no real threat. He felt less a soldier and more a forest guide then, hacking his way through the underbrush.

Onward they continued, taking this street after that. Diederic's breath rasped in his chest, his axe-arm burned with the strain of hewing down those who stood before him. Sweat dripped from his forehead faster than he could wipe it away, threatening to blur his sight when he needed it most. He tasted bile in the back of his throat, though he knew nothing remained in his innards to bring up.

Then, even as a great shadow fell across their path, Lambrecht declared, "We are here."

Diederic stared, and the few remaining embers of his faith flared briefly to light. Blocks away, the street climbed a shallow but steady incline—one of the many mounts and hills that marked Jerusalem's cityscape. Atop the rise, scarcely visible from Diederic's vantage, stood a handful of small chapels, their walls and roofs largely unmarked by the age that left its imprint on most of the city's structures. Near the southernmost chapel stood a tall stone wall, battered and broken, surrounded by rubble older than the structures built nearby. Momentarily overwhelmed even through his armor of doubt and cynicism, Diederic knelt in reverence toward Golgotha, and the shattered remnants of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Even as he watched, a slow but steady procession of Church soldiers trudged up and down the hill; this, more than even Jerusalem itself, was the heart of their quest, the culmination of their oath. Each and every man had sworn never to stop, never to surrender, until he had prayed in the remnants of that Church.

Though Diederic felt the tug of the oath he thought he had already abandoned, he glanced questioningly at the priest who stood beside him, head bowed in deep respect. Surely the Hill of Calvary could not be their destination! No matter how desecrated, the remnants of the Holy Sepulchre could not be the source and the center of this madness!

Could it?

Again, Lambrecht seemed to read his thoughts before Diederich could give them voice. "Much as I would dearly love to climb that hill for myself, following in His footsteps, it is not our destination. We go *there*."

Diederich followed Lambrecht's pointing finger. "I see nothing. Just more homes."

"That is because you are not meant to see, Sir Diederich. Nobody was. Some hundred paces from us stands a house, perhaps larger than average, but otherwise normal enough. There was a time, however, when it was touched daily by the hand of God. Before Caliph Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah destroyed it, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre cast its shadow directly across this house at the precise moment of dawn.

"It is there that we should find what we seek."

Diederich rose to his feet and followed as the priest set off toward the west, but already he had wrapped his cloak of cynicism about him once more. And Diederich began to wonder: If Lambrecht had known exactly where they were heading all along, where to find the cause of the insanity that gripped the district, why had he said nothing of it earlier?

Even as he opened his mouth to inquire, however, a trio of lunatics—two Saracens and an Italian peasant-bowman—appeared from around the next bend. Swords and axes rose and fell, and Diederich no longer had the breath to spare for questions.

He recognized the house as they drew near, without a word from Father Lambrecht. It would have been impossible to miss.

None of the victims of the spreading madness attacked them once they stood before it. This close to the source of the nightmare, it seemed that even the coordination to stand and wield a weapon was beyond them. A long-bearded man, clad in black and wearing the shawl of Judaism, shouted profanities in Hebrew as he ripped the teeth from a corpse at his feet. A young Saracen couple, newly wed, sliced ribbons of flesh from each other with rusty blades and fed them, one by one, to a wild dog who sat at their feet. A young nun lay suffocating slowly on the ground, her mouth and nostrils sewn shut, apparently by her own hand.

Diederich trembled, and he felt the pressure of that terrible

voice begin to build once more in his head. His eyesight blurred, and his hands began to sweat, loosening his grip on axe and shield.

“Father?” He hated the childish tenor of his voice, but it was all he could do to force the word past the rising fever dream. He’d found his way back once, with Lambrecht’s guidance. He could do so again.

But his ears remained empty of the priest’s words of support, his shoulder devoid of Lambrecht’s comforting hands. Indeed, through eyes that refused to focus, Diederich saw a dark shape move past him to traverse the three steps leading up to the door. He heard a faint creak as the portal opened, and a resounding thud as it closed.

Seemingly aware of Diederich’s sudden weakness, the voice in his head grew loud and shrill, demanding that he rise up and take his place among the ever-growing horde of lunatics, that he wield his axe to no greater or more discriminate purpose than the mutilation of every living thing. The images in his mind’s eye grew ever more horrible: scene after scene of bloodshed and pain, swift but vivid images of truths terrible enough to scar the soul. They floated in a sea of unending screams, buoyed aloft by a bank of impenetrable mists. For a sliver of eternity, Diederich teetered on the brink of madness.

But where his faith was far too weak to support him, his growing anger was a lifeline, a tendril of reality and sanity to which he might cling. It started as a whisper, obscured by the terrible sounds that buffeted his senses, but with every breath it grew.

He had been abandoned.

Left for madness, torment, death.

Betrayed.

Over the nightmarish images that circled in his mind, Diederich laid the face of Father Lambrecht like a blanket. From his memory he dredged the priest’s every feature, every movement, every word. He heard again the psalms, the Last Rites, the words of encouragement. They rang hollow now, each and every one.

Lambrecht had known where he was going. That fact, above all others, rang like a bell in Diederich’s soul. Lambrecht had known, and he had offered no warning.

And if the priest could abandon a companion and a fellow

pilgrim to madness and a foul, honorless death, of what else was he capable? Diederic thought back to the bodies over which Lambrecht was performing the Last Rites when they had met, and he wondered suddenly how they had died. He had seen no trace of injury, nor of fresh blood, and he wondered.

Had he turned them over, might he have seen a narrow wound, like Joris's own, in their backs?

His fist clenched on the Saracen axe so tightly his gauntlets bit furrows deep into the wood, Diederic slowly straightened. His vision cleared, his eyes locked on the door before him. The screams and whispers in his head faded, not completely, but to a background annoyance—the slosh of a stream against its banks, or the buzzing of distant flies.

Well, let them continue to harangue him, to taunt him, to wheedle and promise and cajole. They wanted him to kill? Fine, he would kill.

He started with the lunatics gathered around the house. Lambrecht had left him to suffer the horrors of madness; Diederic would not do the same to them. Not one so much as lifted a hand in defense. Then, after wiping his axe clean on the nun's tattered habit, he strode forward and put his boot to the door. It exploded inward, and Diederic was through before the last of the splinters struck the floor.

Somewhere within, doing God only knew what, was Father Lambrecht. And Diederic would have answers from him—would learn if he sought justice only for himself, or in the names of his fallen brethren as well—before he spilled the priest's lifeblood on the stones.

The stairs seemed to descend forever into darkness, and after all he had seen in the past hours, Diederic was prepared to believe that they very well could.

The house itself had been normal enough, if richly furnished and carpeted. He had seen no sign of current inhabitation. Perhaps the family had fled before the siege, or perhaps no one dwelt here any longer. Axe in hand, alert for the slightest movement, he had crept from foyer to bedchamber, kitchen to dining hall, and had found nothing more significant than a frightened lizard for his trouble. His arms had quivered,

and he had demolished a heavy table with a fearsome shout and a heavy blow of his axe before he was even aware of his mounting frustration. If Lambrecht had simply left via the courtyard in back, he might have headed anywhere, and Diederic would never find him.

Nonetheless, Diederic was certain that this had been the priest's intended destination. It hardly made sense that Lambrecht would have risked life and limb fighting through the throng of madmen purely to deceive a companion whom he'd planned to abandon.

And indeed, Diederic's persistence had paid off. As he paced back and forth throughout the house, focusing on each step to distract from the sights and sounds that churned in the back of his mind, he finally noticed a change in the tenor of those steps in the bedchamber. Beneath the wooden frame and goose-down mattress, he found a heavy stone plugging a passage that descended into the earth. Had it been fitted properly in place, Diederic would never have found it, but the last man to pass through—and dare he hope it had been Lambrecht?—had not taken the time to secure it.

Now the cries and calls of the city faded into the distance above him. The only sounds he heard were the sharp echoes of his footfalls on the dusty stone steps and the crackling of the makeshift torch—formerly linens and a table leg—he gripped in his shield hand.

Around and around, and ever downward, the staircase wended its way deep into the bedrock of the Holy City. The dust of centuries lay thick upon the steps, but even in the inconstant torchlight, Diederic could see the prints of someone come shortly before him. Beetle carapaces crunched beneath his boots; spiders scurried about the walls, repairing webs but recently disturbed.

When his depth beneath the house reached, at a guess, roughly thrice his own height, the scent of the stale air subtly changed. Diederic, who had traveled into Roman catacombs before, recognized immediately that he was in the presence of ancient death.

As such, he was prepared for the appearance of ossuaries recessed into the walls where the dead might rest. What he did *not* expect was to find the recesses along the stairs themselves, nor to find them standing vertically. The dead here did

not rest, but stood sentry against intrusion.

Corpse after corpse, clad in ancient armor, glared impassively at him from empty sockets. Rictus grins showed missing teeth, the gaps bridged as often as not by cobwebs that fluttered in a weak, unfelt breeze, granting each skull the illusion of breath. Bony hands held tight to spears or rested on heavy Roman shields.

Diederich ceased walking once, to stare back at a lifeless sentry. His footfalls continued to echo down the steps, three—no, four—times before the stairway was engulfed in silence. Perhaps it was a trick of the shadows that whirled and cavorted around the torch, but Diederich was almost certain that he saw his own face reflected back from the gaping sockets.

Unnerved, he continued down the stair....

In utter silence. His heavy boot made no report as it impacted the ancient stone.

A second step, a third; still there was nothing, nothing at all. Had it not been for the crackling of the torch and the rasp of his suddenly labored breathing, Diederich would have been certain he had been struck deaf. He wanted desperately to turn back, but he could not bear the thought of Lambrecht getting away with his betrayal.

On the fifth stair, his steps again sounded as normal, reverberating between the walls. Diederich's brow wrinkled with a disconcerting thought.

His steps had remained silent until he had caught up with his echo.

Diederich quickened his pace, and determined not to stop again until he had reached the bottom, however much farther, however deep, it might be.

Not that far at all, as it happened.

The staircase made half a revolution more, another several feet of descent, and deposited Diederich at one end of an impossibly long hallway. By this point, he had utterly lost any sense of direction on the winding stairs, and could not begin to guess where beneath Jerusalem the corridor might lead. If by some stroke of chance he faced due east, it would carry him directly beneath Golgotha itself, but somehow he doubted his destination could be anywhere so sacred.

The footprints in the heavy dust led him farther on. Embers spiraled from his torch to fizzle on his gauntlet or the uncaring

stone floor. It was surprisingly cool down here, surrounded by darkness and rock, but the air remained stuffy and thick. It resisted his attempts to catch his breath, as though resentful of his intrusion. Unseen things, too large for scorpions but too many-legged for rats, scuttled in the darkness beyond the advancing torchlight, and watched his passage through eyes that had never known the sun.

Finally, the dancing firelight fell upon the corridor's end, and upon a door far older than most of the buildings above. Constructed of a smooth, heavy wood that Diederick did not recognize, it seemed blacker than the surrounding shadows, absorbing much of the light. Brass bars secured the door both horizontally and vertically, creating the image of a great cross of light before a gulf of endless darkness.

Above the door, etched deeply into the stone and filled with silver, an inscription read simply, "*Deuteronomy 18:10.*"

Diederick scowled, and gave the door a heavy shove.

The maddening shriek of stone-on-stone belied the ease with which the cumbersome portal swung open. With the element of surprise well and truly lost, Diederick darted through the doorway and leaped to his left, determined not to be trapped there by any lurking foe.

Foe there was, but hardly lurking.

"I am impressed, Sir Diederick. You've greater strength of will than I'd credited you for."

Beyond the door stretched a chamber of cavernous proportions. The floor, sloping gently downward, boasted scraps of cloth, tufts of wool, and scattered bits of straw, arranged roughly in rows. It took Diederick a moment to recognize them as the age-eaten remnants of kneeling cushions. On the far side of the hall, a series of broad and shallow stairs covered in insect-eaten carpet led up to a high dais, overlooking the whole of the chamber. The farthest wall supported an enormous crucifix which hung above a large altar, covered in ornate Greek lettering and thick layers of cobwebs, constructed of the same dark wood as the door. It could only have been intended as an enormous sanctuary,.

And sitting cross-legged before an open panel in the altar, visible only due to the burning oil lamp on the floor beside him, waited Father Lambrecht. In his lap he held something shielded from Diederick's gaze by the fold of his tabard

sleeve. At his side rested his heavy mace.

"I intend to do far more than impress you, Lambrecht." Diederick allowed his own torch to fall to the ground. The shadows leaped, but combined with the lantern across the room, the fallen brand cast light enough for him to begin crossing the chamber. He casually swung his axe with every step, promising the priest what was to come. "And is that the prize for which you abandoned me to madness?" Then, as though the thought had only just occurred, "And stabbed in the back good men who trusted you?"

If he was startled at the accusation of murder, Lambrecht gave no sign. "It is indeed, Sir Diederick. And if many more men had to die, or go mad, for me to acquire it, it still would have been worthwhile."

"Some ancient Roman or Saracen treasure, Lambrecht? Gold? Perhaps frankincense and myrrh, *Father*? Or maybe just thirty coins of silver?"

"More valuable than any treasure, this. I hold the future of the Church in my hands."

Diederick kicked aside the last of the ravaged cushions and mounted the first of the steps to the dais.

With a flourish more appropriate to a stage performer than a cleric of the Church, Lambrecht flung his arm aside, revealing what he held. Fragments of cobwebs and what looked, to Diederick, like brief wisps of smoke or mist drifted away into the darkness, leaving behind....

"A stack of worn parchment," Diederick was halfway up to the dais now, "for the lives of Joris and the others. Satan's making ready to welcome you even now, Lambrecht."

But Lambrecht's eyes had gone unfocused, his voice distant. He seemed lost in some other place, and unaware of his approaching demise.

"These are the surviving pages, Sir Diederick, of the Laginate Grimoire. Most of the works secreted here by the Romans are worthless, or minor curios at best, but *these!* I have sought a work of this power for years."

"Have you." Diederick crested the last of the steps.

"So much has been lost: to history, to fate, to the short-sightedness of our own Mother Church. But oh, what remains! It speaks of many wonders, the Grimoire. It speaks of the future, read in the stars; and of secrets of the past, revealed in

bones. It speaks of the dead, and the truths they whisper to those with ears to hear them.”

Diederich’s blood quickened and he raised his axe as he strode across the dais. Only a few paces, now....

Lambrecht’s eyes grew wider, and bubbles of foam burst upon his lips. “It speaks of the nature of dreams, of visions, of sights unseen.”

The axe struck like a baleful lightning bolt hurled by an angry god. It rebounded from the stone with a furious clang, and Diederich stumbled to one knee, thrown off balance by the lack of resistance. His vision blurred, as if the room itself vibrated.

Or had his sight been veiled since he entered, and he was only now aware of it? Lambrecht sat several feet from where Diederich had been certain he was. The knight rose and took a step, only to stumble once more as the ground seemed to leap up at him, and the priest himself to split in three even as his form melded with the shadows around them.

“It speaks of spirits bound by words of power, screaming silently in places of prayer.”

Diederich’s head felt as though it would split in twain, as a chorus of thousands shrieked without breath in his ears. His axe hit stone once more, and he could not spare a thought to pick it up again.

Through it all, the priest’s voice carried.

“It speaks of the spirits of the wild, that guide the birds, and the beasts, and the fish of the sea, and all things not man.”

They skittered into the feeble circle of light, legs and wings and mandibles twitching like drunken marionettes. Diederich could not hear them as they swarmed across his legs, made their way inside his armor. He could not hear them as they began to feast on countless tiny bits of skin. He could not hear them as he fell. He could not hear himself as he screamed.

“It speaks of the spirits that drive men mad, that possess them to partake in abominable acts.”

Over the endless shrieks, the room echoed with a distant crash from above, as the first of a hundred lunatics hurled aside the stone door and set foot upon the stairs. Diederich didn’t know how they were managing to stand, let alone walk,

“It speaks of the spirits, Sir Diederich. And it speaks of the hollow, hungry places in which they dwell.”

The lantern spat and guttered, and the smoke that emerged from its burning reservoir curled back upon itself and faded. In its place rose a single tendril of white mist. Like a living thing, it prodded at the air, tasting it. It slithered, snakelike, above the floor, to wrap itself lovingly around the pages of the Grimoire, and the hands of the unblinking priest.

Gradually Lambrecht's pupils contracted, and he peered down at the mists that flowed across his arms. Like a child with a toy, he raised one hand, then the other, and the haze drooped from both as if it were a clinging moss.

Clutching the Grimoire's pages in one hand, scooping up his mace in the other, the priest rose to his feet. The mists pooled around him, fanning out in the wake of his steps. He seemed to drift across the floor as he approached the fallen, twitching knight.

"Is it not fascinating, Sir Diederic? The Grimoire has lain here for years, with no harm to any. We awakened the spirits of the book with our coming, sent them forth to wreak madness. Perhaps it savors the taste of blood, or the taste of faith." Lambrecht glanced down; Diederic, for all the pain and horror, stared up at him with rage-filled eyes. "You haven't much faith left in you, do you, Diederic? But you should still have plenty of blood...."

Even as he hefted the pages and the bludgeon, perhaps deciding which was to be Diederic's fate, the mists wafted across the knight's face, soft as a dying lover's caress. A burning cold shot through his body and his soul at their touch: the pain that overwhelms all other torments, the fear that inspires the sickest invalid to rise.

The cold did not mute the screams in his ears. It did not draw the veil from his eyes, nor soothe the stings that reddened his flesh. It did not free him from the grip of the Laginate Grimoire, or the priest who carried it. But for the length of a single, precious breath, it made them cease to matter.

With a howl more animal than man, Diederic lunged to his feet. He felt Lambrecht's nose fold beneath his gauntleted fist, even as he slapped the clergyman's mace aside with his other hand. The weapon landed with a resounding thump and slid across the floor to slam into the burning lamp. Oil spilled, and a small trail of fire ran across the stone floor of the dais. The air grew heavy with the scent of smoke, and the strange

mist vanished back whence it came.

Lambrecht staggered, gasping, trying to draw breath through nostrils that no longer opened. Tears poured down his face to mix with the thick blood that pooled on his lips and chin. The words on the parchment swam and blurred before his eyes, and crimson droplets appeared on the page. His head ringing, he groped beneath his tabard for his last line of defense.

Diederich advanced on the tottering priest. His sight remained blurred too, but he could make out Lambrecht's shape before the dancing flames. He heard the scrape of steel on leather, and knew without having to see that Lambrecht now held a dagger—a dagger with a long, narrow blade that had tasted the blood of Joris van den Felle.

Feigning utter blindness, biting his lip to stay focused through the shrieking in his head, Diederich aimed a clumsy blow off to Lambrecht's right. The priest, dagger upraised to strike, stepped in to take advantage of what seemed a perfect opening.

Diederich spun, clasping Lambrecht about the neck and the wrist, and pitched him bodily over the edge of the dais.

Bone met stone, and bone gave way. Bits of parchment fluttered around the fallen priest, finally coming to rest like the first snowflakes of winter.

Instantly, Diederich's world righted itself. The numbing screams ceased, his eyesight cleared, and though scores of welts remained, he felt no more movement across his skin.

With the pained walk of a much older man, Diederich went about the dais, gathering his axe, his shield, and Lambrecht's mace, then slowly down the steps. He found the priest, his leg obviously broken, his face swollen, his eyes shut, but breathing all the same.

For how many minutes he stood there, axe raised high to sever Lambrecht's head from his shoulders, Diederich couldn't say. The blood pounded in his temples, his heart raced, and all he wanted was to rid himself—and the world—of this foul creature.

Finally, however, he lowered the weapon and knelt beside the insensible priest. "This is no mercy," he whispered, hoping even now that part of Lambrecht might hear him. "I do not stay my hand for you. Excommunication first, then a slow

hanging for murder: this is the fate you have earned. Not the quick and honorable stroke of an axe.”

Diederich gathered the fallen papers, for the synod would require evidence of Lambrecht’s heresy, and shoved them rudely through his belt. Then, though every bone ached with weariness, he stripped Lambrecht’s armor from him and left it heaped upon the floor.

Would the madmen come? Were they even now pouring down the stairs into the corridor? Or had they disappeared, or reverted to helplessness, when the pages of the Grimoire fell from Lambrecht’s hands?

Well, so be it either way. Diederich would fight if he must, and if he was to die here, he would ensure, at least, that he had the strength remaining to take Lambrecht with him.

With a pained grunt, Diederich heaved the priest over his shoulder and began the long walk back toward daylight.

Three

Before the trial reached the end of its first day, Diederick wished that he had let fall his axe, rather than permitting Lambrecht to draw another breath.

The sun had risen eleven times over the Holy City since the day the soldiers of Mother Church had breached the walls, and in that time the pilgrims had done a remarkable job of making daily life seem normal. The streets were free of corpses and the hot desert winds swept aside the stench of decay, though many of the stones boasted dry and flaking stains. Not only the soldiers, but the many Christians who had followed behind them, had already claimed many of the city's homes for themselves. A few shops had opened for purchase or trade of goods, while many other storefronts had new owners who worked furiously to ready themselves for business. The unarmed and unarmored once again made up the majority of traffic along the city's byways. Church bells tolled the hours, and every chapel in the city held regular mass.

The synod that would confront Father Lambrecht, on matters both ecclesiastical and secular, assembled in a large pavilion at the base of the Temple Mount. A horseshoe-shaped platform rose high above the ground. Along its length, a dozen men sat in judgment, the most exalted three in the center from whence they would lead and moderate the proceedings. Eleven of the twelve were drawn from among the highest, most noble, and most faithful of the pilgrims; the twelfth was the most illustrious of all.

Having already offered his testimony, Diederick stood at the rear of the pavilion along with many dozens of Jerusalem's new citizens, eager to see the laws of man and God in practice. A priest accused of heresy, of murder? This was the most sensational news since Raymond de Toulouse had refused the crown of the new Kingdom of Jerusalem four days prior.

The knight stood with his arms crossed and his brow fur-

rowed. He was clad not in his hauberk, but in black hose and a silken tunic of gray—attire appropriate for his status as landed gentry. Atop it all he wore his knight's tabard, cleaned and mended of the many injuries and indignities it had sustained during the siege and the madness that had followed. He stood and he watched and he cursed the slack-jawed curiosity of those around him, wincing at the acrid stink of their sweat in such close quarters. But most of all he cursed himself, for allowing the snake-tongued priest any opportunity to defend himself.

“Summon the accused.”

Diederich turned along with the crowd as three sets of footsteps sounded from the entrance. His eyes blazed with hatred, where those in the crowd shone only with fascination.

He strode forward with his head high, as though he were still clad in priestly vestments rather than the ragged and stained grey tunic that hung from his shoulders to his knees. He walked with an obvious limp, a relic of the fall he had taken from the dais, but he refused the aid of any crutch. Some kind soul among his keepers had straightened his broken nose as best they could, but it jutted left at a slight angle. His hair was tangled and knotted, his cheeks unshaven; he exuded a stench that put the audience in the gallery to shame. But Lambrecht projected the image of a man to be respected. The two armored sentries who strode beside him could have been mistaken for bodyguards and manservants rather than jailors.

Even as they guided him onto the square wooden platform that stood before the assembled judges, Lambrecht kept his gaze locked firmly on the three men in the center of the synod. He knew—as did Diederich, and indeed everyone present—that while he might technically stand accused before twelve, it was these three who must be convinced of his innocence, or his guilt.

To the left of center loomed the towering Laureins d'Auvergne, a French earl known to both Diederich and Joris van den Felle. He stroked his heavy beard as the accused mounted the stand; Diederich knew he had at least one vote on his side.

To the right, a scrawny fellow in the cassock and miter of high Church office. This was Bishop Colaert: one of the oldest

men to have embarked on the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, let alone to have survived it. His face, deeply lined, had showed no reaction to Diederic's testimony at all, nor to the arrival of the accused priest.

And in the center, drawing awed looks from the assembly, Godefroy de Bouillon, Defender of the Holy Sepulchre and crowned Princeps of the Kingdom of Jerusalem. He sat resplendent in polished armor and white tabard with golden cross, battle-ready garb that he had refused to shed for any purpose since the city had fallen. So great were the charges leveled here, against a man of the cloth, that he had insisted on sitting on the synod himself, despite the work yet to be done in repairing Jerusalem and intelligence that suggested the approach of a Fatimid army several days hence.

Once Lambrecht finally stood atop the platform with both hands clasped on the railing, Godefroy rose from his seat. "Father Lambrecht Raes, you stand before this synod in the eyes of God and your fellow men, charged with crimes against the laws of Heaven and Earth." His voice carried through the pavilion, silencing all whispers and mutters amid the gathered throng. Even the sounds that carried from the city outside faded away, as though all Jerusalem paid heed to his words. "You stand accused of heresy against God the Father and Christ the Son. You stand accused of the practice of sorceries, and the binding of spirits, by use of pagan rituals. You stand accused of the murder of men of Christendom, soldiers of the Church, and in the case of Joris van den Felle, a man above you in social worth. And you stand accused of assault upon the person, and attempted murder, of the knight Sir Diederic de Wyndt.

"Do you understand the full nature and import of the crimes of which you stand accused?"

"I do, your Highness." Lambrecht's voice, though powerful still, possessed a nasal quality it had previously lacked—likely the lingering effects of his broken nose.

"Do you understand that you stand accused before both secular and Church law? That a finding of your guilt in the first may result in death by hanging, and in the second, excommunication and the damnation of your immortal soul?"

"I do."

"And have you heard, standing without while waiting to be

called, the testimony offered against you by Sir Diederick de Wyndt?"

"I have." Lambrecht turned about to lock eyes with his accuser, and smiled a friendly greeting. Diederick felt his fists and his jaw clench tight.

"Very well." The Princeps lowered himself once more into his seat. "As it is the graver matter, we will begin first with the accusation of heresy, and the charges that endanger your immortal soul. The matter of your life or death can wait."

Lambrecht merely nodded. Diederick could not help but roll his eyes.

It was Bishop Colaert who spoke next, his quavering voice a sharp contrast to Godefroy's powerful tones. "Father Lambrecht, do you recognize these pages given us by Sir Diederick?" He gestured, and one of the guards stepped forward, a stack of creased parchments in his fist.

Lambrecht leaned forward, as though to get a better look. "Yes, your Eminence."

"Tell us of them."

"These are the surviving pages of the Laginate Grimoire, which tell of pagan rites and witchcrafts. It was compiled and set to parchment by wicked, abominable men in days of old, before the rise of enlightened philosophy in Greece. Even when they worshipped the pagan gods of Olympus, the Greeks were wise enough to shun such works, and most copies of the Grimoire were lost. The last *whole* copy was destroyed when his Eminence Michael Cerularius ordered the burning of occult works in Constantinople, some forty years gone."

"Indeed." Colaert glanced at his fellow judges, then continued. "And know you how these pages came to rest beneath the Holy City?"

"My understanding, your Eminence, is that they, and other secret writings, were sent forth from Rome to avoid their capture and use by the pagan Goth tribes that beset the empire. They have lain here, forgotten by most, since the Saracens took Jerusalem."

"You damn yourself with your own words!" Laureins shot to his feet, leveling an accusing finger at Lambrecht. "Surely no pious man of God should know so much of these heretical writings!" Many in the gallery nodded in agreement.

Lambrecht, however, merely shrugged. “Do I, your Grace? I should point out that I need merely have argued that I have never before seen these writings, and you would have only Sir Diederic’s word otherwise.” Diederic opened his mouth to protest—decorum be damned—but Lambrecht offered him no opportunity.

“But I am not here to besmirch the word of an honorable knight of the Church. I could argue, as well, that his Eminence Colaert also knows the history of these writings, else how could he trust my answers? But neither am I here to cast aspersions or doubt upon a fellow man of the cloth.

“No, your Grace. I am familiar with the Laginate Grimoire. Nor does my knowledge stop there. I have held in my hands the *Book of Going Forth by Day*. I have perused the secrets locked away in the Goetic writings, and examined the rites of the *Kalachakra Tantra*. I have studied the findings of the *Collegium Horizontis* and the worshippers of Mercurius ter Maximus. I have even perused an incomplete copy of *Al Azif*, though it was scribed in the original Arabic, and there was much I could not comprehend.”

“Are you confessing to heresy, Father Lambrecht?” It was Princeps Godefroy who asked, but Lambrecht’s gaze remained fixed on Laureins. “Or simply attempting to impress us with your wide readings?”

“Your Grace, would you take the field of battle against a foe whose numbers you had not counted? Whose tactics and skills you had not studied? Whose weapons were of a make you knew not?”

“Not if I had any other choice,” Laureins admitted.

“Nor would I. Nor would I wish my Church to do so.” Now the priest stepped back, clearly addressing the entire synod. “Can we combat heresy if we do not recognize it? Can we ward ourselves, and our flocks, against the workings of Satan if we know not the nature of his tools and his servants?”

“The Romans hid these books, rather than burn them, because they recognized their importance. Even King Solomon consulted seers and bound spirits. Even Christ *Jesu* descended bodily into Hell. I study the foe so I may know him, not so I may join him; I armor my heart and soul against the temptations of these foul magics with my love of God and Church.”

Diederick, to his mounting horror, saw not only many of the spectators, but at least half the judges, slowly nodding in understanding.

Godefroy leaned forward in his chair. "Perhaps it is true that knowledge of these matters, though distasteful and hazardous to body and soul, may not be heresy unto itself. But *practice* of these rites is as worship of false idols, and is an offense directly unto God. You have not answered *those* charges, Father Lambrecht."

Lambrecht looked down at his hands, clenched nervously on the wooden barrier. "I would not speak ill of a fellow Christian, your Highness."

"Speak. We will judge the value of your words for ourselves."

"Very well." Lambrecht's gaze returned to meet his accusers. "I have no doubt in my heart that Sir Diederick is a just and honorable man, and soldier of the Church. But I fear I must question his mental state in the hours following the fall of Jerusalem."

Diederick leapt forward with a low growl, only to find himself held about the waist and shoulders by Lambrecht's jailors.

"Sir Diederick," Godefroy thundered. "We will forgive this outburst *once*. But you have said your piece, and you will now stand quietly with the other observers, or you will be dismissed from these proceedings."

His teeth grinding audibly, the knight bowed his head and stepped back.

"Not a man among us," Lambrecht continued, "is ignorant of the events that followed our entry into the city." A number of those present lowered their eyes in shame, though many more seemed unrepentant. "Diederick as much as confessed to me that he was part of those, that the madness of battle had overtaken him. He claims that I cast magics upon him, but he offers nothing but insect bites and the evidence of his senses—senses that he, himself, describes as impaired—as proof.

"I believe that Diederick, the poor fellow, was indeed struck by a temporary madness. And that in his desperation to assuage himself of his guilt for the actions he took therein, he has convinced himself that some outside influence was responsible. Perhaps there was, but if so, it was the work of Sa-

tan, not I.”

“I know Sir Diederick,” Laureins grumbled. “If he swears to me he saw a thing, I believe in that thing as surely as if I saw it myself.” But his voice had quieted, and whatever certainty he might retain was absent from the eyes of Colaert and Godefroy.

The trio of worthies dismissed the synod soon after, that they might spend the evening in contemplation and deliberation. They would take up the issue of Lambrecht’s secular crimes on the morrow, or perhaps the day after, once his ecclesiastic standing was determined. But Diederick, his gut churning, hardly needed to wait. He knew already how that day would go.

Did Sir Diederick see me murder any man? He could hear it in Lambrecht’s own voice. Did anyone else? Assumptions and suppositions do not make me guilty, your Highness, though I understand fully his burning desire to find someone responsible for the deaths of his friends.

Even the dagger would not suffice. True, Lambrecht should not be carrying such a weapon, but Diederick could hardly prove that it, and not any other blade like it in all Jerusalem, had been the one to take Joris’s life.

He had been a fool—a blind, naïve fool—to carry Lambrecht alive from beneath the bedrock of the city. So exhausted, so pained, so shaken to his very core by what he’d experienced, it had never occurred to Diederick how fantastic his story would sound to others, and how little he truly had to prove its validity.

Sleep came slowly and reluctantly to Diederick that night, and in his dreams he watched again and again as Lambrecht walked from the pavilion, his head held high—a free man.

The straw, indeed the very stone, reeked of sweat and urine, terror and death. Through the tiny window the sun peered only a few moments each day, and the stale and malodorous air seemed unwilling to make the effort of climbing through it. Rat droppings traced hidden routes across the floor like trails of breadcrumbs; one could almost see the pestilence they left in their wake, rising from them like heat on a summer’s day. For most of the day and night, the room was illuminated only by the torches flickering in the hallway be-

yond.

In the midst of it, his eyes turned inward in what might have been prayer, Father Lambrecht sat cross-legged in his ragged grey robe.

He did not know how long he had sat. His days were marked only by the occasional arrival of food and water, and a fleeting glimpse of sunlight around mid-afternoon. His testimony at trial had been akin to a vacation, and already he was uncertain how long ago he had offered that testimony. He suspected it was earlier that day, though it could have been as long ago as yesterday.

When a trio of figures blocked the torchlight through the window of his cell door—a barred portal somewhat larger than the one through which the sun occasionally crept—Lambrecht did not even bother to look at them.

“Good day to you, Sir Diederic. Or good evening. I’m afraid my sense of such things is impeded at present. I don’t suppose you’ve come to apologize?”

In the hallway beyond the door, Diederic turned to the ubiquitous pair of guards. “I need to speak with him alone.”

The soldiers did not move.

“What have you to worry about? You’ve confiscated my weapons. Even if I wished him harm, I’m hardly strong enough to break through the cell door barehanded.”

“I apologize, Sir Knight,” the man on the left offered, “but it would be inappropriate of us to—”

“‘Sir Knight,’ indeed.” Diederic faced the both of them. “I am Diederic de Wyndt, landed vassal to Robert the Second, Duke of Flanders, himself vassal to the king of France. And I am now *ordering* you to leave me to converse with the prisoner. Alone.”

The guards’ reluctance was almost palpable, but disobedience was not an option. With many a backward glance, they disappeared up the passageway, the lingering echoes of their footsteps sending a brief chill down Diederic’s spine.

“Quite an impressive show of authority, Sir Diederic.” Lambrecht finally lowered his gaze to stare at the man opposite the bars.

“We have exactly as long as it takes them to find someone of comparable status to countermand my orders, Lambrecht. But for the moment, it’s just you and I.”

“So it is.”

“So for just this moment, may we drop this nonsense about my hallucinations? I want to know. I want to know why you *really* sought the Laginate Grimoire. I guarded your life from those madmen, including some who had but lately been fellow pilgrims on the same journey as I. You owe me the truth, at the very least.”

“I’m far from certain that I owe you a thing, Sir Diederic.” For a long moment their eyes locked: a struggle of will and hatred into which their bodies, separated by the heavy door, could not follow.

At last, however, the priest smiled. “But then, why not?” When he spoke now, his voice was as soft as Diederic had ever heard from him, scarcely above a whisper. Even if the knight had placed additional listeners in the hall, outside Lambrecht’s line of sight—and he had indeed considered doing just that, though he had not followed through—they would have been unable to hear. Diederic himself had to press his face tight against the bars and concentrate to make out the words.

“I spoke truthfully to the synod. The future of Christendom and of our Mother Church rests in understanding the tools and the weapons of our adversaries.

“But understanding them is not enough, Diederic! The soldiers of evil are many, and they are powerful. We must be willing to wield their own weapons against them, lest they overrun us and throw down all we have built! Fire to fight fire, Sir Knight. Sorcery to battle sorcery. It is the only way.”

“You’re mad!” Diederic had to struggle against a very physical urge to back away from the door.

“Would you stop at any length to save the life of a loved one, Sir Diederic? A wife, or a son? Why should my love for the Church be any the lesser? She is shortsighted and provincial, but I will save her despite herself, despite her blindness.

“Is that all you would ask of me? I cannot imagine we shall have the opportunity to converse again.”

Long seconds passed without a word, the silence broken only by the occasional chittering of rats in the walls. Then, just as voices drifted from down the hall, suggesting the imminent return of the guards, Diederic spoke.

“Why, in the name of all that’s holy, would you offer the Last Rites to men that you murdered?”

For the first time since they had met, Lambrecht appeared truly taken aback. “Why would I... Because they were dead, Sir Diederic.”

“What?”

“I could not let them stop me in my endeavors, once they had learned of them. But it was their lives that stood in my way, not their souls. Why would I damn them to no purpose?”

Diederic was still shaking his head in stunned disbelief when the guards returned with orders to remove him from the gaol.

His name was Eliseo. Just Eliseo. Once, so recently he could smell the fading aroma of those days upon the air, he had borne a last name: a family name, a name that was spoken with honor and respect throughout Spain.

No more. Eliseo had been so full of faith, so full of enthusiasm, so full of courage when he rose to answer Pope Urban’s call. He had traveled far from the only home he had ever known to take back the Holy Land from the Saracen heretics. But hundreds upon hundreds of miles, and day after day of endless bloodshed, had sucked the faith and the courage from him like leeches. When the time had finally come, when the walls of Jerusalem had fallen, he had seen the horrors that lay between him and the Holy Sepulchre, and had looked back upon the butchery he had already inflicted upon the citizens of the city. And the last of his conviction had left him. He had thrown down his sword and his shield and fled from the city—an oath-breaker and a coward.

And were that not enough, he had caught a Saracen arrow in the thigh as he ran, a wound that grew hot and angry, perhaps an early sample of the torments he would suffer in Hell for betraying his vows.

Eliseo. Literally “My God is Salvation.” How poorly his parents had chosen!

Now he sat before an open storefront, his chair an upturned barrel, his table a broad windowsill. He sat amid other pilgrims shorn of faith and hope, wounded in body and in mind, sporting bandages and fresh scars—each as alone on his own barrel as Eliseo was. To the shopkeep they paid what

coin they had in trade for whatever wines and other intoxicants the man had purchased from other travelers, or scavenged from the ruined homes of Jerusalem's Christians and Jews. They drank away all that they had, in hopes of forgetting all they had been. And like Eliseo most refused to dishonor their loved ones back home by telling any man their full name.

Eliseo was on his third cracked and filthy clay cup of bitter dregs the proprietor laughably called wine; it gave sufficient cause for his tongue to curl and his eyes to water, but not enough to slip into the drunken stupor he sought. Tilting his head and raising the vessel skyward, he allowed the last drops and bits of accumulated detritus to trickle down his throat and across his greasy, unshaven chin. Eliseo cursed thickly at the cup, as though it were responsible for the lack of any further liquid, and dropped it to the counter.

Before it struck, a shadow appeared beside him, seemingly out of nowhere. "I could use your help, my friend."

The newcomer was French, to judge by his inflection. Eliseo didn't bother to look up. "Nobody needs my help. I have no help left to give anyone. Go away."

The figure did not go away. He pulled over a barrel instead and took a seat beside Eliseo. "Shopkeep! Bring my companion here another cup of... whatever that godforsaken stuff is."

That, at least, was sufficient to drag the Spaniard's attention off his hands. The man sitting beside him was clad in a fine tunic and blue tabard. His hair was cut short, and a thin beard hid his cheeks and chin. He did not belong here. His eyes were not quite empty enough.

"In point of fact, my friend," the stranger continued, "you are exactly the sort of person whose help I require. And in doing so, you can earn enough money to keep yourself in wine—real wine, not this putrid hemlock—for months to come."

"I see." For the first time in many days, Eliseo felt a faint stirring of some emotion other than dull thirst. "Then I am happy to hear your proposal, Sir...?"

"Diederic. Diederic de Wyndt."

"...was then, my Lords, that I saw the man who now stands accused. He was clutched tight to another, also a pilgrim, and I thought at first that perhaps I witnessed one soldier support-

ing his wounded brother. But as they turned, I saw, to my horror, that the accused held a dagger plunged into the other man's neck. I watched as he removed the blade and laid his victim down in the doorway. And it was then that I saw the second corpse, lying there already."

A low mutter sounded through the pavilion at Eliseo's testimony. Diederic could barely keep himself from grinning as he watched Lambrecht's hands clench and unclench upon the handrail of his platform. The priest was no longer smiling.

"I see." Bishop Colaert leaned forward across the horse-shoe table. "And is it not possible that you saw Father Lambrecht aiding a man who had been wounded prior to your arrival? Removing a weapon with which someone else had struck?"

Eliseo shook his head. "No, your Eminence. I am no physician, but I have fought for many years. I have wounded and slain other men, and been wounded in turn. I can assure you that a wound such as that I saw would have proved *immediately* lethal. It is not possible that the fellow could have walked, or even been helped, anywhere."

Colaert scowled unhappily, but both Laureins and Godefroy, to say nothing of the other judges of the synod, nodded their agreement.

"Very well," Colaert conceded. "Tell us of what followed."

The witness glanced around the room—too nervously, Diederic thought. Eliseo's eyes fell beneath Lambrecht's furious gaze, and he cleared his throat twice before he could continue.

"It seemed at first that he was offering the Last Rites to the two men, for he knelt beside them and spoke, anointing them with unguents. But as I drew nearer, I heard that it was no holy rite he uttered."

"And how can you be sure of this?" Princeps Godefroy inquired.

"I might not look it now, your Highness, but I am an educated man. I know my letters, and my Bible, and my histories. And though I am far from fluent, I know bits of several languages. This one he spoke was not French, nor Latin, but Greek. It sounded, to me, as though he asked direction of the corpses themselves, my Lords. He sought.... Forgive me, as I said, my Greek is far from perfect. Something related to a

person, or maybe a place, called 'Lagina.'"

Almost there. Diederic's fists were clenched, his brow furrowed. One more answer....

He knew the question was coming; it was Laureins who asked it.

"Can you tell us, Master Eliseo, why you have only now come forward with this tale, rather than at the start of the trial three days gone?"

Eliseo gestured sheepishly at the bandages that clothed his thigh. "I took this wound not long after the walls fell, your Grace, and it grew feverish. It was but yesterday that I was released from the surgeon's care and heard of these proceedings."

Diederic held his breath. It had cost him the bulk of the wealth he had brought with him from France to entice Eliseo to bear false witness. The rest had gone to a surgeon, more interested in the pleasures of the body than the good of his patients, to support Eliseo's excuse. It was the weakest point of their façade, and both Diederic and Eliseo knew it. The surgeon had received only a pittance—all the knight had remaining—and unlike Eliseo, he had no vested interest in maintaining the lie. If the synod chose to summon him for confirmation, the entire tapestry might unravel.

But Colaert seemed disgusted with the whole affair. The gaze he turned to Lambrecht was no longer so sympathetic as it once had been. And neither Godefroy nor Laureins had any reason to suspect Eliseo, or Diederic, of falsehood.

More for the sake of appearances than any true emotional investment in the outcome, the bishop pressed one more question. "Why did you not attempt to apprehend the accused yourself, or come to the aid of the fallen men? You could not have known for certain that the other men were already dead."

"No, your Eminence, I could not. But even as I made to approach, I saw this man"—and here he pointed to Diederic—"emerge from one street, and heard the sounds of others approaching from afar. While I know now it was not the case, at the time I suspected Sir Diederic of being an accomplice to the accused. Knowing I was outmatched, I fear that I fled so that they might not notice me."

Lambrecht leaned slowly over the guardrail. "Neither," he

quoted with a snarl, "shall you bear false witness against thy neighbor." But though Eliseo again struggled to keep his gaze steady, and his jaw might have quivered, it was a hollow protestation, and they both knew it. The priest had no compelling argument that the testimony was falsified, and it overlapped and supported just enough of Diederic's own to sound convincing. Had it only been the Spaniard's word against Lambrecht, that might have been one thing, but Diederic was a landed knight. Now that his claims had substantiation, they carried the weight of evidence.

Godefroy, Princeps of Jerusalem, rose from his seat. "Remove the accused from the pavilion and bid the observers depart. We will deliberate, and call him back when we have decided upon his fate."

For the first time, Lambrecht's expression was far from polite when he was dragged past Diederic in the grip of his guards. The knight allowed himself to grin at last.

"Let it be known that this court—under the ecclesiastic authority granted me as servant of Pope Urban and Princeps of Jerusalem—hereby finds you, Lambrecht Raes, to have knowingly and willfully pursued heresies, to have engaged in the casting of spells, and to have made false use of your office as a priest. For these there can be no other censure but excommunication. You shall evermore be denied communion, and all the sacraments and grace offered by our Mother Church, by the Lord God, and his son Christ *Jesu*.

"Furthermore, let it be known that this court—under the temporal authority granted me by King Phillippe the First of France, and by Emperor Alexius the First of Byzantium, and mine by right as Princeps of Jerusalem—hereby finds you, Lambrecht Raes, guilty of the secular crimes of murder and perjury before a high court. For these crimes, you shall be hoisted by the neck and hanged until you are dead. And as you die, you shall witness the purification by fire of the blasphemous pages for which you spilled the blood of good Christian men.

"Let no man offer the condemned comfort, nor any priest offer him Last Rites, nor let him be buried in consecrated ground.

"So have we ruled. So let it be done."

Lambrecht's scream of denial and rage as he was dragged from the pavilion was the most exquisite symphony Diederick had ever heard.

The sun hovered on the western horizon: the last sleepy glimpse of day's eye before the lid of night closed over it. Determined to carry out the distasteful act as swiftly as possible, the synod set soldiers to locating a viable spot. Finding a tree sturdy enough to support a hanging in the center of the city might have proved difficult, had it not proved unnecessary. A grain warehouse not far from the pavilion boasted a system of ropes and pulleys built to handle weights far greater than any man; the paved street outside would provide a safe spot for the small bonfire to which they would feed the Laginate Grimoire. As the warehouse's owner had vanished during the fall of the city and Godefroy's new regime had awarded it to no claimants, it was available for whatever use the synod chose to put it.

Armored soldiers led the procession from the synod's pavilion, pulling a heavy wagon in which the condemned stood, his wrists and ankles chained. Next followed the twelve men who had doomed him to such an end; duty and simple decency required that they at least observe the full horror of the sentence they had handed down. And behind them came a throng of stragglers, from both within and without the pavilion. Some came for curiosity and fascination, to witness a spectacle they had never before seen. Others came for entertainment, hoping to liven up a boring afternoon of rebuilding. Only a few, such as Diederick himself, came to see justice done.

Since his initial outburst, Lambrecht had remained silent and stone-still. He walked where his guards guided him, and otherwise looked straight ahead, scarcely even blinking. Only when they led him down from the wagon to stand beneath the noose did he show any sign of awareness. He flinched as the rope was placed about his neck, as though the hemp stung.

Before the condemned stood a small pyramid of wood and kindling, already beginning to spark. A thin column of smoke stretched upward toward the darkening sky.

As though one light sought to take the place of the other, the fire flared into full conflagration even as the sun dropped fully

below the horizon. The faces of the observers flickered in the dancing firelight.

Bishop Colaert stepped forward, the pages of the Grimoire held in his gloved hands. With a shake of his head, the old clergyman tossed the parchment into the rising flames. He glanced over his shoulder at Princeps Godefroy, who gave a single saddened nod.

A quartet of soldiers took solid hold of the rope's trailing end, wrapped it once about their forearms, and hauled. With the squeaking of pulleys and a sickening lurch, Lambrecht's feet left the ground and instantly started to kick and thrash at the air. His face reddened, his eyes and tongue protruded, and blood seeped from under the rope and from within his left ear.

Even as the priest rose from the earth, a peculiar breeze wafted across the assembly. Although the sun had set, the wind carried not the swiftly cooling breath of night in the desert, but a heated bite: the last warm breath of the passing day. It stung the eyes and smelled of burning, of sweat, and of dry rot.

Despite his burning, rage-driven desire to watch every moment of Lambrecht's slow death, Diederic felt his eyes drawn to the fire that burned beside the strangling priest's feet. The corners of the Laginate pages curled up on themselves like a clenching fist, but they did not brown, did not burn. The flames immediately around them subsided, turning from brilliant red and orange to a dull corpse blue.

And then, as others began to notice the phenomenon, the woodpile detonated with a deafening crack.

Flames roared skyward in a pillar of fire high Biblical in proportion. Burning debris rained down over every building and tent in sight, setting at least half a dozen alight. Blazing splinters embedded themselves in flesh, in eyes, and in clothing. The screams of the injured, the blind, and the burned shattered the silence of the night. The soldiers who had held Lambrecht aloft let go their grasp on the rope and collapsed to the stones, clutching at their wounds.

From the ground where he had tumbled, Diederic glanced over his burned and bloodied arm, the only shield that had saved his eyesight. And he saw, rising from the scattered flames, not the dark smoke that had been present mere sec-

onds before, but a ghost-white haze.

The mists. The same mists that had crept, tentative and cautious, from the lantern burning in the underground shrine now billowed and flowed from the madly crackling flames. They rose around the falling, choking priest, cradling him like the loving arms of a mother—or perhaps the cocoon of web spun about a spider's prey.

To Diederic, it seemed that Lambrecht's fall was never-ending. Long after he should have struck the ground, after the rope should have pulled loose from the tackle above, he continued to plummet, the ground somehow receding before him. And as he fell, his form began to fade, until he was naught but a silhouette lost in the mists.

It could not be. He would not *let* it be! With a roar of inarticulate hatred, Diederic lunged to his feet. Blood poured from his arm, from skinned shins, from splinter-dug lines across his cheeks, and he ignored it all. Behind him, burning buildings cracked and splintered, burning men shrieked in agony, but for them he had no ears. Laureins staggered toward his fellow knight, his beard eaten away, his flesh blackened, flames still flickering across the tunic on his back and the hairs on his head; Diederic shoved him aside without a second glance.

His hands outstretched, as though they already clutched Lambrecht by the throat to finish the job the heavy hemp had begun, Diederic dove into the rapidly dispersing mists, and was gone.

Four

It had no name.

Oh, there was one recorded *somewhere*. Nobody would build a fortress of this size without naming it, and that information could likely be found buried in the Empyrean Church archives, deep beneath the Holy Basilica in the heart of Caer-caelum. But whatever name the fortress might have borne was long forgotten, lost in the infamy of the ground on which it stood.

To turnkey and prisoner alike, it was Perdition Hill. The fortress was unimportant; it was the man-made hell beneath that mattered.

Leona Talliers crouched stiffly beside an underground pool, up to her elbows in lukewarm, gritty water. With hands rubbed raw from constant scouring and pocked by exposure to splashing lye, she hauled a soggy, cream-colored robe from the pool. It was tattered and worn, but now, at least, moderately cleansed of dust, sweat, and blood. With hardly a glance, she passed the robe along. Savah would beat it dry with heavy sticks before passing it, in her turn, to another woman; she would attempt, with hands as abused as Leona's own, to mend the garment without leaving new bloodstains that would necessitate a second washing.

Daring the displeasure of the pacing guards, ever alert for signs of slacking, Leona paused to wipe the perspiration from her brow, moistening a sleeve already yellowed through constant similar use. Although she wished desperately for a respite from the heat, she knew better than to splash any of the water from the pool across her parched face. She had done that once, and the diluted lye accumulated within the water had irritated her eyes for a week.

The heat beneath the hill was oppressive—a weight that bound the prisoners as thoroughly as any chain. It was not the sharp burn of the flame but the slow sweltering of the oven; it baked the miasma of sweat, smoke, human waste,

and despair into a nigh-tangible mass that plugged the corridors. The slightest effort was exhausting, yet sleep came reluctantly and fitfully at best. Robes were washed regularly, to prevent the accumulation of vermin, but as for the men and women themselves, they had long since forgotten what it was to be clean, to be free of the sticky film of sweat and dirt that each wore as a second skin. The furnaces in the lower levels, and the torches that were the only source of illumination, kept the heat constant regardless of time or season. Night and day were not the province of sun and moon down here, but simply the whim of the guards.

Ignoring the ache in her back and neck, Leona bent forward again to begin laboring on the next of the filthy robes. A brief glimpse of her reflection took her aback, as it always did. Her hair had once been fiery red, her skin a healthy bronze, but a year and more beneath the earth had dulled the former, and paled the latter almost white where it was not gray from filth or ruddy from the heat. Leona stared at her reflection, and a stranger met her gaze.

She flinched as a scourge cracked behind her, so near that she felt the wind of its passing in her hair. She glanced behind at the mail hauberk and crimson tabard, traditional to the guard, and bowed her head once in apology before scrubbing at the robe. She knew better than to look to her companions for sympathy. Were she to taste the lash directly, it would simply mean more work for others to clean and mend the robe she now wore.

Hours passed, each one an eternity. The water in the pool now mixed not merely with lye, but with blood from shredded skin, and the foul secretions of blisters formed and torn in quick succession. Finally, however, Leona felt the grip of a guard upon her shoulder, pulling her from the pool and directing her to stand.

“Get a whole load ready,” he informed her, not even bothering to look her in the face. “Gather it up, and come with me.”

Her back protesting strenuously as she bent, her arms quivering beneath her burden, Leona gathered a sizable heap of the garments and followed as the guard led her from the chamber and into a gently sloping passage.

As she passed beneath the arch, her eyes darted upward, taking in the inscription on the stone mantle above.

“Predicants 15:5.” Of all the Septateuchal passages inscribed in the halls of Perdition Hill, this was the one most often repeated, and one she had long since learned by heart.

“Suffer among you no man who is slothful, but ensure he labors as is equitable for his due. If he worketh not, offer unto him no charity, but allow him to falter.”

And work for their due the prisoners did, if they wanted to eat. Arduous and painful as it was, Leona gave thanks for laundry duty. In Perdition Hill there were tasks aplenty that were far more odious.

Unwilling to offer the guard any cause for anger, Leona struggled to keep up, ignoring the bone-deep weariness that was as constant a companion to her as hunger. Her calloused feet, though bare, beat like heavy boots upon the floor. On they walked, onward and upward, through passageways of ruddy stone that writhed through the Hill, the tentacles of some shapeless beast from before the coming of man.

Another archway, beyond which opened a side passage leading to one of the many chapels scattered throughout the catacomb. Within the chapel, an Emyrean priest waxed philosophic about the wages of sin and the virtues of cooperation to a literal captive audience. Leona herself had not yet attended her mandatory daily allotment of mass, but she rather doubted her dour companion would excuse her long enough to do so. She would have to sit through the nightly prayers before dinner, then.

It seemed they had walked forever—an illusion that, though familiar to Leona as her own breathing, she could not shake. It was indeed a lengthy trek from the washing pool; then, it was a long way from anywhere to anywhere in this thrice-damned place.

Finally, when her calluses threatened to split upon the stone floor, and her arms visibly shook beneath their heavy load, they were there.

The main hall was enormous, unbelievably so. Arched ceilings rose high unto the very top of the hill, supported by buttresses ornately carved with warlike angels glaring down upon the prisoners. A great chandelier, in which burned a thousand candles, illuminated the chamber, reflecting off the reddish stone and a series of stained glass windows high

upon the walls. There were seven windows in total: one for each of the Sixfold Scions, and a seventh that showed only sunrise. The windows led nowhere of course, and the only light ever to fall upon them was cast by those many candles.

And above every door from the hall, in large ornate letters, was the same inscription, the mantra of Perdition Hill: *Honesty is a song sung only by the righteous. Speak truth, and let thyself be made worthy.*

Now that it was evening, or what the guards proclaimed and the prisoners accepted to be evening, the hall filled with the slow shuffle of feet and the rustling of cloth. Men and women returned from their daily labors, battered, exhausted, and oftentimes injured, and the guards strode alongside them, mail hauberks clanking in counterpoint. The acrid stench of sweat and blood rode before the prisoners, and their whimpers and groans reverberated in the passageways.

With her guard looming behind her like a shadow, fingering the handle of his lash whenever she slowed, Leona stood between two large wicker baskets along one long wall. One by one, in a stream as endless as the tides, prisoners shuffled past. Each hauled a robe soiled by the day's toil over his or her head—modesty requires privacy, and privacy was nowhere to be had beneath the Hill—and dropped it in the first basket. Her movements mechanical, Leona drew a clean robe from the other basket and handed it on. Over and over, prisoner after prisoner, until by evening's end, she would be left with a full basket of dirty garments to be hauled back down to the pool come the morrow. This was her life, had been for some time, and would assuredly be until the day she died. She had had over a year to grow accustomed to that fact; it galled her still. For Leona Talliers, like many of those held in Perdition Hill and the other prisons of the Emyrean Inquisition, was largely innocent of the charges against her.

But then, others were not.

“They took him below some hours ago.”

Leona started, might even have let loose a soft yelp. Lost in thought and the repetitive duties of her task, she had not expected anyone to speak with her. Fearfully she glanced behind, waiting for the overseer's lash, but he was gone, having moved away to discuss some matter with another guard.

When she looked back, Leona already knew whom she

would see. Only one among the prisoners had the sort of timing, the sort of foresight, to appear at the precise moment the guard was absent.

The Vistana stood before her, dark eyes shadowed, somehow impressive despite being clad in the same tattered garment as everyone else. Like the fortress above, the Vistana doubtless had a true name, but none of the prisoners used it. Most refused even to associate with her. Everyone knew the Vistani practiced true witchcraft, and here proximity was as good as guilt. Leona would have had nothing to do with her, either, save that the two were joined by a mutual interest.

“Again?” Leona asked, voice hushed. “He has not recovered from the last time!”

“And yet.”

The pale-skinned woman sighed. “He’ll not be waiting his turn in line, then.”

The Vistana nodded. “But neither will the guards forgive him tomorrow if he stinks of today’s labors. Pass me two robes, Leona. I’ll smuggle the extra to him.”

Leona hesitated, but she had only seconds before the guard returned. With a nod, she slipped the Vistana two of the cream-hued garments, then watched as the slim, dark-haired woman slipped away into the crowd.

And indeed, when everyone’s tasks for the evening were complete, and the prisoners herded like cattle and packed into the waiting cells for a meager dinner and a fitful night’s sleep, not only the Vistana but also Leona herself found themselves sharing the stranger’s cell. Leona shivered briefly at the Vistana’s foresight, and wondered again what witchcrafts the gypsies truly practiced.

Filthy, louse-ridden straw crunched beneath her feet as Leona made her way to the rear of the cell, away from the rusty bars and the eyes of the crimson-clad guards. The other prisoners within the cell, several dozen in all, were too focused on their bowls of watery gruel to do more than grunt a protest as she squeezed between them. Taking care not to stain her newly cleaned robe with the eye-watering mildew that clung low to the wall and fed off the decaying straw, Leona crouched beside the Vistana, who gently tended to the stranger’s wounds.

He had dwelt here for months—though without the pass-

ing of the seasons Leona could never have said precisely how many—yet “the stranger” was all they had to call him. His features, though similar to those of Malosians, were just different enough to suggest some other land of origin, and his words, on those rare occasions he spoke at all, carried a hint of an unknown accent. His face, unshaven even when he first arrived, was now covered in a wild growth of beard, the same sand-brown of his hair. He had the physique of a warrior, though weeks of insufficient gruel had left him bordering on gaunt. Most peculiar of all were his eyes, which seemed unwilling to focus, but instead stared beyond his surroundings at some world nobody else could see.

He responded little, if at all, to the words and actions of those around him. He answered no questions, engaged in no conversation. When he spoke at all, it was to utter strange and foreign words—names, -perhaps?—in the awed tone of a man lost in memories, or else in prayer.

Words like *Jerusalem. Outremer. Lambrecht. Jesu.*

And ever more frequently as the weeks and months went by: *Purgatory.*

It was frustrating to those few who had tried to befriend him, and most of the other prisoners had long since given up. The Vistana, however, had gazed in wide-eyed fascination the day he appeared in Perdition Hill, and had kept close watch on him ever since, seeing to those needs that he was unable, or unwilling, to meet for himself. Leona could not say what about him had fascinated her. Perhaps it was the Vistana’s own interest that had piqued her curiosity. Or perhaps it was the rumors that swirled among the prisoners—rumors regarding the reasons for the stranger’s imprisonment.

Who he was, where he was from, what he had done: these were all questions for which the prisoners had no answer. And to judge by the frequency with which the stranger was chosen for “questioning” by the guards, neither had the Inquisition.

And maybe *that* was what drew Leona’s compassion. Not a man or woman present was a stranger to the torture chambers of the Inquisition’s Truth Seekers, but the frequency of the stranger’s sufferings vastly overshadowed anyone else’s.

The Vistana gently pulled the old robe—soiled not only by sweat, but urine as well—from the stranger’s body. Leona

knelt to aid her in replacing it with the new robe, positioning herself as best as she could to block anyone else's view. She did not even want to imagine the consequences, should any of the guards decide something lewd was occurring in the cell.

Leona tore a strip from the hem of the robe—small enough that it should pass as normal wear—and moistened it with the last remaining drops of her allotted water. As Leona supported the stranger's head, the Vistana, clearly better versed in the healing arts than Leona herself, dabbed carefully at the man's few outward wounds.

Priests of the Emyrean Church were forbidden to shed blood, and even the most vicious of the Inquisitorial Truth Seekers could honestly claim not to have violated that precept. They didn't need to—not when they had plenty of bloodless options at hand.

Today, it appeared the treatment of choice had been suspension by various extremities, possibly with added weights for that extra bit of pressure on the joints. The stranger's wrists were badly chafed, made red and inflamed by the heavy ropes. Deep bruising suggested substantial damage within, particularly around the chest and shoulders, and one of his arms hung loosely at his side, dislocated. The Vistana bent forward and took a firm grip on that arm.

"Hold his shoulders," she whispered, and with hardly an instant's pause to allow Leona to brace herself, she yanked up and back. The wet snap of the bone slipping into place was inaudible beneath the stranger's agonized cry.

Ignoring the glares of those around them, the two women locked eyes. "We've not much time now," Leona observed. The Vistana merely nodded.

And indeed, she had spent only moments treating the stranger's lesser injuries when the whispered warning of "Redbreasts!" hissed through the crowded cell. Leona lowered the stranger's head to the straw and scooted aside. The Vistana simply folded her hands together, expertly sliding the moist cloth up one sleeve where it would be effectively invisible.

The guards that appeared before the bars glared menacingly into the cell, and offered up a few obligatory utterances along the lines of "What's all this?" and "What are you vermin

doing in there?" But cries of pain were hardly a rarity in the nights of Perdition Hill, and when no immediate bloodshed, carnality, illness, or witchcraft presented itself, the soldiers were all too happy to continue on their rounds without so much as unlocking the cell door.

The stranger twitched and rolled over in the straw, his utterances limited to the occasional groan.

"Has he ever been so bad?" Leona asked, her voice barely louder than a breath, though the guards had gone.

"Once, when he first arrived—before you joined me in his upkeep. They fed him the pear."

Leona gagged. Perhaps the most diabolical of the Inquisition's tools, the pear was a metal device that widened as an attached screw was turned. Fully collapsed, it fit snugly within a person's mouth, but as it started to expand....

"They did not open it fully," the Vistana continued. "I suppose they wished him to be able to talk. But even so, he could hardly chew for weeks."

"*Jesu*, forgive me!" Both women started and stared down at their charge, but already he had subsided once more into agonized, restless slumber.

Leona, having completed the long morning walk down to the washing pool, was stunned to discover the stranger assigned to stand beside her this day. Men, particularly those of his physical acumen, normally found themselves assigned far more laborious tasks: assisting in the forges, digging new passages to interconnect the old, breaking rocks. The stranger's injured arm, swollen and weak despite the Vistana's treatment, rendered him unsuitable for such tasks. Yet his arm was hale enough to hold a robe, and he could wield a stick in the other to beat that robe dry.

Perhaps their keepers thought to humiliate him with woman's work—just another torture heaped upon him—but in this they were doomed to disappointment. The stranger carried out his tasks as ordered, as mechanically as a trained animal, and otherwise remained oblivious to his surroundings.

For many hours she worked beside him, handing him one water-sodden garment after another; if he recognized her at all, he gave no sign. Around noon, or so the keepers claimed, the

lot of them ceased their labors. They were herded, single file and at spear-point, into the nearest chapel, where they were manacled to stone pews. It, like every chapel, had inscribed above the entryway the notation "*Proclamations 9:17.*"

Or, as it meant to those who knew their scripture, "*Prayer is the repast that sustains men's souls in misfortune.*"

Leona watched the priest stride in, accompanied by another pair of guards, and ceremonially dip his fingers in the stone font beside the entrance. Their crimson tabards each displayed the sixfold sun, holiest icon of the Emyrean Church, but the priest boasted the symbol in gold, rather than the guards' standard white. That, and the priest's lack of helm, were the only means of telling one from the other, until the man began to preach.

It was the same hour of her life she experienced every day. The priest read from the Septateuch; extolled the value of honesty, confession, and repentance; railed against the evils of heresy and witchcraft that afflicted the lands and the good people of Malosia; and otherwise said nothing new. Leona would long since have confessed the sin of witchcraft, if only to end her interminable days in Perdition Hill. Alas, the Inquisitors demanded sufficiently detailed confessions that false admissions were easily spotted.

It was after she and the stranger had filed back to their positions by the washing pool, but the guards had not completed escorting everyone else back to their duties, that Leona realized they had a few moments.

"Tell me, stranger," she whispered, barely audible over the water lapping against the edge of the pool. "Who is this 'Jesu' from whom you beg forgiveness?"

Never before had Leona felt the stranger's eyes directly, but now he turned an incredulous gaze upon her. It was apparently the sheer absurdity of her question that drew his attention.

"*Jesu,*" he croaked in a voice unused to speech, as though simple repetition of the name should provide her an answer. "Our savior, son of the Lord our God."

"You know of the Sixfold Scions, then! But I am not familiar with the name you've offered. Which of God's sons is he?"

The stranger's jaw dropped as though it would fall completely from his face. Even as he drew breath to speak, how-

ever, one of the women down the line muttered a soft “Red-breasts coming!”

Beneath the eyes of the guards, Leona and the stranger had no more opportunity to speak that day. But as the hours passed, his eyes returned to her again and again, and if his expression was questioning, perplexed, even disbelieving, it was far steadier, and far more alert, than she had ever seen.

In the following days, though the stranger sought any means by which to continue their abbreviated conversation, such opportunities failed to present themselves. Someone else stood between them in the shuffling line to and from chapel. The ebb and flow of the crowd cast them in different cells when it came time to bed down for the night. It was maddening! To have such a brief, tantalizing glimpse into the true nature of this horrific realm in which he found himself, and then to be unable to pursue it further, was worse than having no notion at all.

On the fourth morning after their brief discussion, the guards declared the stranger fit to return to his previous duties. Along with dozens of other men, he was escorted not down to the washing pool, but across the length of Perdition Hill. Here, several small cul-de-sacs extended from the main passage, little more than blisters of open air within the stone. The job of the prisoners was to transform those dead ends into traversable passages by means of inadequate tools and exhaustive labor.

Dust poured from the walls, clogging and choking; the clatter of the heavy picks against the stone was deafening. Still, the stranger labored on. He ignored the agony that flared often through his injured arm, ignored the fountain-like rivulets of sweat that dripped without providing the slightest relief from the heat, and pondered.

This was Purgatory. While not miserable or agonizing enough for any Hell, it was certainly as far from Heaven as could be imagined.... Where else could he have found himself?

Yet the woman’s question had shaken him from his horrified, despairing reverie. Even the most righteous of heathens were condemned to Hell, but here was a woman who had apparently never even *heard* of the son of God.

Or had heard of too many....

He shook his head, sending a cloud of rock dust cascading from his hair to the floor. He had questions, too many questions, and nobody from whom to seek his answers. He wanted to throw down his pick and go find this woman, demand that she explain.

He did not. Even in his prime, before months of deprivation had weakened him so, he could not have battled his way through so many guards. This duty was considered most dangerous for the prisoners, as accidents were not uncommon, but also for the guards, who must watch over men armed with picks and shovels that could easily serve as weapons. Twice as many of the—what had the other prisoners called them? *Redbreasts*—twice as many Redbreasts stood watch over the miners as over any other contingent of prisoners. One man with an old pickaxe, however determined, could never hope to win through the lot of them.

And so the stranger worked, pounding away at the stone even as he pounded away at his dilemma, and he grew frustrated at his lack of progress with either.

It was during his second week back in the tunnels that the cave-in occurred.

The stranger and three of his fellow prisoners chipped fiercely away at a stretch of wall. They knew that they were close to breaking through—had known for days, ever since the dull clang of their picks on stone had begun to echo hollowly. Even before they heard the barked orders from the guards, felt the sting of the lash on their backs, they had redoubled their efforts, working tirelessly through the following days. It was not a need to please their jailors that inspired them, but the knowledge that once the wall had fallen, the turnkeys would have to discuss with their engineers where next to dig. Breaking through this wall meant at least a day, possibly two, of respite—or at least of easier duties—before their efforts must resume once more.

Finally, some hours after midday mass, they were rewarded for their efforts by a loud crack, accompanied by a visible shifting of the rock. A ragged cheer, made hoarse by thirst and ambient dust, but heartfelt nonetheless, arose from the workers—a cheer that was cut short by the low, doleful

groan that echoed from beneath them.

As though it had waited eons for just such an excuse, the wall collapsed into dozens of smaller stones, shattering like glass. Dust billowed outward as the rock impacted the floor, sending all four men into fits of coughing and retching, obscuring their vision like a thick smoke.

Or, the stranger could not help but note, like mist.

Even as they doubled over, hands outstretched blindly to locate one another in the rolling dust, a second groan, louder than the first, shook the floor beneath their feet.

And then, perhaps unable to bear the impact of the collapsing wall, that floor was gone.

Unlike the wall, it did not go all at once. It was that fact alone that saved him. The stranger felt the stone shift and begin to slide away. Disoriented by the cloud of grit, unable to catch his breath for coughing, still he was able to leap aside, his body propelled by instincts honed through years upon years of battle. He felt the base of his heel part as he pushed off, split by the jagged edge of a breaking rock. He ignored the pain, ignored the warmth of his own blood, and could only hope as he took to the air that he had not, in his befuddlement, hurled himself at one of the other walls.

Thus the impact of the floor rising up to meet him, knocking both breath and no small amount of dust from his lungs, was a welcome pain. The stranger spun himself about, shredding his robe against the rocky floor, and lunged for a hand protruding from the cloud. He clenched it tight, shouting meaningless encouragements for the man on the other end to hold on. And for a moment, that man was saved.

But the weight was heavy, awkward, and the stranger felt the stones loosen and shift beneath him. Maybe, just maybe, he could save his fellow prisoner. And maybe, more likely, they would plummet to their deaths together.

With a whispered apology, the stranger opened his grip. Skin slipped from skin, and a brief, choked scream was silenced by a sodden thump.

There he lay, hands crossed above his head, as the tunnel shook and the earth itself seemed determined to collapse. Everything from the tiniest pebble to rocks larger than his head clattered to the floor around him, bounced off his upraised arms, his legs, his back. They bruised flesh and bone

but thankfully inflicted no more serious injury.

Finally, the shuddering subsided, the dust began to settle. The stranger cautiously opened his eyes. Through the clouds that impaired his vision, he thought he made out a large perpendicular corridor, some ways up the passage. In that, at least, they had accomplished their objective.

Between him and it, however, lay a jagged gap in the floor, easily three paces across. The light of the dust-muted torches was insufficient to see what might lie below. All he could tell was that the open space below was no natural cavern, but a squared passage—as artificial, as manmade, as the one he currently occupied.

He could, however, clearly make out the form of one of his fellow prisoners crouched tightly against the wall, mere feet from the pit's edge. Of the third worker there was no sign, and the stranger could only assume that he shared the same fate as the man he had been unable to save.

Now that the falling stone had subsided, he could already hear the sound of running footsteps from back down the passage, and the shouts from the guards—not of concern but of anger. He and his surviving companion would taste the lash, and possibly far worse, before night had fallen; there was no help for it. Two prisoners dead, all the effort that had gone into carving out the connecting passage wasted, and the soldiers would be looking to cast the blame on *someone*. Since they could neither argue with their superiors, nor place responsibility on the engineers, the prisoners who labored at the actual digging would have to suffice.

But in the moments before the Redbreasts arrived, and in the slow, excruciating hours to follow, the stranger could not shake his ever-growing clutch of questions from his mind. It was time, by God, to have his answers!

“My name is Diederick de Wyndt.”

Leona, halfway to dozing against the rear wall, started awake at the sound of the voice. She knew it could not possibly be, but it sounded like...

It was. The stranger sat in the next cell, slumped sideways against the bars. He had tied his evening's robe around his waist, rather than pulling it on as was proper—probably, she realized, to avoid staining it with the blood that ran from the

whiplashes across his back. His head turned to the side, he gazed at her with a directness of which she had believed him incapable. Her eyes wide with wonder, she crawled nearer the bars so they could converse in a whisper.

“Did you—were you speaking to me?”

“I was. You tried to speak with me days ago, and I was rude. I apologize.”

“There is no need. I am Leonera Talliers. Everyone calls me Leona.”

“An honor, my lady. And your companion?”

Leona did not even bother to look behind her. God and Scions, did the woman know *everything* before it happened?

“We call her ‘the Vistana.’ She—”

“My name,” the dark-skinned woman interrupted, her voice no less a whisper but sharp enough to demand attention, “is Viola Hanza. And the honor, Diederick de Wyndt, is mine. I have waited for you for a very long time.”

For a long moment, both Diederick and Leona stared at the Vistana. The air around them grew heavy with the sounds of mutters, groans, and snores.

When it became clear that neither was entirely certain how to proceed, Viola asked, “You come from afar, do you not, Diederick?”

The gruff knight actually chuckled. “Farther, I think, than any of us—myself included—could believe.”

“The rumors say you came from the Mists,” Leona breathed, unable to keep from asking. “That you just appeared from nowhere!”

“And right into the arms of a squad of your Redbreasts,” he confirmed. “As impossible as it sounds, no less to me than to you, that is precisely how I arrived here.”

“True witchcraft!” Leona leaned away and made a strange gesture, touching first throat, then navel, then an X-pattern across her breast. It threw Diederick briefly, until he remembered her mention of the “Sixfold Scions,” and the sun with six rays that adorned the tabards of the guard.

“Indeed, likely it was, though none of my doing,” he acknowledged. “And the welcome they offered me suggests that such heresies are no more smiled upon here than they are back home.”

“They are not,” Viola confirmed. “Every man and woman

here is accused of witchcraft, or some equal heresy, against the Empyrean Church.”

“And are you witches, then?”

“I am not!” Leona protested. “Nor are many of us here! The Inquisition sees guilt where none exists.”

“And you?”

Violca smiled softly. “I See in the manner of my people, *giorgio*. Some call that witchcraft.”

Diederich’s eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. For now he was more interested in learning of this land—a land that he was becoming less and less convinced was Purgatory—than he was in directing suspicion at one of the few who had shown him any kindness.

“You know so little of your own circumstance,” Leona said. “Is there no Inquisition in your own land?”

“There is not. My own Mother Church seeks out heresies, but she has no servants dedicated to such a task.” He thought, bitterly, of Lambrecht, of the Laginate Grimoire. “Perhaps,” he added, “she should, at that.”

He raised his eyes. “At the entrance to the torture chambers, above the mantle, I saw an inscription.” Sometimes, dwelling on that writing was all that had kept him sane. It, like the longer mantra in the main hall, was not *quite* Latin, but so near that he could interpret it easily. “It reads *‘Malosians 8:6.’*”

Leona dredged deep in her memory, and then nodded. “*Only the faithful man sees. Only the faithful man hears. Only the faithful man knows. Trust ye in the faithful man, for no other is worth your trust,*” she quoted.

“It sounds very much like a Bible verse.”

Even Violca seemed confused at that. “I know not of what you speak,” Leona told him. “It is a verse from the Septateuch.”

“Septateuch? Ah. Seven books, yes? One for each Scion, and the last for.... God, their father?”

Leona smiled. “The first for the God Most High, not the last, but otherwise, yes. You learn swiftly, Diederich.”

“So who were the ‘Malosians,’ then?”

“We all are, Diederich. That is, most of us. Not you, and perhaps not the Vist... Violca. This land is Malosia.”

“Tell me of it.”

It seemed a straightforward enough question. Diederich

cocked his head in confusion when neither of the two women immediately answered.

"Which of us would you prefer to start?" Leona finally asked.

"Does it matter so much?"

"Rather," Viola told him.

"You see," Leona said, "I have lived here my whole life, nearly twenty summers. My parents lived here, and my grandparents before them, all in a small village called Birne. We have legends that tell of Birne's founding many generations ago. The Emyrean Church has reigned from Caer-caelum for far longer, ever since it absorbed the authority of the Crown. Our histories go back centuries."

"I am Vistani," Viola interjected where Leona paused. "We know the lands within the Mists. We know the Mists themselves, at least so well as any mortal might hope. We See.

"I tell you that I witnessed the birth of this land from the Mists. I felt the pains of that childbirth. I, and several of my cousins, have wandered this land since its beginning, seeking to understand how it came about, and why, to this day, it appears so empty, so hollow, to our Sight.

"And I tell you, Diederic de Wyndt, that I have spent less than seven seasons in this land, the last two down here in this wretched prison. I cannot account for Leona's memories, or her people's history, save perhaps that they sprang whole from the Mists. But nonetheless, I know that I speak truth."

It was impossible, absolutely and utterly. A land, a people, a history could not appear fully formed, like Minerva from Jove's skull. But somehow, in the core of his soul, Diederic knew that Viola's words were fact, as thoroughly as he knew his name, or that his limbs would move if and as he willed them.

Either Diederic could no longer trust his own ears, his own eyes, his own mind, or God Himself—for who else could create a land?—had a hand in Malosia's birth. And in either case, the cruel, horrific nature of this land could mean only one thing.

This was Purgatory, after all.

Diederic folded in on himself, hugging his knees to his chest, and no matter how Leona and Viola tried to coax him, he spoke to them no more that night.

Yet Diederic's curiosity was well and truly piqued. Try though he might over the next few days to lose himself once more to reverie and despair—for they were so much easier than the exhaustion and torture that were now his lot in life—he could not. His mind refused to wrap itself once more in its protective fugue, and though he felt certain this Malosia was merely an aspect of his sentence to Purgatory, a portion of his soul was not convinced.

Still, he spoke no more with Leona or Violca. He feared they would pull him even farther from the emotional retreat he so desperately craved, or at least that they would confuse him further, when he had not made sense of what he already knew. And so he avoided them, doing his best when the prisoners were herded to their cells to note where they were going, and to go elsewhere.

He managed this for several days, before finally overhearing a conversation that demanded his attention. It seemed unlikely, even at the time: Violca *happened* to share her revelation on the one night that Diederic *happened* to be in the neighboring cell, forced near enough to the bars by the press of his fellow captives that he was able to overhear her whispers? Unlikely, indeed! Yet it only occurred to him later to wonder if the Vistani, using the Sight she claimed to possess, had planned it thus.

It had been a particularly loathsome day. Diederic and a dozen other men had been led to a cramped passage, its ceiling barely five feet off the floor, and commanded to expand it. The necessity of crouching had backs, legs, and necks aching within moments. Their overseer, displeased with their rate of progress and unwilling to accept the awkward position as an excuse, had been unusually free with the whip. That evening in the cell, Diederic reeked of stale sweat and dried blood, his body throbbing with pain to match one of his sessions with the Truth Seekers. He had all but fallen into a pained slumber (perhaps “passed out” would be nearer the truth) when he heard Violca's voice.

“... less empty with every passing dawn.” Her tone was low, monotonous, entrancing—or perhaps entranced. “What was fluid becomes hard and unyielding. What Might Be becomes What Is. What Must Not Be becomes What May Be. It looks

backward at us, shrieks its desire, fills the land with its malevolence; for above all else, it desires to be born.”

Leona crouched beside the Vistana, who sat cross-legged, her back against the bars, her eyes rolled up in her skull. She glared as Diederich approached the bars from the other side, her jaw clenched in anger, and for a moment she seemed unwilling to speak to him. Finally, however, she spat, “Violca was worried, for the land and for you. I do not know what she means when she says the land is ‘hollow,’ but it disturbs her far more than she lets on. She hoped that if she meditated, if she saw the state of Malosia, that she might again get through to you. I hope you’re quite satisfied.”

Any reply Diederich might have offered was overwhelmed by a sudden high moan. Violca shuddered, her eyelids fluttering over bloodshot whites, her fingers trembling. Her words, hesitant, sepulchral, seemed to come not from her throat, but from below, as though the world itself would utter them, and needed her only for her voice. “The land seeks a blackened soul to make itself complete! A darkness without to fill a darkness within.

“Malosia calls to him, and he must heed. He comes soon....”

With a wet gurgle that sounded disturbingly akin to a death rattle, Violca tensed, her arms clutching madly at the air. Her head flew back, ringing like a bell as it struck the bars, and blood trickled down her neck from deep within her hair. Even as Leona grabbed for her shoulders, Diederich reached through the bars to cradle the Vistana’s head. He could not stop the spasms, dared not try lest he hold her so tightly he cause further damage, but he could at least ensure that she did not injure herself further against the unyielding iron.

At last the convulsions ceased, and not a moment too soon. Already they had attracted the attention of every other prisoner in both cells. Any more and the Redbreasts would be on their way, assuming they were not already. Crouching awkwardly with his hands through the bars, Diederich gently lowered Violca’s head to the matted straw. Her breathing was shallow, but now at least it was steady.

For perhaps an hour, Leona and Diederich—so far as he could, through the bars—tended to the unconscious Vistana.

Diederich held her head and washed her forehead with a dampened bit of cloth, while Leona looked her over for injuries she might have suffered during her fit. Their audience slowly drifted away and returned to sleep, as it became clear that nothing further of interest would occur.

Eventually, when even Diederich was contemplating lying back for the night and hoping to speak to the Vistana tomorrow, Violca bolted upright, wracked by an ugly coughing fit. The sounds were wet, rasping. She shook for perhaps half a minute, and then she slumped back against the bars, gasping for breath.

Relieved as he was that she seemed improved, Diederich found himself biting his lip in impatience as Leona made endless inquiries after Violca's well-being. How was she feeling? Was she in pain? Did she remember what she Saw? How was she feeling? Was her head all right? Would she like the wound cleaned? And again, how was she feeling?

When he could finally stand no more, he rapped a knuckle on the bars. Flakes of rust drifted from the iron as the two women turned to look at him. "Violca," he said, voice gentle but firmly insistent, "you said the land called him, and he would answer. Who is 'he'? Whom did you See?"

Violca's eyes grew unfocused once more—not in trance this time but in the effort of remembrance. "I do not know his name," she said softly, her voice rough from her choking fit. "But I see him standing at the very edge of Malosia, at the horizon, casting his shadow over us all. He is *giorgio*...."

"Non-Vistani," Leona whispered, in answer to Diederich's puzzled look.

"Not short," Violca continued, "but not quite so tall as you would notice in a crowd. His features are fleshy, resting loose upon his face as though not held quite so tightly as yours or mine."

Diederich's breath caught in his chest as a horrible suspicion began to creep, spider-like, up the length of his spine.

"His hair was once the brown of youth, but now grows hoary from the frost of age, and his eyes are older still. They have sunken into his cheeks, fleeing from the horrors toward which he has turned them. His nose seeps blood when the wind blows cold, and his fingers are stained black with ink,

and red, so red....”

She stopped, her eyes snapping back into focus, as the iron bars creaked audibly beneath Diederich's tightening grip. Rusty flecks bit into his skin, and his blood trickled faintly down the metal. He spoke, and his voice was the hissing of an angered snake.

“He's here....”

No more despair. No more doubt. No more fear. Be this some strange and foreign land, or Purgatory, or Hell itself, it no longer mattered. Diederich knew now what he must do, and let no man, no woman, no Scion, no *God* stand in his way!

“Leona,” he said softly, crouching low once more, “Violca. I intend to leave this place.

“Will you help me?”

Five

The first recorded escape from Perdition Hill occurred one night in early spring.

In the lands above, an especially harsh winter was loosening its grip. The last of the snows were melting away, the first bits of green emerging into forest and field. Within the Hill, however, the prisoners were as hot and as miserable as ever. They shuffled and staggered into the great hall, shielding their eyes from the relative brightness of the massive chandelier. Exhausted, injured, sullen, they dropped their sullied robes into the first basket and received their replacements from the second. The guards, equally captivated by the repetition of routine, handed out wooden bowls and performed the nightly headcount as they casually shoved prisoners into communal cells. The warm air grew heavy as the sweat of unwashed bodies and the unappetizing bouquet of the sludgy gruel wrestled for dominance. A normal evening, this, the latest in an endless cycle that had lasted years, and would last for many more.

At least, it started out that way.

One of the younger guards on duty, a burly fellow with wheat-blond hair and the fervor of youthful fanaticism, strode up as the last of the prisoners hobbled into the cells. As he had done dozens of times before, he shoved the bars shut with a resounding clang, removed an iron key from his belt, and thrust it into the heavy padlock.

Rather than the anticipated click and thump, the key made an ugly grinding sound as it struggled against tumblers which refused to turn.

After a few puzzled moments spent futilely fumbling with the key and staring dumbly at the lock, the young Redbreast waved for one of his superiors. The man harrumphed over, his armor clanking, and for several seconds they conversed.

With much irate grumbling, the guards ushered the inhabitants of the last cell back out into the hall, where they were

ordered to line up against the far wall. Several soldiers stood careful watch over the impromptu assembly. After another brief discussion, the guards decided that the excess prisoners would be crammed into the other cells. It would be uncomfortable for all concerned, but who really cared for the comfort of the captives anyway? Tomorrow, the smiths would be put to work either repairing the lock or replacing it.

Decision made, the elder soldier ordered his subordinates to see to it. The first of the Redbreasts had taken a single step toward the prisoners when the basket full of soiled robes erupted in a column of flame.

Sparks and bits of burning cloth showered through the air like dandelion fluff. The nearby prisoners, a few singed and all thoroughly terrified by the sudden burst of fire, backed away, shouting and clamoring for help. Thick black smoke rolled up from the basket to spread, web-like, across the ceiling.

After an instant of shocked dismay, the soldiers leapt into action with true military precision. Several ran for buckets of water, stored in all the Hill's main rooms for exactly this purpose. A trio of guards moved to reinforce the pair already stationed at Perdition Hill's main entrance. This was little more than a formality. The great portal, bound in iron and opened only by a single key, could have stopped any escape attempt on its own. Nevertheless, the soldiers clustered before it, hands on weapons, alert for any attempt to take advantage of the chaos.

Several guards were left to watch over the milling prisoners, of course. But given the multiple distractions, "several" was simply not enough.

It would be some moments before the fire was extinguished, a few more before the prisoners were finally herded into the remaining cells. Since nobody had made a try for the main door, and each of Perdition Hill's supply rooms and armories had its own guard, the Redbreasts—worn out and frazzled by the sudden excitement—did not think to redo the head count for over an hour. And by then, by the time they finally discovered that they were three prisoners short, it was far too late.

It had simply never occurred to any of them that an escapee might flee *downward*. After all, there were no other exits from Perdition Hill.

The escape itself, though reliant on intricate timing and a fair share of luck, was simplicity itself compared to the efforts they'd put into preparing for it.

Violca had needed two full weeks, smuggling little bits out of the kitchen each night, to accumulate sufficient lantern oil and mutton grease. Another three nights passed before she had the opportunity to palm a bit of flint and steel from the kitchen supplies. Diederic's job was easier; he needed merely to sneak a few handfuls of gravel and powdered rock up from his daily mining. And before even that, Violca and Diederic had required three nights to convince Leona that they were not mad, that their chances of escaping the impenetrable Perdition Hill outweighed the consequences of failure, horrific as they might be.

The stench of the filthy workers and acrid bite of the lye had covered the fumes of the oil and grease in which Leona soaked a number of the robes, letting them marinate beneath an ever-growing stack of laundered garments. It was difficult to transfer them to the basket of soiled robes that night, but not impossible; the guards had no real cause to pay close attention to the transfer of clothes. Similarly, it had required nothing more than a feigned stumble for Diederic to catch himself on the cell door and, in the process, cram a handful of rock into the padlock's mechanism.

After that, it was only a matter of edging through the crowd of waiting prisoners, slinking near enough to the laundry for the spark of the flint and steel to ignite the soaked robes and the fumes rising from them. In the chaos to follow, with the eyes of the soldiers drawn in half a dozen directions at once, the trio had slipped away down the nearest passage.

Now, however, things were growing complex once again.

Diederic, Leona, and Violca moved softly down the corridor, their path lit by a single dancing torch the knight had pried loose from a sconce on the wall. They leaped at every shadow—even the battle-hardened Diederic—eyes and ears straining for any hint of movement. They progressed at a snail's pace, more afraid of noise than of delay. They did not speak; they barely even breathed. The only consistent sound was the faint rustling of their robes. Each wore two, one over the other, for reasons that Diederic insisted were vital but had

not explained.

After what he guessed was roughly twenty minutes, he finally uttered a gruff whisper. "We're far enough from the great hall. Which way?"

Leona glanced nervously at Violca. "Diederick, are you certain? I still do not think—"

"We agreed, Leona," Violca said, equally softly. "We need supplies. Every armory, every storage room, has guards. There we can get much that we need, or at least improvise it."

"I know, I know." Despite her words, Leona was far from convinced. Her eyes were wide, and her lower lip trembled. "But to go back to that room, *deliberately*...."

The Vistana laid a hand on her shoulder, dirt-encrusted yet comforting. "We've all suffered there, Leona. If you can face it once more, none of us ever need do so again."

Leona offered a feeble smile, and nodded.

"If that's done," Diederick interjected sharply, "we should keep moving. Leona?"

With a deep breath, the woman set off once more, Diederick and Violca in tow. Down and across they felt their way. The heat only grew as they moved deeper, and all felt the hairs on their necks stand, their stomachs churn, as a glimpse of an intersection, or a scent scarcely noticed, brought to the surface unpleasant memories that might better have remained buried.

An endless descent that nonetheless was over far too soon brought them to the doorway, beneath the inscription that read "*Malosians 8:6*." And they stared, unmoving, into the chamber that was arguably the bloody beating heart of Perdition Hill. The workshop of the Inquisition's Truth Seekers.

The chamber of tortures.

In the dim light of the torch, the machinery was somehow more frightening even than when one was strapped inside it. The devices appeared to move, to stretch out across the room in search of new innocents to devour. Chains became tendrils, manacles claws, gears teeth.

The fugitives stood in the doorway, their breath rasping in their throats, each trapped briefly in a private hell.

Finally, shaking themselves loose, Diederick and Leona moved into the room. She nodded once, stiffly, to his hissed "Do you remember what we need?" and immediately moved

to a water-filled basin, and the framework and fulcrum that stood beside it. Diederich himself strode to the rack and ducked beneath it, his hands working the ropes and pulleys.

He straightened abruptly as a chill breeze wafted over him. Completely foreign to the slow-baking furnace that was the entirety of Perdition Hill, it offered no relief from the heat, instead only rendered the flesh even more susceptible. Looking around in search of a source, Diederich's eyes fell instead upon the Vistana, who remained, motionless, in the entryway.

"Violca? Were you intending to help us any time soon?"

Still she stood, unheeding, unfocused. Violca felt a strange flicker in her vision. She could best describe it as the opening of an eyelid, though both her eyes were already wide and unblinking. It was not unlike the sensation she experienced when allowing herself to slip into a trance, or when practicing the lessons of the *tarokka* taught to her by Madam Tsuru. Something in this terrible room reached out to her, touched her, on a level beyond those of mortal senses. The cold breeze washed over her once more, and Violca let herself slip sideways, permitting herself to See.

She wished to all the gods in all the domains that she had not.

The room grew dark beneath her Sight, filled with spectral shadows impervious to the light of the torch. The implements of torture twitched and writhed, moaning in ecstasy over the torment they had inflicted, and would soon inflict again. Wood creaked, ropes stretched, like fingers yearning for a well-loved toy.

And then she saw it.

It appeared between her and the rack, yet somehow seemed to stand at a great distance, far greater than the length of the room. It was human in form, but there was nothing left of humanity in its broken shape or gaping features. Its posture changed second by second: first doubled over in agony, one arm outstretched, fingers broken and curled into arthritic claws; then standing upright, head thrown back, left leg bent sideways at the shattered knee; then down on all fours, dragging itself forward like a crippled spider. Violca could see no movement *between* these forms. It flickered one to the next with the dancing of the torch, as though it was simply a series of images in a book through which she rapidly flipped.

With each shift in posture, with each flicker, it came one pace nearer, drawn toward her in its motionless advance.

Its mouth gaped open in an endless scream, its voice the sound of breaking bone, tearing flesh, and crackling flame. Behind it followed a second, and a third, and an uncountable throng beyond. And all of them, all of them, screamed.

Did they not exist during the day? Or was it the faith of the guards and the Truth Seekers—honestly felt, however vile their behavior in its name—that kept the spirits at bay? Violca could not begin to guess. She knew only that they were here now, and that nothing of sympathy or kindness or mercy survived within them.

Violca screamed, her voice torn from her throat, as the first of the flickering, jagged forms drew even with her companions. Diederich and Leona stared at her, astonished, even as dead and deathly hands reached out to touch them.

Leona gasped, her face grown pale, as a sodden, dripping handprint appeared upon her forearm. Water gushed down her sleeve, flattening the cloth to her skin. Even as she flailed, wild eyes searching for her unseen attacker, a second wet palm-print appeared on her left arm. Held in an unbreakable grip, the young woman was bent double, and her head plunged beneath the waters of the basin beside which she stood.

Diederich screamed as the flesh of his wrists and ankles suddenly paled and then chafed away, exposing the moist reddened meat beneath. His body jerked straight, his ankles and wrists pulled in opposing directions, strained by unseen rope. His joints and tendons creaked as they threatened, quivering, to burst from their sockets.

And as Leona slowly began to drown, and Diederich's body seemed on its way toward tearing itself apart, Violca....

Fled.

She ran as though the Mists themselves pursued her with murderous intent. Her feet, toughened by months of walking on harsh stone, slapped against the ground with such force that they threatened to split. Her lungs, filled with the musk of her own fear, burned harder with every step. A bend in the passage separated her from the light of the torch, and still she ran until her memories of the tunnel finally failed her. One

hand along the wall to feel her way, the other outstretched before her, she continued more slowly.

Despite the terror that sat in her gut like molten lead, it was not blind panic that drove her headlong flight. She had in mind a destination, and she knew that her companions would not likely survive even the briefest delay.

The passage seemed to continue forever, and Violca grew ever more nervous. Was she lost? Had she overlooked a turn in the dark? The room she sought was close to the torture chamber, she knew it, but if she'd gotten lost, or it wasn't close enough....

Violca spotted the dancing luminescence of another torch ahead. Gasping in relief, she broke into another run, practically flying around the turn, and ran headlong into an inquisitor on patrol.

With a pained grunt, the two figures staggered back from one another. The torch dropped from the startled soldier's hand to gutter on the floor; Violca clutched her left side, where impact with the man's hauberk had bruised a rib.

For all his training, the guard was far more startled to find a prisoner, alone and unaccounted for in the depths of Perdition Hill, than Violca was to run into a guard. And in that brief moment of hesitation, the guard sacrificed his one chance at survival.

With an animal shout, Violca grabbed for the thick-bladed short sword that hung at the Redbreast's side. The guard made a desperate swipe, but urgent need offered a newfound haste to Violca's movements. The guard received a nasty cut for his troubles, only partly absorbed by the leather gauntlet, as his hand closed not on her wrist, but on the edge of the blade. Startled by the pain, the soldier yanked his arm back, granting Violca the opportunity to shove the sword, clutched in an awkward two-handed grip, up and into his chin. A loud clang followed an equally noisy crunch, and the Redbreast's helm popped from his head like a child's jack-in-the-box. It spun across the stone, coming to rest only when the dead man's hand landed across it as he fell.

Violca was moving again before the body ceased to spasm. She held the soldier's torch before her as she ran (it would only occur to her later that Diederick might have liked the sword). And finally, *finally*, she found her destination.

It was just like every other chapel in Perdicion Hill. The same inscription adorned the entryway. Long stone pews with bolts and manacles faced a lectern draped in red cloth that boasted the sixfold sun in gold. And just beside the door, the marble font that just might be her companions' only hope—if she had not taken too long already.

Violca tugged her clay mug from the tie on her belt and dipped it in the font. If this failed to work, she had no further ideas. But then, if this failed, they would all be dead before she had time to come up with any others.

Had the restless spirits wished solely to kill, Violca's efforts would have come too late. She had taken too long to find her way to the chapel, to overcome the guard.

But killing was not the only purpose motivating those dead, invisible hands. Their victims would suffer, as they had suffered; would die slow, as they had died. Leona nearly drowned half a dozen times, only to find her head painfully yanked from the water seconds before her lungs gave out. Diederick stretched a bit further every moment, tendons quivering and threatening to tear, but he remained in one piece. Only after long minutes of agony, when their victims could view death with as much longing as fear, would the ghosts complete their macabre task.

Diederick thrashed wildly, desperate for some means to escape, to fight back, but his struggles accomplished nothing. He could not see, or feel, his phantom attackers, though his ears just barely registered the sounds of low, harsh whispers, and he choked on a foreign miasma of sweat and excrement.

And then Violca stood in the doorway, a torch in one hand, her cup in the other. Diederick could scarcely see her, his eyes obscured by tears of agony and confused by the dancing of the two torches. But he thought he saw her lay the torch down, pry the leather covering off the top of the mug, and hurl its contents into the room.

The knight felt a few droplets splash across his arms and face, cold and wet, and had a brief instant to wonder what in God's name Violca thought she was doing before he was briefly deafened by a chorus of horrific screams. Something sizzled behind him—the sound was like bacon in a skillet—and he gagged on the revolting odor of decayed and bloated

flesh put suddenly to the fire. The sensation of the unseen ropes vanished from his limbs, and he fell to the hard floor with a bruising thump, the breath knocked from his body. Across the room, Leona collapsed beside the dunking basin, weeping and coughing water from her throat and lungs.

They might have lain where they fell, gasping and unmoving, were it not for Violca's frantic calls. "I don't know how long they'll stay at bay! We must leave, quickly! Quickly!"

With a grunt, Diederich heaved himself onto his stomach and crawled for the door, one hand grabbing what few useful supplies he'd gathered before the spectral assault. Leona, coughing, did the same. Even as they reached the door, Violca dropped her torch, snagged them both by the collars and dragged them through. She kicked the door shut, just as the invisible chorus of shrieks and grinding bone rose once more.

For a long time, well after the echo of the slamming portal had faded away, the trio of fugitives sat propped against the far wall, watching the thick wood with heart-pounding dread. Nothing emerged; the spirits within seemed unable or unwilling to leave their place of torment. The hall was sanctuary to the prisoners—at least from the ghosts.

"What..." Leona's question died beneath another fit of coughing, and it was some moments before she could try again. "What was it..." Another cough. "...that you threw on us?"

"Holy water. I took it from a ceremonial font."

Diederich stared at the Vistana beside him. "How in God's name did you know that would work? What if the water had no effect? Or what if the priests were all show, and the water was nothing special?"

Violca shrugged. "I had no better ideas. Perhaps next time, you'll suggest one."

He stared a moment longer, and then returned to gingerly prodding at his chafed and bloody wrists.

Watching her companions slowly recover, Violca could not help but notice that neither of them had asked her what had actually *happened* in the torture chamber, what it was that dwelt within. Perhaps they already knew, she thought, or perhaps they did not wish to.

After a few moments of recuperation, Diederich gathered their meager supplies into a pile between them. It was dis-

hearteningly small, consisting of a few lengths of rope from the rack, less than fifteen feet in total; a metal bar, roughly two feet in length, that had served as an axle for the dunking fulcrum; a length of leg irons. Diederich thought he might be able to use the latter as a makeshift flail, but it would be awkward at best.

“Still,” he told the others, as much to raise his own spirits as theirs, “it should be enough to make do.” Resting his weight tentatively on his inflamed ankles, he rose and extended a hand, assisting Leona to do the same. Violca, uninjured save for the bruises she had acquired in her headlong dash, was upright before either of them.

They continued their slow progress, drawing ever nearer the lowest depths of Perdition Hill. Diederich’s breath was fast and shallow; Leona’s eyes watered from the strain of staring about her in all directions. They started at every shadow, froze at every sound. When Diederich, alarmed by a flicker of torchlight in the corner of his eyes, whirled about and slammed the leg irons into the wall, sending chips and powder cascading around him, Violca placed a gentle hand on his bicep.

“You have never seen a spirit before, have you, Diederich.” It was not a question, despite her phrasing.

The knight smiled grimly. “I have killed many men, Violca. My sleep is often haunted, my dreams filled with their faces. But to see one when I am awake? To feel its touch? No. No, there are many who believe in such things where I am from, but I have never met a man who could honestly claim an experience like ours. Not any man I would call sane, anyway.

“I take it... am I to understand, then, that such things are common here?”

“Common? No.” Violca shook her head. “But very, very real. In the domains of the Mists, Diederich, the dead speak with a voice as loud as yours or mine. The trick is to learn when it is best to listen, and when it is best to flee.”

As if on cue, a smattering of voices did indeed filter through the labyrinthine passageways to dance, just barely noticed, beside the fugitives’ ears. These were no spectral screams or ghostly chants, however; though the words were made unintelligible by the great distance they had traveled, the tones were very clearly mortal, and they were not well pleased.

All three of them froze, staring back the way they had come. "The hourglass is running," Violca commented darkly.

"Do you think they discovered we were missing?" Leona ventured.

"That, or they found the body."

The Vistana actually *felt* the weight of her companions' stares landing upon her shoulders. She offered a simple, half-hearted shrug. "I ran into a Redbreast, quite literally, on the way to the chapel."

"And when, pray tell, were you planning to speak of this?" Diederich demanded.

Another shrug. "When I felt it mattered. Now it matters."

Diederich grunted once, unconvinced. "We should keep moving. I'd like to be out of here before the guards start searching the lower levels." Their pathway now lighted by two torches, the trio broke into a steady, distance-eating jog. At several points along the way, they snagged additional unlit brands from sconces along the walls. There was no telling how long their light would need to last them.

"Violca?" Diederich asked between breaths.

"Yes?"

"Couldn't you have at least kept his sword?"

"I knew you were going to ask me that."

They were by now beyond any point to which Diederich or Violca had ever traveled, reliant solely on Leona's memories of a chamber she had visited only rarely. Where recall might fail her, however, her ears did not. She knew that the room they sought could not lie far from the laundry pool, and the faintest trickle of running water was enough to guide her.

Like the tree whose twisting root system the hallways resembled, Perdition Hill survived only thanks to the availability of water. Fed by an underground spring, a small stream wound its way through the complex's lower levels. It emerged first in the fountain chamber, source of drinking water for guards and prisoners alike, and guarded at all hours by a quartet of Redbreasts. From there it trickled through hand-carved drainage tunnels until it reached the washing basin with which Leona was all too familiar. There it accumulated into a constantly-refreshing pool, before carrying away the dirt and residue of lye into the last of the three chambers. It was to this final point of access, before the stream disappeared

down a rusty iron grate, that the fugitives now made their way.

They knew they were close before they actually entered the room. Their noses, and the rising gorge at the back of their throats, were warning enough.

The stench struck hard, hammer-like, with such force that they actually staggered from the impact. Their eyes watered, and their lungs burned.

They stepped through the archway, and their footsteps began to crunch, as beetles, roaches, and centipedes—living and dead—flattened like snow beneath their bare feet. From every direction they came: crawling, slithering, fluttering, skittering. They alighted on hair, writhed across toes, and tasted the fugitives' terrified breaths on the air.

Yet the vermin were not here for them; the prisoners had simply stumbled into the greatest feeding ground for miles around. This was the disposal chamber of the Hill, where rotten scraps of food, garments bloodied beyond washing, and chamber pots stained and filmed with human waste were dumped into an iron grate, to be washed away by the flowing waters.

The waters performed—to put it mildly—an insufficient job.

The room was redolent of decaying meats, and the sides of the tiny stream were deep in a yellow film of excrement. And all of it moved, as flies descended upon it, beetles chewed on the edges, and maggots writhed within. For the first time, Diederik truly understood why waste duty was considered a punishment nearly on a par with a visit to the Truth Seekers. He hawked and spat, trying to clear the vile taste from his mouth, but even his saliva had picked up the wretched taint.

“God and Scions!” Leona’s quavering voice was muffled by the sleeve she held clutched to her face. “What—what...”

“Why are we here, Diederic?” The Vistana was far more composed than Leona, but even she held a hand over her mouth and nose, hunching her shoulders against the constant blizzard of vermin. “You said we had to come here before we found our way out. Now we are here.”

Diederik took a deep breath (regretting it instantly), and squared his shoulders. He gestured to the scum-encrusted grate with the metal bar taken from the torture chamber. “This

is our way out.”

Leona fell to her knees and retched, her entire body shaking. Even Viola looked pale, and her eyes were wide. “You’re mad, *giorgio!* You’ve dragged us down here for nothing! We cannot possibly—”

“We can, and we will! This is why I chose not to tell you in advance. But it *must* be done!”

“How....” Leona looked up from the ground, shaking her hand to dislodge some flattened insects. “How do you know it goes anywhere?”

“I told you: there are tunnels beneath these, tunnels the Redbreasts seem not to use. Perhaps they do not even know of them. The waste must funnel into one of those.”

“And if none of these tunnels provide an exit, Diederic?” Viola asked harshly.

“Then we fail. None of us entered into this with any illusions, Viola. Now I am doing what I must to get out of here. I believe you should do the same.”

Leona bent double as her stomach heaved once more, then she straightened slowly, painfully, and nodded. “I want to go home,” she said simply.

Another moment, then two, and Viola’s shoulders slumped. “You are correct. I would never have agreed to this, and you should have given us the chance to consider some other option. But we are here now, and I have no intention of returning to the tender mercies of the Inquisition.

“How do you suggest we proceed, *giorgio?*”

Neither much cared for it when he told them, but again, they were forced to admit that little choice remained. Handing the bulk of the equipment to Leona, Diederic stepped gingerly through the writhing mass of insects and the foul sludge on which they fed, wincing with each squelching footfall. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he gulped for air, and his face took on a distinctively greenish cast. Finally, his legs quivering and his jaw clenched tight against the bile attempting to climb his throat, he stood beside the grate itself.

It was a simple affair: a rusted and pitted iron framework with a series of bars spaced roughly six inches apart, laid in the floor. The entire contraption was bolted to the stone and slick with years upon years of refuse and waste.

Diederic slid the metal bar between the framework itself

and the rightmost of the bars. Folding up the sleeve of his robe for cushioning, he placed both hands on the bar, and heaved downward with all his prodigious strength.

Nothing happened.

Diederich shifted his grip, tightened his fingers. A simple groan turned into a shout of exertion. His entire body shook, and the sickly green in his cheeks and neck gave way to a breathless red. His eyes squeezed shut, hiding from Viola and Leona the fact that the left orb had suddenly gone blood-shot as the knight's incredible strain burst a vessel within.

Finally—*finally*—he was rewarded with the pained shriek of metal stressed beyond its capacity. The bar on which he leaned slid free, sending Diederich stumbling face-first into the slime-covered wall behind the grate. He huffed once in pain and surprise, placed the back of his hand to his nose, and stared for a moment at the blood pooling there. Then, shrugging it off—in this room, the last thing he really wanted was a working nose anyway—he turned to examine his handiwork.

The rightmost bar had relented, bending upward and outward. It was a small deformity, barely more than an inch or two, but in bending outward, the bar had twisted the framework in which it was mounted. An aperture now gaped open where that frame had pulled away from the stone around it. It was small—oh, so small—but it was enough.

Diederich shoved the bar into this new opening, working it back and forth, wincing at the screech of metal on metal and metal on stone. In this effort, the surrounding sludge actually aided him, providing a little grease to lubricate the bar.

Again, he leaned heavily into the bar, his arms, legs, and fingers straining, and his breath rasping in his throat. And again, though it took almost more than he could bear, the old, corroded metal finally gave. With a resounding snap, one side of the grate popped loose to jut ceiling-ward, the bent metal still fastened by heavy bolts to the stone on the other end. It was jagged, it was ugly, but it was open.

Diederich dropped to his knees and vomited, no longer even cognizant of the terrible substances that coated his legs and the hem of his robe. His vision was blurred, his muscles shook, and the pain in his gut suggested that he might have herniated something. His numbed fingers could no longer re-

tain their grip, and the metal bar, itself now bent forty-five degrees from true, dropped into the hole with a dull splash.

A gentle hand touched him. He looked to find Leona standing over him, offering him a sip from her mug. He accepted gladly. The water, though lukewarm and gritty, seemed the best he had ever tasted.

Violca stepped forward too, lashing a length of rope about the end of a torch. Straddling the grate, she lowered the flickering brand, taking care to prevent it from swinging, lest it twist about and burn through the hemp. Leona and Diederic, the latter limping with one hand pressed to his gut, staggered over beside her.

“You were right, Diederic,” Violca said simply.

Beneath them, the falling water accumulated in a shallow, filthy pool centered in a floor of worn and cracked stone. Other than the dust and cobwebs, it could have been a chamber on any level of Perdition Hill. Two archways provided egress. The flowing water snaked from the room via the one to the left. More insects, thankfully in far lesser quantities than above, scattered from the alien light and heat of the torch.

Violca hauled in the rope and unwrapped the brand. “You first, Diederic.”

“Absolutely not!” Diederic stared, red-faced, at the Vistana. “I need to anchor the rope for the two of you. You cannot—”

“I may not be the great, strapping warrior you are, *giorgio*,” Violca said, “but I am no weakling. I can anchor the rope long enough for each of you to climb down it.”

“You—”

“And in your current shape, Diederic, I have my doubts as to whether you could have lowered the *torch*, let alone Leona or myself.”

“But—”

“Go. We haven’t the time to argue.”

Grumbling, Diederic took firm hold on the rope, wrapping one end about his forearm even as Violca threaded the other over and around her torso. They had barely ten feet of slack between them, but that would get Diederic close enough to jump the remainder. Leona, now holding both torches, tossed one down the hole, angling so as to avoid the pool. It struck the stone and guttered briefly, but continued to burn.

Ignoring the ache in his chest and stomach, and failing to ignore the squishy substances at the edge of the hole, Diederich pushed himself off the edge. It was a tight fit, and he found himself wiggling in order to pass his thighs and hips. Finally, with a faint pop, they were through.

And at that moment, the rope went slack.

Diederich felt himself starting to fall and lashed out blindly with both arms. They slapped the sludgy stone, slipped, skidded—and held. Already they began to ache with the strain of holding him. Between his exhaustion and the slippery surface, it was all he could do to keep his position; there was no way to pull himself up.

“Violca!” he hissed, his voice angry, scared. “What in God’s name—”

He was interrupted by the sound of a balled fist striking flesh, and of flesh striking the floor, crushing a hundred vermin beneath it.

“Well. Well, well, well.” The voice was masculine, unfamiliar, and terrifying in its implications. “What have we here?”

Six

Diederick swore under his breath. All he could see was the filthy wall and the bent grate sticking up before him. He lacked even the leverage to turn around.

“I’d wondered what the commotion was about,” the voice continued, slowly drawing nearer. “I was just on my way to the main hall to find out. I ought to thank you for saving me the walk.”

Footsteps behind him, growing louder. A shadow, flitting back and forth in the torchlight, fell over him and expanded against the wall. Diederick’s back twitched in anticipation of a sudden knife between his shoulder blades.

“I’ve half a mind to stomp you about the head and shoulders until you fall through, you heathen bastard,” the voice continued. “But that would be too generous an end for you, I think. Better to let the prisoners watch you and your whores meet your ends at the hands of the Truth Seekers. None of you have *really* seen what they can do when they put their minds to it. You should make for a powerful message.”

The man stepped, just barely, into Diederick’s peripheral vision. He could make out little save a pair of heavy boots and the bottom hem of a crimson tabard—but that was enough.

“Where are my companions?” he demanded through gritted teeth.

“Never you mind,” the Redbreast sneered, amusement in his voice. “You’ll be seeing them shortly. You might even see them in one piece, before the end.”

Diederick felt gauntlets close on the scruff of his robe, felt himself being hauled from the hole. As though resigned to his fate, he raised one arm to clasp the guard’s wrist—and then lifted the other as well, leaving the entirety of his weight to hang, unsupported, from the Redbreast’s grip.

The man grunted and staggered, bending at the waist, but did not fall. Diederick stared up into a face younger than his own, its eyes burning with zealous hatred, its flesh turning red

with exertion. Boots slipped on the waste-slick floor, sweat dripped from the guard's head, but he refused to fall, to join Diederic in plummeting to the filthy water below.

And then Viola, her eye already swelling shut where the Redbreast had struck her, appeared behind them and efficiently kicked the struggling guard behind his right knee.

The Redbreast simply folded—Diederic's weight was far too much to support on a single leg. He fell forward, his chin catching the edge of the twisted grate—the resounding click of his teeth echoed through the room. Diederic hung for a moment, suspended by the guard's body lying across the hole, and then gravity and the slick surface won out. With a sickening slurp, the pair dropped out of sight.

Viola ran forward to peer down into the gaping hole, steadying herself with one hand on the wall. "Diederic! Diederic, are you hurt?"

From beneath, echoing oddly in the chamber, his words drifted back to her. "Not as badly as he is. Leona?"

"Fine. Or as fine as I, at any rate."

"Good. Get the rope and get down here before someone else shows up."

Diederic sat in the murky, malodorous water, perhaps a foot deep, and prodded at his right ankle. The pain was sharp, but not too strong. Odds were good he had but twisted the joint, not broken it, and that meant he could walk. With his other hand, he continued to hold the unconscious Redbreast's head beneath the surface, though the bubbles had already ceased.

The light from the torch above darkened as Leona slid into the gap. Unsteadily, nervously, she dropped, inch by inch, until she was low enough for Diederic to lift her from the rope. Viola, who lacked any such anchor, simply allowed herself to dangle by her fingertips from the grate and then drop, aided again by Diederic's steadying hand.

In the meantime, Leona efficiently stripped everything of use from the Redbreast's body. The flint and steel she kept, along with the man's key. It was unlikely to unlock anything in these lower tunnels, but one never knew. The short sword she handed to Diederic who, after a moment's contemplation, sighed and handed it to Viola.

"The sword is a lot easier to use than the leg irons," he re-

plied to her questioning gaze, “and I’d prefer more than one of us be armed.”

Swiftly, the trio stripped themselves of their outer robes, which had accumulated abhorrent levels of filth and stench. The inner ones weren’t much better, soaked through as they were, but at least they had avoided the worst of the clinging, wastes. Diederic tried the guard’s boots, decided they were too large for comfort, and discarded them.

“I must admit, Diederic,” Leona acknowledged as they began walking, deciding that one direction was as good as another, “that when you told us of these tunnels, I only half believed you. Why would the Redbreasts waste time having you dig new passages for more space, if these lie available and unused?”

Diederic paused to remove his own flint, using it like chalk to leave a tiny mark on the archway through which they passed. “I wondered that myself, when I learned of them. I can only assume that either the Inquisitors are not aware of them—though I find that unlikely—or that they have some ceremonial purpose.”

“Or,” Leona added, thinking back to the torture chamber and shivering, “that there is something down here they wish to avoid.”

Violca followed behind, only half listening to their conversation, her thoughts far away. The dust, the cobwebs, even the tool marks occasionally visible on the walls, all supported the notion that these passageways were ancient, perhaps even predating Perdition Hill’s use as a prison.

She knew them to be ancient indeed—but she knew as well, as though she had Seen it herself, that these passages, and their history, had not existed before Diederic and the other man had come to Malosia.

Long and long they walked, wending their way through corridors wreathed in the dust of years. Though darkened by age, and slowly cooling as they delved deep into the hill beneath the Inquisition forges, the passages looked and felt very much like those of the Perdition Hill complex above. The trio proceeded in the flickering illumination of a single torch at a time, and conserved their water as best they might, unsure

how long their meager supplies must last. On occasion, they came to a dead end and were forced to backtrack, and then they were glad for the marks Diederich left behind them on the walls. But otherwise they had little cause for happiness or hope.

Their sense of time, already skewed by months of working to the Redbreasts' schedule, failed them utterly in these empty halls. They had nothing to mark the moments but their footsteps and the burning of each torch, and they rapidly lost track of both. The sconces here contained brands of their own—a fact to be grateful for—but so old was the wood that it burned fast and fitfully, proving woefully ineffective.

The corridors were not without crossroad or contour. Here and there, chambers jutted from the main passage. Some had the tattered, age-worn remnants of bedding or tables; others had shelves with parchment so brittle it was apt to crumble to dust beneath the weight of a lengthy stare. Most, however, boasted little indication of what purpose they might once have served.

Diederich, Leona, and Violca moved through an unending labyrinth of monotony and tedium, and with every passing moment, their supplies dwindled. They walked until they tired, slept poorly, and walked again. At first they conversed, cajoled, even jested with one another, trying to keep their spirits up. By the second night—or rather, by the second time they bedded down on the hard stone—they had nothing more to say. By the third, the tiny bits of dried meat Violca had smuggled from the kitchen had run out despite their most careful rationing, and the few drops of water in the bottoms of their cups sloshed loudly.

But it was then, as well, that something finally went right for the beleaguered fugitives.

At Diederich's insistence, one of the trio remained on watch while the others slept, though here in the empty halls both women felt he was guided by the excessive paranoia of an old soldier. Still, they had agreed, as much to keep the peace as for any other cause, and this night it was Violca's turn to watch first. She sat for hours, staring sullenly to the limits of the meager torchlight, running nursery rhymes and traditional Vistani dances through her head to keep from dozing. When her best estimate suggested she had watched long enough,

she rose on aching, unsteady legs. Ignoring the rumble of hunger in her belly and the sandy parched sensation in the back of her throat, she tottered over to Diederic and bent low to whisper in his ear that his turn had come.

And she stopped, her eyes widening. She thought.... From within or beyond the stone, just faintly audible over the knight's rough snores, she could have sworn she heard....

"Diederic!" Her voice was a hissed whisper, urgent and piercing. "Diederic, wake up!"

His eyes opened instantly, his hand reaching of its own accord for the heavy length of chain at his side. "What? What is it?"

"Quiet! Listen."

"I don't—"

"*Listen!*"

Nothing; for long moments, nothing. Then, just as Diederic's face began to twist into an expression of anger, he heard it. His eyes grew wide, even as Violca's had, and he could not help a grin of relief from spreading across his features.

"Water! I hear running water!"

There was, of course, nothing to be done but to awaken Leona and immediately resume their now not so aimless march. If they could find the flow, it could mean more than an opportunity to refill their dangerously empty mugs. It just might lead them to a way out.

With only the faintest trickle to go on, however, it was a task rife with difficulty. Many a time they lost the sound entirely and were forced to backtrack, stopping every few paces to listen at the walls and the floor until they located it once more. Often the corridor turned in the wrong direction, and the trio desperately searched for branching passageways back the way they wished to go, growing ever more panicked until one of them again reacquired the sound.

As they drew nearer the source of the flow, the halls around them began to change. The lines of the stone grew harsh, angular, and somehow less regal, less civilized. Tool marks, old as they were, were obvious in the stone, showing where the hand of man had carved the passageways from the living rock.

Diederic could not help but notice, with a shiver, that the

marks were fundamentally wrong. No expert, he, but he had learned a bit about stonecutting during his slave labors in the passages above. He knew enough to recognize the signs of tool use on stone when he saw it. And he knew enough to recognize that these passages had been carved not down from the surface of the hill, but *upward*, from the unknowable depths.

It was a fact, he decided, about which the others did not need to worry for the time being.

The floors shifted abruptly from rough worked stone to a cobbled mosaic of asymmetrical tiles. What they might have been intended to represent was impossible to say, their colors scuffed away beneath years of tromping feet, but the remaining shapes were subtly disturbing, hinting at images that no sane mind would choose to witness. The heat of the passages above was gone completely now, replaced by a faint, chilling breeze, its source unclear, that set the torchlight to dancing wildly.

Where Diederic's eyes were locked to the floor, however, Leona's had drifted upward. And as they approached an archway, sealed by a heavy wooden door, she grasped Diederic's shoulder and pointed, shuddering at what she saw.

Above the door was carved an inscription, very much like those found in Perdition Hill proper. It, like the others, was near enough to Latin for the knight to make out its meaning. But where the inscriptions above had simply referenced Septateuchal passages, this one was spelled out in its entirety.

"Prayer is the fodder that fattens men's souls for consumption."

"That's...not as you quoted it to me earlier," Diederic whispered to Leona. She could only shake her head.

Hesitantly, oddly afraid to take their eyes from the inscription, the trio turned their attention to the door itself. Made of a dark wood, it boasted no carvings, no decoration, nothing but a simple latch and handle. It was the first they had seen in all their wanderings, which in and of itself was remarkable, but the door proved otherwise mundane.

The chamber beyond was not.

Diederic hauled the door open, wincing at the deafening whine of ancient hinges long unused, and thrust his torch through the widening aperture. The light fell upon the outer-

most edge of an amphitheater. Concentric rings of stone benches descended in ever-tightening layers down from the level of the door toward a wide-open space below. Dust lay thick upon the stone, and the air was heavy, somber, patient. The feeble torch failed to illuminate the center of the chamber, let alone the far side, but even so this was undoubtedly a place of worship, a place of power. The trio of intruders knew it, and the room knew it, too.

Cautiously, their eyes darting this way and that, the fugitives made their way into the room, descending toward the shadowed center. Their footsteps echoed into infinity, not fading away so much as they were simply lost in the vastness beyond. Four other doors, apparently identical to that through which they had entered, provided ingress into the room. Where the sixth might have been, directly across from them, the advancing torchlight revealed a steep set of steps that cut directly through the rings of seats and led into the darkness that obscured the amphitheater's ceiling.

The open floor of the chamber finally came into view, and the entire room brightened as the torchlight reflected brilliantly from a metallic floor polished mirror-smooth. Near the base of the steep staircase, a pair of stone fountains in abstract shapes sprayed gouts of water upward. They must have been powered entirely by naturally flowing water, for surely no mechanism could have survived so long unattended.

And in the precise center of the chamber, a simple altar, hardly more than a lump of stone slightly shorter than a sarcophagus. Whatever carvings or adornments it might have boasted were hidden by a worn, moth-eaten cloth draped across it. It was deepest crimson—the same red as the Inquisition tabards, once one allowed for years of fading—and it boasted upon it a great symbol in white.

At first, from a distance, Diederik, Leona, and Viola took it for the sixfold sun. Proximity, however, revealed subtle differences, marking it as something very much other than the icon of the Emyrean Church. The central image was no perfect circle, but an uneven, amorphous shape, organic rather than geometric in origin. From it projected six asymmetrical, meandering limbs. No sunrays, these, but wriggling tendrils, or perhaps plumes of smoke.

Or mist.

Unaware of Diederich's sudden hesitation, Viola moved ahead to examine the altar. She ran her fingers over the cloth, shaking them now and again to remove the accumulated dust.

"Leona? You know the Emyrean Church better than I. What do you make of this?"

Silence.

"Leona?"

Viola and Diederich turned as one, their hearts quickening, afraid that their companion might simply have vanished into the darkness; it would not have been so surprising, in this terrible place. Instead, they found her staring upward, her expression slack in rapt fascination. The knight and the Vistana both found their gazes drifting ceilingward to match.

Where the light of the torch alone had failed to penetrate the darkness above, the added illumination reflected from the floor had proved sufficient. From above, gleaming in silver and lapis lazuli inlaid deep into the black stone, a perfect rendition of the night sky gazed down upon them, the eyes of an unblinking and uncaring god. Stars and planets, comets and constellations—complete as life and twice as clear—wove their way along their prescribed course through the heavens. Diederich had never once seen Malosia's night sky, but he had no doubt at all that this would prove a flawless match. It was utter perfection—the culmination of a lifetime's expertise at sculpting and crafting.

Nor were the stars and the other wonders of the firmament the only signs on the ceiling above. Arcs and angles, showing the movement of the celestial bodies through the ever-changing spheres, crossed and recrossed the black expanse. Runic circles, pentagrams, goetic seals, and other far more esoteric iconography hovered amid and among the stars, sometimes connecting them, sometimes overlapping.

And in the center, around which all the cosmos must revolve, an amorphous form akin to that found upon the altar cloth. An unmarked darkness amid the bright and busy mosaic, it drew the eye in a way that even the brilliant astrological imagery could not, as if one stared into a deep and motionless pool. The plumes of shadow that stretched from it ran through and around the occult symbols to terminate at each

of the doors: the five the fugitives had already seen, and a sixth they could only now detect atop the great stair.

Long minutes passed as the fugitives stared at the tableau above. It was wondrous, sublime, profoundly disturbing.

It was Violca who first tore her attention from the ceiling and back to more immediate surroundings. Driven by curiosity, yes, but also by a strange and desperate need to find something else on which to focus her attention, she reached out, gathering a handful of cloth in her fist, and yanked the covering from the altar. Motes of dust and flakes of something dried, crusted, and brown drifted to land around her feet, and the Vistana found herself wishing she had remained enraptured by the ceiling after all.

The altar bowed lightly upward in the center, sloping down toward the head and foot. A faint humanoid form was etched shallowly into the stone, crossing over the hump; anyone lying in such a pose would be bent backward most uncomfortably. Three rusty lengths of chain, each ending in a closed manacle, offered mute testimony to the notion that those who might assume such a posture did not do so out of willing religious devotion. A jagged hole in the stone, flecked with rust, suggested a fourth chain, now long gone, had once completed the set.

The surface of the altar was stained, thick and heavy, with layer upon layer of dried, flaking blood. It accumulated in two distinct spots, one at the throat, the other the abdomen, and was so thick in places it altered the contour of the stone itself. But worst of all was the dried brown smear that worked its way from the lower stain and onto the surrounding floor: the spoor of something less than human, drenched in sacrificial blood, slouching unevenly away from its detestable genesis.

Attracted by Violca's gasp of revulsion, Diederick and Leona gathered around her, observing her abhorrent discovery for themselves. Diederick found himself speculating less about the secrets hidden in the history of the Empyrean Church, and more about those that might lurk back home. His own Church, he knew, had adapted various pagan rites over time, the better to win over the heathens who observed them. Could it have secrets so dark buried in the archives of its past as well? He thought again of Lambrecht, and he wondered....

It was Leona who broke their silence, their morbid fascination. With a final shudder of disgust, she said, "There's nothing here for us. We should go."

"Actually," Diederick countered, the spell broken, "there is." Tearing his gaze from the altar, he strode to the nearest of the two fountains. He dipped a finger in the water, sniffed it, dabbed just a bit on his tongue. It was gritty and tasted of rock and minerals, but it seemed safe enough. Safer, certainly, than going without. He plunged his cup into the spray, allowing it to fill, and motioned for the others to do the same.

Unfortunately, while this solved the most immediate of their problems, it did little for the long term. The sanctuary provided no food, nor any obvious method of egress from the catacombs. In the end, they chose to mount the narrow stair, which they guessed once served as the priest's entrance. If anyone was likely to have a swift means of entry and exit, they figured, it would be the clergy. It was better than choosing doors at random, at any rate.

The door atop the stair, other than being substantially higher off the central floor, looked no different than the one from which they had entered. The staircase itself was uncomfortably steep, with barely a single stride between the top step and the doorway. Diederick and Leona perched precariously upon the stair while Violca examined the portal itself. An old, rusted padlock barred their progress only briefly—so long as it took Diederick and Violca to carefully swap positions so the knight could smash the lock from its socket with his chain—and simply as that, they were through.

Leona glanced back at the archway as they shuffled through, her eyes seeking the ubiquitous inscription of their own accord.

"Reason blinds the eye to truth."

She shook her head, and did not share her discovery with the others.

The passage in which they found themselves was unlike those they had so far encountered. The stonework was far smoother, the intersection of the walls with the floor and ceiling more sharply angled and delineated. The floor was paved in simple rows, though why anyone would cobble a stone floor was something of a mystery to Diederick, and the sconces on the walls were frequent and evenly spaced. Pas-

sages branched out to either side here and there, but these more closely resembled the other halls. The fugitives chose to keep to the main passage, in the hope that it might lead somewhere worthwhile.

And indeed, that seemed the right decision, for it became clear after several moments of travel that the passage was sloping upward—so gradually as to be scarcely noticeable, but climbing just the same. Perhaps, just perhaps, they had finally found their way out!

Invigorating as they found the prospect, however, it had been many long hours of hiking, searching, and climbing. Exhaustion tugged at them like the chains of their prior imprisonment, and after only a few minutes of travel, Violca suggested that they bed down for a rest. Neither of the others argued.

Diederich volunteered for the first watch, clutching a flickering torch as the others slept. He watched as the smoke drifted upward to vanish into the darkness; it writhed and curled, hypnotic in its patterns. Slowly, his eyes grew unfocused, his breathing deep and even. Never would a man of arms such as he have fallen asleep on watch—never—had things in the darkness not weighed heavy on his mind, and upon his eyes.

Lulled by a voice he could not hear, Diederich slept. The torch fell from his limp hand and rolled across the stone, but continued feebly to burn.

He jerked awake, heart pumping, eyes wide. This was unacceptable! To allow himself to doze, when it was his duty to stand sentry, was a gross dereliction of duty! Tensing his jaw until his teeth ground audibly, he propped himself up and reached again for the torch.

He never touched it. Again he heard the faint strains of a distant lullaby, felt it gently wind through his ears, his soul. It was so calming, so peaceful, and he was so tired.... Almost blissfully, he allowed himself to drift back into slumber.

The tiny part of his mind that rebelled, that shouted at him that there could be no lullaby, that they were alone in the dark, could not make itself heard over the gentle song.

Perhaps they dreamed, all three in tandem, the same images assailing their minds and souls. Or perhaps, despite their slumber, some part of them observed the hall around them, as if through opened eyes and attentive ears. It was

illusion; it was real, and if it was more one than the other, none of them could ever say with certainty.

From the unseen distance, the sound began. Little more than a faint scraping, as of something dragged across the polished stone, it seemed impossibly far, yet ever nearer with each step. *Shuffle. Scrape. Shuffle. Scrape.*

Behind it, a low voice gibbered and wept. The air in the passage grew wet, sticky, the miasma pestilence given breath.

The hall filled with a growing luminescence: the twinkling of a hundred candles. They saw the darkened hallway, shimmering, faint, like a desert mirage. Beneath that image, overlapping, they found themselves within a cavernous ballroom. Fine red carpet crossed the chamber and led to a broad stair, providing access to some unseen second floor. Great chandeliers of gold hung from the ceiling, and it was from these the light emanated. The strings of an orchestra sounded faintly in the corners of the room, though they saw no musicians playing, nor any instruments. The entire chamber, in fact, was utterly empty, save for the trio themselves... and one other.

It floated, writhing gently in an unfelt breeze, perhaps a dozen paces from where they stood—or where they slept.

It was elegant, intricate, the height of fashion hundreds of years gone. Satin of deepest blues and richest greens, ruffles that gleamed like newly sprouted leaves beneath a morning dew, and a train that would have put a prince's bride to shame. It must have been the true delight of some *belle dame* of wealth and privilege, the *piece de resistance* of her wardrobe.

It was also marred by violence: bloodied at the throat and at the belly, the dried stains had caused the delicate fabrics to stiffen and tear. It leaned to one side, weighted down by a length of rusty chain manacled to the left cuff, where the woman's wrist would be. But no wrist filled that cuff, for no body filled the gown. It floated, empty and unworn.

With the silent shuffle of unseen feet, it glided forward. The chain clinked across carpet and uneven stone; the despairing wails grew loud. It spun and pirouetted across the ballroom, moving straight toward them down the drab stone hall, all in one impossible sequence of graceful steps.

Dreaming or awake, their breathing quickened, their heart-

beats raced. On they slept, or dreamt that they slept, and even as the apparition drew nearer, they could not move, could not flee.

And approach it did, gradually, inevitably. The skirt wavered and shifted as though limbs moved beneath it, limbs that utterly failed to resemble human legs. The dried blood stains moistened and became rivulets slowly running down the length of the gown. As it neared, the ballroom shifted and writhed like a living thing. Stairs became row upon row of stone pews, and the chandeliers drew up into the ceiling, until their sparkling lights became the array of stars that had adorned the heights of the dark cathedral.

Wake up! Wake up! You must wake up! But Diederich could not, or if he had woken, he could not move.

And between one breath and the next, it was there before him, dipping low in a curtsy. It flashed across the intervening space faster than any arrow. The shriek of the chain echoed through the passage, but once it faded, the weeping ceased too.

"They took my womb...." The hollow voice, like the lamentations that had preceded it, came not from within the gown but from beyond, below. The right sleeve lashed outward, seizing Diederich's wrist in an invisible grip, and unseen eyes bored into his soul.

"They took my womb to birth some thing that wants no mother...."

Diederich screamed as his wrist burned—not with the searing touch of flame, but the feverish heat of infection. The thing released his wrist at his scream, and took it again. Released, and grabbed once more. With each touch, the pain grew sharper, ever sharper. And with that pain he awoke.

Still shouting, Diederich lunged to his feet. He reached to grab the torch and cried out once more, agony lancing through him. In the feeble light, he saw the skin where the specter had grabbed him in the depths of dream. It had browned where unseen fingers had clasped it, hardened, and cracked. Pus, hot, yellow-white, and sickly sweet, ran freely down his arm.

Shuddering, he lifted the torch with his other hand and looked about him. Leona and Violca lay upon the floor, tossing and turning, moaning even as they slept. Whatever he had

seen, they could see still, and whatever it had done to him, that and worse awaited his companions.

But what could he do? Shouted names, even several vicious slaps across their faces, failed to awaken them.

God help him, what could he do? What did it want?

And then, in a flash of inspiration, as though God had indeed answered, Diederick knew. Ignoring the pain in his wrist, praying only that the spirit would understand his efforts and refrain from harming his companions, he turned and ran. In the clatter of his footsteps, he thought he heard the clanking of that dangling chain.

At a dash he burst through the door to the amphitheater, flailing wildly as he nearly tumbled down the steep and unforgiving stairway. In a descent that was as much a controlled fall as it was a run, he pounded downward, until he stood beside that horrid stone altar with its ancient bloody stains.

What could such a spirit, mutilated and sacrificed for some horrific god, want? Perhaps, just perhaps, the same thing Diederick and the others wanted: freedom from this cursed, forsaken pit of Hell.

Desperately he reached for the first of the chains, wincing at the sight of his wrist, grown dark with blood and other humors. Fingers made clumsy with pain fumbled at the catch. Thankfully, the manacles were held shut merely with pins; had he required a key, all would have been for naught.

Flakes of rust sifted through his fingers as he wrenched open the first of the manacles, the second, and finally the third.

A breeze that smelled thickly of blood and afterbirth washed over his face, and in the unseen distance, an eternal lament finally came to an end.

Violca and Leona sat upright, awake and blinking in the darkness, when Diederick returned, panting for breath, torch in hand. He knew they were going to ask; he didn't make them wait for an explanation.

"How did you know?" Leona asked softly as he concluded his tale.

Diederick slumped to the floor, waiting for the rush of the fever to pass, cradling his mangled wrist. "She wore... the fourth chain. I hoped that maybe—"

"Maybe?" Violca demanded. "And if you had been wrong?"

Despite his pain, Diederich could not help but grin. "I had no better ideas," he offered, echoing her explanation of days before. "Perhaps next time, you'll suggest one."

And then there was only silence, as they gathered what little strength remained to continue their journey upward.

Seven

“My Good Friends, I regret that I cannot travel with you any farther. I apologize, as well, for the nature of this farewell. Know that it could not be helped.”

The passageway, though winding and circuitous, had indeed led the fugitives finally to the surface. Through a mechanism so old it had nearly failed to function, the passage opened into a concealed room near the center of the fortress atop Perdition Hill. There they had hidden for days on end, allowing their eyes to grow accustomed to the light, their lungs to free and open air. The contingent assigned to the fortress itself, primarily responsible for delivering supplies to those below, was quite small. Thus the fugitives availed themselves of the opportunity to arm and equip themselves for their coming journeys, and even to shed a bit of Redbreast blood in retribution for all they had suffered.

Now they had camped upon the edges of a windswept field of high grasses, in the shadow of a seemingly endless wood. For several days, they had said little to one another, so focused were they on speed and stealth. This morning, Leona and Diederic had awakened to the sun peeking shyly over the eastern horizon to find the Vistana missing and a sheet of parchment rolled into the knight's hauberk. They read it as one, Leona's eyes wide, Diederic's growing ever more narrow.

“Leona, I know that you would have me come with you to Birne, but I know too well how the Vistani are treated in the towns and villages of Malosia, particularly with Redbreasts rooting out witchcraft in every corner and under every rock. Diederic, I pray for your good fortune, but your quest is not mine. I must find my own people, must tell them where I have been and what I have learned. And you would be even less welcome among them than I would be in Birne.

“I have never offered the hand of friendship to a giorgio before. But I say now that none of us would have escaped without the aid of each other, and the months before our depar-

ture were made more tolerable by the presence of a companionable voice. I thank you, Leonera Talliers, and I call myself your friend. The luck and strength that saw us out—I wish you only more of it in the dark nights to come.

“And I thank you, Diederick de Wyndt. I offer you no such wishes for the future, for you and I shall meet again ere long.

“Take care, both.

“Violca.”

Long moments passed as they digested the contents of the note like a meal gone sour, reading it over and again, seeking some hidden meaning that simply was not there.

“Why?” Leona finally asked, her voice plaintive. “Why would she go like that? Without so much as a farewell?”

“Because she knew.” Diederick snatched the note from Leona’s hands, crumpling it into a lump. “She knew that I would never have let her go alone, that I would follow her to the ends of the earth and beyond, no matter what she or her family had to say of it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“She was my only chance!” He hurled the tiny ball out into the open plain, where it vanished into the windblown grass. “Her visions were my only path to Lambrecht! She’s left me blind, God damn her!”

He stared unseeing into the distance, fists clenched. Part of him gave thought to tracking the Vistana down, but he knew in his heart that he lacked the woodcraft to find her, if she refused to be found.

Finally, reluctantly, he turned. “Very well, Leona. It seems I’ve nowhere else to go, for the nonce. Which way lies Birne?”

She gestured vaguely at the forest before them. “Have you any qualms about the woods, Sir Diederick?”

“Should I have?”

Leona could not help but smile. “This is the Forest of Cineris, so I imagine it depends on whether you believe what they say of it.”

“Let us pretend, for a moment, that I am not from around here, and you can tell me what it is ‘they’ say.”

“Things dwell within the Cineris,” she told him, her voice grown hushed, “things that have never seen the unshaded light of the sun, things black and ever hungry. They feast upon game, yes, but also upon travelers, and they are never sated.

Their hunger is the appetite of the woods themselves, and older than the soil on which they stand.”

They stood in silence, save for the rustling of the leaves in the constant wind.

“‘They’ are very dramatic, aren’t they?” Diederick asked. Leona grinned once more.

“They are indeed.”

“And what do *you* say of the forest, then?”

Leona shrugged. “Birne and other villages have stood near the Cineris for generations. It can be dangerous, certainly, but if one knows which predators to watch for, and how to appease the Fair Folk who dwell within, it’s safe enough.”

Almost, *almost* he scoffed at the reference to the “Fair Folk,” thinking of the many superstitions and rites he’d seen practiced across a dozen countries in his travels, offerings to fey creatures that never amounted to more than old wives’ tales and mundane misfortune. Almost scoffed.

And then he thought of spectral gowns and haunted torture chambers, and chose to remain silent.

Instead he shifted the weight of the stolen hauberk, slung his axe once more over his shoulder, and followed Leona into the wood.

It should have been beautiful, this forest blooming to life in early spring. Seen with eyes newly freed from the hollows of the unforgiving earth, the youthful growths and colorful blossoms should have been wondrous, worthy of thanks, deserving of praise.

But to Diederick’s weary gaze, impatient and frustrated, it all seemed askance, terribly wrong.

The blossoms were as gaping maws, spread wide to snatch the unwary passerby, excreted by soil redolent with the scent of decay. The trees, their roots knotted and protruding from the earth, looked like bestial claws reaching down from on high to grip the soil. They stood in uncanny, unnaturally ordered rows, and their swaying in the wind was the slow, belabored breathing of the forest itself. The green that burst through the rich soil or spread across the hardened wood was not, to him, the beautiful verdant shade of new growth but the sickly hue of brewing disease. His wrist ached to think of it, and the faintly yellow stain of seepage spread across the bandage Leona had wrapped tightly about his wound.

It was indeed a time of new growth, and much that sprouted should have stayed buried.

He watched in silence as Leona made ready for camp that night. Watched as she scavenged dried lengths of wood from the forest floor, never pulling a single limb from any living tree. Watched as she mixed a bit of stew from leftover bits of trail rations, cooking it above the fire. Watched as she set aside a tiny portion of the meal in a saucer off on its own, beneath the shadow of a gnarled and twisted oak.

She insisted that they were safe, that her offering to the Fair Folk should avert whatever danger they might otherwise have faced, but still Diederic demanded that they alternate standing sentry, one at watch while the other slept. It made for long and tiring nights, but his soldier's instincts would allow nothing less. And so he stared into the darkened forest, jumping at every animal's call, at every branch wavering in the constant breeze, and waited for the wood to show its true colors.

Thus it went, night after night after night. Three times Leona treated his wrist with crushed herbs and fresh bandages, and three times the infection seeped through her careful ministrations. It seemed unwilling to spread beyond his wrist, for which Diederic was grateful, but equally unwilling to heal. The sharp, burning pain nagged at him day and night, and transformed even the easiest task into exhausting labor.

Twilight fell at the end of their fourth day in the Cineris. The embers of their fire danced and cracked, and seemed insufficient for holding the darkness at bay, as though even the shadows of the great old trees had taken on some semblance of weight. The crescent moon peeked shyly through the leafy canopy above, but few of the sporadic stars managed to find a similar path. The dull illumination of the fire was an island amid a sea of green and black.

Beyond the campsite, the breeze blew cold—a straggling breath of winter—and the evening mists began to rise.

Diederic watched Leona set aside another portion of their rapidly dwindling rations. Unable to keep silent any longer, he opened his mouth to speak, to berate her wasteful superstitions.

What emerged was not his voice.

No, that was not right. Diederic had not spoken at all. The

call had come from some distance beyond, hidden in the darkness of the trees. Even as a second voice answered the first, Diederic dropped low, his axe held tight in a two-fisted grip. Leona shoveled fistfuls of dirt upon the flame, extinguishing it with an ugly hiss.

A third voice rang out, equally remote. The words were unrecognizable, mangled by the distance they had traveled and the tight spaces through which they had squeezed, but the tone was unmistakable. Diederic had given, and received, too many orders to fail to recognize them now.

And then he heard a sound far more frightening than the voices of soldiers. From deep in the forest, he heard the low, mournful cry of a hunting horn, and the answering baying call of hounds. Sweat broke out on Diederic's brow; the hair stood on his arms and neck.

"Is there a river?" he hissed, reaching out to drag Leona into a crouch beside him.

"What?"

"A river! Or a stream, even a creek! *Something* that might aid us to elude the hounds!"

Leona shook her head fearfully, forgetting that in the darkened wood, Diederic could not see the gesture. "Small springs are common enough in the Cineris, but running streams are rare. If we were nearer to Birne, I could find you one, but here?"

"How far?"

"To Birne? Better than a dozen leagues!"

Snarling, Diederic rose to his feet, dragging Leona behind. "Then you had better pray that you and I stumble across one of those springs, else we're likely to have the dogs upon us before we've covered a pittance of that!"

Swiftly he draped an old blanket over his chain hauberk, in hopes of muffling the worst of the sounds, and they ran. Though their eyes were nigh useless, warning them only of the largest of trees mere instants before they would collide, they ran. Branches lashed out like claws, drawing blood from uncountable tiny wounds; roots and briars rose up to trip them, sending each or the other sprawling a dozen times over, and a dozen times again. Hair snagged on overhanging limbs; trousers snagged on jagged thorns; sticks and leaves rustled and cracked, betraying their every movement.

With each step, the forest hindered them, and with each step, the barking of the hounds grew louder, the calling of the soldiers more distinct.

Leona's breath rasped loud and painful in her lungs. Her sides burned; her eyes stung beneath the constant flow of sweat and blood. She had long since lost sight of Diederic—though she followed his crashing progress through the trees—had lost sight of everything except the tiny circle of earth visible before her feet.

And then she took that step, that one last step, and knew she could not take another. A year and more of endless labor within Perdition Hill had toughened her up for many things, but long-distance running was simply not among them. With a gasp, she plunged forward to find herself face down in the loam. Her nose and lungs filled with the overwhelming aroma of honeysuckle.

She heard her pursuers in the distance, the shouting soldiers scrambling through the brush, the howling dogs tugging at their leather leashes, eager to run their prey to ground, to rend flesh beneath their clamping jaws. But immediately around her, at least, the wood was silent. No animals or insects called, for surely they all hid from this disruption of their world; absent, too, was any trace of her companion. Perhaps, she realized with a shiver, he had not even realized she had fallen behind.

For long moments she lay, struggling to catch her breath, before the tiny clearing around her abruptly lightened. Several footsteps and the crackling of a torch heralded the foes' arrival. Fighting panic, Leona flipped herself over, only to stare into the eyes of two grinning Inquisition soldiers.

"Well, well," the first began, standing over her with torch held high. "What have we—"

Leona lunged upward, her fist wrapped around the dagger she had acquired from the fortress on Perdition Hill, and drove the blade up under the man's hauberk, into the meat of his inner thigh. Hot blood washed over her arm, and the Redbreast collapsed with a gurgling scream, bleeding to death through severed arteries as she watched.

The torch tumbled to the earth but continued to burn as the second Redbreast stepped forward, his expression furious. Only paces away, he raised a sharply tapered sword. To

Leona, it looked to be a better end than being dragged back to face imprisonment once more.

Branches cracked and mail clattered as Diederic rose from the underbrush, wraith-like, wrathful. The Redbreast spun and staggered as his hastily raised shield absorbed the impact of Diederic's axe. Held in two fists, the axe blow was meant to drive the man to his knees, but he recovered with the speed of a professional soldier and slowly circled the clearing, his eyes locked on Diederic over the edge of his shield.

For his part, Diederic only wished for a shield of his own. He had reluctantly chosen not to take one from the fallen soldiers back at the keep, knowing that the added weight would have rendered his infected wrist nigh useless. Now, in the face of a blade that danced to and fro with expert precision, he thought he might have willingly endured the pain.

Seconds passed as they circled, each taking the other's mettle in the feeble light, but Diederic knew he could not afford to wait—delay was the Redbreast's friend, not his own. He faked a stumble, turning his ankle inward and jolting to one side, in hopes of drawing his enemy out, but the soldier saw the feint for what it was and refused to take the bait.

So instead Diederic scooped up the torch as he steadied himself and hurled it at the Redbreast's head.

For a precious second, the soldier's shield slipped out of position as he raised it to protect his face. For just that second, he was blind to Diederic himself.

Even as the light flickered and threatened to go out, the knight sprinted across the intervening distance. Using his axe like a hook, he hauled the Redbreast's sword to one side, dragged the shield down with his other hand, and kned the man hard in the groin.

The breath rushed from the soldier's lungs with a high-pitched squeak. To his credit, he doubled over only marginally, already catching himself, trying to focus through the pain, to ready himself for the next attack.

Diederic offered him no chance to do so. His arm already extended, he brought the back of the axe in on the soldier's head with a resounding crash. The weapon lacked a butt-spike, and the Redbreast's helm was thick, but in conjunction with the blow below the belt, the impact was enough to stun

him for several heartbeats.

His last.

Diederich flipped the blade around and struck once more. This time the edge punched through mail, through flesh, and through ribs with a loud crunch. It was followed by a second, louder sound as the force of the blow knocked the soldier's body back, hitting the trunk of a large tree.

Diederich followed in a flash, pinning the body to the trunk with a single outstretched hand. Suspending his axe from an overhanging branch, he swiftly and methodically searched the soldier. "Are you all right?" he asked, voice low, as he worked.

"I am." Leona appeared beside him, bloody dagger still clasped in her fist. "But we have to go, Diederich."

"In a moment." The knight, having found what he sought, lifted the Redbreast's waterskin from his belt and squeezed, emptying it onto the forest floor. Then, yanking the top open with his teeth, he held the leather beneath the soldier's fatal wound, catching what he could of the dripping blood.

"No! We—What in the Scions' names are you doing!"

"If the dogs are not exceptionally well trained, we might be able to lay a false scent trail, mislead them for a bit." Diederich shoved hard against the corpse, squeezing more blood from it like a ripe fruit.

"Diederich," Leona breathed, her voice as intense as he'd ever heard it, "we have to go *now!*"

Finally he turned, though he had not released the body. "Why? We should have a few moments before any of his companions find us here. We—"

"Diederich, please! You don't understand! The Redbreasts are hunting in the Cineris! That hunt"—and here she jabbed a finger at the corpse against the tree—"has now been blooded. And nobody has offered the Fair Folk their tribute! Nobody has asked their blessings on the hunt!

"We are all of us in danger, Diederich, and from foes far worse than the Inquisition Redbreasts! Please, we have to go!"

"Oh, for God's sake, Leona, enough! There's not going to—"

The sound that emerged from the forest around them was directionless. It came from everywhere and nowhere, some-

how heavier, more *real*, than the world around them. It failed to echo in and among the trees.

It was the high, delighted giggling of a little girl.

On and on it came, barely allowing pause for breath. On and on, longer than even the most elated child could possibly have maintained it. And when it seemed the laughter must stop, that it could not *possibly* continue, it *accelerated*. It moved beyond the human, coming ever faster, rising ever higher, until it blurred from individual giggles to a single piercing whine.

A whine that became the howling howl of some terrible hound, far older and more primal than the dogs of the Inquisition hunters.

A second howl rose then to join the first, and then a third, until the woodlands shook with the call of ancient predators, trembled with the need for blood.

The Fair Folk hunted the Forest of Cineris, and Diederic de Wyndt could no longer refuse to believe.

Again Diederic and Leona ran, ignoring the brush that tore at their skin, the bruises left as they careened off of tree branches, as in the distance the world went mad. The Inquisition hounds ceased their own calls, now whining and whimpering at the scent of death. Whooping and howling sounded on the breeze, in melodious voices no human had ever uttered. Hoofbeats thundered through the forest, through tight spaces where no horse could ever run.

And all throughout the Cineris, men began to die. Their screams echoed long into the night, becoming as much a part of the woods as the call of owls or the chittering of insects.

Still Diederic and Leona ran, clasped hand in hand to ensure that neither would fall behind again. From right and left, the shadows of mounted warriors fell over them, armor-clad and wielding impossibly long spears, though there was never a light to cast such shadows. From ahead, the howl of something older than any wolf caused them to veer to one side, stumbling down an ivy-coated embankment until they tumbled to a stop amid a patch of clover.

They swiftly rolled once more to their feet, axe and dagger clutched to hand, as a trio of Redbreasts stumbled into the clearing from the opposite side, their faces masks of panic. Instantly the soldiers charged, their eyes focused on an en-

emy of whom they could make sense. Diederich met the first head on, parrying the man's sword with the haft of his axe, and then kicked—not at his own opponent, but to the side. His blow caught the second soldier by surprise, folding his leg at the knee. It was hardly a crippling strike, but it allowed Leona to step in past the reach of his sword and, with hands no less efficient for all that they shook, slit his throat with her dagger.

The third soldier took a single step, moving to support his brethren, only to cough a gurgling spray of blood as something took him from behind. It protruded through his chest, ugly and ungainly, and it was both the tip of a spear and the branch of an ancient oak, depending on the flickering of the single torch he held. For an endless breath the soldier stood, held upright by the weapon that still drank his life from his body; then he disappeared, hauled with inhuman speed back into the shadows of the forest.

The remaining Redbreast, stunned by the speed at which his companions had been dispatched, reacted just a hair too late to Diederich's sudden attack. Sword and axe danced in a waltz of steel and sparks. But the man could not keep up the pace, and the knight's heavy blade slipped through his defenses to send him, senseless, to the ground. And then, again, there was nothing to be done save run.

Leona, her breath again coming in ragged gasps, kept up for several moments until exhaustion forced her to stop. Her grip on Diederich's hand dragged him to a sudden halt too, and kept her from collapsing to her knees.

"Diederich," she gasped, sucking in great lungfuls of air, "there's... nowhere that we can... go. We would have to... escape the Cineris entirely to avoid... the Folk. Maybe not... even then."

"What would you have us do then, Leona? Lay down and wait for death?"

She coughed, once, and seemed at last to catch her breath. "If they blame us for this transgression, Diederich, we *are* dead. The Fair Folk will have their due."

A pair of torches flickered in the woods before Diederich thought to reply. Grimacing, he muttered to his companion, "I am *not* going to die here, at the hands of some damned forest faeries!" Then, before she could stop him, he raised his arms

above his head and began to wave. "Here!" he called to the passing torches. "Over here!"

Before Leona's unbelieving eyes, another pair of Redbreasts, one leading a dejected, terrified hunting hound on a thick leather leash, stepped slowly into the clearing. Each held a torch in one hand, the hilt of a sword or the end of the leash in the other. For long heartbeats they glared at Diederich, and he back at them.

"Whatever we face here," the knight said finally, "is bigger than any conflict we may have with each other. We should stand together, at least until this new foe is defeated. What say you?"

The Redbreasts glanced at one another, then nodded as one. With an eye on Diederich, they stepped into the circle of trees. "I am Renard," the first offered stiffly. "My companion with the dog is Arsen."

"Diederich. And," he added, realizing that she would not do so of her own accord, "this is Leona."

She glared at him.

Further conversation, or perhaps recrimination, would have to wait. From the woods around them, a faint but steady glow pierced the darkness—the result of no torch or lantern. The trees around them stood in sharp silhouette, each seeming to stretch forth a clawed branch to grasp for anyone foolish enough to draw near. Shapes that cast bizarre and formless shadows, shapes that cast multiple shadows, shapes that cast no shadows at all, scurried back and forth within the light, dancing to the beat of war-drums only they could hear.

Immediately the Redbreasts tensed, turning their attention outward, staring with widened eyes. Diederich clenched his axe tight in both hands....

And promptly brought it down, with a sickening crunch, upon the neck of the soldier who had identified himself as Renard. Arsen, crying out in dismay, had barely let go the leash and dropped his hand to his sword hilt when he felt the bite of the knight's blade too, and then he felt no more at all. The hound, which had by this time had more than enough of it all, bounded whining into the forest.

Even as the bodies of the men he had betrayed gave up their life's blood, Diederich was already dragging them both to

one side, draping them, one atop the other, over the heavy roots of the nearest tree, even as he'd seen Leona place her saucers of stew.

"We have not hunted your wood!" he called out, raising bloodstained hands to the unblinking glow. "We have shed the blood only of those who have come against us in violation of your forest! It was they who failed to offer you your due, not we. And I offer you these two men, allies slain by mine own hand, as your rightful tribute!"

A single howl arose from the shadowed forest, silencing all other sounds, from the beating of hooves to the screams of other dying Redbreasts. And then it also faded into silence.

In the constant light, a form appeared, crouched atop a fallen log that sprouted its own fungi and other new growth. It was human in shape, painfully thin, long of limb and lithe of motion. Skin the color of alabaster seemed, despite its pallor, to absorb the light rather than to reflect it, making the form difficult to see amid the shadows. Diederich could make out a flash of golden hair; green eyes of brilliant emerald at the outset, decaying to the hue of long-bruised flesh near the center; a face of perfect, inhuman beauty, to shame even the sculptures of classical Greece. Ruby lips parted to reveal the tearing fangs of the ravenous wolf, set in the shark's multiple rows.

She stared at him and he at her, and he felt in his soul that the thing watching him was the forest itself, made manifest. And finally, she smiled.

"We like you." Her voice was beautiful, melodious—a siren's call that plucked at his heart and threatened to draw him toward her, though he knew it would mean his death. "Remember us well, Diederich de Wyndt."

In the blink of an eye she was gone, the phantom light and the bodies of the fallen Redbreasts along with her.

Dazed, Diederich wandered over to Leona, who stood amid the circle of trees in open-mouthed shock. Slowly, he looked back over his shoulder at the spot where the fey woman had crouched, and then shook his head.

"I think," he said solemnly, "that perhaps *they* knew more about the Cineris Forest than we credited."

Unable to choose one of myriad emotions playing across her face, Leona spun on her heel and began the long march

toward Birne.

Eight

Another week passed, slowly, frustratingly, as Diederic and Leona made their way through the thick overgrowth. On several evenings, the giggling of little girls resounded in the distance among the trees. Once, Diederic awoke at midnight, convinced he had heard someone whispering, “Come! Come and dance with us!” while tugging upon his leg, only to find nobody present when he opened his eyes. But beyond these unnerving experiences, the Fair Folk of the forest seemed content to keep their distance, so long as the travelers put aside their tribute every night—a practice in which Diederic was no less devout, now, than was Leona herself.

Once and once only, on an afternoon where the spring rains fell gently but insistently through the canopy of leaves, they heard the distant barking of hounds and the calls of a second Inquisition hunting party. But whether it was the rain, simple luck, or the false trail Diederic laid in the Redbreast’s rotting, cloying blood, the hounds missed their scent, and the hunters never drew near.

Leona spoke to Diederic only so much as circumstances required, and otherwise kept her own counsel. She was, perhaps, unsure of how to treat him, how to speak with him, now that she had seen what he was capable of. But after a week, when the forest thinned ever so slightly and the game trails showed signs of regular use, her dark mood lifted. She began to talk, frequently, even desperately, though she had little to say. When she had pointed out the fourth variety of tree, and delved deep into the history of the second hunter’s trail, and lovingly detailed the fishing in the tiny river that trickled its way through the underbrush, Diederic had finally had enough.

“Leona!” he barked, interrupting an intricate description of a river trout.

The young woman practically leapt out of her skin. “What!”

Much more calmly, Diederic said, “Is there something in

particular you'd care to share with me?"

"I—"

"Something *other* than fishing, and game trails, and the differences between oak and ash and yew?"

"I've not been here in well more than a year," Leona said softly. "When I left, the crops were faring poorly, trade had all but ceased, and the Redbreasts were taking men and women on the flimsiest of excuses. I... am not certain what to expect."

Diederick smiled, and scratched idly at his wild growth of beard. "If it offers superior amenities to my previous arrangements, I'll call it sufficient."

With a laugh that seemed to well and truly shatter her black mood and calm her nerves, Leona laid a hand briefly on Diederick's elbow and resumed her trek.

The sun hung low in the western sky when the trees thinned further and Birne itself finally drifted into view.

Nestled in a small hollow between inclines too small to be called hills, Birne seemed little more than a haphazard collection of structures: perhaps a dozen farms, roughly fourscore other buildings, and a few open wells. The road through town was itself little more than a game trail, widened and marked by permanent wagon ruts. The fields extended to the edges of the forest. It was exactly as Diederick had imagined it to be.

With their shadows marching ahead of them like heralds, Leona and Diederick strode slowly into town, and were greeted with silence. The outermost fields lay abandoned, the workers having completed their tasks for the day, and only the occasional scarecrow, hanging limply, watched them as they passed.

The crops were short, this early in the season, and several of the outermost fields remained unsown. Thus, when the travelers *did* finally come across someone active in the fields, they had no difficulty in spotting him, or hailing his attention. He wandered over, running a hand through straw-blond hair, suspicion casting a pall over a face still round with the unshed softness of childhood.

"Help you, travelers?" he asked gruffly, attempting to mask the shifting, breaking tones of adolescence.

"Alfrec?" Leona leaned in, squinting in the rapidly fading

twilight. Her face erupted in a wide grin. "Alfrec, is that you? Scions above, you've sprouted like a weed!"

"My apologies, Lady," the teen offered, scratching beneath his wide-brimmed hat in puzzlement. "I fear I don't recognize...." Abruptly he froze, his eyes finally adjusting to the setting sun from which the two strangers had appeared.

Leona grinned further, in anticipation of revelation. And revelation there was, but hardly of the sort she had envisioned.

Alfrec's eyes grew wide, threatening to flee his head entirely. His voice leapt up at least an octave as he shrieked "Witchcraft! Witchcraft!" at the top of his lungs. He was still screaming as his sprinting form disappeared through the crops, trampling newly-sown sprouts underfoot. In mere seconds, nothing remained to tell of his presence but the girlish shouts fading into the distance and the straw hat that slowly settled to the earth at Leona's feet.

Diederich raised an eyebrow at Leona's thunderstruck expression. "I shall assume," he said dryly, adjusting the angle of the axe that lay across one shoulder, "that this is not a normal greeting in these parts."

"I don't understand," Leona whispered. "I *know* Alfrec. I watched over him in his crib, when I was young and his parents needed to be out. Why would he...?"

"I don't know." Diederich twisted his neck about, looking for any response to the teen's shouts. "But I know how serious a charge witchcraft is in Malosia, and I think we might want to find someplace less exposed to discuss it."

Leona nodded. "My cousin Marta lives near this end of town. We can stay there until we sort this out."

The house to which she led him was not large, even by the standards of Birne, but it was certainly homey. Surrounded on two sides by rich, well tended gardens—one flower, one vegetable—it was a simple affair, narrow and two-storied. The chimney was constructed of stone, the rest of the structure wood. Diederich could not help but note that, even as the sun finally disappeared and night truly fell, no smoke emerged from within that chimney, no firelight flickered in the cracks between the window shutters.

He did not share his concerns with Leona. Perhaps Marta was simply early to bed? He stood beside the porch, his head

awash in myriad scents from the flower garden, and waited as his companion pounded on her cousin's door.

When the response came, it came not from within the house but from Birne's central road. Even before they hove into view, Diederic heard the grumbling of a dozen angry voices, heard the tromp of footsteps, and saw the flickering of the torches.

Leona was about to have a very unpleasant homecoming.

"Stay behind me," he hissed at her, taking a single stride along the tiny walkway that led to Marta's door. "And try to forget that you know these people. If any win past me, you had better be prepared to use that dagger."

"What? But I—"

"There she is!" The teen, Alfrec, stood near the front of the crowd, pointing over his elders' shoulders. He was accompanied by perhaps two dozen men and women. All were clad in the heavy, worn clothes of the farmer, the laborer, the manual craftsman. And each clasped something to hand, be it a torch, a cudgel, a pitchfork, or a knife.

Diederic opened his mouth to speak, to lay down a challenge, only to groan as Leona pushed past him, her arms spread wide.

"What is wrong with you?" she called to the advancing mob, hurt and anger causing her voice to break. "Is this how you welcome your lost children?" The mob stopped at the edge of Marta's property, glaring but not quite willing to step forward.

"I'm one of you! Leonera Talliers! Sorran, you and I grew up together! Elsi, how many days did we work side by side in the fields?"

At the forefront of the crowd, an older man stepped forward. His shoulders stooped, his face was beaten to leather by decades in the sun, yet he nonetheless carried himself with the weight of authority, and the strength bred by a lifetime of toil. He carried in one hand a sickle, in the other a torch to light his way.

"Leona Talliers is dead," he said, his voice raspy and harsh. "She was taken by Redbreasts well over a year gone."

"Yes, Theoric, I was," Leona replied. "And I escaped, thanks in part to this man here. We—"

But the old man—Theoric—scoffed, and a ripple of disbelief passed through the crowd like a wave. "Nobody escapes from

the Inquisition!" someone unseen called out from the rear.

"Not without witchcraft, they don't," Theoric added. "Maybe you're not who you look like, or maybe you are, but in either case, we've enough problems with curses and black magic around here as it is." Emboldened by his words, and perhaps by the look of despair that sank across Leona's features, the mob took a step forward as one....

Only to find Diederic, his axe held in a loose, casual grip, standing between them and their intended victim.

"No witchcraft aided our escape," he said, calm, collected. "But if you take another step, if you attempt to lay a hand on Leona, I will be happy to demonstrate the skills we *did* employ to win free."

At the forefront of the mob, men and women exchanged nervous glances. A faint creak sounded as, somewhere in the midst of humanity, someone drew back the string on a hunting bow.

Diederic's eyes narrowed. "You could try it," he offered. "But you had best pray to your God and all six Scions that your first arrow kills. Because I swear to you, you'll never loose a second."

The would-be archer lowered his weapon.

"You would slaughter innocents, Sir...?"

Diederic met Theoric's gaze. "Sir Diederic de Wyndt. And no, old man, I would not slaughter innocents. So I suggest you and your folk *remain* innocent in my eyes."

The village elder nodded. "And you two truly escaped the Inquisition? With no magic aid?"

"There were more than two of us, but yes. In fact, we took the clothes we wear now, and the supplies we carry, from Inquisition Redbreasts. I should be happy to try to find an emblem or insignia, something to prove to you what I say."

Theoric took a single step, and then carefully hung his sickle from the rope he wore as a belt. "Leona," he said, looking over Diederic's shoulder, "I ask your forgiveness. Things here have been—truly unfortunate, while you've been away. Perhaps we acted rashly, but I hope to make you understand: our concern is genuine."

Leona stepped forward. Her eyes burned with anger, but she managed a curt nod.

"Back to your homes!" Theoric called out. "And let tomorrow

be a day of happiness! We truly have recovered one of our lost!"

And the mob dispersed, though for every expression of gladness or apology, Diederic saw a narrowed pair of eyes, or overheard a whispered doubt. Not everyone in Birne, it seemed, was as willing to be convinced as Theoric himself.

Nor did that fact escape the old man himself. "Some of us," he said softly, "are more frightened than others. Many of the townfolk are looking for someone to blame for their misfortunes, Leona. I had hoped the capture of one witch would suffice, but they need more. And others may worry that your presence as escapees will draw the Redbreasts down on us as surely as if you *were* witches.

"I am sorry. I fear that no matter what happens, you should not expect a pleasant homecoming."

"A bit late for that, already, I should think." Leona turned to go, but stopped suddenly as Theoric's words truly struck home. "What 'other witch,' Theoric?" And then, in a voice grown suddenly high with worry, "Where is Marta? Why did she not come to the door?"

The old man sighed, his gaze flitting from Leona's face to Diederic's axe. "I shall show you," he said finally, his shoulders slumping. "But you won't like what you see."

He led them through the center of Birne, urging quiet so that the townfolk might sooner make their way home to sleep. Along the way he pointed out the homes and shops of the town's leading citizens, bragging about how this blacksmith forged the finest horseshoes, how that hunter always carried home the richest game—or at least, how they had once done so. Alas, harsh times had come to Birne. Even Diederic, no farmer or gardener, could see that the crops that had sprouted thus far were thin and feeble, and that the trees nearest the village had already been stripped of their lumber-worthy branches. He did not bother to ask why the folk of Birne did not press farther into the forest for their building needs. He knew that the Fair Folk would be his answer.

"There can be no doubt," Theoric continued as they passed a well from which frogs sporadically chirped, "that our misfortune is of no natural cause. The flowers bloom, and the grasses grow. It is only the food crops that fail to sprout. Visi-

tors continue to pass through, if rarely, but no traders have come to Birne in many a season. The milking cows grow fat, while the beef cattle sicken and fail.”

“Has it grown so bad so swiftly?” Leona asked, her voice ached. “I recall it was difficult, but this....”

The elder nodded. “The folk of Birne have come to believe that the concerns of Pontiff Cornelis are not so unfounded as we might once have hoped. They say,” and here he cast Leona a sidelong glance, full of import that Diederick could only partly apprehend, “that the Inquisition is right to seek out witches and heretics in our midst, and in other villages throughout Malosia.”

Leona stiffened. “And the people here believe I am a witch?”

“You must understand, Leona: the Inquisition branded you thus. Few believed it when you were first taken, but for a time, our situation indeed improved. Now? Now nobody doubts the presence of witches, summoners, and corpse-talkers among us. It’s unlikely that I, or even your strapping friend here, could have talked them out of wreaking vengeance upon you, when first you appeared, if not....” A coughing fit followed, but a deliberate one, and Leona understood what Theoric hesitated to say.

“... if not for someone else they could blame,” she finished for him. “Someone who was here when their fortunes soured, as I was not.”

“Just so. Here we are.”

Diederick knew it was a church before Theoric so much as opened his mouth again. The coating of whitewash—a rather poor attempt to make the building seem fancier than its humble wood construction—had begun to crack and peel. The sloped roof was shingled and well maintained, and above the main entry stood the sixfold sun, sculpted of wrought iron and probably worth more than the building itself.

Like most churches in Diederick’s experience, the building bore a spiritual weight, as though its footprint on the landscape, its shadow in the day and its looming presence at night, were larger than the edifice itself. Part of that, he knew, was the smattering of graves that so frequently accompanied the small town church, like children following af-

ter a protective mother (or fleas on a dog, he sometimes thought in his less charitable, less pious moments). And part of it was that nearly every such church, regardless of location and climate, boasted at least one gnarled and ponderous tree somewhere on its property, a grasping hand that laid claim to lands well beyond the church proper.

It was an apple tree, this time, far older than the church itself. What hung upon its largest, sturdiest branch, however, was no apple.

“Dear God,” Diederich breathed, even as Leona gasped and ran ahead. “Is it really necessary to keep her hunched up like that, old man?” For the wicker cage that swung from the branches was barely wide enough for the woman within to crouch, and certainly not tall enough for her to stand. The cramping alone must have been agony.

Theoric at least had the decency to look embarrassed. “Sir Knight, you must understand. This woman is a witch, a sorceress, and a trafficker with vile things.”

“So you say,” Diederich muttered under his breath.

“For us to offer even the simplest comforts risks allowing her sufficient strength to concentrate and work her wiles. I’ll have no witchcraft aiding her escape—not when she has so much to answer for!”

“Theoric!” The call came from ahead, where Leona stood livid beside her cousin’s cage. Her voice quaked with repressed anger, so much so that the men responsible for guarding the prisoner, positioned to either side of the hanging cage, laid hands to their hunting knives and glanced nervously at one another.

The old man smiled wanly up at Diederich. “Would you be kind enough to grant us a moment, Sir Diederich?” Scarcely waiting for so much as a nod, Theoric jogged ahead, his hands already raised in supplication.

Diederich leaned back against the fencepost at the property’s edge and watched. The discussion between them was heated, and it looked more than once as though Leona would strike the town elder. But their voices were kept low enough that Diederich could make out tone only, no words. For nigh on twenty minutes they argued back and forth, silhouettes lit only by a lantern kept by the two men standing watch.

Finally, her fists clenched and her entire body rigid, Leona

stormed back to Diederic. Her face was tear-streaked, her jaw set.

“I need your help, Diederic.”

The knight, who had held his breath in anticipation of just that statement, released it in a soft sigh. “Leona,” he began carefully, “I haven’t the time for this. I’m here to get my bearings, to learn more of Malosia. After that—”

“Diederic, please! Marta is no more a witch than I!”

“I’m sure that’s so. But unless you want me to tear her from that cage and slay our way out of here, I’m not entirely certain how you want me to help.”

“Diederic....” Leona was all but begging, now. “Diederic, they’re not even going to try her. The folk here have already determined her guilt. Theoric tells me... he tells me that the only question up for debate is whether to hold her for the next Redbreast patrol or to”—her throat all but closed around the words; she forced them through via sheer brute strength—“burn her ourselves.

“Please....”

He squeezed his eyes shut and sighed once more. His hunt for Lambrecht seemed as far and impossible now as it had in the depths of Perdition Hill.

“All right. I’ll see what I can do come morning.”

The mists rose around midnight, thick and heavy. They poured upward, first from the streams and creeks, spreading in an endless flow. They crept across the ground, silent, rolling, until they filled the tiny streets and byways of Birne; a man walking outside at night, with a lantern clutched in his hand, could not have seen his own feet. They crept about the houses and buildings, prodding at doors and windows, slipping fingers of fog through the tiniest cracks and crevices, until all but the most tightly sealed of structures was partly hazy within, as well as without.

Dawn rose, gray and diffuse, and brought with it a slow but insistent rain. It turned the road to churning mud and set the streams to a mad rush. Cows and chickens stood miserable, drenched and shivering, and people scuttled quickly about their daily labors, shoulders hunched against the rain. The very air was wet upon the skin; it even smelled of water.

Yet the sun behind its curtain of clouds could not burn away

the mists, nor could the rains wash them from the air. Birne floated amid an infinite sea of fog.

It was not, Leona told Diederich as they breakfasted that morning, an auspicious start to his efforts.

“The fog has always been an ill omen here,” she explained, sliding poached eggs onto a pair of plates and handing one across the table. “Our misfortunes always seemed to grow worse beneath its touch, as though it was the shadow of some plague or blight fallen upon Birne.”

Diederich mumbled around a forkful of egg.

He sat at one side of a small table, perfectly square, in Marta’s kitchen. The accused witch—having, as she put it sourly, “plenty of room for guests at the moment”—had offered her cousin and friend the use of her house while she was otherwise occupied. As it appeared from without, it was a simple enough affair, consisting of little more than a bedroom and a combined kitchen and sitting room, each furnished poorly but comfortably. A large attic sat above. It was far less than Diederich was accustomed to as a landed noble, but after months of imprisonment and camping in the wild, it would suffice.

A fire burned fitfully in the hearth, sizzling on occasion as a rivulet of rain made its way past the flue, but the flames failed to take the chill of the mists from the air. The house was comfortable enough otherwise, and Diederich was tempted to put his investigation off for a day or two, until the weather improved. Any delay in his efforts here, however, meant a delay in the hunt for Lambrecht, and so none was acceptable, however comfortable it might prove.

Thus, with the barest modicum of manners and etiquette, he shoveled his breakfast into his mouth and set about gathering what he would need to ward off the elements. Cloak, boots, and heavy tunic were obvious. Although his soldier’s instincts railed against it, he decided to leave his hauberk behind this day. He expected no battle, and the chain links would trap water and cold during the day, and require hours of cleaning and drying come nightfall.

His massive axe might prove more a hindrance than a help too, as he sought the trust of the townsfolk. But he did, at least, strap an Inquisition thrusting sword, as well as a single-edged hunting knife, to his belt. Expecting battle or not, Died-

eric was no fool.

“Where to first?” Leona asked, reaching for her own cloak.

“First,” Diederich said, his gaze unblinking, unyielding, “you are going to close up all the shutters, make certain the doors are locked, and wait right here until I return.”

Leona froze. “I beg your pardon?” Her voice was ice.

“I’m doing this alone, Leona.”

“Diederich, you’re a stranger here. Most folk won’t even speak to you, and those who do certainly won’t be honest.”

“And you, Leona, are a witch.”

“Diederich!”

The knight shrugged. “So far as many of your fellow citizens are concerned, it’s the truth. To others, you are at least an *accused* witch. At best, you are family to a witch, sympathetic to her cause. The people here may not be open with me, but they’ll be *afraid* of you, Leona.”

“You can glare all you like,” he continued a moment later. “But can you look me in the eye and tell me I’m wrong?”

Grimacing, she turned away. Diederich nodded once, offered “Be careful until I get back,” in a much softer tone, and then shut the door firmly behind him.

Everything outside was shades of gray. The rain succeeded in washing away what little bits of color might have showed through the pervasive fog. Diederich moved through a realm of ghosts and shadows. Houses, unseen until he was mere paces away, loomed from the mists, and were just as suddenly gone. If there were other passersby along the road—and now and again Diederich heard just enough whispered conversation or muddy, squelching footsteps to assume there were—he never saw them.

He had no sense of where to start, so in the end, he chose almost at random. As most of the typical misfortunes attributed to witchcraft were those of farmers—such as sickly livestock, poor crops, and the like—it made most sense to begin with the farms that formed the outskirts of Birne.

As he and Leona had expected, the farmers had little to say to Diederich. Most were polite enough, or at least respectful enough of his social class not to slam the door in his face. But few offered details, or proved willing to answer questions with anything more than a noncommittal grunt or the standard “It wouldn’t be my place to speak about that.”

The knight's persistence eventually bore fruit, albeit meager. It was early afternoon, though that would have been hard to prove given the ambient light, and Diederic's patience was wearing thin, when he knocked on the door of the largest farmhouse on that side of the village.

The man who answered was stooped with age and arthritis, though his features seemed slightly younger than Theoric's. His snow-white hair was cropped close to his head, and his cheeks were covered in stubble so rough it might have doubled as a wood-file.

His name, he informed Diederic after inviting the knight inside for an ale or a cider, was Alpert Mason, eldest bearer of the Mason name—at least among those currently above ground, he cackled—a proud family that had moved to Birne almost as early as the village's founders. He was afraid of no stranger, no sir, and he had seen too many good years in Birne to let some fiend-worshipping, filth-talking, godless witches ruin it all now!

"So you truly believe Marta is a witch?" Diederic asked, a cup of steaming cider held to his lips.

"Oh, aye. Our town's always been blessed, Sir Knight. We had our problems, now and again, but never awful, never lasting. Things only went bad in recent years, and truly hideous over the past months. In all my years, I've never seen the seeds take to the earth so poorly, or the early sprouts come in so feeble. We're barely into spring, and I've already seen one blight spread through the fields. I don't imagine it'll be the last, either."

"Shouldn't things be improving, now that she's imprisoned, then?"

"Ah, that's the thing about witches, son. I've never yet heard of one to work alone. Covens, circles, and cabals, that's their way." He spat once on the floor in emphasis. "And the fog! God and Scions, I don't know what they called up in the fog this time, but damned if it's not vile! Had two cattle die on me last night, I did, and there's nary an egg to be found in the entire coop this morning. Rumor around the well is that it's the same every farm from here to the Cineris, and that...."

"Yes?" Diederic prompted as the old man's voice faltered.

"You understand, it's not wise to speak of such things. Gives them power. But I heard tell this morning that Selia's

eldest boy took ill something horrible last night, and he's always been a healthy lad. It may be nothing, but a lot of folks are blaming the fog. And a few are blaming you."

Diederich raised an eyebrow at that. Alpert simply shrugged.

"You and Leona arrived just before the fog rose, Sir Knight, and you're out and about asking questions in defense of someone everyone knows is a witch. Me, I respect your loyalty to your friend, but a lot of the others have different ideas about your motives. Wouldn't expect anyone else to talk to you today, were I you."

And indeed, though Diederich left the Mason farmstead with further questions, he found nobody else as willing as Alpert had been to open up. A few spoke to him briefly, confirming what the old farmer had said regarding the town's prosperity and recent tribulations, but by the time night fell, Diederich had nothing more than clothing soaked to the skin to show for his efforts.

The rain continued to fall that night; the fog grew thin and wispy, but failed to dissipate entirely. In the distant woods, wolves howled at the unseen moon. The people of Birne huddled beneath the covers and behind locked doors, and silently prayed—some to the God Most High and the Six Scions, others to powers less benign—for their reign of ill fortune to end, and for the strangers to cease drawing the ire of dark powers with their endless questions.

Diederich himself snored lightly on the floor by the fireplace, wrapped in several layers of blankets to cushion the cold stone beneath him. He and Leona had already drawn stares from the townsfolk when they chose to stay together in Marta's empty home. He would not encourage any further talk by attempting to share Marta's only bed. The rumors would be bad enough without the truth of their innocence to shield them.

They had spoken that night, going over what little Diederich had learned, but Leona had been unable to add anything of substance. Diederich, tired and cold, had decided to put off further discussion for the morning, when they would decide what to try next. He fell asleep knowing how awful such a night must be for Marta, trapped without shelter from the raging elements.

The attack came roughly an hour before dawn.

Diederick bolted upright at the sound of splintering wood, and was already fully awake when the shutters collapsed inward, shattered by a series of blows from a hatchet. He ignored the torch as it came spinning into the room; nearly extinguished by the pervasive rains, it guttered and spat upon the floor. Diederick knew it would burn itself out long before it could do more than scorch the heavy wood on which it had landed, that the house was in no danger of burning. Instead, alerted by the sounds of heavy footsteps on the porch, he faced the door.

Indeed, the torch had been little more than a primitive distraction. The door buckled beneath the force of the first impact, gave beneath the second, and a trio of people clad in black, their faces incompletely masked by cloth scarves, appeared within. From the sounds of squelching in the mud, a fourth and a fifth intruder waited outside, perhaps intending to clamber in through the window.

The trio held makeshift but effective weapons in their hands: here a heavy cudgel, there an axe handle. They were young and male—Diederick could tell as much from their movements and their posture—and their enthusiasm for violence clearly outweighed their skill at inflicting it. Clad only in a long night-tunic, so disdainful of his attackers that he couldn't be bothered even to reach for a weapon, Diederick flexed his hands and smiled.

First across the room came the largest of them, clutching a tree branch heavy enough to stave in bone if it were allowed to connect. He swung it over his head, clearly intending to bring it smashing down upon his enemy, in a show of brute force and brutish skill. Diederick took a single step, meeting the fellow while he was unprepared to defend. One hand caught the attacker's wrists, preventing the club from descending. The second delivered a straight jab into the man's gut, even as Diederick also kicked out, driving the ball of his foot upward into his attacker's knee. Joints separated, the breath rushed from the intruder's chest, and the first of the trio struck the floor with enough force to shake the house.

The second hung back, stunned into inaction by the swift dispatch of his friend. Silhouetted by a second torch carried by the third fellow behind him, the young attacker was recognizable to Diederick; the scarf did nothing to hide his eyes, or

the fleshy curves of recent childhood around them. It could only be young Alfrech, who had fled before them when they arrived, and gathered the mob against them. Diederic's grin widened, and he tossed off a friendly wave at the young man, who paled around his mask.

And then the first of the men outside dove in through the window and rolled to his feet, hatchet in hand, and Diederic ceased to find the whole affair funny. A cudgel meant an intended beating, but a hatchet-wielder could only mean to kill.

The knight stepped back to the bedroll in which he had slept and bent low. As the newcomer neared, leaving thick and muddy footprints on the wood, Diederic scooped up his chainmail hauberk and hurled it with an angry shout.

Fifty pounds of metal wrapped itself about the charging man who—even with arms raised to deflect it—could do little to avoid the massive projectile. The sheer momentum of the impact took him off his feet; he landed hard, the breath exploding from his lungs.

Diederic was past him in a flash, his arms outstretched. The second man who had remained outside, climbing through the window after his companion, had barely pulled his arms and chest through when the knight had him in a heavily muscled grip.

Diederic twisted once, firmly. Several bones in the intruder's neck snapped as one, and the body went limp, hanging in the open window.

When the door to the bedroom opened and Leona emerged to stand behind the knight, a heavy dagger in her hand, the two remaining attackers had clearly had enough. Alfrech and his companion bolted into the foggy night, their weapons falling to the mud with a wet clatter as they vanished.

"I'm not certain you should be here just now," Theoric whispered, appearing between Diederic and Leona at the edge of the churchyard.

Diederic shrugged, and took a moment to wipe the ubiquitous rain from his brow. "I wish to pay my respects, Theoric—more honor, I should say, than the young man deserved after his cowardly assault. Still, it's a shame that he forced me to act as I did, and I would have the townsfolk know that I do not take what happened, including my own response, lightly. If

any object to my presence here—”

Two of the black-clad passersby, squelching through the mud on their way to the graveside, paused long enough to glare at Diederic. One hawked and spat; the glob disappeared into the muck at the knight's feet.

“—then that is their concern and none of mine,” he finished calmly.

They stood and watched as dozens of Birne's citizens gathered in the feeble shelter of the apple tree. Marta, still in her cage, had been moved out of the way for the duration of the ceremony, and the good people stood about the muddy pit that was a freshly dug grave.

Before the hole stood an icon of wood: three beams nailed together in the center: a poor man's approximation of the six-fold sun. Already its lower extremities were coated with mud and other detritus, but those gathered round it treated it with utmost respect. A red-haired young man in a cassock, whom Diederic had heard called Father Cerran, stood beside the wooden icon, his arm draped about an old woman who stared dully across the open grave. Her gray hair was plastered to her face, her heavy wool shawl grown fat with accumulated rain. Her shoulders slumped with old age and new sorrow, and her shaking, feeble hands clenched hard at the hem of her gown. If she heard the words of comfort the priest offered, she made no sign of it.

Finally, the crowd ceased to grow. Theoric moved from Leona's side to stand with the mourners, and the priest began to speak. “My friends,” he said, his voice high but heartfelt, shouting over the rain and the rustle of the leaves, “let us not despair, as we gather to bid our farewells to young master Rolan Reveaux. As his life—while short—was happy and full of love, let his passing remind us of the love we have for one another, as we support our friends and neighbors through these difficult times.”

“Wasn't love that killed Rolan!” someone in the crowd called out. A mumble of agreement rippled through the gathering, but Diederic and Leona were gratified to note at least a few of the mourners rolling their eyes at the interruption.

“No, it was a case of terminal idiocy,” Diederic muttered, sufficiently under his breath that none but Leona would hear.

“Rolan,” Father Cerran continued, shouting louder now to

forestall further interruption, “was a good lad, devoted to his family and to his faith. He loved....”

The eulogy continued, but the downpour increased its tempo. Diederic could not be bothered to strain his ears to hear any more. He shifted his cloak about on his shoulders instead, warding off what he could of the wet chill, and settled in to wait.

Leona tossed him an irritated glance. “You might show a little respect,” she hissed angrily.

“I’m here, am I not? That alone, I think, should be sufficient.”

“Sufficient! Diederic, you killed a *Reveaux*! They’re one of Birne’s founding families!”

“He did, I’d remind you, try to kill me—*us*—first.”

She could only sigh in aggravation. “My point, if I may make it, is that anyone who was not too afraid or too insular to speak to you before is surely certainly too angry or too offended to do so now. That you were merely defending yourself is the only reason they have not already tried to hang you. Well, that and fear of what you might do to them,” she amended swiftly. “But cooperation? Now? Not damn likely.”

“That’s just fine,” Diederic commented, staring thoughtfully across the churchyard at the pontificating priest. “I believe I have other avenues to explore.”

They waited for many more minutes, until Cerran had completed his eulogy, and the several prayers that followed. Theoric uttered a few words about banding together as a community in the face of hardship, and several of the dead boy’s friends, Alfrech included, offered a tale or two about their departed companion. And then it was simply a matter for the gravediggers to struggle with the soft and viscous earth, while everyone else went their separate ways. Diederic, his honor satisfied, was among the first to leave.

For hours the old woman stood, oblivious to the cold, the mud, the fog, the rain; she only watched. As the mourners passed by, some few stopping to offer a final prayer or flower, she watched. As the gravediggers fought hard against the sodden earth, finally covering the simple pine coffin and filling the grave with mud more liquid than solid, she watched. And when there was no more to see, when the constant rain had

hidden any trace of the grave except for the humble wooden marker, she watched still.

“Silma?” Theoric appeared beside her, his hair feebly protected from the elements by a wide-brimmed hat. “Silma, you need to let it go.”

For the first time, the old woman’s eyes focused, and she turned on her companion with a narrowed gaze. “You, Theoric? You, of all people, would say this to me?”

“Silma, please!” He begged her, openly begged, as he never would have had any other citizen of Birne been present. “I grieve with you. I grieve *for* you! And the time will come for vengeance! But not now!”

“Why *not* now?” she spat back at him. “If the ancient pacts no longer hold the power they once did, then I must strike *now*, while they hold weight at all!”

“And if you draw his attention further? If he interferes with the rites? Gods and demons, Silma, the equinox is only weeks away! Would you have us unprepared?”

“I will not fail. And after that? Perform your rites, or not. Prepare, or don’t. I care not, anymore. My son is dead, Theoric. I am going to the orchard.”

“Silma....”

“I am going to the orchard,” she said again, slowly, as though educating a foolish child. “And should anyone attempt to stop me, Theoric, they can expect the same as the whore Leona and her vaunted guest.”

Theoric remained behind, watching as Silma Reveaux disappeared into the fog. Slowly, he lifted his soggy hat from his head, held it to his chest, and prayed.

Nine

“Well met, Father. May I speak with you a moment?”

Cerran placed the worn copy of the Septateuch upon the altar—a well loved copy, he might instead have called it—and stared across the dimly lit church. The stranger stood in the doorway, shaking off the worst of the rain. Already nervous around a man of such barely restrained violence, the priest could not help but note the pair of blades that hung about the knight’s waist, and the chain hauberk he now wore beneath his cloak.

Making a show of covering the holy book with a protective cloth, Cerran moved around the altar, not so subtly placing it between him and the new arrival. “I’m not certain you should be here, friend,” he said, his voice unsteady.

“People tell me that a lot around here.” Diederick shook the last of the loose water from his cloak and slammed the church door shut behind him. The candelabras by the altar wavered, then burned high as the wet winds ceased. “It’s enough to make a pilgrim feel unwelcome.”

“Do not judge them harshly,” Cerran implored, lighting a few extra candles so his hands might have something to do other than shake. “They’re not bad folk here, or unfriendly. They just don’t trust outsiders. Fate has not been kind to them of late.”

“‘Them,’ Father?” Diederick approached the altar, bowing his head in respect. He had, from force of habit, crossed himself before remembering that such a gesture was perhaps inappropriate in this particular house of worship. “Not ‘us’? That seems rather unneighborly for a man of the cloth.”

Cerran laughed, a sound utterly devoid of humor. “I have been the overseer of this church, by decree of the Empyrean See in Caercaelum, for almost four years. Every other soul in Birne has family that has dwelt here for at least that many *generations*. I’m barely more a fellow to them than you are.”

“I’m surprised to hear that, Father.” Diederick forced himself

to register no expression at the priest's jittery demeanor. Rather than watch the man continue to search for any excuse to retreat, he stepped back and seated himself on the front row of uncomfortable pews. Although he knew he should do his best to set the priest at ease, he could not help stretching his legs out before him, informally—even disdainfully—crossed at the ankles. “I would have thought the citizens in a town like this would be especially respectful of their priest, and devout in their practices. Particularly if times have grown as hard as you say.”

Again that humorless laugh. And though Diederick would never have sworn to it, he thought he heard in that disturbing sound a touch of—what? Hysteria? Desperation? “None of them believe, Knight. Not really. Oh, they attend my sermons. They recite the prayers and sing the paeans. They ask me to speak at... at funerals.

“But Birne is an old town, Knight, and she has old customs. When the folk have need to enter the deep wood, it is not to our God Most High and his Six Scions to whom they offer tribute. When the crops wilt, they may make their prayers in church, but it is to the soil itself, and the plants within, that they truly beg. I, and my church, are here for appearances' sake—nothing more.”

His hauberk clinking, the wood beneath him creaking, Diederick leaned forward, his hands on his knees. “Are you suggesting, Father Cerran, that *every citizen* of Birne is a witch?”

“Witch?” The priest's voice rose high, quavering. “What is a witch? The Pontiff did not send me here to convert old wives and herbalists. If the Inquisition thinks to capture every pagan, everyone who respects the old ways, they will have to coat the length and breadth of Malosia in endless layers of blood.

“But necromancers and sorcerers, spirit-worshippers and brides of demons? These, spring from the old ways too, and these the Inquisition—and I, and every good and faithful child of the Scions—must ever watch, and ever destroy.

“It is for this crime, Knight, that Marta must burn. It is for these workers of black magics that the citizens of Birne scour their midst, suspecting even those they trust. It is against these vile blasphemers that I should protect my flock, drawing

them into the protective embrace of God and Scions!

“And you know what, Sir Knight? For all my years here, I haven’t the first notion if any such evil ‘witches’ are to be found in Birne, or if every man, woman, and child simply clings to the old ways because I, and all the priests before me, have failed to show them any true alternative.”

Father Cerran slammed both fists to the altar—one to each side of the Septateuch—dropped his forehead onto the holy book, and wept.

Staring askance at the sobbing priest, Diederich rose to his feet. His cloak swirled, sprinkling drops of water as he strode toward the exit, shaking his head in pitying disbelief.

“Sir Knight?”

He was near the door, his hand reaching for the knob, and for a moment Diederich contemplating pretending he had not heard. Then, suppressing an irritated sigh, he turned about.

“Yes, Fath—”

The priest stared sightlessly at him with eyes shrunk deep into their sockets, dried and cracked to the consistency of old parchment. His flesh had grown pallid, so pallid, showing the blue web of veins that crossed beneath his skin. Hair fell from his head in locks. His jaw gaped open—wide, far too wide—and hung loosely by flesh alone, wriggling obscenely as his head flopped lifelessly to his left shoulder. Teeth clattered to the floor, their roots twitching mindlessly like maggots, and from deep within the priest’s chest there rose a horrible, choking, sepulchral moan.

Diederich could not breathe; he could not blink. His hands seemed trapped in tar as his fingers struggled in vain to close around the hilt of his sword. He felt the doorframe strike him hard in the back as he fell away from the horror before him. If he could only....

“I hope you find what you seek,” the priest told him, his voice normal, if a bit gruff from weeping. “Perhaps you can lead the town to salvation as I could not.” His cheeks, tear-streaked, were simple flesh; his eyes, though red, were human. No trace of tooth or hair remained on the altar or the floor at his feet, and his face radiated the healthy glow of youth.

For the span of two ragged breaths, Diederich remained backed against the door, his own eyes wide and staring.

Then, just as Cerran opened his mouth once more, assuredly to ask the knight if something was amiss, Diederic slipped around the frame and disappeared at a dead run into the slow rain.

Long he ran, virtually blind, his boots sinking deep into Birne's central byway. His hair lay plastered to his head, his cloak to his shoulders. He ran until the rain finally let up, though the fog swiftly thickened as if to make up for the shortfall. He ran until his hands and arms were bruised from colliding with obstacles he could barely see in the endless gray: fence posts, trees, gates, even one of the town's stone-walled wells. He ran until his breath rasped in his throat and his sides burned with an inner fire—until he could run no more.

Diederic de Wyndt, proud knight of France, collapsed to his hands and knees in the clinging mud and gasped for breath, his heart pounding as if to shatter his ribs from within.

He could not have seen what he saw! He *could not have!* Even in this horrific land of ghosts and apparitions, of ancient fey and even older gods, it simply was not possible. No man could live in a realm where it was—not if he wished to retain any shred of his sanity.

Was that it, then? Had his experiences and trials driven him mad? Diederic found that he could view the prospect with surprising equanimity. It would explain a lot, and it might be preferable to the notion of living in a world where these things were real.

Alas, he did not think it likely that he could simply sit back and dismiss all that had happened as the feverish hallucination of a lunatic, much as part of him might wish he could.

But either he truly was seeing things, or something really *had* happened to Father Cerran back at the church. He had to know which.

It came from the fog even as Diederic began to rise. His only warning was a peculiar whinny, a disturbing call that he could later only describe as a wolf growling through the mouth and throat of a horse. He glimpsed a dark shape dart through the mists, little more than gray on gray. Talons of bronze raked across the mail that protected his left shoulder, shrieking as they rent metal. Blood and tiny links of steel rained down into the mud, and Diederic, spun by the impact, collapsed once more to his belly, his body shaking. The wound

stung mercilessly; the blood bubbled and frothed as it came into contact with the unearthly venom deposited by those tearing claws.

Through the pain he heard the beat of hooves circling about him, not sinking into the mud but galloping across it as though it were the heaviest stone. Again that horrific call: an ugly melding of predator and prey. The fog grew thick before Diederic's eyes—impossibly thick, more smoke than vapor—until he could scarcely see the hands on his own outstretched arms. The mists grabbed that sound and spread it about, until it came from everywhere at once.

Grunting, Diederic struggled to his feet. Steel sang against leather as he drew his sword and dropped into a ready crouch. Around and around the hooves clattered and sang; around and around shrieked the ghastly call. He waited, motionless, breathing slow and steady to manage the pain that burned through his shoulder.

There! It appeared again, scarcely visible: the merest hint of a shape that was only vaguely human. Diederic struck, lashing out with a strength born of desperation. The sword arced true, slicing through the mists to collide with what appeared to be the creature's waist.

The blade rang out, bending with the force of the blow, and the knight's hands trembled. But no flesh parted; no blood flew. Again the talons lashed out, and it was only Diederic's frantic efforts, hurling himself backward and away, that saved him from a second envenomed wound. He landed in the muck a third time—this time on his back—and scuttled away from his foe like a crab, the useless sword forgotten in the mud.

The hideous bray rose in pitch and transformed into a cackling and mocking laugh, disdainful of this foolish man and his pathetic weapons. The hooves receded into the distance, but Diederic knew the creature circled. It would be back in moments, cloaked in fog until it was upon him; he doubted that those talons would miss a second time.

But where steel faltered, perhaps lesser weapons might prevail.

Had he run far enough, in his headlong flight from the church? Was he near enough that he could reach his goal before the thing that haunted the mists grew tired of its

game? Diederich peeled himself from the mud, tucked his head down, and ran as though his very soul depended on it.

Again he careened from unseen obstacles, hidden in a fog that had grown impossibly dense. The haze fought his efforts to breathe and sat heavy in his lungs, forcing him to cough and choke. His every step was a struggle, against not only the clinging air but the clinging earth. The mud sucked eagerly at his boots and let loose only reluctantly. The cackling, the howling, the beating of hooves—first from this side, then from that; first from before, then from behind—overwhelmed all other sounds save Diederich's own ragged gasps.

He felt the presence looming from the endless gray behind him just as he reached the path leading to Marta's front door. He dove forward, but found himself jerked to a painful halt. Talons ripped through the fabric of his heavy cloak, and Diederich was free to move once more.

He struck the front door with both arms crossed before his head. The wood, barely propped in place after the attack of last night, gave way without so much as a protest.

He did not look behind him; he could not spare the time. Praying all the while that those hideous talons were not raised to rend his flesh and corrupt his blood still further, Diederich scabbled for the pack he had carried all the way from the fortress atop Perdition Hill. He tossed goods and supplies aside, searching, digging....

There.

He had never been certain why he had kept them. A memento perhaps? A reminder of their great, if onerous, escape from Perdition Hill? A good luck charm? Or perhaps it had simply never occurred to him to stop and get rid of them.

Diederich rose to his feet, and from his clenched fist dangled the leg irons he had acquired from the torture chamber of the Emyrean Inquisition.

Iron. Creatures of the fey could not bear the touch of pure, cold iron. Or so Diederich vaguely recalled, from half-remembered legends of foreign nations he had visited on another world.

But it was better than standing around and waiting to die.

It stood in the doorway, heralded by thick plumes of fog that prodded eagerly at the interior of the house, excited at this new domain to conquer and obscure. Still it was hidden,

merely a darker form in the mists. Diederich saw arms that were grotesquely long, with talons to shame the fiercest raptor. The abomination's legs sometimes seemed to number two, and sometimes four, depending on how it moved. He saw a snout that was not remotely human open wide in an all-too-human grin, and shake with that same obscene laughter, before the fog grew too thick to see even that.

With a scream of rage, of hatred, of denial, Diederich leaped at the doorway and brought the length of chain down upon his foe. It passed through the spectral shape as though it were as insubstantial as the fog itself....

And just like that, with no fanfare whatsoever, it was over.

The cackling ceased in mid-breath, the shape vanishing from the doorway as though it had never been. The fog retreated and lightened—not evaporating entirely but returning to its prior weight—and even the sting of Diederich's wounds faded away. He twisted his neck awkwardly to examine his shoulder. Mud there was plenty, but he saw no blood, no flesh. Only the faintest damage to his hauberk remained—damage that could well have been the result of his headlong flight and multiple collisions.

Could it all have been a hallucination, no more real than what he thought he had seen in the church? He was certain not. It *felt* too real to be any product of madness. But then, was that not what madness was?

Diederich poured himself a heavy mug of cider from Marta's kitchen, warming his blood and steadying his nerves. He thought of waiting until Leona returned from whatever errand had called her away, to ask if she'd ever heard tell of such a beast. But after mere moments, his impatience won. By God, he would have his answers! Fortified against the chill of fog and fear, he set out once more from the borrowed house.

But this time—appearances be damned!—he carried his axe with him, and the length of leg irons dangled from his belt.

It finally felt like he was *doing* something. Diederich strode through the roads of Birne with purpose and determination, wisps of fog swirling in his wake. The weight of his axe felt solid on his shoulder, reassuring. He would learn what in the names of God and Satan was happening here, happening to

him!

After several resolute moments of marching through mud and mists, Diederic had to admit to himself that he really had no idea where he was going.

If he was mad, there was nothing to be done for it. Better to assume that what he had seen and felt was real, that some malign power was indeed at work in Birne—be it Marta the accused or someone else. But how to find them? The priest was a simpering, ineffective rag of a man, and if nobody else in town would have aught to do with him....

Diederic pulled up short in the road. There *were* folk in Birne who were only too happy to interact with the prodigal Leona and her foreign friend. Diederic had dismissed their attack as the antics of young fools, trained to belligerence and fear by generations of insular existence.

Now he began to wonder if he had been too quick to reject other possibilities. Perhaps it was, indeed, time to have a word with his attackers and their families.

A viable idea, that, but harder to implement than a vow of chastity in Sodom's brothels. Of his five attackers, Diederic knew the names of only two, and one of those currently served as fodder for the worms and beetles beneath the village.

That left only Alfrec, and he might as well also have been dead, for all the luck Diederic had in attempting to see him. He felt as though he had gone through half the village before anyone would even direct him to the young man's abode. Once there, the neighbors informed him that Alfrec and his parents had gone to visit relatives in Darbos, and if he ever saw a member of the family again, it would happen before a tribunal charging Diederic with assault. Squelching the temptation to break in and ransack the house, the knight wandered over to a tree stump at the edge of the property and sat himself down to think.

In a town so small, everyone knew something about everyone else. Surely a dozen people could tell him the names of Alfrec's and Rolan's friends, and Diederic was equally sure that he would find his other attackers among them.

Sighing, he rose once more. It might well come to that, but before he began intimidating teenage boys, there was one other source left to exhaust.

Girding himself for what could prove, at best, an unpleasant conversation, Diederich wandered off in search of Rolan's mother, Silma Reveaux.

A housemaid answered the old woman's door, but could only gape in fear at the armor-clad, axe-carrying figure in front of her. Before Diederich could so much as ask, she stammered out an apology that the mistress was not home at present, and might not return for some time, and perhaps his Lordship might try the graveside?

His steps far heavier than could be accounted for by the accumulated muck, Diederich trudged back toward the church. He felt as though he were traveling round and round in circles, but more even than that, he dreaded the notion of confronting the old woman there, of all places. Beside the grave of her son, whom he himself had slain, did not seem the most opportune place to ply her for answers.

He was actually relieved when the gravestones and the tree, silhouetted in black against the misty backdrop, showed no sign of Reveaux. In fact, with the exception of the two guards, Marta—still in the hanging cage that had once more been strung up in the apple tree—and a smattering of shrieking crows, the churchyard seemed devoid of life.

"Apologies, Sir Knight," said the first of the two guards, an older fellow armed with bow and hunting knife. He chewed upon the thick ends of his unruly mustache as he spoke, and was clad in a heavy leather jerkin that was the closest he would ever come to owning armor. "I'm afraid I've not seen old Silma since she left the funeral."

"Saw her talking to Theoric," offered the other, younger and clean-shaven, with the arrogance common to young men almost as handsome as they believed themselves to be. "We were hauling the witch's cage out of the church to bring her back here, so I heard none of it. But they were on about something. Probably," he added with an ugly smirk, "how much longer to wait before burning the bitch to ash. I've no idea where she might have gone after that."

"The bitch might." The voice was rasping, made ragged by pain and weak by starvation, but it might once have been gentle, feminine. All three men looked up to see Marta leaning heavily against the bars of her cage, peering at them with wide eyes.

Diederich turned to approach, only to find both men moving with him. "I'm terribly sorry, Sir," the older man began, "but without Theoric or one of the other elders present, I think it would be inappropriate of us to allow you to speak with the prisoner."

"It's for your own good, you understand," the younger added. "We'd not want her using any of her devilish wiles on you."

Diederich took a single step. "I am going to speak with the prisoner now," he told them. "If you like, you may attempt to stop me."

"And what if we do?" the young man snarled back. "You'll kill us like you did Rolan?"

The older guard, for his part, was wise enough to move away.

"No," Diederich continued, his voice calm and even. "Under the circumstances, I imagine I'll find quite different ways to kill you."

The young man laughed—a laugh that died midway through his second breath as it slowly dawned on him that, just perhaps, the expressionless warrior was neither jesting nor boasting. His own expression falling, he nervously fingered the handle of his knife even as he ran his eyes up the length of Diederich's axe.

Then, with exaggerated deference to his older companion, he too stepped aside. "I suppose no harm would come of a short conversation."

Diederich had moved past him before he finished speaking, to stand beside the cage. It was the first time he had seen Marta up close. Emotions warred deep within his soul, and he could not determine whether he felt pity or revulsion the stronger.

Her hair, a deeper red than her cousin's, was clumped together in filthy strings. Her face and hands were coated in dirt, and the rags she wore stunk worse than any Diederich himself had sported as a prisoner of the Inquisition. The bottom of the cage was encrusted with human waste, and her breath reeked of sickness and hunger.

"Leona says you've agreed to help me," she wheezed, squeezing fingers through the bars to take his hand. "Thank you. I want you to know—"

Diederich could not prevent himself from recoiling at her touch. “You said you might know something of value?” he prodded, eager to be away.

“What? Oh, yes. Yes. You seek Silma Reveaux?”

“I do.”

“You believe she can help me?”

He bit back on an urge to shout, to rail at her for her digression. “I don’t know. I hope so. Where is she?”

“I cannot say for certain. But,” she continued, as Diederich’s eyes narrowed and he drew breath to speak, “I know that when she’s been distraught in the past, she often took to the orchard. She’s passed entire days there, tending the trees.”

His glance at the guards left no doubt as to his meaning. “Go back toward the center of town,” the older man told him, “and then west. The orchard takes up much of that side of Birne. You’ll not miss it.”

Diederich nodded once, and was gone, leaving Marta’s last, gasping “Thank you!” to float unheeded on the breeze.

The orchard was impossible to miss, indeed. Several acres in size, it was surrounded by a short wooden fence—presumably intended only to mark the edges of the property as it was far too small and feeble to keep anything out. Beyond the orchard began the thick reaches of the Cineris, but even without the fence, the demarcation would have been obvious. The orchard consisted exclusively of fruit trees, and even the unnaturally spaced trees of the forest were not placed in such orderly rows as the orchard’s own. The rich black soil smelled of new growth and the recent rain.

Ladders and wheelbarrows lay scattered about, left to rot and rust in the damp. It was wasteful, and seemed unlike the folk of Birne in Diederich’s limited experience. Perhaps someone had been using them earlier that day, despite the weather, and had simply not completed his tasks?

Whatever the case, Diederich heard nobody at work in the orchard now. Branches creaked in the wind, leaves rustled, and small animals occasionally darted from tree to tree, but he heard no conversation, no sounds of labor. The gate screeched as he pushed it open, but even that warning attracted no attention. Leaving it standing ajar, Diederich moved into the orchard.

It was an impressive accomplishment, whatever else might

be said for it. Scores of trees stood in near-perfect rows, gathered in groups of similar type, so that all the apples might be gathered at this time, all the pears at that, and so forth. So early in the season, not much had sprouted, but Diederick could only imagine that in a short span the branches would be laden with colorful fruits, the air tangy with their sweet aroma. It was remarkably lush and healthy, the lot of it—particularly given the townsfolk's claims of feeble growth and crop blight elsewhere in Birne.

Largely unimpeded by the mists, thanks to the orchard's rigid design, Diederick strolled hither and yon among the trees. He found a few more tools, and several stepladders as well, all suggesting that myriad people worked the orchard, but nobody was present now. Farther he walked, determined to search the enclosure from end to end, ever more desperate with each step. If the old woman was not to be found here, he was out of clues.

And indeed she was not—but she *had* been.

It was the size of the prints, largely but not utterly obliterated by the rains, that attracted Diederick's attention. Most of the footprints he had seen in the soil were heavy: boots, work shoes, even bare feet, but all clearly belonging to those who tended the trees. These were smaller, far smaller, and close inspection revealed that each print nearly overlapped the next, so feeble were the steps that made them. Assuming Birne had no crippled children he had yet to meet, these could only be the footprints of an old, arthritic woman.

Once found, they were easily followed, and eventually led Diederick to a spot near the orchard's westernmost edge. Here the trees were planted ever more closely together, creating a patch of earth where sunlight rarely fell. Was there a fruit that thrived better in darkness than in light? Diederick was unsure.

But Reveaux had come here, of that he was certain. The prints led into the midst of the tight copse, then out once more; what she might have done within was impossible to say. The mud showed heavy sign of upheaval, and Diederick could not help but wonder if she had perhaps unearthed or buried something. Dropping to his knees and leaning his axe against a heavy root, he began to sift through the soil.

At a depth of two inches, the loam was just as it was at the surface: thick and dark.

At four, he was startled to come across a layer of sand. It was a rich red in hue, like no beach or desert he had ever seen. It stung to the touch, leaving the skin pink and irritated—not terribly painful, but enough to discourage most men from digging further. Even with his vastly limited knowledge of agriculture, Diederic was quite positive it was out of place here.

The knight carefully wiped his hands on the hem of his tattered cloak, and pulled his leather gauntlets from his belt and drew them on before proceeding.

At a depth of six inches beneath the earth of the orchard, he found it.

Initially, with only a narrow hole through which to see, he could not be certain he had discovered anything unnatural. For long minutes he labored, even going back out toward the gate and borrowing one of the shovels left untended so that he might work faster. And finally he had uncovered enough to be certain of what he saw. He recognized it from a few pagan writings he had perused during his studies, the better to know his enemy, and from the ornate ceiling of the sanctuary in the tunnels beneath Perdition Hill, and even from his brief glances at the pages of the Laginate Grimoire.

Beneath the soil of Birne's orchard lay a circle of summoning, no smaller than six feet in diameter. The outer ring, and the heavy lines of the pentagram within, were formed by the roots of the trees themselves, overlapped and intertwined. How long it must have taken to produce such a thing, how many years—how many generations!—of careful placement and cultivation, shaping and pruning. Smaller signs within and around the pentagram were more clearly manmade, consisting of carefully measured lengths of wood lashed together with heavy twine. And across it all, carved into wood both living and dead, were innumerable runes and phrases of power. Most were in languages Diederic could not recognize, let alone interpret.

The wood in the center was charred a midnight black, and the soil around it smelled thickly of incense, roses, brimstone, and blood.

Diederic knelt beside the circle, leaning heavily on his borrowed spade, and could barely comprehend what he saw. His muscles ached, sweat dripped from his brow, and

his hands were drenched inside their leather gauntlets, but he was oblivious to the complaints of his body.

This could be the work of no single heretic, nor even a small coven of witches. Such a feat took great effort, and more importantly, *time*. The taint of black magics ran through Birne, and it ran deeper than he had imagined.

At least it meant he'd not gone mad, though he found the thought less comforting than he otherwise might have.

Finally looking up from his crouch, Diederic saw something else, something blocked from his view by hanging branches when he stood upright.

At the southwest edge of the orchard, between the enclosing fence and the heavy growth of the Cineris, stood a house.

Easily the match of any structure he had seen in Birne, save for the church itself, the domicile was three stories tall, and many paces on a side. That it had stood for many years, longer than most of the village, was clear enough. The wood was rough, rotten in spots, and planks boarded up windows that boasted neither shutters nor glass. The brick chimney had partly collapsed, leaving a gaping hole just above the roof, and the porch was so thickly overgrown it might have been just another part of the yard. The decaying wood and shifting earth caused the entire structure to lean toward the south. It looked *tired*, Diederic thought, as though it could tolerate only a few more years before it would simply fall over and slumber.

Even from this distance, Diederic could see the heavy padlock that hung on the front door. It was of black iron, and if not truly *new*, it was certainly of far more recent vintage than the house itself. Nor could he help but notice that a single window, out of the entire house, boasted a sizable gap between the boards that blocked it. It could be coincidence, or the result of shoddy workmanship, but it would be enough to allow anyone within the structure to peer out—and it perfectly overlooked the copse of trees in which the summoning circle lay hidden.

Diederic stood and moved toward the dilapidated house, determined to investigate it. Or at least, he tried. Perhaps it was the disorienting effects of the fog, making shapes seem farther than they were, but try as he might, he could not make his way to the property. Here, he circumnavigated a thick

tree, only to find himself moving back toward the main entrance. There, he strode directly between rows, which should have carried him in a straight line, only to glance up and discover that the house which was supposed to be before him was now off to his left. He even went so far as to take hold of the fence in one hand and follow it along the perimeter of the orchard, only to find that a heavy bough blocked his way. He would have to release his hold on the fence long enough to go around, and sure enough, he found himself elsewhere in the orchard than he expected when he did so.

Diederich had been lost before, more than a time or two. He knew how it happened, knew what mistakes to avoid. And he came to know, as he pondered his current conundrum, that he had made none of those errors here.

He was not confused. He was not perplexed by the fog. Something was *actively* preventing him from finding his way, something he could only construe as witchcraft.

Scowling, Diederich returned to the fence once more. By God, he was not about to let some foul sorcery keep him from his goal! Again he followed the fence until the bough blocked his way, and there he stopped and looked carefully around him.

The branch protruded from what looked very much like a peach tree, though it was by far the largest Diederich had ever seen. The branch was nearly as thick at its base as the trunk itself, and narrowed only marginally as it reached for the fence. The builders, in fact, had been forced to construct around it. Diederich contemplated simply hopping the fence, but he would have to let go of it long enough to move around the branch, and if the ward functioned on both sides, he could find himself lost not in the orchard, but in the depths of the Cineris. Not a risk he was prepared to take, no matter how determined he might be.

So he would simply have to remove the obstacle. Diederich grimaced as he hefted the axe from his shoulder—this would *not* do the blade any good at all—and raised it above his head.

From a knothole in the bough, a single hornet buzzed angrily at Diederich's face.

The knight lowered the axe long enough to wave the insect away with his left hand. It took a moment. The tiny creature

kept returning, as though it understood its home was in danger and was determined to wreak what miniscule vengeance it could upon the perpetrator. Only when he finally caught it in the palm of his gauntlet and crushed the life from it did the hornet cease to pester him.

Again he raised his axe, turning his attention back to the branch....

A branch that now wore a writhing, squirming coat of life. Not just hornets, but beetles, earwigs, ants, and wood roaches swarmed over the bough, transforming it into a living thing. From beneath the roots of the tree, worms and centipedes emerged in an endless stream, and spiders descended on invisible strands, anchored to the branches above.

Gagging, Diederich stepped back, his mind assailed by memories of his helplessness in the chamber below Jerusalem, the remembered sensation of insects squirming across his skin. He felt movement on his arms and slapped furiously at them, before realizing that it was just a quiver of revulsion, the hair on his skin standing upright. He raised his axe aloft a third time, shifted his weight, and then froze as every flying insect on the bough took to the air at once.

It was impossible! The vermin could not possibly be defending the tree! Perhaps... Perhaps it was another illusion, terrifying to behold but vanishing in mere instants, such as the apparent transformation of the priest.

When he felt the first agonizing sting on the side of his neck, and the burning bite of fire ants clambering down the inside of his boots, Diederich decided that this was no illusion. The knight's composure and decorum crumbling to dust, he fled.

Across the orchard he ran, stumbling over roots and tiny contours in the soil. He heard nothing but angry buzzing in his ears, and he refused to look behind him to see if the unholy swarm pursued.

Only when he had cleared the gate to stand once more in Birne's tiny roadways, well outside the orchard, did Diederich pause. No sign of the swarm appeared outside the fence, though in the fog it could easily have lurked just out of sight. His flesh burning where he had been bitten and stung, Diederich took a moment to divest himself of any clinging insects,

and then limped back to Marta's house.

"... doing at the orchard anyway?" Leona asked as she moved from kitchen to garden, collecting this herb and that. While she might have lacked Violca's expertise in the healing and herbal arts, village life had versed her well in the basics.

"I'd wanted to speak with Silma Reveaux," Diederich explained, scratching idly at a welt on his neck. "I still do, though I've got a rather more extensive range of questions to ask her now."

The young woman reappeared and began daubing bits of powdered leaves on his various insect bites. As she reached his left wrist, she cast Diederich a questioning glance. He merely nodded and clenched his teeth.

Using a small blade, razor-sharp and meticulously clean, Leona slashed open the infected skin, allowing the pus to drain, and treated the wound with a slightly different collection of herbs. The smell of the powdered plant was overpowering, and thankfully so, as it cloaked the sickly miasma of decay that accompanied the fevered humors. Other than a faint gurgle at the back of his throat, Diederich endured the ritual without complaint.

"I think," he said a moment later, partly to distract himself from the pain, "that I've come up with a way to get into that house. I'll need to search around your cousin's possessions, see if she has what I need."

He glanced up from the table as he spoke. His breath, already fast and uneven from the pain, lodged in his throat, and sweat broke out across his brow.

The skin, deathly white, clung to Leona's bones, transforming her into a walking corpse. Strips of flesh hung quivering from her face, torn aside to reveal the gleam of bloody skull beneath. And that face! She had turned away from him, yet her head, as it hung loosely and unevenly from her neck, had warped and turned to meet his gaze. Her chin remained pointed forward, her jaw distending horribly as the upper half of her features twisted about to stare upon him. From that gaping chasm of darkness, Diederich heard the moan of a dozen women deep in the throes of ecstasy, each gurgling to a halt as unseen throats were slit one by one.

And then, between one blink of the eye and the next, she

was Leona once more, frowning as she placed the remaining powder in various jars. Whatever croaks of horror Diederich might have made in the back of his throat, she had apparently taken as more indications of pain. "I don't believe you should go back—Diederich? What's wrong?"

She could only stare as, ignoring her queries, he dashed about the room, checking every window, locking every door. She uttered a brief shriek as he overturned the table, spilling leaves and powders across the floor, and dragged her down behind it. Blade in hand he waited, gasping, seemingly unable to decide whether to watch the entrances, or her.

Gradually, his pallor faded. Whatever assault he had expected had clearly failed to materialize.

"Diederich?" she asked again.

He merely shook his head. "I thought..."

What could he tell her? That he was ensorcelled, or haunted, or harrowed? It only meant that whatever witch lurked in the village was working black magics against him. If Leona could not help him, why endanger her any further? And if his soul was damned by the touch of these magics, well, Malosia had done nothing if not prepare him for Hell.

"I thought I saw something outside," he finished lamely. Working to bring his gasping lungs back under control, Diederich dropped his weapon, clasped his hands together to stop them shaking, and forced a wan smile across his face. "So, I should keep away from that house. Worried for me, are you?"

She stared a moment longer, but no further explanation was forthcoming. "No. Well, yes, but that's not it. I just believe you have better options to explore. More likely possibilities." She rose and began gathering bits of broken pottery and scattered powder. He, too, stood, and rather sheepishly righted the table.

"But I haven't. Most of the townsfolk refuse to speak with me, and those that do haven't offered me anything worthwhile. They all believe that Marta is guilty, and while I can't say that she is or is not, *something* is happening in this town. I thought for a time that the priest might be responsible, that the crop failures and the like might be intended to drive Birne away from 'witchcraft' and into the arms of the Church. But Father Cerran is a pathetic fool, nothing worse."

"The Church does not use magic," Leona protested.

“Maybe not before.” Diederic, impatient to be back on the hunt, chose not to explain further.

Leona shook her head, exasperated. “You’d be wasting your time.”

Diederic tilted his head. “Meaning what, Leona?”

She shrugged once. “That house has been abandoned for years, and even before then, it was a shared property—like the orchard—among the town’s founding families. It would be disrespectful to search it without acquiring permission from all of them. But there’s no need. I cannot imagine there’s anything there.”

“I see.” Diederic stood and poked once or twice at the new bandage on his wrist. “Leona, this is not the first time someone’s mentioned Birne’s ‘founding families’ to me. And I cannot help but notice that the old woman I’m looking for is from one of them. These families are arse-deep in whatever’s happening here, and if they once owned the house, I cannot think of a *better* reason to look into it.”

“Diederic, please. I really do not believe....” But he was already moving, digging in cupboards, closets, and chests until he had what he required. Then, with hardly a backward glance, he was gone once more.

Minutes passed as Leona stared at the door, conflicting loyalties warring in her heart. Finally, she stepped out into the street.

Unhindered at all by the fog, for she could have traversed Birne’s length and breadth while blindfolded, she made her way to one of the town’s largest homes.

The door opened only after several moments of her angry pounding.

“My dear Leonera,” Theoric greeted her. “What can I—”

Leona’s response was an openhanded slap across the elder’s face. He staggered back a step, eyes wide, with one hand raised to his stinging cheek.

“This is your fault, you old fool!” she snarled at him, not permitting him the opportunity to protest. “If you hadn’t allowed everyone to use my cousin as your scapegoat, we wouldn’t be on the edge of calamity now!”

“What in the Scions’ names are you on about, woman?”

“Don’t you dare invoke the Scions, Theoric! Not to me, not now. Diederic’s been to the orchard, and he plans to search

your old house.”

The old man frowned. “He’ll never find his way, Leona. And if he does, I’d remind you that it was *you* who brought him into this, not I.”

“Because I wanted to save my cousin! And make no mistake, Theoric. Now that he’s put his mind to it, he *will* work his way through the wards. You know better than I what he’s likely to find.”

Theoric’s frown deepened. “Perhaps,” he conceded, “you had better come inside and discuss this further.”

Even as he stepped back to allow his guest entry, a sharp wind gusted from the west, a wind that smelled of dried earth and rotten apples. Leona turned to face it, casually, as though mildly curious, and gasped once. Her entire body shuddered, and then she was off at a run which Theoric, even in his youth, could never have matched. He could only stare as she vanished from sight. Stare and begin to weep as he came to understand what had occurred—and even worse, what must now inevitably follow.

Ten

Again, Diederic stooped by the unearthed circle, deep within Birne's orchard. He had feared that simply setting foot within the gate would herald the return of the insect swarm, but so far the only vermin he had seen were a few worms unearthed by the recent downpour, and a colony of ants feasting upon one of said worms that had not survived the rain. Still, he avoided the large peach tree, just to be certain.

From his crouch he stared at the decrepit old home, as though the intensity of his gaze might be enough to bring it to him. But then, his eyes were the problem, weren't they? Images of Leona as a twisting corpse surrounded by a swarm of hornets, flashed across his vision. He shuddered.

It was a difficult shot at the best of times. Throwing from a crouch, between closely spaced trees and low-hanging branches, it became downright frustrating. With each throw, leaves rustled, tiny branches snapped, and with each sound, Diederic was certain that a cloud of stinging, biting insects would rise up and descend upon him like a Biblical plague.

On what must have been his ninth or tenth try, as the grinding of his teeth threatened to drown out the sounds of the orchard, the stone finally flew true, despite the trailing weight of the hemp lashed around it. It sailed smoothly between the branches to drape itself over the wooden fence.

Diederic tugged, carefully. The stone brushed against the topmost rail and threatened to flip back over, but it held. So long as he was cautious, kept his pull light and even, it should serve. Carefully he reached into the pouch of supplies he had liberated from Marta's house and tied a flimsy scarf across his mouth and nose.

And now, exasperating as throwing the rope had been, came the difficult part. Taking the rope in both hands, hunching down below the level of the branches, Diederic closed his eyes. Ears straining for any sound of motion, skin twitching in anticipation of an unseen assault, he began to creep forward,

the rope his only guide.

Branches tugged at his clothes, roots reached up to tangle his steps, but Diederich persevered. Nicked and battered by the various obstacles, he finally felt the sun upon his head and rose to his full height, but he kept his eyes shut and followed the rope.

He heard the sounds of buzzing, felt the first bite on his forehead. Fire rushed across his face from the painful venom, and Diederich risked a quickened pace. He felt impact after impact upon his hauberk, his sleeves, his trousers, and the cloth that protected most of his face. What little skin remained exposed suffered bite upon bite, sting after sting. Tears of pain welled up between his tightly closed eyelids, and Diederich began to wonder if he would make it as far as the fence. The pressure on his skin, as insect after insect struck his clothes and his exposed flesh, was as constant as the storm's rain; not a sound in the world could have penetrated the incessant hum of a thousand tiny wings.

How much was the pain, how much the accumulated venom, how much the resurgence of that same helpless fear from his confrontation with Lambrecht and the Grimoire? Whatever the cause, Diederich felt his legs grow unsteady, his equilibrium falter. His grip on the rope grew slack, and with a frustrated gasp that might have been a sob, he felt himself topple forward....

To slam, chest first, into the wooden fence.

Added to the pain he already felt, the bruised ribs and shortness of breath briefly overwhelmed him. It took Diederich a moment to realize that he had made it. For all the pain and fear, without sight to trick and eyes to deceive, he had managed to penetrate whatever force warded the house.

With the last of his strength, Diederich pushed himself up and over the fence, toppling face first into the mud on the other side.

The buzzing ceased instantly; even the tickling touch of spindly legs Diederich had felt inside his hauberk vanished as he crossed the fence. For a hundred heartbeats he lay there, struggling to catch his breath. Then, one hand still on the fence as though he were afraid it might vanish, Diederich opened his eyes.

The house loomed over him, boarded windows peering ma-

lignantly down, angered by his presumptuous intrusion. He felt a strange pressure upon his shoulders, as though the weight of the building itself had settled upon him.

But whether the house liked it or not—and indeed, whether he himself did—Diederich was there. The fence remained solid and held its position, and nothing but muddy, overgrown grass stood between him and the age-warped walls.

Upon closer inspection, the heavy padlock proved a feeble hindrance. Its presence suggested more recent use than Leona had implied, but the lock did not merely hold the door shut, it held it *up*. The leather hinges were old and brittle; the wood in which they were mounted was soft and rotted. A single kick was enough to separate them entirely.

The door swung inward with a dull crash and then dangled, squeaking, from the padlock. Swirls of dust, a barrage of splinters, and mud knocked loose from his boot settled into the room as Diederich stepped over the threshold. He grimaced as he crossed the room. So much for any element of surprise!

Even now, in the middle of the day, the chamber was cast in a pall of twilight. The sun peeking nervously between the boards of the windows provided barely the light of a handful of candles, and it seemed unwilling to cross the open doorway, perhaps frightened by what lay beyond. Diederich found himself in, as best as he could tell, a broad chamber that occupied the majority of the first floor. He saw a few spots where supporting walls might once have stood. Bits of rubble, discarded furniture, and piles of old leaves all lay scattered across the wooden floor. It creaked with every step he took, releasing puffs of dust that smelled heavily of mildew. He left behind him a trail of dripping, flaking mud, and heavy footprints in the dust.

At roughly the center of the room he stopped, cursed under his breath, and lit a torch. He had brought only one, in case the house had a cellar; he had not anticipated it being so dark inside. Best to hurry, then.

The inner walls were bedecked with mildew, and old water stains, tear-like, marred the wood from ceiling to floor. Closer now, and in better light, Diederich could indeed make out the remains of interior walls that had once divided this level into at least four separate rooms. With the exception of

the stone hearth and its cast iron hook, however, insufficient furniture remained intact to suggest what purpose any given chamber might have served. With his foot, he prodded at a pile of rotted cloth and splintered wood that might once have been a bed, or perhaps a sofa. A scattering of centipedes was his only reward. Diederic recoiled, and turned his attention back to the room at large.

On the far wall, a staircase led upward. The steps looked at least as feeble as the floor, and entire sections of the railing had fallen away. Just beneath it was a small door, one Diederic would have to duck to pass through. Unremarkable, it might have led to anything from a simple storage cupboard to basement stairs. What drew his attention, however, were the hinges themselves. Unlike those of the front door, they appeared relatively new.

A step, a creak of wood, another step—and a tiny plume of dust drifted down from the ceiling above. Diederic froze, staring upward, ears straining for any sound. Had his own movement caused the house to subtly shift, or had the dust been shaken loose by someone or something else, moving in the room above?

A minute of silence, two, and Diederic relaxed, if only slightly. He allowed another moment of internal debate before he moved toward the door beneath the stairs.

It was padlocked too, but a few heavy blows with the axe solved that problem readily enough. The door swung outward, leaving the padlock and an uneven chunk of wood behind. Diederic ducked his head and peered inside.

The aroma of moist earth, nearly as potent here as it had been in the orchard, covered him like a blanket. The air was damp and surprisingly warm. Beetles and roaches skittered away from the light of his torch. A rickety wooden staircase led down, into a basement or cellar invisible from atop the steps.

With no room to swing it, Diederic carefully laid his axe down upon the steps. Torch held aloft in one hand, dagger in the other, he descended into the ever-thickening air. The stairs shuddered with every step, threatening to tear loose from the wall, and every inch claimed by the torchlight saw more insects scattering in fear. By the time he reached the bottom, Diederic could scarcely breathe. The rich dirt scent

was overwhelming, but there was something more to it, something lingering beneath it, something cloying and unpleasant.

Wooden shelves, waterlogged by years of moisture and weighed down by layers of mildew, sagged from the walls. The ground was indeed naught but dirt, uncovered by any manmade floor. It was rough and uneven, showing various lumps. Something had been buried beneath the earthen floor, quickly and carelessly.

Images of summoning circles flashed through Diederic's mind, but he doubted that was what he would find. He placed the torch in a wall bracket and, again scraping at the soil with his hands, he began to dig.

The first body was barely a foot deep.

The overwhelming stench of decay struck him like a fist, causing his eyes to water and his gorge to rise. Much of the meat had already leached away into the soil, leaving a shriveled layer of skin and flesh behind. If any doubt had remained to Diederic that the Emyrean Church was not responsible for Birne's misfortunes, they were laid to rest now, for the body was clad in the crimson mantle of an Inquisition soldier. He couldn't see the Church using up its own elite in that way.

Even a moderately casual search around the first corpse, at roughly the same depth, revealed a second, a third, a fourth, and more. Two were Redbreasts, others travelers from afar, to judge by their garb, and a few might have been men and women of Birne itself. All those near the surface were relatively fresh, but beneath them Diederic saw a limb protruding here, a bone there. God alone knew how deep the bodies were buried, or for how long they had been there, but it must have been years—long enough for some to have decomposed entirely to bone.

Shaking his head in horrified wonder, Diederic began to rise, brushing the soil from his hands.

The topmost Redbreast lurched upright, sitting up before him. A putrid hand lashed outward, flinging soil and bits of flesh, to clasp viselike about the knight's forearm. Chain and bone alike creaked beneath the inhuman pressure as the body yanked Diederic close. Empty, dripping sockets locked gazes with Diederic's widened eyes. Lungs that had not moved in months began once more to pump; a hot, wet

breath, laden with maggots and decay, wafted across the knight's face, making him gasp and gag. Frantically wiping damp particles of rotted flesh and worse from his face, Diederich hurled himself back, pulling away from the corpse's grip with all his might....

He slammed hard into the far wall, sending the already-precarious shelves crashing to the soft earth. Clouds of dust poured down around him, from wall and ceiling both. Diederich coughed, clearing his lungs, and rose to a fighting crouch, dagger held before him.

But he had no enemy to face. The body of the Redbreast lay as it always had, half-covered in soil and clay. He felt no pain in his wrist, merely the sensation of pressure already fading away, and his tentative touch found nothing awful clinging to his face.

Shaking, Diederich grabbed the torch and backed his way to the steps, and upward, never taking his eyes from the bodies that lay exposed in the fruit cellar. He staggered twice, moving unsteadily up the stairway, but he refused to look away from the earthen floor below.

It cost him. He felt the impact of his boot on wood, heard the clatter of metal dragged across the step. He knelt, cursing, making a desperate grab, but it was already too late. He watched helplessly as the axe he had left lying at the top of the stairs plunged off the side and landed with a dull thump in the cellar below. He warred with himself, desperate to go and retrieve it, but the mere thought of stepping back down there set his heart to pounding once more. Cursing again, bitterly, he moved back into the main room.

At the top, he slammed the door behind him. It would take a carpenter of some skill and great patience to repair the damage he had done to the lock, so he settled instead for dragging pieces of broken furniture to block the door, and using a chair leg to prop it shut. He did not actually expect the bodies to rise up and pursue him, any more than Cerran's or Leona's transformations had persisted, but with his breath catching in his chest, his skin tingling at every sensation, he was unwilling to take the chance.

His shoulders finally relaxing just a bit, he made his way around to the base of the larger staircase leading up. He expected to find nothing more of interest—surely a cellar full of

corpses was secret enough!—but he needed to be certain.

It wasn't until he was halfway up the stairs that something struck him as not quite right. Leaning down, he peered once more into the main room on the first floor.

The front door, which should have hung loosely where he had kicked it in, stood firm in its frame. Indeed, a trio of wooden boards nailed across it from left to right ensured that it would be no easy task to take down a second time.

He found himself only marginally surprised, and wondered if that meant that he was growing accustomed to this awful place. He continued his climb with his torch extended ahead of him, to burn or brush aside the worst of the cobwebs that crossed the stairs.

The second floor was in no better shape than the first, though at least it had kept its interior walls. Those walls were waterlogged and mildewed; several puddles of stagnant water had collected in depressions in the old wooden floor, only slowly draining into the level below. Mosquitoes buzzed angrily around these spawning pools, daring Diederick, begging him, to come closer. Heavy cobwebs filled the upper halves of the rooms, suggesting that nobody had passed through in months, if not years, but the occasional clear print in the dust belied that assessment. Someone or something *had* been here, no matter what the native spiders might have to say about it. Diederick waved his torch idly, watching the webs crisp and curl away from the flame. He heard rats skittering about in the shadows at the edges of the room, but they seemed too frightened of either his presence or his fire to emerge.

It was, if anything, even darker here than it was below. The windows were all thoroughly boarded, and what little sunlight squeezed through those barriers seemed to ooze viscously down the wood, rather than spreading out into the room. His footsteps screeched as they had below, and he could feel the wood give beneath his boots, bowing downward. Nervously, he cast his gaze to his feet, and made certain to watch where he placed his weight.

As below, the furniture here was broken and decayed, though some rooms had aged better than others. He inched open a door that hung upon a single hinge and found himself in what was recognizably a bedroom. The mattress against

the far wall lay atop a pile of splintered wood, and even in the feeble lighting, he could see how it bulged and writhed with the vermin that had taken up residence within. To his left, a small table leaned heavily against the wall, thanks to a missing leg, but was otherwise largely intact. It boasted dust-covered combs and bottles of myriad sizes, suggesting a lady's dressing area. A large brass-framed mirror stood above it, the glass too grimy and dusty to show anything but a faint bright spot where Diederic's torch gleamed back at him. Everything else in the room was reflected as nothing more than dark and blocky shapes, rather like a poorly constructed mural. Diederic himself showed as little more than a column against the deeper darkness—a column holding aloft the room's only light.

A column behind which something moved, darting across the room with the speed of a diving falcon.

It was little more than a flash of motion in the mirror, utterly lacking in detail, gone even before Diederic spun around. It left behind no evidence but a swirl of dust and the gentle swinging of the door it had brushed on its way out.

Diederic ran after it, dagger held high, footsteps thudding and echoing off the unstable floor. Despite his speed, no trace of the swiftly moving intruder remained—nothing except a faint sob that hung in the air. It seemed to his ears to be the cry of a despairing child, standing at her mother's grave or watching a favored pet sicken and die. He heard a door slam from above, watched as the ceiling shook and another plume of dust puffed earthward.

The creaking floor grew louder now, and Diederic refused to admit it was anything other than his own imagination that made it sound less like old wood and more like a screeching animal. With his poignard and torch gripped in sweat-soaked gauntlets, he set foot upon the stair that would take him to the house's third and highest floor.

One step, two, three; then he felt it. A breeze where there should be no breeze, colder than the outside air, gusting insistently down the staircase. The cobwebs above him billowed and wafted out, reaching toward him with tiny tendrils of gossamer white. His torchlight flickered, guttered, rallied....

And went out.

He stood stock-still, waiting for his eyes to adjust to what

feeble light wormed its way in from outside. He could see no more than two or three steps ahead, but it seemed brighter above than it did below. He remembered the missing board he had seen from outside, and guessed that the stairs must open up into the chamber behind it. Testing each step as it creaked beneath his weight, Diederich inched his way upward. From above he once more heard the sound of sobbing, but it struck him now as less desperate and more devout: the cries of a youngster who had learned to summon tears at a moment's notice if it meant getting the toy or pastry she craved.

The cobwebs continued to billow as he passed, and Diederich was reminded of his passage through the mists. His footsteps slowed further as he reached the top of the stairway; above all else, he wished he had his axe.

A single long hallway with a handful of doors made up the entirety of the third floor. Only one of those doors stood open, and through it lanced a single pale beam of sunlight. Even from where he stood, Diederich could see the window with its missing plank, standing in what appeared to be an old library. The room's shelves were teetering, and completely bereft of books, but they could have served no other purpose. It was an odd find in a village such as Birne, but Diederich could well imagine that the founding families had taken pride in their education and literacy.

No leaves marred the floor here, but the dust was thick as ever. Diederich could clearly see the prints of someone moving through the hallway. And again, the age of the prints was at odds with the thickness of the cobwebs in the stairs. Even more strangely, the tracks seemed aimless, directionless. He could see them easily enough, but each time he attempted to follow the prints with his gaze, he lost them in the shadows and the swirling dust, only to locate them once more pointing in an entirely different direction.

There was nothing for it, he realized glumly, but to try each room one by one. Dagger at the ready in one hand, he reached out with the extinguished torch to push open the nearest door.

He had not quite made contact when he heard the voice again—not from the room before him but from the farthest, down the hall. This time, the child was not crying at all, but

giggling in anticipation. It was a disturbing laugh, displaying a level of wanton desire with which no child ought be familiar. Worse, it struck him as not unlike the laughter he had heard in the Forest of Cineris, just before the Fair Folk began their wild hunt.

Even as he watched, the door at the end of the hall began, ever so gradually, to drift open. The laughter grew louder still.

Diederich crossed the hall at a headlong charge, ignoring the shuddering of the floorboards. Shoulder first, he slammed into the door like a battering ram, determined to take whatever lurked behind it by surprise.

The sodden wood parted before him like so much parchment, and Diederich stumbled into the chamber beyond. Old rags and bits of clothing, rotted and moth-eaten, wrapped tightly, perhaps deliberately, about his ankles. He had a vague sense of a rich child's bedroom—complete with frilly canopy above the bed, shelves of stuffed animals, and a chest of toys—before he tumbled headfirst into the side of the bed.

Mildew and dust shot up his nostrils at the impact, choking him, as the mattress collapsed in a puff of old fibers and dead beetles. The silken canopy tore and draped over him like a net, and even the wooden frame collapsed beneath his weight. As the dust began to clear, Diederich found himself prone on the floor beneath the boarded window, limbs entangled in bits of sheet and canopy, the sagging mattress blocking his view of the room.

From out in the hall, a single footstep echoed.

The floor shook, wood dust sifted from the window, and one of the stuffed animals toppled from its shelf to land on Diederich's stomach. It might once have been a bear, but entire portions of its face had been eaten away, revealing yellowed stuffing that swarmed with mites. A single button eye stared accusingly at him, as a millipede scrambled for shelter in the hole where the other had once rested.

A second step. Diederich thrashed about him, trying to tear free of the entangling fabrics, but it seemed they had a mind of their own. Tangles worked themselves into knots; threads clung with the tenacity of twine.

A third step. The room grew shadowed as something loomed heavy in the doorway, blocking the light from the hall.

Diederich could hear the jagged rasp of something sickly, breathing... breathing....

Frantic now, his vision blurred by sweat, Diederich began sawing at the entangling fabrics with his dagger. They parted easily, but always there seemed to be just one more.

The wooden frame protested loudly, the mattress sagged further, as something slowly crawled its way, inch by inch, across the shattered bed. As he struggled to win free, Diederich saw the mattress fold at the edge, saw the shape of a single hand pulling itself forward....

With the suddenness of a striking viper, she appeared above him, leaning awkwardly over the broken bed. The skin of her face was wrinkled, withered—older than any mortal had right to be, older than age itself. Her mouth stretched wide in a manic grin, leaking a foul yellow drool and revealing teeth broken and serrated, more animal than man. Diederich's eyes watered at her breath, which smelled of mulch and bile. The growth that dangled from her head, casting her face in shadow, was no hair, but a heavy moss—the moss that grows upon the sides of dead things. The nails of her hands were jagged wood, and her eyes were shot through not with blood, but the green veins of the darkest leaf.

It wasn't real.... He recognized Leona's features, twisted and distended beyond even his prior visions, beyond anything remotely human. It wasn't real.... Diederich forced his eyelids, craving desperately to squeeze closed, to remain open and staring, waiting for her face to revert to normal as it had done last time. It wasn't real....

Cackling, the hag that had once been his trusted friend lunged forward with her left arm, her right clinging to the decaying mattress. Claws of wood raked the skin of Diederich's cheek, leaving an array of splinters deep behind them. Battle-honed reflexes twisted his head away at the last instant, so that she merely tore a few inches of flesh, rather than ripping the face from his skull. The desperate maneuver slammed his head solidly into the wall behind, and for an instant the hideous creature before him was replaced by little more than flashing colors.

"Leona?" He barely forced the words past the pounding in his skull, didn't even know if this was really whom he thought it was. "Leona, why?"

Slashing blindly with his dagger, hoping to keep the hag away for a few precious instants, Diederich pushed hard against the wall, struggling to stand. A few bits of the cloth clung to him, but not enough any longer to hold him fast. His shoulder cried out in agony as a claw struck with bone-jarring force, not quite enough to penetrate his mail but sufficient to pin him where he stood. His vision cleared, bit by bit, just in time to show him the hag's broken, gaping maw lunging at his throat.

Wielding the torch like a club—and God be praised, how had he managed to hold to it all this time?—he struck at her face. Teeth cracked and came loose beneath the impact of the wood, and the creature loosed an angry howl. With his other hand, Diederich stabbed furiously at the arm that held him.

Skin parted like old parchment, but no blood poured forth. There was nothing... nothing in the wound but sawdust. Her mouth gaped open, and again Diederich heard that manic cackle, but it seemed somehow to come from behind the creature—from beyond, not from within.

Whether she was a willing participant in his betrayal or another innocent victim seemed no longer to matter. Whatever Leona Talliers had been, she was no longer. She had become something Other, something driven by some demon of the wood, or perhaps the same fey spirits Diederich had encountered before. What remained of her humanity was a shell at best, a vessel for things ancient and inhuman.

A vessel....

Diederich's thoughts scattered as a vicious backhand caught him across the face. Agony stabbed through his eye to the other side of his head, and he felt the cheekbone bruise, perhaps even crack. The impact knocked him clear across the room, slamming him hard into the chest of toys. Wood splintered beneath him, a few long shards stabbing through the links of his hauberk, and he found himself covered in broken dolls and bits of miniature castle. There was no sign of either his torch or his dagger, nor sufficient time to dig for them.

From her position lying across the bed, the thing that had been his friend somehow tensed and leaped, clearing the entire room in less than a heartbeat, to stand on bent and rickety legs before the sprawling knight. She struck downward,

fingers bent into talons, even as he lunged to his feet, arms crossed above his head to absorb the blow. The impact drove him back to his knees, sending waves of pain coursing up both arms and fire through his infected wrist. Groaning with the exertion, he twisted his upper body as he stood, driving the claws off to one side.

He knew the backhand was coming again, as it had before. He knew as well that he could not likely avoid it—but then, he hadn't planned to. Once more bracing his arms, he tensed for the impact to come.

His arms and ribs very nearly broke under the force of the blow, and again Diederick was hurled from his feet and across the room, back the way he had come. His plan, such as it was, had been to scamper to his feet, hopefully before the creature reached him again, and burst through the planks that boarded the window, taking the struggle outside.

What luck, then, he had the wherewithal to think dryly to himself as he plummeted earthward, that the hag's blow had actually sent him straight *through* those flimsy boards. He bounced once off the roof of the second story, and landed with a bone-jarring thump in the heavy mud.

Long he lay there, bits of wood and shingle raining around him, trying desperately to draw breath into his bruised and battered lungs. The stabbing pain in his side implied a broken rib, and the agony that shot through his leg suggested an ankle barely spared the same fate. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, and he could only hope it came from a bit lip or tongue and not some deeper organ.

If she would only give him a few moments to recover....

No. Even as he watched, the creature that once answered to Leona -Talliers hauled herself out the window, arms and head first. Bent backwards, her back to the wall, she clung to the house by her hands and feet like some obscene spider, scuttling downward in defiance of all the laws of God. Her head hung upside down, her teeth gnashed, and spittle dripped from blubbering lips to flow past her eyes and into her mossy hair.

Ignoring the pain, the grinding in his chest with every breath, Diederick hauled himself to his feet and stumbled toward the fence. So unsteady was he that he didn't so much hurdle the wooden rail as fall over it, crying out as the impact drove nails of agony through his cracked rib. He gave thanks

that at least the mystical wards which had prevented him from finding his way through the orchard did not seem to function in the other direction.

A single glance, cast under the lowest rail of the fence, showed the hag already skittering from the wall onto the grass. From her upside-down crawl she rose fluidly to a standing position and dashed for the fence with the speed of a hunting wolf.

Diederic staggered ahead, crawling every few steps when he toppled from his run. It wasn't far, but he was so slow, so unsteady, and the hag was so unbelievably fast.

Please, God, hold her off just a moment more....

He stumbled once more, caught himself against the bole of a tree, and tried to get his bearings.

The circle! He coughed twice, his entire body wracked, as he glanced wildly around. *Where the Hell was the circle!*

It was, if he understood such things properly, designed to keep demons and spirits *in*. Just maybe it would be enough to keep the thing inside Leona *out*.

Another staggered step, another tree, and there it was....

But it was not empty.

Crouched in the dirt, her skirt and hands and even the ends of her hair covered in muddy soil, Silma Reveaux glared at Diederic through eyes that glowed with rage and hate. In the same voice that had cackled from Leona's throat, she shrieked her fury to the trees and the winds, and pointed toward Diederic with a yellowed nail atop a palsied finger. In her other hand, she clutched a bundle of twigs, tied with twine into something that only narrowly resembled a human form. It boasted a tiny lock of red-brown hair atop its rudimentary head, and Diederic thought he could just make out runes much like those carved into the roots of the circle itself.

The knight's own howl of rage cut through his agony, his exhaustion. Wincing against the pain in his chest, forcing himself to stand upright, he lunged even as the Leona-thing came hurtling through the trees, flashing across the intervening space like a javelin. It gibbered as it came, some horrid combination of cackle and wracking cough.

Diederic crossed the circle inches before the creature's talons closed upon his cloak. He felt the old woman's feeble bones break under his weight as he struck her, heard her

gasp of agony, and rejoiced in her pain with every sound Leona made. He ripped the woman from the protective circle and hurled her at the hag's feet. Stepping to the side where the wooden figurine had fallen, he crushed it beneath a heavy heel.

The hag froze, its entire body trembling, as it stared at the moaning crone prostrate before it. The wind stirred, blowing through the orchard as though the trees were no impediment at all. Around and around it blew, collecting the leaves and the dirt and even the insects like a curious child. The fog swirled with it, mixing the lot into a heavy stew, until sight was but a memory of happier times. Buried beneath the wind, something howled—something that should never have had a voice of its own.

And then it stopped. The detritus fell to earth like a brief wooden rain. Leona stood for just a moment, and indeed she was Leona again. Her mouth and her arm began to bleed, her eyes to blink. She sobbed once before she collapsed to the wet soil, her eyes rolling heavenward.

Sprawled beside her, the thing that had been Silma Re-veaux struggled to rise under the power of whatever spirit had driven the hag. Its mossy hair hung in gnarled curls, its talons clutched spasmodically at the earth, and it chortled at the inner screams of the woman who had yanked it from the world and bound it to another's mortal flesh. But this body was old, and broken, and the thing inside needed time to knit it whole once more.

Time that Diederick intended it would never have.

"I know not what you bargained with, old fool," Diederick muttered at Silma, casting his eyes about him until he found a sturdy branch. He knelt beside it, wrapped the end in a bit of cloth he tore from the hem of his cloak. "But I hope it was worth it!"

Two strikes of his flint and steel, and the rag-wrapped branch ignited. For long moments Diederick held it aloft, ensuring the wood had well and thoroughly caught, ignoring the high moaning beneath him.

"You're tough as Saracen scale, and you may not bleed," he said gruffly to the hag, "but I'll wager you can still burn."

"Stop!"

A pair of figures crashed through the orchard, both gasping

audibly for breath. Diederick held the burning branch before him like a club, relaxing only slightly when he recognized them as Theoric and Father Cerran.

"Please, stop," Theoric begged as they drew near. "This isn't necessary."

"With all respect, old man, you haven't the slightest idea of what you speak. This is not the lady Reveaux, not any longer. This—"

"It is, actually," the elder told him. "She's just not... alone." As Diederick's gaze narrowed, he continued hurriedly, "We can place her in the circle, Sir Knight, and confine her there until Father Cerran can exorcise the demon riding her. There's no cause to kill her."

"Hogwash, Theoric. She called this thing deliberately, probably when her first assassin failed to kill me in the fog. She stuck it inside Leona; it *wore* her, like a suit of armor!" He pointed angrily at the circle. "But then, you know all about this, don't you, Theoric? Or am I mistaken in assuming that you're also a scion of one of Birne's precious founding families?"

The old man cast his eyes earthward. "Diederick, please. Step aside with me, and let Father Cerran do his work. Silma's not an evil woman. She was simply blinded by rage and grief at the death of her son. Can you truly blame her? Have you not felt the need for revenge burn in your own gut?"

The knight grumbled something inaudible.

"I'm sorry?"

"I will allow Cerran to try, on two conditions, Theoric."

"Name them."

"First, he tends to Leona's wounds."

"Of course."

"Second, I want the truth of what's happening here. *All* of it. If I suspect for one instant that you've lied to me, or omitted anything, neither Silma nor you will leave this orchard."

The elder looked up at Diederick's face and shuddered. For all the knight's injuries, his obvious exhaustion, the fact that he was armed with naught but a flaming branch, Theoric had no doubt that he meant exactly what he said.

Leaving the puzzled priest to drag the moaning creature into the summoning circle, they moved deeper into the orchard.

"I've been seeing things, Theoric," Diederic began before they'd even come to a stop. "Horrific, nightmarish things. Will that stop once Cerran's exorcism is complete?"

"I—honestly, Sir Knight, I cannot say for certain, though I believe so. She set woods demons and fey spirits against you, and they do not dwell entirely in our world. Folklore suggests that, when the spirit world peers at certain people, those people see glimpses of that world in their turn. Perhaps you are one of those."

"Perhaps." Realizing that Theoric would keep walking if allowed, Diederic halted, grabbing the old man's shoulder to force the same.

The old man sighed. "You have traveled through the Cineris, Sir Knight. I understand you faced some difficulty in doing so."

"You might say so."

"When Birne was founded, the Fair Folk were wilder still, and the demons of the wood ran rampant. The soil was rich, the wood solid, the animals healthy, but there could be no town here. Not without tribute."

Diederic nodded as it all fell into place. "The founding families of Birne... you're witches. You have been for every generation since... offering and sacrificing to your fey and your demons, so the town might remain prosperous."

Theoric nodded. "And prosper we did, far more so than any other village within a week's travel!"

"And if the occasional innocent had to lose his life.... Well, that's just the price to be paid, is that it?"

The old man's eyes welled up. "We're not evil folk here, Diederic. Most of Birne's families do not even know this. We've kept it secret, within the founding families, all this time.

"You must understand: a simple tribute of food or drink, perhaps a bit of incense, or at worst a goat or a calf, was normally sufficient. Only at our highest festivals was human sacrifice demanded. And always, where possible, we chose those who deserved it: merchants who tried to cheat us, or travelers who mistreated our daughters. All the favors granted us by the old powers, we used them purely for the benefit of the town. Healthy crops, abundant food... we were never selfish with them, never!"

"Yes," Diederic scoffed, "Silma was quite the altruist."

“Sir Knight, some months back, the favor of the Fair Folk faded. Cattle and crops sickened; children were stillborn or died in their cribs. We performed all the rites and rituals, but it wasn’t enough. We came to learn....”

Theoric cleared his throat. “We came to learn that only human sacrifice restored their favors, and only for brief periods. We did all we could to keep our neighbors out of it. We even risked poisoning a patrol of Redbreasts when last they came through! But it was never enough. I do not know if the spirits are angry with us and withholding their grace, or if something is interfering with their own powers, but in the end, it makes no difference. We must sacrifice, and we must *keep* sacrificing, lest we lose everything we have!”

“And Marta?”

The old man was crying openly now. “I would not have chosen her. I swear I would not have! But the townsfolk saw our luck changing for the worse, and they needed someone to blame. I could not tell them the truth—that it was not witchcraft, but the *failure* of witchcraft, that was at fault—so when they selected Marta, I had little choice but to go along with it. At least... at least she’ll buy us time before we have to find another sacrifice.”

Diederich reached out and snagged the old man’s tunic. “You’re going to come with me,” he rumbled, “and you’re going to explain this—all of it—to Leona.”

Theoric’s eyes locked with the knight’s own. “I’ll not have to, Sir Diederich. Leona already knows.

“The Talliers were one of Birne’s founding families as well.”

“You told me you were no witch!” His fists were clenched, his face a deep red, his voice loud enough to shame Gabriel’s own trumpet. “You *swore* to me!”

“I’m not!” Leona’s eyes were unfocused, her head throbbing. She had awakened in her cousin’s home, only to find the thing standing above her as frightening as what had stood *within* her. She fell back before him, stumbling over a chair in the center of the room. “Diederich, I’m not a witch! I just....”

“Just *what!*”

“You never asked if I knew anyone who was,” she said in a small voice, her eyes downcast.

It took every bit of restraint he had not to strike her. Instead,

one of the window shutters exploded outward—the recipient of his rage. His hand ached, but what was one more pain?

“You lied to me, woman! You told me none of this!”

“I thought you’d refuse to help!” She reached out for him, but met nothing but empty air as he stepped away. “Diederic, I thought if you knew witchcraft was practiced here, and to what extent, you’d see no reason to believe my cousin innocent of it!”

Snarling, the knight stalked about the room, gathering his possessions. Bereft of any additional weaponry, he even snatched up the Redbreast’s dagger Leona had been wielding.

“Diederic, please! We need you! They’re still going to burn her!”

“You might have thought of that before you manipulated me.” He began shoving supplies, a blanket, and an extra tunic into his pack.

“*You still need my help!*” Leona hissed at him. “You think you know how to deal with witchcraft because you defeated one grieving old woman? She’ll turn to others for help, for revenge—others far beyond the power of anyone who dwells in Birne!”

Diederic only grunted.

“Reveaux cannot follow you from here, Diederic, but the reach of the Laginate Cabal is long, as long as the Inquisition’s own! You cannot—”

Her words ended in a startled squeak as Diederic abruptly stood before her, his face bare inches from her own, his hands clenched painfully on her shoulders. “What did you call them!”

“I—who? I don’t—”

“The cabal! *What did you call them!*”

“The La—Laginate Cabal! They’re the eldest tradition of witches in Malosia! It was from them my ancestors learned to appease the demons and the Fair Folk!”

“Where?”

“I don’t know! I swear I don’t! Folklore says that the coven practices near Caercaelum, laughing at how near they are to the Inquisition. But I know nothing more!”

Diederic shoved Leona back with a snarl, already turning away before she stumbled over the chair to land painfully on

her backside. Ignoring the ache of his ribs, his wrist, he hefted the bag of supplies over his shoulder and stuck the dagger in his belt.

The Laginate Cabal. It could be no coincidence. Diederick did not know precisely what their connection with the Grimoire might be, but one thing he knew for certain: if Lambrecht was indeed in Malosia, he would learn of the Cabal. And he would seek them out, if he had not done so already.

If he had found them, Diederick would find some means to track him, though it might take a hundred years. And if he had not, then Diederick would wait for him, to give him a proper and long-delayed greeting.

Leona's cries for pity, for mercy—for the sake of her cousin if not for herself—fell to the heedless mud as Diederick set foot upon the main road, determined to leave Birne far behind.

Eleven

He fell forever, and forever, until he seemed no longer to fall at all, but simply to float in an eternal emptiness. All around was white, an ever-shifting mist, with no sky above him, no earth below.

And he wondered... was this death?

Then he felt the tearing pain where the rope had frayed the skin from his neck, the trickle of blood from his ear, the dull ache of a nose broken days before. He sensed the rise and fall of his breast, the chill on his skin beneath his flimsy prisoner's tunic. No, this could not be death, not with so many of the pains and discomforts of the flesh clinging to him. This was... elsewhere.

And then the fog grew thin, and Lambrecht Raes tumbled, bruised and broken, to land with a crunch in the unforgiving snow.

Snow. For years he had traveled the world, a pilgrim and a priest in the armies of Pope Urban. He had known deprivation; he had known the bone-chilling cold of the desert nights. But not in half a decade or more had he known the touch of snow. It clung to his bare feet and legs, a merciless vampire sucking the warmth from his body. Lambrecht clasped his arms around him and shivered violently. His nose, irritated by the cold, dry air, began to bleed; already his toes grew numb.

He stumbled forward, his head bent against the whipping wind and the bits of icy white that swarmed about him like hungry insects. The ground sloped sharply beneath him, and he nearly tumbled off his feet. Was he atop a hill, then? On some mountain pass? It mattered little. If he failed to find shelter soon, the only difference it would make would be to those who eventually found his frozen corpse.

"Is that someone out there?"

Lambrecht almost cried with relief at the sound. He saw little more than a silhouette within the white, and imagined the

other man saw him as the same. He did not recognize the accent, and knew he must be far from Jerusalem indeed—as if the snow had not told him as much!—but for the nonce, he cared not. “Yes! Yes, here! Please, I need help!”

The figure who emerged from the blinding snow was a young man, scarcely past his teens. His skin, rubbed red by the icy air, was too pale to mark him as a Saracen, and he was clad in heavy trousers and a thick coat of wool. He carried a shepherd’s crook, and a well-worn sling hung from his belt. Lambrecht collapsed into his arms as he approached.

“God and Scions, man! What are you doing up here, clad like that!”

Distraught as he was, Lambrecht took note of the unusual oath, but now was hardly the time to question it. He knew, as well, that the truth was not the proper tool for this task.

“B-Betrayed,” he stuttered through trembling lips, his voice hoarse and rough from the bruising around his neck. “Guide attacked m-me as I s-slept. Left me with n-nothing. Sheltered in a c-cave, but I had to leave. N-no food....”

“Right bastard!” the young shepherd cursed in sympathy. “Come, I’ve plenty of food and shelter for both.”

“B-Bless you, son.”

The pair shuffled and limped deeper into the cold, until what Lambrecht took to be a heavy flurry of snow resolved itself into a rocky wall, a wall with a narrow crevice leading within. The air was warmer a mere few feet into the cave, and as the smell hit him, Lambrecht understood why. The sound of bleating and shuffling hooves only confirmed his suspicions.

Within the cave, a dozen sheep paced restlessly, voicing their unhappiness at the weather.

In their midst, a small fire burned erratically. The shepherd must be familiar indeed with the region to have located enough wood to burn in this weather. Lambrecht pushed through the milling sheep and sat beside the tiny flame, warming digits that had already turned an ugly blue.

“This cursed storm,” the young man spat, sitting opposite him. “Came out of nowhere, it did, and damned early in the season too. We ought to have had another week or more of grazing before winter truly set in.”

“Ill luck, truly,” Lambrecht commented, grateful, but now

wishing the fellow would shut up so he might think.

But the shepherd scoffed. "Luck has sod all to do with it, stranger. We've suffered greatly in these parts for years now. Damn witches are a plague on Malosia. The Inquisition can't round them up fast enough, if you ask me."

Lambrecht raised his eyes. "Witchcraft, you say?"

"Aye. You must be coming from far indeed if you've not had trouble with them."

"Oh, I've had my share."

"Well, I don't mind telling you, I had my doubts at first. I mean, every land has its good years and its bad, right?"

"Of course."

"Right. But this year, my hometown's suffered too much to just call it a lean year. And not minutes before I found you, Scions strike me down if I didn't witness some witch's magic before my own eyes!"

"Did you now?" Lambrecht kept a straight face, but inside he smiled. He'd heard such tales from yokels before, ignorant folk who had no idea what true witchcraft looked like. What was it to be this time, he wondered. A monstrous shape in the snow? Sheep acting out of sorts?

"It was right outside this cave, it was," the shepherd continued. "I saw a burst of smoke and flame, where no fire could possibly light. And when I stepped out to investigate, I found this!"

And he held out, in his clenched fist, a handful of crumpled parchment, the edges faintly charred.

Lambrecht's breath quickened, and the world around him dropped away as his eyes tunneled in on the only thing that mattered.

Dear God, it had come with him! Wherever he was, it had come with him!

"Aye, I see you're as stunned as I," the young man said, mistaking Lambrecht's reaction. "I fear I cannot tell you what it says. I'm not lettered, myself. But I intend to turn it over to the Church first chance I get, and they can pass it along to the Redbreasts. Where there's witchcraft, there's witches, right?"

"Right...." Lambrecht muttered softly.

"You're lucky it appeared to me too, stranger. If I'd not been outside, investigating this, I'd never have seen you when the snow drifts parted."

“Praise be.” Lambrecht tore his gaze from the parchments. “Son, I could take a look at it, if you’d like. I *can* read, and perhaps I could tell you the significance of what you’ve found, or help you to understand it.”

For long moments, the shepherd peered at him. Then, “Forgive me, old man, I mean no offense. But I scarcely know you as yet. I’m uncomfortable handing over pages of dark magic—and I truly believe that must be what they are—to just anyone.”

“Of course, son. I fully understand.”

They chatted a bit further, over the warming fire and strips of dried meats, until darkness fell outside, transforming the endless white to endless black. Then, leaning back against a sleeping sheep, the young man allowed slumber to claim him.

It was easy enough for Lambrecht to work the shepherd’s sling from his belt, place a stone within, and bring it crashing down upon the fellow’s head. He hesitated, be it ever so briefly: the young man had saved his life after all. But Lambrecht had a purpose, and for all he was trapped in some unknown land—God alone knew how far from home—that purpose had not altered. In fact, if half of what the shepherd said of witches was true, Lambrecht was needed here more than anywhere.

And so he brought the weapon down and said a prayer for the young man’s soul, even as his blood spilled onto the rocky floor, even as he stripped his heavy clothes from him. The sheep stirred, agitated by the smell of blood, but Lambrecht dragged the body to the cave mouth, pushed it out into the cold, and the beasts settled soon enough.

The snow still covered the earth, but it had ceased to fall, leaving the night cold and clear. Lambrecht stared at bright and twinkling stars, and he recognized none of them. He dropped his gaze, and saw the peaks of nearby mountains stretching out before him. So he was on a high pass, after all. It would be a long trek down, but with the proper clothes....

What was this? There, across the nearest vale, transformed by the night and the snow into a bottomless crevasse, a tiny light flickered. Another fire, perhaps, within another cave? He could think of nothing else it might be. Someone else, then, had found shelter on the mountainside tonight.

Lambrecht carefully marked the spot in his mind, and re-

turned to huddle in the warmth of the fire and the congregated sheep. Carefully, reverently, he smoothed the parchments creased and crumpled by the yokel's careless grip. He sifted through them, slowly, spending many minutes on each.

It was all here. Every page of the Laginate Grimoire he had salvaged from the chambers beneath Jerusalem was here. Lambrecht felt tears of gratitude running down his face, and he shifted to his knees to pray. There he stayed for over an hour, offering thanks and seeking guidance. The remainder of the night he passed not in sleep, but in careful study of the Grimoire. That its magics were real, he already knew—but in this strange land, he had best master them swiftly.

And then, then he would learn of this land itself, and the witches who threatened it.

Morning dawned a blinding white, gleaming off an endless carpet of snow. With one hand held high to shield his eyes, Lambrecht emerged from the cave. He wore the shepherd's clothes, and if they were a tad large, they were far preferable to frostbite. He leaned upon the man's crook, and he carried in a pouch at his belt the remainder of the fellow's rations, and the carefully folded pages of the Laginate Grimoire.

He could see clearly that he indeed stood atop a mountain, albeit one not particularly tall. The trail winding down into the vale, and up other nearby peaks, was difficult to find beneath the snow, and likely even more difficult to traverse. But he would manage. With no better idea of where to go, or even which direction to choose, he set out to locate the cave he had spotted the night before. Perhaps whoever sheltered there might offer him directions.

The crisp air was both refreshing and painful. It cleared the mind but bit at his lungs, and on occasion his broken nose would shed a tiny rivulet of blood. He muttered under his breath as he marched, repeating over and over a chant from the Grimoire. According to the ancient Greeks, the litany granted strength, clarity, and comfort to the wanderer. Whether it actually worked or Lambrecht simply took comfort in the ritual, he felt strong and hale of limb as he climbed steep trails that should have left him winded. Indeed, he could have walked for hours more, as he crested a small rise on the neighboring slope, and found himself standing before what could only be the cave he sought.

Someone had been here, certainly. Even had he not seen the fire last night, the tracks in the snow made that clear enough. Shepherd's crook held defensively before him, Lambrecht ducked beneath an overhang, dripping with icicles like jagged fangs, and stepped inside. The light within was dim, but sufficient for him to function without torch or lantern—a good thing, as he had neither.

Whoever had inhabited the cave was gone, departed some time in the night or this morning, but evidence of their presence remained in plenty. A firepit, far larger than the one by which Lambrecht had spent the night, smoldered in the center of the cave. Above it, on a haphazard wooden framework, hung a kettle. Its base was scorched from the kiss of the fire, and whatever it once held had been allowed to boil away, leaving nothing but a residue of herbal scraps. Pentagrams, runic circles, and what appeared to be an eyelid or a rising sun turned upside down adorned the walls, painted in the blood of animals. Their bones and fur lay scattered about, their entrails splayed in ceremonial patterns. On the wall beside the kettle hung a length of barrel wire from which dangled half a dozen chicken's feet—all left ones—with various names scribbled over them in black ink.

Witchcraft, indeed. It was a primitive magic, amateurish and uneducated, but that didn't make it ineffective. For a time, Lambrecht looked it over, idly tapping his fingers on the pouch that held the Grimoire. Then he plucked a single foot from the framework as evidence of his find, stuck it in his pouch, and turned to go.

At the mouth of the cave, he discovered that perhaps he had not wasted his time climbing up here after all.

Near the base of the mountains far below, where the land stretched out into an open plain and winter had brought chilling winds but little snow, he saw the chimneys and the smoke of a thriving town. Several roads led through its borders and crossed one another within, and even from here he could see the occasional wagon upon those roads. Not too large, but clearly a center of trade and commerce. He would never have seen it from his shelter of the prior night, but from here it was as clear as still waters, in direct line of sight to the cave.

Ah. And that, in turn, might explain why the witch, whoever he or she might be, had chosen this shelter for the working of

black magics. Were gambling not a sin—and had he any money—Lambrecht would have wagered many a coin that the victims of that sorcery dwelt in the town below.

He should hurry, then, if he would learn the nature of this iniquity in time to stop it.

He was but one of a handful of newcomers entering the town that afternoon, and no one offered him so much as a second glance. Firalene Down it was called, or so he overheard from the travelers on the road ahead. As he had surmised from above, it was a thriving place, busy and bustling for its relatively small size and awash in merchants and passersby. It had the feel of a hamlet that had grown faster than anyone had intended, and didn't entirely know what to do with itself. Inner roads, winding and organic, led to outer neighborhoods built with zealous adherence to right angles and grids. The older houses of simple wood were overshadowed by newer buildings, mostly whitewashed, and some even constructed of stone quarried from the nearby mountains.

No defensive wall surrounded Firalene Down, nor did any men-at-arms stand guard on the roads. Travelers came and went as they pleased, and Lambrecht, accustomed to years of siege and warfare, could not but marvel at how open and inviting a community it was.

Or so it seemed on the surface. The priest had not stood in the shadow of its buildings, smelling the rich aroma of wood smoke from its chimneys, for more than ten minutes before he knew that something was amiss. Men garbed for the road laughed boisterously with one another, exchanging tales of past exploits and prowess far more fiction than fact, but they were alone in their levity. The folk of Firalene Down went about their business with downcast eyes, hurrying on their way, and where conversation was unavoidable, their voices were clipped, their smiles wan.

It was not so constant as during a siege, nor so prevalent as in the midst of a plague. A man less discerning than he might have missed it entirely. But Lambrecht knew fear when he saw it, and in Firalene Down fear had made its home.

Lambrecht made the requisite small talk with his fellow travelers, commenting on the early winter, the icy breezes

that battered everyone in the open, the heavy storms in the mountains. And slowly he learned of Firalene Down, and of Malosia entire.

He reached the eldest part of the Down, where the roads were winding and the houses growing old, as the slow-moving avalanche of twilight crept down the side of the nearby mountains. There, Lambrecht found the streets packed with townsfolk. Several cried as their friends and neighbors held them, and Lambrecht overheard fragments of many and varied prayers. Several fellows with clubs and axes—townsmen pressed into service, no doubt—stood guard around one of the largest and oldest homes. The windows were curtained all in black, and a procession of elders and official-seeming individuals moved through the open door.

Stepping to the rear of the crowd, the priest glanced about until he found a man standing alone. Perhaps a few years older than Lambrecht himself, his hair was dyed black with some herbal oil, and his coat boasted buttons of polished brass. A man who wished to look more important than he really was, then, probably a vendor or merchant. Perfect.

“What happened here?” Lambrecht asked, forcing a note of hushed awe into his voice.

The other man shook his head sadly. “Our town reeve, Jesmond... you know of him?”

“Only by reputation.”

“Yes, well... he’s dead, poor Jesmond, and his whole family with him!”

“How horrible!” Damn, but it seemed he was too late to prevent the culmination of whatever black work he had discovered. “Was it some accident?”

Glancing around, the fellow lowered his voice. “They say it looks like a pack of wolves somehow got inside. Chewed them all up.”

Lambrecht’s eyes narrowed. “Surely that’s impossible, though? An entire pack, unseen in town?”

“Aye, impossible it is. It’s the haunting, sure as we’re standing here.”

The priest weighed his options, and decided to take the risk. If he was a merchant, this man was accustomed to dealing with outsiders; he might not take further questioning amiss.

“Forgive me, friend, but as you must have surmised, I’ve only recently arrived in Firalene Down. I was told this was the best place for trade within many a league. If the town’s haunted, I’d certainly like to know of it!”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this,” the vendor whispered, though his eyes announced that he relished the attention the tale could garner him. “You must swear to me that you’ll not repeat it. We cannot afford to lose any of our outside trade to fear, on top of everything else.”

“Of course. You’ve my word.”

“It started some months back, you see. A young couple—as nice a pair as you could hope to meet, I’d spoken to him once or twice myself at Scions Mass—well, they were found near the edge of town, both dead. Stabbed a dozen times each or more, God strike me if I lie!”

“Monstrous!” Lambrecht commented, if only to reassure the man he was paying attention.

“Monstrous indeed! Well, as you might imagine, there was quite the fuss. We’re a trading town, here. We’ve our share of brawls, and thefts, and aye, there’s the occasional murder when a deal goes sour, but this? This, we could not have!

“Reeve Jesmond, he rounded up all the thief-takers in town, and some of our best hunters, too, and they set out to catch the man responsible. Nor did it take them long, seeing as how the girl had a jilted suitor whom she’d left to marry her young husband. A fellow by the name of Humphrey Lassiter.”

“And was he guilty?”

“As sin. Oh, his father swore that Humphrey had been with him the night the poor couple was slaughtered, but old Remmy the herbalist, she saw Humphrey out and about that night. Swore it on the Septateuch. And they found a dagger buried in Humphrey’s yard, dried blood all over. Humphrey swung within a week.”

Lambrecht coughed once and rubbed painfully at the raw skin on his own neck, hidden by the coat.

“So you believe this Humphrey Lassiter is haunting Firalene Down?”

“The troubles all started a few days after he was hanged. First it was just a run of ill fortune: sick cattle, problems with the roadway slowing down trade, a building fire or two. Calamities and misfortune, but nothing that couldn’t be coincidence. But

then, one by one, the men involved in Humphrey's capture started to suffer. They found one thief-taker bleeding all over his floor, but when the surgeon examined the body, he found no wound! And Remmy, the herbalist? They found her, and her entire family, dead at the dinner table. It looked as though she'd mistaken one root for another and poisoned a meal she'd meant only to spice, but Remmy knew her plants better than a Friesian knows her spots.

"And now this...." The man shook his head again, and made a strange gesture before his breast. To Lambrecht, it looked much like he was crossing himself, but with six points rather than four.

"I see." For a time, Lambrecht watched the men move in and out of the house, like a trail of feasting ants. "I must say," he continued finally, "that I've heard of communities with similar problems, back where I come from. Those were attributed to the craft of witches and black sorcerers, not ghosts."

The merchant nodded. "Aye, a number of us suspected witchcraft at first. But Father Marten assured us that this was the work of no witch."

"Did he, now?"

"He did. He...." But the townsman had already lost his audience, for Lambrecht was gone.

He spent the night at a traveler's inn, so mundane that he had forgotten its name by the time he reached his room. That was fine; all he needed was a place to pass the night in privacy, to further study the pages of the Grimoire, until the next dawn.

The church, once he set out that morning, was easy enough to find. It was the only structure in the old neighborhood made of stone, and certainly one of the largest. Even as he approached, he could hear the voice of the congregation within, repeating portions of the litany. For a moment he closed his eyes and he was home, standing upon the dais rather than outside the walls, and the voice leading the service was his own.

Then, shaking off his reverie like rainwater, he stepped inside.

Father Marten, or so Lambrecht presumed, stood behind a simple podium, on which a heavy scroll lay open. The man

was clean-shaven and boasted a head of startlingly blond hair. His face clung stubbornly to the appearance of a youth that must assuredly have left him some years ago, but the lines around his eyes were old. He wore a simple black cassock, trimmed in scarlet, and his voice was somehow pleading and comforting all at once.

He beseeched his flock, who sat rapt and attentive, to remain strong in the face of the evils that assailed them. Working together, they would find some means of exorcising the vindictive spirit that haunted them; in the interim they must cleave together, aiding one another, allowing their faith and their friendship to carry them through arduous times.

Lambrecht, standing at the rear of the sanctuary, rolled his eyes. Well-meaning, yes, but naïve and unwilling to face either reality or necessity. Just like even the best of his fellow priests back home.

"This is no ghost you face," he announced firmly, striding down the aisle between the pews until he stood in the precise center of the church. He heard the whispers and the mutters, felt the eyes of the multitude upon him, watched a series of warring expressions flash across Marten's face. "And waiting for it to go away will earn you nothing but further grief."

"I'm uncertain who you are, traveler, or where you come from," Father Marten said sharply. "But here, it is considered inappropriate to interrupt a sermon."

"I apologize for my rudeness, then. But I am a man of the cloth too, though the Church I serve is far from here. Back home, I dealt with misfortune, malediction, and the servants of evil too. And I tell you: you face no ghost. What has happened to Firalene Down is witchcraft."

A second mutter fluttered through the crowd, and while many of the gazes cast upon him were angered and impatient, Lambrecht sensed more than a few that showed curiosity to hear more.

"Nonsense," Marten countered. "I appreciate that you think you're helping, friend, but all servants of the Emyrean Church are trained to recognize the black arts. We must be, in this day and age. And I assure you: we are haunted, not cursed or ensorcelled."

"Must a ghost use poisons, then? Must it use the beasts of the wild as its tools? Or do these sound more to you like the

weapons of the witch, and less the wrath of a spirit wronged?" He thought to continue, but a glance around him showed a great many faces, even those formerly twisted in suspicion, nodding slowly in agreement. For now, it was enough. He bowed his head in apology.

"But I grant you this much, Father Marten. It was inappropriate of me to interrupt. I once more apologize for my lack of manners. Please, continue. Perhaps you will convince me, after all." So saying he took a seat in a nearby pew, and piously folded his hands.

Marten continued for a bit, but he knew full well he had lost his audience. His sermon concluded swiftly, and he blessed his flock before they filed out of the church to set about their day's activities. Lambrecht remained seated as they shuffled past, until he and Marten were the only souls remaining in the sanctuary. Marten stepped down from the podium and wandered over, seating himself on the pew beside the newcomer.

"You say you are a priest, Father...?"

"Lambrecht, Father Marten."

"Father Lambrecht, then. Tell me, was that truly necessary? My friends and congregants are frightened enough as it is."

"Why lie to them then, Father Marten? You know as well as I what you face. I can see it in your eyes. By ignoring this evil, you only give it strength to do more harm."

Marten sighed. "Perhaps. But I must balance one hurt against another, and choose the lesser for my people." He paused for a moment, measuring his words. "Tell me, Father Lambrecht, has the Church back in your homeland an arm like our own Inquisition?"

"It does not, though from what I have learned, perhaps it ought to. It seems a potent weapon against witchcraft and heresy."

Another sigh. "It was, at that. For a generation or more, Malosia has been beset by black magics. It seems that the demons and spirits of the world, and the underworld, have grown attentive. Calling them scarcely requires any ritual at all, or any knowledge of sorcery. The more potent witches are well learned in the occult, but anyone can call up some foul being to wreak his vengeance and curse his foes, if his desire and his hate are great enough. Against that, the Inquisition was—is—a necessary tool.

“But they have grown paranoid, Father Lambrecht, and overly zealous. They see witchcraft where there is only tradition, magic where there are only herbs or superstition. For every witch they have imprisoned in the past year, three or more innocents must suffer as well.”

“A shame, truly. But if it is the only way to purge your land of this darkness....”

“Do you not see, Father Lambrecht? If I acknowledge the presence of a witch in Firalene Down, it becomes my solemn duty to summon the Inquisitors—and others would do so should I refuse. Should they come here, they may or may not find the witch responsible, but I can assure you, they will arrest *many* for crimes exaggerated or wholly imagined. More will suffer then, I fear, than suffer from the witch’s work alone. I cannot do that, Lambrecht, not to men and women I’ve known for years, not only as congregants but as neighbors and friends.”

Lambrecht nodded slowly. “I do not begrudge you your position, Father Marten. It is, indeed, a difficult one.” He stood, glaring down at the local priest. “Alas, you have proved weak. You have chosen the wrong course, because it is easier. A true man of God does what is necessary, not what best assuages his guilt.”

“How dare—”

“I will find your witch for you, Marten. I will show your congregants that evil need not be ignored, nor hidden from. It can be *fought*.”

“Lambrecht, please!” But Marten’s entreaties were directed at the other man’s back, for already he was at the door, and well upon his way.

Twelve

He had to wait for evening before he might begin his efforts, for he could not possibly sneak by the guards and into the reeve's home during daylight. So Lambrecht waited, impatient to be about his business, and reviewed the rites and incantations over and again. In this, above all else, he could afford no error.

In late afternoon, the cold winds picked up once more, howling from the mountains with bitter fury. Throughout Firalene Down, people wrapped their cloaks and their coats tightly about them and hurried to be done with what business they had lingering. The snows remained high in the mountains, as they usually did even in the heart of winter, but an icy rain began to fall, ensuring that even the heaviest of clothes would not suffice to keep a traveler warm.

At the base of the hills, where the mountain streams collected and set off in new directions, the mists rose. Steadily they drifted outward, creeping along the streets of Firalene Down, just another tired traveler. They seemed abnormally heavy, collecting within a few feet of the earth, so that a man could see where he was going well enough, but not where he might step along the way. The wise of the town shook their heads in befuddlement, for the fog was a rare sight indeed in this sort of weather, at this time of year. And then, after commenting on that fact to remind their friends and family how wise they were, they put it from their minds and made ready for dinner.

In an alley near the reeve's home, Lambrecht stood in the shadows, repeating a simple incantation under his breath. He reached out with both hands, and the mists rose up to meet them. They curled about his fingers, curious, even friendly—not unlike a favored pet. The priest increased the speed of recitation and crossed his arms over his chest. The mists rose and embraced him in a cocoon of shifting whites and grays. Crouching, he vanished into the haze that sat low in

the winding streets.

Even had the guards been trained watchmen, rather than conscripted laborers, they would never have seen Lambrecht as he slipped by them, just another whirl amid the fog.

The house smelled of blood and sweat, with just a hint of animal musk. Lambrecht stood in the sitting room and shook his head at the splashes of dried blood that marred the kitchen, and trickled down the steps leading to the second floor. Such a waste—and it might all have been avoided had Father Marten possessed the courage to stand up to the evil in his midst.

Well, Lambrecht would just have to do it for him.

Safely inside, he ceased his repetition of the charm, allowing the clinging vapors to dissipate into the ether. For several moments he wandered the house, one sleeve held to his nose to muffle the worst of the stench, until he found himself in the master bedroom upstairs. Here, where the blood was thickest, the buzzing flies had gathered in droves for a final feast before the winter grew too much for them. The mattress was shredded, and not only blood but tiny strips of flesh lay embedded within. This was the center of the attack, the place of greatest violence, the heart of the magic.

Almost reverently, Lambrecht slid from his pouch the chicken's foot he had taken from the cave above, where the witch had worked his malevolent craft. Although he trusted his memory, he removed as well the pages of the Grimoire and read over the incantation once more, just to be sure. Wincing in anticipation, he ran his fingers through the drying blood, until they were caked with rust-hued flakes. He dabbed them next upon his tongue, swallowing hard against a surge of nausea. With the taste of the blood fresh in his mouth, Lambrecht began the new incantation, pausing after its first recitation only long enough to spit upon the chicken foot he clasped in his right hand.

Even as he chanted again, the talons flexed of their own accord, creaking and cracking in the silent room. Two curled inward, while the last pointed slightly to Lambrecht's left. Still reciting, he moved about the perimeter of the room, watching as the extended digit changed direction. As sure as any compass, it pointed continuously in a single direction. Smil-

ing around the words of the litany, Lambrecht completed it twice more. Sliding the chicken's foot up into his sleeve, he turned and strode purposefully toward the front door.

"Hey, who's that now?" The guards converged upon him as he pushed open the door, their cries attracting the attention of those passersby remaining in the cold and darkening streets. Lambrecht smiled beatifically and allowed them to congregate around him.

"I know him," one of the women on the street called out. "He's the fellow who interrupted Father Marten at morning mass!"

"Is that so?" the guard asked. "I've heard about you, sir. We're going to have to take you in."

"You could do that," Lambrecht said reasonably, "although I'm not entirely certain to whom you're supposed to report, what with Reeve Jesmond having passed on. But if you do so, you'll have to explain to your superiors how I walked past you into the house."

The men exchanged nervous glances.

"Or," Lambrecht continued, raising his voice so all on the street could hear, "you can follow me, and I shall lead you to the true source of the ill fortune that's troubled your town for months."

"He was saying something about that in church," another passerby commented. "You said that it was witchcraft that afflicted us, not a haunting."

"Indeed I did."

"Father Marten disagrees. Why should we heed a stranger over him?"

Lambrecht raised his hands in supplication. "What harm in allowing me to try? If I'm truly in error, you'll all be with me, to ensure I answer for my mistakes. And if I'm not, you can end your nightmare *tonight*."

In the end they acquiesced, as Lambrecht had known they would. Curiosity, if nothing else, would permit them nothing less. Accompanied by one of the house guards and a steadily growing throng of citizens, whispers flying among them, he marched along the winding road. At every crossroad he ran a finger across the talon, concealed within his sleeve, to determine which way to turn. It was enough, for now, that the people were starting to believe he could locate and confront the

source of their woes. He doubted they were prepared to accept the *means* by which he did so.

Eventually, as the crowd behind him grew to over three dozen, the chicken's foot led him to the door of a modest house, at the very border between the old and new portions of Firalene Down. A garden, overgrown and long untended, ran around three sides of the building, and many of the shutters were in obvious need of repair. Smoke rose from the chimney, so the house was clearly occupied. It simply seemed that the occupant had lost all interest in maintaining the property.

Listening to the mutters of the throng behind him as they recognized the house, Lambrecht already knew who would come to the door. He could not help but smile; it was so blatantly obvious, once one ceased clinging to the foolish belief that the town was haunted.

A moment after his knock, the door opened a crack, revealing little more than gray hair and a bushy gray beard, surrounding a pair of squinting, suspicious eyes.

"What do you want?"

Lambrecht bowed his head in greeting. "A good evening to you, sir. I presume I have the honor of addressing Master Lassiter?"

Humphrey Lassiter's father scowled. "You know damned well who I am. Everyone in this miserable town does."

"Indeed, but I am not from this 'miserable town.' Tell me, Master Lassiter, do you find this house comfortable, or do you prefer your cave in the mountains?"

The old man tried to slam the door, but Lambrecht simply raised a boot and kicked. Leg muscles accustomed to years of marching easily overpowered the small man pushing from the other side, and Lassiter fell sprawling to the floor. Without so much as a downward glance, Lambrecht strode by him, eyes darting about the room.

It was a combination kitchen and dining nook, filthy and heaped with the refuse of half-eaten meals, but otherwise unremarkable. That was fine; he hadn't expected the trappings of witchcraft to stand in plain sight. He rubbed gently at the chicken's foot, and nodded once.

"Would you be so kind," he asked, turning to one of the largest men in the crowd, "as to move the cauldron aside?"

“No!” Lassiter called out. “You’ve no right to be in my home! Get out!” But already the citizens were caught up in Lambrecht’s enthusiasm, his certainty.

The cauldron swung aside with ease, revealing a metal grate partly obscured by the firewood beneath. The man who had moved it reached in and removed a handful of humanoid dolls replete with real human hair, a trio of blood-red candles, and a wolf’s fang.

It was more than enough. Angrily the crowd seized upon the screaming old man, and it was only Lambrecht’s cries for calm that prevented them from beating him to death then and there.

“Let us do things the proper way, as they should have been done all along,” the priest requested. “Take him to your authorities, along with the evidence you’ve found here. It ought to be enough to put him in the ground beside his son.”

With a murmur of acquiescence, the crowd began to drag Lassiter from his house. Lambrecht lowered his head and folded his hands, muttering under his breath. To the awed citizens around him, he seemed lost in prayer.

Soon, he thought to himself, mouthing the eldritch words. *Soon....*

With a cry of rage, Lassiter tore a hand loose and pointed a trembling finger at Lambrecht. His shouts were incoherent, but the priest knew a malediction when he heard one. Whatever had granted Lassiter the power to wreak his vengeance, he was calling upon it again.

Though it flashed through the room unseen, every man and woman present felt the power of the curse wash over them to swirl about the stranger who had saved them. And as it struck, they felt it burst, its power fading into nothingness as though it had never been.

Lambrecht smiled, keeping his eyes downcast, and continued to recite the protective charm as the crowd pummeled Lassiter into silence, shoving a filthy rag in his mouth to serve as a gag. Then, and only then, did Lambrecht look up.

“You see, my friends? Against a man who knows his enemy, a man of faith, a man of knowledge, even the witch has no power.”

And that smile continued, growing ever broader, as the crowd whisked him along Firalene Down’s winding roads, declaring Father Lambrecht, priest from lands afar, their new

savior.

They arrived at the church just before midnight, but it might as well have been mid-afternoon for the size of the crowds in the streets. The tale of Lambrecht's triumph raced ahead of them like an excited dog, and like all such tales, it grew in the telling. Many who joined the procession late were convinced that the priest had walked unharmed through a thicket of poisonous thorns and a torrent of hellish fire only to subdue the witch with the power of his faith alone. Even folk who didn't entirely believe the stories were only too happy to leave their beds, to move abroad in the drab and chilly nights, thrilled beyond measure at the hope that the darkness plaguing their town had finally been banished.

And Lambrecht basked in their adoration, his soul swelling with pride and purpose. *This* was how it was meant to be! Finally he had found a people willing to accept his guidance, to open their eyes to the truth that in order to fight witchcraft, one must understand it, bend it to one's own purpose! It was a tool, like any other, ungodly and evil only in how it was used, not by its very nature.

Oh, he would take his time. No need to tell the good souls of Firalene Down that it was magic, not mere faith, that had sustained him this night. Let them grow accustomed to him first, to thinking of him as wise and benevolent. Let them come to depend on him, to trust him. Then, and only then, could he be certain they would accept the truths he offered. But at long last he was on the path—a path he had been denied back in Jerusalem. He was unsure where precisely Malosia was, but he knew now that the mists that had carried him here had been sent by God himself.

The streets were lit by dozens of lanterns and torches, their tiny plumes of smoke vanishing swiftly into the dark night sky. By the time the procession reached the church, it was too large even to fit inside. Fitting, then, that Father Marten awaited them not beyond its doors, but standing upon the steps, a candelabra clutched in one hand.

"Are you quite happy now, Father Lambrecht?" he called out in a voice that cut through the clamor and commotion with the force of a headsman's axe. Silence spread through the crowd in ripples, until only the occasional cough, the crackling of the lights, and the ever-present winter winds broke the

night air.

Lambrecht extended his arms before him, palms up, in a gesture of magnanimity. "I, Father Marten? It is not I, but every man, woman, and child of Firalene Down who should be happy. This night has seen the end of your troubles, and the capture of the witch responsible for your so-called haunting!" He lowered his left arm and crossed his right over his breast. "I pray that some day you can forgive yourself for the harm you caused—inadvertently, I know—by your failure to see the true cause of your congregation's suffering." He bit back a smile at the grumbling behind him, as various members of the throng realized that their beloved priest had indeed led them astray.

But Marten was not to be cowed so easily. "I need forgive myself nothing, Lambrecht! Even were I mistaken, it was a mistake made as I tried to do what was best for my friends, for my flock. I did nothing for my own gratification or glorification! I think you cannot say the same."

God damn the man! Could he not see that Lambrecht was the necessary future of this town? Here he had tried to allow the priest to save face, to pass off his inaction as honest error, and Marten had spat it back in his face! So be it.

"Father Marten," Lambrecht said, his voice calm but carrying, "it was not I who deliberately lied to these good people. Yes," he replied to the mutters and denials from behind, "it is true! Marten admitted it to me in his own words! He knew it was no ghost that plagued you! He feared the presence of Inquisitors more than the presence of a true witch!

"Perhaps," he exclaimed, as though the thought had just occurred, "he feared the loss of his authority. After all, without Reeve Jesmond, who would functionally stand in charge of Firalene Down, if not Father Marten?"

He could *feel* the anger of the crowd growing behind him, hot and violent. It warmed him as thoroughly as any fire, building, building....

"It's true." Even Lambrecht was startled at that, and the admission took the edge off the crowd's rage. "I did mislead you, my friends, and for that I most humbly apologize. I felt it was the safest option—not for me, but for all of you. I did not wish to see our town torn apart by suspicion and fear of one another.

“And unlike Father Lambrecht, I lacked my own witchcraft to wield against our enemies!”

Lambrecht felt the eyes of those nearest him turning in his direction, not yet angry, not yet accusing, but no longer so certain as they had been.

“My friends,” Marten continued, “for how many years have we been together? You know me to be as faithful a man, as committed to God Most High and the Six Scions as anyone could ask. Whatever else you think of me, whatever doubts this night has cast upon my character, surely you know this much.

“If one man’s faith alone were sufficient to battle the black magics, would I not have been the first to stand in your defense?”

“Perhaps you simply lacked the means to find the witch!” Lambrecht retorted. But he could feel the situation slipping from his grasp.

“And how did you do *that*, then, if not witchcraft?” Marten asked simply.

No! This would not do! He could salvage this!

“I used what tools I needed to,” Lambrecht acknowledged, “not for personal gain, but to protect the people of this town! The people *you* should have protected! Does it matter the manner in which I did so, if every man here is the better and safer for it?”

“Every man, Father Lambrecht? Or simply those that are not inconvenient to you?”

Lambrecht scowled. What in God’s name was the priest on about?

And then the door to the church swung slowly open, and a single figure emerged. He limped heavily, moving with the aid of a wooden crutch, and for good reason: even through the rags that wrapped his feet against the chill of the night air, it was clear that several of his toes were absent. The left side of his mouth hung down in a permanent scowl, regardless of the expression on his right, and the eye above stared off at an angle. He seemed, to Lambrecht, vaguely familiar, but he could not quite place....

“Tell me, Father Lambrecht, do your ‘manners’ and ‘techniques’ and ‘tools’ include attempted murder?”

Oh, God... *the shepherd!*

With a shriek of frustrated rage, even as he felt his last hold on the people's sympathy fraying away, Lambrecht shoved the nearest man aside, clearing a tiny bit of space between himself and the crowd. The incantation of earlier in the night came unbidden to his lips, and he spit the words into the cold wind as fast as they appeared. Like a geyser, the fog burst from the earth around him; even as he chanted, Lambrecht could not help but feel that he was not *summoning* the mists so much as opening the way for them, granting them permission to act on his behalf. In the span of a single breath, the yard before the church was enveloped in a thick soup of white, muffling all sight, all sound, all light.

Thrashing blindly, angry fists closed where Lambrecht had been, but the renegade priest was there no longer. And though they searched for hours, both within the deepest mists and long after they had finally dispersed, the enraged townsfolk could find no sign of him.

Dawn was some time distant, with only the very first traces of gray marring the blackness of the eastern horizon. His entire body trembling with fury, Lambrecht crouched behind the heavy trunk of an ancient tree and listened to the sounds of the crowd dispersing in the distance.

How dare they! After all he had done for them, after he had shown them the way, to turn on him like he was some common criminal! Absolutely unacceptable!

It was all that thrice-damned Marten's fault. His cowardice had infected his entire congregation. Lambrecht had seen it, over and over, in many of the churches back home; he'd thought things different here in Malosia.

Well, so be it. Marten and the others who'd turned Firalene Down against him would pay for their sins, and in the process, they just might help smooth Lambrecht's path to others more likely to heed his wisdom.

He left the shelter of the tree, darted through shadows. Grass and soft earth gave under his stolen boots as he approached his destination. After a quick glance to ensure the road was empty, he sprinted across the open space, vaulted a low iron fence, and landed on all fours.

Here, here and nowhere else in Firalene Down, he would find what he required.

Crouching low, like some common graverobber, he darted past the first row of burial plots. These tombstones were old and worn, the earth overgrown, the graves too old for his purposes. Flitting from stone to stone, always keeping the markers between himself and the road, Lambrecht moved through the cemetery.

The ground sloped, forming a shallow hill at the center of the graveyard, and it was here he found what he sought. Even had the temporary wooden marker not been sufficient, the freshly turned earth would have alerted him to the presence of a recent burial.

Now the gibbous moon and the stars were not enough. Lambrecht struck flint to steel, lighting a single candle. Carefully he kept the tiny flame low, invisible to any early morning passersby below. It was barely sufficient, that feeble illumination, but it would have to do. He shoved the candle deep into the soft earth, letting it stand on its own, and removed once more the pages of the Grimoire. This afternoon, he might have proved reluctant to attempt an incantation of this complexity, of this *darkness*, but now his anger burned far hotter than his fear.

Weighing the pages down with stones, he dropped to his knees and began digging madly, like an animal.

In seconds he had turned up a beetle. Clutching the carapace, he turned the creature upside down and held it beneath his nose, so close the wriggling legs almost touched him. Deeply he inhaled, though it was no normal scent he hunted. Twice, three times.... No. No, this one would not do. Carelessly he tossed it aside, and proceeded to dig once more.

More beetles, worms, a lone roach.... Every one he examined closely, sniffed of its essence; every one lacked the spiritual taint he sought.

It was only once he had dug down several inches that he found it: a large black beetle, its carapace faintly reflective and rainbow-hued in the dancing candlelight. Again the priest clasped it in two filthy fingers, held it to his broken nose, and inhaled deeply.

Yes. This one would work. This vermin had tasted of the corpse buried below, consumed a morsel of its flesh. And that was enough to serve.

Lambrecht winced inwardly at what was to come, but hesi-

tated not one second. He placed the beetle between his teeth and crunched down hard, allowing the writhing limbs to tickle his palate, the creature's sticky innards to coat his tongue. With the fluids of the insect fresh in his mouth, he began the recitation.

At the first completion of the incantation, his mouth began to burn. Focusing through the pain, he started again.

A second time through and wisps of mist accumulated in the air before him, spinning in a slow spiral around the earthen mound.

A third, and the mist fell like autumn leaves, seeped into the soil, and was gone.

Four times... five....

On the sixth recitation, the soil began to shift about as something shuddered and moved beneath it, something that should never again have seen the light of day. Lambrecht watched as the first dirt-covered, decomposing hand broke the surface of the earth, and he rejoiced.

The wind gusted over a road made hard and cold by the changing seasons. The staccato clatter of the horses' iron shoes reverberated in otherwise-silent air, for it was enough to frighten away the tiny beasts that might normally brave the trees beside the highway.

At the head of the column, riding proudly beneath the crimson-and-gold standard of the sixfold sun, Captain Wulfaer of the Emyrean Inquisition released his hold on the reins long enough to wrap his heavy cloak more tightly about him, shivering despite its warmth. He hated winter, hated it with an abiding passion that was probably inappropriate in an agent of the Church, but he was fairly certain that the Scions would forgive him his temerity. He, like his mother, was swarthy of skin and dark of hair, and far more comfortable even in the roasting heights of Malosia's vicious summers than he was when the north winds blew.

At the very least, he and his division could have remained holed up in the stockades at Avron, but no. Some priest had sent a desperate missive to Caercaelum about a witch in Firalene Down, no minor spell-worker, but a true dark sorcerer. There might even have been two of them; Wulfaer was not entirely clear on that point. Still, they'd be arriving soon

enough, just a matter of an hour or so now. And he'd figure it out from....

Wulfaer's steed, bred for war and coached by the finest trainers in all Malosia, snorted suddenly, its breath steaming in the cold. It pranced side to side, not quite nervous enough to halt, but as uncomfortable as Wulfaer had ever seen it. It scented something—something that hung too low in the night air for its rider to detect.

With a raised fist, the captain ordered his column to halt. Instantly the beat of hooves and the jingle of harnesses ceased, replaced by the clinking of chain and the creak of leather gauntlets closing around hilts. With one hand resting on his own pommel, Wulfaer scanned the terrain.

The grasses along the road bent sharply in the winter breeze. The trees, largely bare save for those few spots where the reds and golds of autumn clung stubbornly, waved gently as though bidding the Inquisitors greetings—or perhaps farewell. The night was already growing dark, for the mountains, tooth-like, took great bites from the sun as it descended behind them.

It all looked normal enough. Even the relative silence was fairly typical, given the frightening presence of the Inquisitors and their mounts. For the life of him, Wulfaer could see nothing, sense nothing, that should have spooked his horse.

But neither had he risen through the ranks, first of the Church soldiers and then of the Inquisition, by acting rashly.

Another gesture, and the column moved ahead once more, but slowly, cautiously. Every man's eyes searched their surroundings for the slightest incongruity. Even the other horses, their riders' anxiety adding to their own, seemed subtly more alert, ready to leap ahead or aside at an instant's notice.

Gradually, they crested a small rise in the road, and Wulfaer yanked his mount to a halt. The beast whickered unhappily, as discomfited by what lay ahead as its master. Several of his men halted behind him, and Wulfaer heard a variety of oaths and prayers to the Scions in hushed and horrified voices.

Firalene Down, as with many of Malosia's trading cities and towns, had spawned semi-permanent camps within an hour's travel from the main gates. Within these "peddlers' parks," merchants of questionable quality hawked wares of dubious

worth, but at prices far better than might be found within the towns themselves. Vendors sold greasy foods and bitter ales to travelers unwilling to wait another hour or more for refreshment. A few peddlers' parks outside the greatest cities even provided cheap lodging for those too tired to finish the journey, or unable to afford better.

The peddlers' park on the road to Firalene Down lacked such amenities, and a good thing it was.

It meant that fewer folks had been present to die.

The canvas tents and makeshift stalls lay abandoned. Scattered before them, and across the road, sprawled over a dozen corpses, limbs splayed loosely in grotesque postures achievable only by the dead. Even more disturbing, many of the bodies had already putrefied—some only slightly, some as though months had passed since the soul had moved on to a higher dwelling. Wulfaer knew not if this suggested plague, or witchery, or something else entirely, but he knew full well it was unnatural.

He could, however, give thanks unto God and Scions for this much, at least: the number of corpses could not begin to account for the entire population, vendors and passersby, of a peddlers' park. With luck and grace, most of the folk had fled from whatever catastrophe befell them, perhaps taking shelter within Firalene Down rather than staying behind to die.

The captain and his men dismounted and approached warily, swords drawn, axes hefted, arrows nocked. If whoever, or *whatever*, had attacked these poor souls yet lingered, the soldiers of the Empyrean Inquisition would see to it that it never harmed another.

"Witchcraft, sir! It must be."

Wulfaer rolled his eyes before turning about. Guillame, the division's Truth Seeker, had all the enthusiasm and zealotry of the born witch-hunter, and none of the practicality of the soldier. Wulfaer would have been happier, by far, without him, or *any* Truth Seeker, along. Better to leave the more unpleasant necessities of the Inquisition to the turnkeys at the various prisons. No need to carry it into the world with them.

"Guillame?"

"Sir?"

Wulfaer's voice was a bestial hiss. "*Shut up and get back in formation!*"

The other scowled, and Wulfaer could already sense another formal complaint on the way when they returned to Avron. Fine, then. He had a few choice words for Guillame's superiors as well.

Broadsword in hand, he returned his attention to the first of the corpses obstructing the road. The flesh clung tightly to the bones, and much of the body's back, left visible by rents in the clothes, was discolored by various settling humors. Most telling of all was the clothing itself: this was no normal outfit, but a burial shroud! The corpse looked as though it had been dead for weeks because it *had* been. How in the Scions' names it got here....

With a groan of escaping air, dust-filled and foul with noxious gasses, the corpse rolled over. Fingers of bone, leathery flesh, and creaking tendons clamped viciously around Wulfaer's ankle, locking him in place, as the desiccated jaw gaped wide. The captain could not contain a bloodcurdling shriek of terror and agonized revulsion as rotted teeth bit into his flesh, leaking black and viscous fluids that burned the skin and corrupted the blood.

Wulfaer lashed out with a mindless kick, desperate to get the unnatural thing off of him. Its skull caved in like a ripe melon and tore free from his leg, leaving several teeth behind to fester. Even that seemed more inconvenience than injury, for the corpse rose unsteadily to its feet, pulling itself upright with an iron grip on Wulfaer's own cloak.

"For God's sake!" he screamed, his voice high and trembling, "lend me a hand here!" But there were none free to aid him, for every other dead body in and along the road had risen with the first. They walked or crawled or limped or shambled but however they moved, they converged as one upon the terrified column of soldiers. The air grew thick with the miasma of decay, and several of the living men with weaker stomachs fell to their knees and retched.

Still, for all their revulsion, all their fear of a level of black sorcery such as they had never known, these were soldiers of the Empyrean Inquisition, warriors for God and Scions. Even as they trembled, their hands clutched tight on weapons of war. Arrows burst through sodden flesh, fat with water and foul fumes, and steel blades spilled gobbets of black and clotting blood.

Wulfaer stared deep into shriveled eyes that leaked thick, yellowed tears. He was afraid, more afraid than he had ever been, but he knew now why he must be here, even in the midst of the cold and the wind. Here was where he was needed most. He began to sing at the top of his lungs, an ancient paean of praise to the Scions, even as he thrust his sword through the foul creature's chest, twisting viciously.

Bone cracked, organs tore, blood flew—and none of it so much as slowed the thing down. Fingers bent into foul talons slammed against Wulfaer's head, leaving scores in his helm. The paean died half sung, and the soldier's vision flashed white at the impact. He retreated a step, his blade weaving blindly through the air, as he blinked rapidly to clear his eyes.

His vision returned just in time to show him the thing's jaw gaping wide once more, lunging at his throat.

A desperate parry with his blade cleaved half the corpse's lower jaw from its face, and *still* it came at him—mutilated, mangled, inexorable. Wulfaer heard the screams of men falling behind him, and he could only pray their deaths came swiftly, that they could not feel the claws of bone invade their flesh, or dead teeth chewing upon their limbs.

He had retreated now to stand with the rest of his column, clustered back to back against the advance of the dead. Their horses had long since fled, their training overcome by a primal, instinctual aversion to what should not be.

And Wulfaer had just enough time for what he was certain would be his last thought upon this world. *Dear Scions, let me not rise as one of these once I've fallen!*

As though in answer, one of the tents beside the road shifted. A figure emerged, clad in simple wool coat and trousers. His face was bloodstained, his brown and gray hair plastered to his scalp. Wulfaer could not tell, at initial glance, if this was an injured man—perhaps a survivor of whatever had befallen this cursed place—or another of the walking dead.

The stranger stumbled toward the roadside, wiping the blood from his eyes—eyes that stared wide at the carnage before him. Slowly he raised his hands, made a strange gesture in the air before him—very much like the sixfold sun, but incomplete—and began to chant. It sounded like an Emyrean prayer, but it was none Wulfaer had ever heard.

And to the astonishment of all, the dead paused in their murderous efforts! They did not retreat, did not fall to the earth in resumption of their natural state, but for an instant, they froze, held in place by the power of the sacred words.

"You'd best hurry, Captain," the stranger hissed, face broken out in a sweat despite the biting cold. "I'm not certain how long I can hold them!"

Who and *how* could wait for a more opportune time, though they burned at Wulfaer like a rash that demanded scratching. Instead, through clenched teeth, "What would you have us do? They don't even feel our blades!"

A finger shaking violently, from fear or from the strain of concentration Wulfaer could not say, pointed sharply toward a copse of trees, some dozens of yards back from the roadway. "The dead do not rise without a witch to call them," the stranger rasped, before turning his voice once more to his chant.

With a swift gesture, Wulfaer commanded the five nearest soldiers to accompany him, leaving the others to hold back the dead men should they break free of the newcomer's sway. With blades held high, they charged across the grass and between the thick boughs.

What they found was nearly as disturbing as the legion of the dead.

A pair of men pranced wildly about a small fire. Dreadful symbols were drawn around the flames in what looked like the viscous blood of long-dead corpses, and the scraps of kindling that survived suggested that it had been lit with a copy of the Septateuch itself! The clearing smelled of smoke and sweat.

But most grotesque of all were the dancers themselves, for their movements were stiff and unnatural, their mouths twisted into rictus grins, and they made no noise save an occasional manic giggle. One hobbled heavily, his feet showing signs of frostbite, his mouth and his left eye fallen limp from some head injury for which he wore heavy bandages. The other, in a blasphemous mockery of faith, wore the black and crimson cassock of an Emyrean priest!

The manic figures turned as one when the soldiers burst through the underbrush, their fists and nails raised to strike as mindlessly as the animate corpses had done. They giggled

wildly as their attackers approached, they giggled as the soldier's weapons cleaved their flesh, they giggled as they died.

Wulfaer stalked across the clearing and furiously kicked at the fire, scattering the embers. He continued to scuff at the earth as it died, obliterating the foul symbols surrounding it.

He and his fellow soldiers heard the cheer from the roadside, and slowly they began to relax. They emerged from the wood to see every corpse lying where it had fallen, once more returned to the peace of a natural death.

Yet not all was right in the world. With a heavy heart, Wulfaer ordered several men to collect the bodies of the fallen soldiers, for proper Emyrean burial back home. He sent his fastest and most fit running down the road in search of the panicked horses.

Wulfaer himself approached the stranger, who sat slumped at the side of the road, struggling to catch his breath.

"My name is Captain Wulfaer," he said by way of introduction. "What might I call you?"

"Lambrecht. Father Lambrecht, if the titles of my homeland have any meaning here."

"You're a priest, then?"

"I am."

The soldier nodded. "You saved my men, Father, and myself. For that, you have my gratitude, for whatever good that may do you. But you must also understand, you've raised a great many questions that require answers."

Lambrecht nodded. "My charm against the risen dead."

"Just so."

"It is not witchcraft as you understand it, Captain. I have studied the dark arts, not to employ them, but to counter them. My charm is a simple means of focusing the power of my own faith against the necromancies and sorceries used by the servants of demons."

"And I have every reason to want to believe that, Father Lambrecht. Certainly, if true, it would prove a valuable weapon in our cause." The captain shook his head. "But the authority to decide your fate is not mine. You have used strange magics before me, and I fear my duty allows for no leeway."

"You must take me to see your superiors, then, and let them decide if what I say is true."

Wulfaer nodded. "I will speak on your behalf, Father Lambrecht. Every man here will do the same. You saved our lives; I believe you are no witch."

Lambrecht smiled. "That is all I could ask. Very well, Captain Wulfaer. I am ready to go."

The men of the column turned about, several carrying the corpses of their friends over their shoulders. They would walk, at least until they managed to recover their horses. No time, now, for a visit to Firalene Down—though Wulfaer was fairly certain that their witch problem was over anyway. No, the opportunities offered by this Father Lambrecht were too vital. He must be brought before the Inquisition and the Church, and soon.

As they crested the rise once more, Lambrecht turned to look back, back at the corpses he had pulled from their eternal rest, back at the copse of trees that would be the only tomb for the men who had turned Firalene Down against him.

And he smiled a gentle smile, for he knew that their sacrifice would not prove in vain.

Thirteen

“M’lord, with the utmost respect, is it entirely necessary to keep him here?”

Under other circumstances, Captain Wulfaer would never have spoken thus to the man who strode two paces before and beside him. In fact, in all the years he had served, the entirety of his words to this man had amounted to little more than multiple repetitions of—and variations on—“Yes, my lord!”

But these were as far from normal circumstances as Wulfaer had ever seen, and his need to defend the man who had saved his life, and his troops, had emboldened him.

He could have been anyone’s favorite old uncle, the man to whom he spoke. His hair and beard were the white of the dandelion, and would have sprouted as wildly without the utmost care to brush, comb, and tie them down into some measure of dignity. His eyes were bright, despite his age, his round cheeks red beneath the beard. He boasted that precise level of rotundity that marked the demarcation between plump and obese, and his smile was both friendly and frequent.

An all-purpose smile, that. One that had shined over the delight of his own grandchildren, as they received their gifts on Scions Mass Eve, and gleamed with equal fervor and satisfaction over the slow and deliberate breaking of a heretic’s bones and the roasting of his flesh in search of a confession. For this affable old fellow, clad in simple robes of black, was Oste van Brekke, First Confessor of the Empyrean Inquisition, and arguably the most powerful man in the Church’s service, second only to Pontiff Cornelis the First himself.

And First Confessor van Brekke was not smiling now.

Wulfaer swallowed nervously as his highest superior drew to a halt, allowing his footsteps to fade away down the stone corridor, as though they ran ahead to announce their coming. The First Confessor crossed his arms before him, his hands hidden in his voluminous sleeves, but did not turn.

“Captain,” he said, and his voice was calm, collected, even gentle, “putting aside for the nonce his heretical claims of priesthood in a Church unknown to us, the man is a witch.”

“I don’t believe he is, m’lord.”

“Yes, so you’ve said.” Van Brekke finally turned, and Wulfaer swallowed once more. Was he actually *arguing* with the First Confessor? “Yet you cannot explain the abilities, the *magic*, he displayed.”

“No, m’lord. But he did save my life, and the lives of most of my men. And if he were indeed a witch, surely he could have made some effort to escape capture. He did not. He *volunteered* to come with us.”

“Again, so you’ve said.” Van Brekke placed a fatherly, comforting hand upon Wulfaer’s shoulder. “And I’ve not been deaf to your words, Captain. Your report is why the fellow.... I’m sorry, his name once more?”

“Lambrecht, Sir.”

“Right, then. Why Lambrecht is merely confined, and has not been handed over to the Truth Seekers for confession.”

“Thank you for that, m’lord.”

“If he can indeed convince me that his abilities stem from some source other than the dark arts, that he can be of use to our cause, I’ll happily release him, take him in, introduce him personally to the pontiff. But,” he added, allowing his hand to drop, “honesty compels me, Captain, to confide in you that I think it unlikely. I believe that what we have here is just another witch who hoped that using his sorceries on your behalf might purchase him some leeway. And I fear—grateful as I am that you and most of your soldiers are alive—that it shall not.”

Wulfaer frowned, but “Yes, m’lord,” was again the only safe response.

They proceeded, a quartet of pikemen accompanying them some paces behind, along stone walkways. Rather fancifully dubbed the Citadel of Truth (the peasantry were so easily awed by such titles), the ornate keep stood in the shadow of the Empyrean Basilica in the heart of Caercaelum. It was taller than the Basilica itself, but a far smaller structure overall. In truth, it was not even all that impressive a fortress: narrow and old, and not so formidable as many of the Inquisition’s other strongholds. Nevertheless, the Citadel was the

heart of the Church's sword and shield, the Emyrean Inquisition.

In a way, even being imprisoned here was an honor, for this dungeon was home only to those suspects in whom the First Confessor, or other luminaries of the Church, had taken a personal interest.

The stairs at the hall's terminus spiraled down, and down, and down. Ultimately, it was a trick of architecture and geography. Those who walked the stairway might feel they had progressed deep underground, especially if they were familiar with other prisons such as Perdition Hill. In truth, they were barely ten feet beneath the earth, having simply progressed from one level of the Citadel to another farther down the slope of Scions Mount.

They heard running footsteps before they'd reached the bottom. One of the turnkeys met them at the base of the stairs, breathless, bowing low to van Brekke. The First Confessor smiled kindly at him. "Rise, son, and catch your wind." The guarded nodded once in thanks and panted for a long moment.

Then, "Your Eminence, I'm so grateful you've arrived. We have a...." He stopped, shaking his head.

"A what, son?"

"I'm uncertain, my Lord. It—I *suppose* it's a problem, but I don't truly—"

"Involving the new prisoner?" The question was out before Wulfaer could stop it. He blushed and stepped back, lowering his head in apology, but van Brekke merely cast him a brief reproachful glance.

"Aye," the guard admitted. "With him. Ah, sort of."

"Show me," van Brekke ordered, suddenly not so genial, not so kind.

Another stone hall, echoing, windowless, contributing to the Citadel's illusions—perhaps delusions?—of infinity. They proceeded swiftly: not at a run, but a swift and decisive walk that allowed for greater dignity. At the end stood a solid door, oak and iron. The guard had the heavy key in hand before they reached it. Avuncular and affable the First Confessor might seem, but the turnkey sensed well enough that it would be poor judgment to keep him waiting.

A heavy clang, uttered in the deep voice of iron, announced

the opening of the lock. The door swung aside with surprising ease, on well-greased hinges. Beyond it, another trio of guards, standing motionless at their posts, stared ahead emotionlessly, professionally, yet they could not prevent a narrowing of their eyes, a subtle wincing at the sounds from beyond.

And what sounds! From the communal cells came a commotion the likes of which neither Wulfaer nor even van Brekke had ever heard. A dozen voices raised in cacophony, with nary a single spoken word. Giggles and cackles, whimpers and sobs, formed the several notes of a discordant chorus whose song was desperation.

“Open it,” van Brekke ordered, his jaw clenched beneath his dandelion beard.

The turnkey raised his jingling ring, then hesitated, even in the face of the First Confessor’s order. “My Lord, are you certain? I—”

“Open it. Now!”

A thud of the lock, a creak of the hinge, and it was done. The acrid stench of sweat and the sour miasma of urine tickled their nostrils. The cries and calls assailed their ears.

Within the cell, men and women huddled in corners, their heads buried in their hands as they cried, or scratched madly at the unforgiving walls, mindlessly struggling to dig through solid rock. A few lay on the straw atop the floor, barely able to breathe through peals of endless laughter, and one woman... oh, God and Scions! One woman, shrieking wordlessly against some unseen horror, clawed frantically at her ruined, useless eyes with nails bitten into jagged weapons.

And in the center of it all, the eye of the whirlwind, Lambrecht Raes sat, his legs crossed and his eyelids shut in peaceful meditation, unheeding of the chaos around him.

“I believe you should find,” he said without looking up, “that these heretics are ready to confess.”

Indeed, even as he spoke, the nearest of the sobbing prisoners hurled himself at van Brekke’s feet, begging to confess his sins, to name each and every participant in his pagan rituals, if only the Inquisitors would take the visions away! Another after him, and another, and yet more. Some failed to wait even for permission, but began reciting a litany of transgressions: many relatively innocent, mere crimes of greed and lust; others far more severe, the calling down of curses

upon a rival, or the sacrifice of beasts to the demons of the fields, in hopes of a healthier crop. A living carpet of men and women spread itself before van Brekke, pleading for mercy, or for whatever punishments the Inquisition chose to levy upon them.

More confessions, in an instant, than the most skilled and experienced Truth Seeker could have extracted in weeks.

Oste van Brekke looked upon the heathen priest who sat unmoving within the cell, and he felt his breath quicken in fear.

“Get them out of here,” he ordered, clearing his throat to hide the hoarse tremor in his voice. “All of them!”

Pale-faced guards reached past with trembling hands to lift the prisoners from the floor. Some they scattered to other cells, some to the confessional chambers where scribes awaited day and night to record the details of any admission, a few to the infirmary where Church surgeons would tend to what wounds they could. In moments, none remained, save Lambrecht sitting amid the straw, and Wulfaer and van Brekke framed in the open door.

“Do you still defend this man?” the First Confessor demanded under his breath. The captain, his face as pallid as any of the guards’, could scarcely work his jaw; no sound emerged.

“Do you see, your Eminence?” Lambrecht asked, finally opening his eyes. “I do not offer you merely the means to *confront* witchcraft, but to ensure its just and proper punishment.”

Van Brekke’s boots crunched through the straw until he stood directly before the prisoner, looming above him. “You may believe that you are aiding your cause here, Lambrecht,” he boomed, “but you are not. You have only further convinced me of your guilt. What you’ve done here is unnatural, unholy, and I’ll have none of it ‘aiding’ my Church!”

“Ah, but that’s not truly your decision, is it?” Lambrecht craned his neck so he might meet van Brekke’s eyes. “You certainly do not look like the pontiff about whom I’ve heard.”

“I am not. I have, however, more than enough authority to deal with the likes of you!” Van Brekke raised an arm to summon the guards back to him—and stopped, hesitating, at the widening of Lambrecht’s smile.

“Your Truth Seekers, your Inquisition, your confessions.... They’re all about the *senses*, your Eminence. What a man sees, hears, feels—that to him is real. Let him see, hear, and feel what others do not, and we call that madness.

“Let me show you, your Eminence, what is *real*.”

Van Brekke heard the ringing of church bells in the distance, though the sound could not possibly have penetrated the stone of the Citadel and the earth of Scions Mount. They pealed loudly in his ears, tolled in the depths of his soul, slowly, deeply, one by one.

Clang... Clang... Clang....

And in the harsh reverberations of the bells came other sounds, other voices. The echos of the bell became the choking gurgles of a young mother dragged by her ankles behind a moving coach. The stones of the road ate away at the flesh of her face and bosom, as they had already stolen away the life that had grown beneath her swollen abdomen....

Clang... Clang... Clang....

They were the crashes and the clatters of the instruments of confession; the clicking of the wheel and the groaning of the rope pulled taught; the sizzling of the hot irons, pressed to white and vulnerable flesh; the sloshing of the water as someone thrashed beneath the surface. And God, he was inflicting each and every torture, by his own hand, and he was suffering each and every torture, inflicted by a figure so familiar he could almost recognize it....

Clang... Clang... Clang....

They were the hoofbeats of a column of horses—a battalion, a *legion* of horses—on which rode countless soldiers in the crimson of the Inquisition. They surged like the tide, their numbers endless; the power of their faith sustained them, made them as certain of their victory as they were of the coming dawn. And one by one, they dashed themselves, broken and bloody, against a wall of standing corpses, lurking wolves, prancing devils, and ancient oaks. The vast armies of the Inquisition, and indeed the Empyrean Church entire flung themselves against the plague of witches that festered in Malosia’s heart. The fields ran red with shed blood, and as that blood sank deep into the thirsty ground, from the soil grew a hedge of thorns, brown, twisted, and poisonous. Higher it grew, and higher still, until no trace of the surviving

soldiers could be seen from any view....

Clang....

Oste van Brekke awoke with a prolonged scream. No more the jolly uncle, nor even the imposing First Confessor, but simply an old man subject to the worst, most nightmarish visions his mind could conjure. He sat, the blood and the pain and the horror fresh in his memory, and he covered his eyes with his hands so that none would see his tears.

Beside him, Captain Wulfaer also awoke from his own tortured visions, shaking and sick. In the hall beyond, other guards picked themselves up off the floor.

And before them all stood Lambrecht, leaning heavily upon a pike.

"My apologies, your Eminence, Captain... all of you. I know that was not pleasant.

"But you had to see; you had to understand the madness that threatens your nation and your Church. And you had to understand the madness that you inflict upon yourselves, in your refusal to at least consider the tools I bring you to fight a foe against whom you *cannot* now stand."

He looked pointedly at the weapon he held, ran his hand down the haft. "If I were your enemy, your Eminence, you would be dead now, and I on my way to freedom." He flipped the pike over, held it haft first toward the nearest guard. "But I am not.

"I can draw out your confessions, your Eminence. I can stand with your soldiers, and shield them from the sorceries of the witches and the demon-worshippers. I can instruct your own priests in doing the same. I can *save your Church*.

"But only if you permit me to do so."

Lambrecht bent low, extending a hand to aid van Brekke to his feet. "Take me to see your pontiff, your Eminence. Let him decide if my fate is to fight beside you, or to die in your prisons and take your last hope into the grave with me."

Lambrecht ran a tentative finger over the smooth and ornate wood backing of the velvet-lined chair, chuckled softly at its feel. It sat before a heavy desk of equal opulence; both rested on a lush red carpet. The sixfold sun beamed down on him from the wall above in brass effigy. A shelf across the chamber boasted not only multiple copies of the Septateuch, but apocry-

pha, histories of Malosia both religious and secular, and even the infamous *Spears of the Righteous*—the Inquisition’s predominant handbook on the uncovering and slaying of witches and necromancers.

His books, on his shelf, beside his desk, in his office.

Cornelis the First, pontiff of the Empyrean Church, had proved even less of an obstacle than Lambrecht had anticipated. True, it had seemed for a few moments that he would not be permitted to see the old man. Even after his demonstration, van Brekke had appeared ready to refuse his requests, to hurl him into the deepest dungeon and leave him to rot... or to die, or perhaps be driven mad by the solitude. Yet his abilities could hardly be questioned, and his intentions were—through both the saving of Wulfaer’s life and his failure to escape while the First Confessor lay writhing—certainly made to look benevolent enough. Offered as it was before the eyes and ears of Wulfaer, who knew the dangers faced by the Church in her war against black magics, his request to meet with the pontiff could hardly have been rebuffed.

And so, accompanied by a dozen guards, two priests, and First Confessor van Brekke himself, Lambrecht had been escorted into the august presence of Pontiff Cornelis: an old man, grown thin on a steady diet of faith and crises thereof, utterly terrified of his inability to stem the growing plague of witchery that threatened his people’s lives and souls and the very underpinnings of the Church itself.

Lambrecht had required only a few moments to convince Cornelis of the rightness of his cause, that his “charms of faith” were not witchcraft, and that he, and other priests, whom he would instruct, were the Church’s best weapons against the witches.

It was his final argument that had truly set the pontiff’s fears to rest. “My students shall be few,” he had assured the old man, “each willing to risk not merely life but his eternal soul for the benefit of the Church. Even were my methods and my charms profane, we go into battle wielding them with that knowledge firmly in mind. With your blessing and your grace to oversee our confessions, we rest easy in the eternal forgiveness of God and *Jesu*—that is, God and His Scions. And thus, you may rest assured that your struggle against the

witches cannot taint your sacred Church, for even were there damage to be done, it would be confined to only a rare and willing few.”

Van Brekke had argued vehemently against it, but once the pontiff saw before him a means of battling back the growing tide of darkness, he could not merely cast it aside—as Lambrecht had known he would not. Thus did Lambrecht, in one day, find himself elevated from a prisoner of the Inquisition to an advisor to Cornelis the First, complete with his own quarters and office in the Empyrean Basilica itself.

It was enough to throw even the driven and determined priest into a few moments of confused disbelief. So long had he sought his way to the heart of power, where he might use his superior knowledge for the true benefit of the Church, he was momentarily unsure of what to do now that he had it.

But then, this was not really *his* Church, was it? Let him stumble a time or two. It would simply teach him what mistakes to avoid when he found his way home and achieved a comparable position there. In the interim, he had the ear of the most powerful man in Malosia, and if he held no official rank of his own, well, that too could change in time.

And so, at first, he spent his days with written reports of all the Church’s priests—experienced and newly anointed, young and old. From them he would select those few to whom he would teach the basics of the Grimoire, just enough that they might stand against other sorcerers, never so much that they might challenge Lambrecht himself. He must be careful indeed, feed them their knowledge slowly, in measured doses. By the time they learned that he had lied to van Brekke and Cornelis both, that the incantations of the Laginate Grimoire did indeed call upon spirits and demons and powers beyond the oversight of Heaven, they must already have come around to Lambrecht’s own way of thinking: that the source of one’s power was irrelevant, and that it was the use to which one put it that rendered it sacred or profane.

Slowly, as the cold winter crawled across Malosia, Lambrecht’s duties grew more structured, more formal. Some days were devoted to instructing those few students he found worthy; others to assisting the Truth Seekers in extracting confessions from heathens and heretics. Others still were devoted to reporting his progress to Cornelis, and advising him on the

efforts to come. On occasion, a week or three was spent in travel with Captain Wulfaer or other Inquisitors, discovering witches and sorcerers in the communities of Malosia and uprooting them.

At first he carried the Grimoire with him on such expeditions, hidden on his person by means both mystical and mundane, that he might draw upon the incantations within its pages to counter the witcheries of his foes. But as he progressed in his understanding of its dark contents, he found the need to keep it near dramatically lessened. So long as he made a regular study of it, burning into his mind the ancient Greek and symbols older still, he found even the most elaborate incantations as easy to recall as the simplest catechism, and the names of the entities on which they called as familiar to him as his own.

Now, as the icy grip of winter finally began to relax, he found himself ensconced in that velvet-lined chair. A sheaf of parchments lay fanned out upon the desk before him, another page clutched in his fist. But his eyes stared over them, not at them, lost in contemplation. In his past two or three excursions, against some of the most potent witches to date, he had felt a chill of recognition flood through him as he countered their curses with his own protective charms. The magics they wielded, the spirits that flew invisibly to do their bidding—they all felt familiar, oh so familiar. Lambrecht would have to visit long with the Inquisition's most recent captives, no matter van Brekke's objections to his prolonged presence. He must know *why* their sorceries felt so akin to his own! He must—

The clatter at his door yanked him from his reverie. Scowling, he smoothed out the sheet he had crumpled in his fist, and called for the unseen visitor to enter.

"I pray you pardon the interruption, Father, but I bring news."

Father. Cornelis had, at the very least, legitimized Lambrecht's claim to priesthood when he declared him an advisor—another decision to which van Brekke had violently objected, and another grudge against the First Confessor that Lambrecht would one day call due.

Lambrecht nodded at the young page. "By all means, child. What have you to report?"

"All officers of the Inquisition, and of the Church, are being

informed, Father. There has been an escape.”

“Escape?”

“Three prisoners, Father. Somehow, Scions only know how, they managed to extricate themselves from Perdition Hill. At last report, our soldiers were pursuing them into the Forest of Cineris.”

“I see.” Lambrecht frowned. “I am somewhat new here, child, but I was under the impression that nobody ever escaped an Inquisition prison, let alone one such as Perdition Hill.”

“That is so, Father. It has been years since we’ve had an escape, and never before from the Hill.”

“Tell me of the fugitives.” Lambrecht nodded at the names and descriptions as they were spoken, his mind already moving on to other matters. A Vistani charlatan, a backwoods yokel.... He’d be interested in learning how they managed their escape, but it hardly seemed....

“What do you mean, the last has no name?”

The page could only shrug helplessly. “No name I am aware of, Father. Even the messenger only called him the stranger. It seems that he scarcely spoke a word to any until shortly before the escape, and most of what he said was nonsense.”

“But surely the soldiers who captured him know something of who he is, from whence he came?”

“Hardly, Father. They say he emerged from nowhere in a vulgar display of sorcery. One moment, nobody; the next, he literally appeared from the mists, right in the midst of a division of troops.”

“From the mists?” Lambrecht felt his breath quicken, his heart pound hard in his chest. “When did this happen?”

“In the first days of winter, Father.”

The young page could only take a step back from the desk in fearful confusion as the mysterious priest rose to his feet, and then slowly began to laugh as though he would never stop.

Fourteen

The noise of the common room was not actually deafening. Not really.

But magnified through the lens of Diederic's growing impatience and clinging frustration, the clattering of dishes, the clinking of mugs, the stomping of feet, the incessant buzz of conversation punctuated by the sharp braying of drunken laughter, all intertwined to form an inharmonious din of maddening proportions. And so he hunched over an isolated table, the smell of sodden sawdust clogging his nose. He nursed the finest ale his meager pouch could afford—coincidentally, also the cheapest swill the establishment had to offer—and gritted his teeth against the urge to rise up and strike down everyone around him until the afternoon descended into blessed silence.

Whatever the roadside inn's name, Diederic didn't know it. The old wooden shingle outside boasted the faded image of shattering pottery. "The Broken Pot," maybe? "The Drunken Potter"? "The Place Where the Guests Drink the Remnants of a Shattered Chamber Pot and Pay for the Privilege?" He'd not bothered to ask. But then, neither did he know the name of the town, and he cared about that even less. They all looked so much alike that they'd blended together in his mind until he felt trapped in a waking nightmare of endless repetition, a play put on for his benefit in which each scene made use of the same characters on the same stage.

Here he had sat, day after monotonous day, in a roadside inn whose name he could not be bothered to learn, in a town whose only claim to importance was its position along one of Malosia's major highways. He sat, and he waited for fate—or God, or the Scions, or whomever else—to throw him the one bit of luck he needed.

And that someone, whomever it was be praised, finally did.

Diederic had lost track of how long he had waited. He knew it to be longer than a week, and to be only a few days shy of

costing him his final coin. But on that day, as afternoon reluctantly gave way to evening, over a dozen men tromped through the door of the tavern, the dirt and dust of the road shaking from their boots to merge with the sawdust scattered across the floor.

The common room held its collective breath; the patrons did not cease talking so much as the words snagged roughly against their tongues. Wine and ale sloshed across tables and chairs as shaking hands made clumsy attempts to set down their mugs. Every eye in the room focused on the bright scarlet mantles in which the newcomers were clad.

And Diederich, who had suffered long in the chambers of Perdition Hill, who had ended many a Redbreast's life, and who was now doubtless considered a fugitive to be apprehended on sight, could not have been happier. Indeed, he nearly shed tears of relief as the soldiers filed in, so grateful was he that the waiting was over.

He hung his head low over his mug and tried to look as nervous, but otherwise inconspicuous, as everyone else. The odds that these men knew his description well enough to recognize him by sight, unarmored and enjoying an ale in some roadside inn, were slim indeed, but best not to draw attention. He watched nonchalantly as a single man, doubtless the column's commanding officer, stepped from the crowd and approached the obsequious innkeep. In a matter of moments, coins and keys exchanged hands, and the Redbreasts annexed the largest tables for their own use. The officer himself, however, and one of his men, moved not to join the others, but instead disappeared back into the gently falling night.

Diederich felt the urge to cheer, so excited had he become. Could he believe, after all that had happened, that he might be so lucky now? He had been certain that a division of Redbreasts would pass through this town at some point. But he'd anticipated that his greatest difficulty would come in luring one or two of them from the others. Now? Now they had given themselves to him!

Nodding in casual greeting, a nod that one or two soldiers returned and the others dismissively ignored, Diederich rose—slowly, calmly, though his heart beat fast within his chest—and stepped through the front door.

The evening had yet to develop that growing quiet that is,

as much as failing light, the true mark of night's arrival. The street outside was filled with horseflesh, stomping hooves, and whickering voices as the overworked stable boy fought to manage a dozen chargers at once. The sudden smell of horsehair and manure was overpowering, a sharp contrast to the sawdust and alcohol Diederic had inhaled for days on end. Farther from the inn, the streets were filled with vendors hawking one more sale before closing up shop, and workmen hurrying home for a well-earned meal and a cool mug of relaxation. And among them, vanishing into the din and the dark, a pair of Redbreasts whose plans were soon to take an unexpected turn.

Diederic panicked, afraid that he had lost them already. But no, they had merely stopped a moment to relieve the young man of a pair of horses. Diederic saw them mount up, sliding into sight above the milling beasts. Utterly unaware of Diederic's presence, dismissing him as some unimportant townsman if they noticed him at all, they rode toward the center of town, the second soldier several paces behind his officer.

Both wore a hauberk of chain beneath his crimson mantle, a shield slung over his shoulder, a sword or an axe at his belt. Diederic wore no armor, for he could not have passed unnoticed if he had, and carried only Leona's heavy dagger.

It would do.

Following them was a simple matter, despite his lack of a mount. Among the crowds of folks returning home for the night, or moving goods about in preparation for tomorrow's business, a mounted man could move little faster than one afoot. In fact, Diederic could think of no reason the two Redbreasts had bothered to go mounted on their errand, unless perhaps they wished to present as official and officious an image as possible. All it truly accomplished was to make them that much easier to spot amid the throng.

When they halted before a large estate, one of the oldest and most impressive in the village, Diederic's suspicions about their motives were confirmed. While the officer remained mounted, projecting an aura of regal authority, the other Redbreast slid from his saddle and approached the property's iron fence. At the gate, he tugged twice upon a hanging rope, and stepped back to wait.

A thin, balding fellow in black vest and trousers appeared from the house, a heavy candelabra in his hand. He strode toward the gate, formally but swiftly, a tousle-haired youth struggling to keep pace behind him.

From hiding, Diederich could not hear their precise words, but he recognized the same tone mastered by household servants in every land across every world. The gate squeaked as it opened, inspiring the older man to give the younger a swat across the back of the head and point angrily at the hinges. The officer dismounted and followed the manservant inside, while the soldier accompanied the boy and the horses, to the rear of the house.

As soon as all were out of sight, Diederich moved. The gate had latched behind the Redbreasts, but the fence was not all that imposing an obstacle. A running jump, a solid grip, and a faint grunt were all it took for Diederich to gain the other side.

The grasses of the estate were thick, but even in the fading twilight Diederich could see patches of brown where they had begun to fail. It was the same for the garden alongside the main house, which consisted largely of soil and twisting stems and few blossoms of any note. It smelled of dirt rather than flowers.

It seemed the estate, if not the town as a whole, was suffering just as nearly every community Diederich had come across had begun to suffer.

And then he was behind the house and through the open door of the stables. Bits of straw crunched under his boots as he ran, and two figures on each side of a great brown charger—one in armor, the other wielding a large brush—began to turn.

Diederich slammed into the Redbreast without slowing, hurling him into one of the stable's wooden columns. He felt the man's breath explode across his face, but even half-stunned, the soldier's hand dropped toward the axe at his side. Swiftly Diederich spun him about and smashed his face into the wood. The nose-guard on the helm took the brunt of the impact, but it was enough to immobilize the soldier for an instant. Diederich knocked the man's head forward, exposing the back of his neck beneath the helm, and shoved the dagger up into the Redbreast's skull. The horse whinnied faintly at the sudden scent of blood, but calmed down swiftly in such peaceful,

homey environs.

The stable boy stood frozen, the brush clasped uselessly in his hand, and stared with jaws agape at the sudden violence. Diederich yanked the dagger free with a teeth-grinding screech, calmly walked around the horse, and floored the young man with a vicious uppercut. He'd hurt when he woke—a lot, possibly sporting a broken jaw—but at least he *would* awaken.

Diederich returned to study the corpse. Again he considered the shield with some amount of longing, and again the nigh-constant burn in his wrist convinced him against it. He bent low long enough to lift the soldier's coin purse, and to slide the fellow's axe from the loop at his belt. Even under the circumstances, he grinned in grim amusement as he hefted the weapon: just how many axes had he gone through this year, anyway? The smile faded rapidly, however, and Diederich was once again on the move.

He halted once, at the stable's entrance, glancing back over his shoulder. The posture of the fallen soldier, slumped forward, the wound in the back of his skull beneath the helm.... Something about it rang familiar, plucked and tickled at unpleasant memories.

When it failed to come to him after a moment, however, he shrugged and put it aside, to concentrate on more pressing matters.

He heard the manservant's footsteps well before the front door opened in response to his heavy knock. "Now, Timothy," the old man was saying, berating, even as the door crept open, "I told you to bring the good knight in by the back—"

Diederich kned him in the stomach to silence him, brought a heavy fist down on the back of his head to finish the task, and the old servant joined the younger in unconsciousness. The knight listened intently for a moment, alert for any disturbance, then continued inside.

The house boasted the painted but peeling walls, the flattened carpeting, the polished brass fixtures, and the old paintings in newer frames that were all the hallmarks of a family accustomed to wealth and refusing to allow the neighbors to see that that wealth had begun to fade.

He found them in a sitting room which the family doubtless called a library, owing to the single shelf with perhaps half a

dozen dusty tomes. A middle-aged man and his slightly younger wife—both carrying more weight than was good for them—sat in lushly upholstered chairs, while the Inquisition officer made a polite show of wandering about the room, commenting on this prize or that.

Pressed tight to the wall in the hall outside, Diederich peered through the open doorway and struck when the Redbreast drew near. Had his intent this time been to kill, the man would have died barely having seen his attacker. Instead, Diederich wielded the axe with the blade turned out, striking with the back of the heavy steel like a hammer. The officer fell with an agonized cry as his kneecap gave way.

Diederich kicked him once in the head for good measure—the man had removed his helm upon entering as a sign of respect—and then spun to face the terrified couple, pointing with his empty hand.

“You! In the corner, now, the both of you. And if I hear either of you so much as draw breath to scream for help, you *both* die.”

They obeyed, pressing themselves tight into the corner as though hoping to escape through the very walls; a faint whimpering was their only sound.

Diederich knelt beside the fallen officer, placing the blade of his axe on the back of the man’s neck.

“The practice of witchcraft in the region,” he breathed. “Where is its heart?”

“No... no organized witchcraft here,” the man coughed. “Merely a few isolated practitioners, vile men and women who—” His sentence ended in a gurgle as Diederich yanked his head up by the hair.

“I don’t want to hear the Church-approved answer,” he growled. “You’re a soldier, and as a soldier assigned to this region, you’ve been there. You’ve felt it: the eyes of the enemy on you, the lurking danger that threatens your men. I want to know *where!*”

“Why... why do you—”

“Never you mind why. Just answer me.”

Silence for a breath, two. Then, “Parsimol. Been there... five or six times, and we’ve never found a single witch. But still we hear tales, and... and there’s something about that place that sets me, my men, even the horses on edge. That’s where you

want. Parsimol.”

Diederick nodded, his expression hard. Grimly, he raised his axe.

“No!”

It had come from the woman in the corner. Her husband turned white, held out a shaking hand to beseech his wife to silence.

“Please,” she begged, voice trembling. “He’s answered your questions. We need him alive, please. We’ve got... we’ve got our own witch, you see.” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “If you kill him, we’ve no one to turn to.”

Diederick blinked once, twice, then shrugged. He brought the axe down, but again with the blade turned aside. The officer might not awaken for days—might not be the same for long after that—but he would live.

The couple he left tied back to back, lashed to a table so they could not crawl from the room. Eventually they would free themselves, or one of the servants would awaken, but either way he had the time he needed.

The hardest part was walking past the Redbreasts in the inn’s common room as though nothing had happened. Thank *Jesu* he’d remembered to hide the axe in a tree outside, where he could retrieve it later! He didn’t think any of them would have recognized it, but again, it was hardly a chance worth taking. He climbed the rickety wooden stairs and threw open the door to his rented room. He would need but a few moments to pack, and should be a good distance from town before the soldiers learned that anything was amiss.

The voice, when it came, sounded from the doorway behind him as he slid his hauberk, muffled by a layer of blanket, into his heavy pouch.

“I greet you again, Diederick de Wyndt.”

His hands slowed, but Diederick neither ceased his packing nor turned to face the door. “When you claimed we would meet again,” he said to the wall before him, “I rather assumed you meant it would be years.”

“And yet.”

She stepped through the door, allowing it to drift shut behind her, and seated herself in the room’s only chair. Diederick finally deigned to look up at his guest. She had changed notably, for all that a mere half season had passed since

he'd last laid eyes upon her. Her skin was healthier, darker after exposure to the sun, and her black hair hung in tight braids past her shoulders. She was clad in thick black trousers that disappeared into ankle-high boots, and a white tunic of a far more flattering fit than either her prison robes or stolen Inquisition garb. Diederic could also not help but note that she carried a walking staff, its head heavily gnarled and weighted, and wore at her waist a wicked dagger curved as the crescent moon.

"So what brings you here, Violca Hanza? I doubt very much this is a coincidence."

"There are none, where the Vistani are concerned, *giorgio*. Indeed, I was looking for you. There is much we must discuss."

"Is there, now? We'll have to do so on the road, then. In just a few more hours, this village is going to be a very dangerous place to be me. I'm heading to—"

"Parsimol."

Diederic hurled his pack to the floor with an angry clatter. "God damn it, woman! I've spent the better part of a month learning that name, and only finally heard it uttered an hour gone! The time I've lost... all because you had to run off in the night like someone's illicit lover!"

Violca slid to her feet, her voice frosty. "Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Lord Diederic. I'll try so very hard to keep your vendetta in the forefront of my mind, the very next time I'm tempted to 'run off' and try to find family I haven't seen in half a year, and who have every reason to think me dead."

"I... well, obviously, you had to.... That is—"

"And your gods and mine must forgive my stupidity, in having forgotten that my Sight, a legacy of my people's most sacred beliefs, exists solely for the convenience of any *giorgio* to pass me by."

"Now that's not fair! I—"

"And of course, if I *had* given you the name a month ago, you'd have just accepted it on faith, without taking the time to hunt down someone who could confirm that information?"

"Maybe, but it wouldn't have taken me as long," Diederic grumbled. It was a feeble objection, and they both knew it.

"All right," he offered finally, choking on each syllable, "I apologize. It was an inappropriate outburst."

“Yes.” Violca allowed some of the ice to thaw from her words. “And as it happens, also misplaced. It was no vision that told me of Parsimol, Diederic, but rather information gained by others of the Hanza during my imprisonment. Had I not gone to them first, I *couldn't* have provided it to you.”

“I see.” He remained silent a long moment, shamefacedly gathering the goods that had spilled from his pack when it struck the floor. Finally, he said, “If, ah, I may ask, Violca... since you obviously found your family, why are you here?”

“Because your lack of manners, Diederic, doesn't make you any less pivotal to what is happening in Malosia. And as I said, there is much we must discuss.”

Diederic nodded, hefting his pack over his shoulder. “Then let's be off.”

“*Giorgio?*” He was halfway out the door when her call drew him back. He turned his head, questioning.

“As it is apparently just the two of us this time, I feel compelled to warn you that I sleep with this blade in easy reach.” She patted the crescent blade hanging at her belt. “And it is very, very sharp.”

Diederic snorted. “I'm after a far more important prize on this journey than your virtue, Violca.”

“To you, perhaps.” And then she was past him, staff in hand, her footsteps sounding already on the rickety stairs.

Despite the darkness of a night sky obscured by clouds, with nary a moon or star to be seen, they traveled by torchlight for hours before stopping to make cold camp. Diederic leaned back against the trunk of a young tree bedecked with as many crows as it had leaves. Ignoring the occasional caw and call from above, he flicked a curious ant from his shoulder and offered his companion a strip of dried meat.

“And where did you come up with traveling monies, Diederic?” she asked teasingly, accepting the proffered morsel.

“Here and about. Scavenged, mostly.”

“Stolen?”

“Only from those who wished me harm first.”

Silence once more. Then, just as Diederic opened his mouth to demand some answers, “Tell me of the last month, Diederic. How did you learn you needed to travel to Parsimol?”

The knight sighed. "I traveled Malosia's roads for weeks after leaving Birne, visiting many towns. Only the smaller communities, mind. Nowhere large enough it might host its own Redbreast garrison. Most were equally grim. No matter that we're now in the midst of spring, I saw fields standing half empty, or sprouting only tufts of sickly crops, and scrawny cattle chewing on meager grasses. And of course, most placed the blame on the same source."

"Witches?"

"Just so. A very few others placed the blame instead—in frightened whispers, and only after I bought them many drinks—on the Inquisition itself, for taking too many of their young for them to adequately work the fields."

Violca frowned. "But surely if every village suffers the same way, the blame lies on drought, or a blight among the crops?"

"Maybe, but it's not every village. Thrice, I came across communities where the crops grew high, the grasses green, the cows and sheep fat. And I avoided them."

"Why?"

"Because I already know from whence their good fortune comes," Diederich hissed, thinking darkly of Birne, "and what sorts of payment they offer for it. I needed those who could tell me of witches, but were not witches themselves. So any village so obviously devoted to the black magics was off limits."

Violca nodded even as she wrapped her blanket more tightly around her, shutting out the chilly night air. "That was why you waited where I found you. You knew that a village on the main road, so near Caercaelum, would have to host a Redbreast patrol sooner or later."

"Exactly." Diederich sketched idly in the dust with a stick. "I needed to be able to confront one or two, away from their division, away from their home base."

"I knew I was close, Violca. In every village I visited, the folk were convinced they suffered worse than any other. But also in every village, rumors and travelers' tales suggested that certain other folk suffered *almost* as badly. I found enough overlap in those rumors to lead me to this general vicinity."

"Hardly an unqualified success, Diederich. There are over a dozen towns within a few days' travel."

"Precisely. Thus, I had to wait until I could question a Red-

breast officer, find out where they focused their attentions. It was just tonight I found the opportunity.”

He did not tell her that he knew where to focus his search not just from his weeks of investigation, but also due to Leona’s parting words. So far she had not asked what had occurred in Birne, and he had no intention of raising the topic himself.

They slept the night undisturbed, though Diederich thought he heard a small group of horses galloping along the road around midnight. The riders must be about vital business to risk such speed in the dark, and he suspected the Inquisition officer and his dead lieutenant had been discovered. He took time the following morning to shave the wild growth of beard, trusting to the Vistana’s hands those areas he could not shave by feel, for he lacked anything resembling a mirror. That and a change of clothes should protect him from discovery, at least by any casual inspection.

A quick breakfast—one bearing a strong similarity to dinner of the previous night—and they were off. Diederich set a punishing pace, but Violca showed no difficulty in keeping up. The morning grew warm, albeit not terribly so; the occasional drop of rain, too sporadic and light even to be called a shower, provided additional relief.

They were just passing someone’s long-abandoned field, an old and ragged scarecrow the only sign it had ever been cultivated, when Violca drew to a halt. “Diederich....”

The knight followed her gaze to the glossy black bird perched atop the scarecrow’s shoulder and chuckled softly. “Not very effective, is it?” he asked.

“No, you don’t understand. That crow was in the tree above our camp last night. It’s been following us.”

Diederich turned a bemused smirk upon the Vistana. “Violca, really. I know this place has its quirks and its dangers, but I hardly think—”

“No, clearly you don’t! Damn it, Diederich, either you trust my Sight or you do not, but make up your mind! It’s not just the future that I See, or the world of the spirit. Sometimes it is merely the tiny details that escape everyone else. And I tell you, that crow was watching us last night, and it watches us now, and it *is* the same one!”

“If you say so.” His expression skeptical, Diederich knelt

and scooped up an apricot-sized stone from the side of the road. He hefted it once, twice, and then hurled it with bone-crushing force at the feathered creature.

With a furious squawk and a frantic flutter, the crow took to the air, letting the stone thump harmlessly from the scarecrow's burlap face—a puff of dust the only damage dealt. Diederich opened his mouth, preparing to comment on the bird's speed, when the sky went dark.

From all around they came, diving from the branches of every tree, arcing upward like arrows from the high grasses of the field. Their calls were deafening, and the thunder of a thousand wings buffeted the travelers as fiercely as any storm. The air grew thick and difficult to breathe, heavy with dander, loose feathers, and the stench of waste formed largely of carrion. Diederich and Violca fell back before them, their hands raised in feeble defense of exposed eyes and tender faces. Wings bludgeoned, beaks and talons tore, and around chain armor and heavy clothes, the pair bled from a score of tiny wounds.

Even as the knight and the Vistana collapsed to their knees, the darkness lifted and the sun shone down. The crows were gone as swiftly as they had appeared, leaving behind only a smattering of feathers and thick splotches of guano to prove they had ever been. And with them had vanished the bird that had first drawn Violca's attention.

"Perhaps one day," Violca croaked, "you might learn to trust my instincts."

She stood shakily and began to gather leaves and grass to clean her various wounds.

She halted and turned as Diederich lunged out to grab her wrist tight. "I think," he said, wincing in pain as he spoke, "that I have been very patient up to now. But I feel the time has come for you to tell me what it is you came to tell me."

Violca yanked her arm from his grip. "The next time you touch me, *giorgio*, it will either be to pull me from harm's way, or to put you *in* it!" She looked down at her handful of leaves and sighed. "But you are right," she admitted. "Come."

They stepped from the road, and she began to point out which grasses and herbs he should pluck as they spoke. "Malosia is unique among the lands of the Mists," she began, her voice slipping into a storyteller's cadence. "Oh, yes, Died-

eric. There are other domains; Malosia is but one of many. But Diederic, it is *empty*.”

The knight could only frown. “Empty? I’ve seen several thousands of—”

“Not empty of *people*, *giorgio*. Empty of *soul*.”

“Every domain has one true lord, Diederic. Some hold titles as you understand them—king, duke, count—while others are as anonymous as you or I. But each is bound to the land in a way that even we Vistani do not truly comprehend. All are men and women of evil, cruelty, violence, or pride—or so our own experience tells us, though we have not dealt with some as frequently or as thoroughly as others. And all, we believe, are prisoners, for the Mists offer no boon without a heavy price. Powerful as they may be in their own domains, they are powerless to ever leave—and believe you me, many have tried.”

Again, Diederic could not help but feel that it sounded a very great deal like some form of Purgatory, or perhaps an obscure layer of Hell. But he found the notion bothered him less than once it had. He had his own punishment, his own vengeance, to mete out. All other judges be damned!

“And who....” He winced at the sting of Violca’s ministrations. “Who is Malosia’s lord?”

“That’s just it, Diederic. That is why Malosia stands as such a mystery to the Vistani, why it appears empty to our Sight. It has none.” She shook her head. “Oh, Pontiff Cornelis might rule the Church, and potent witches command the cabals, but none boast the power of a true lord. Never before have any of us seen the like.”

But Diederic felt the memory of Violca’s vision in Perdition Hill like a hammer to his skull, and he knew. “Lambrecht!” His voice emerged as a serpent’s hiss. “The land shapes itself to Lambrecht’s vision! That’s why the witches of Birne found their powers waning!”

Violca raised an eyebrow at the reference, but again refrained from asking.

“Malosia may have no lord yet,” he continued, “but Lambrecht can only be steps away!”

The Vistana nodded. “That is... certainly possible. And it is why I’ve come to aid you.”

“I appreciate that, of course, but I’m not certain I under-

stand.”

“The Laginate Cabal, Diederic. They draw their power from the same source as Lambrecht himself. They have the missing pages of the Grimoire.”

Diederic’s eyes grew wide. “But... the Grimoire was scribed in my own world!”

“Indeed. I’ve no idea how it could have happened, but it is that connection that may prove your salvation. If I can get my hands on their pages of the Grimoire, Diederic, my people can use its spiritual link to your world to find you a pathway back through the Mists.

“We can lead you home.”

Home.... The notion had not so much as crossed his mind, never even occurred to him. Whether these “lands of the Mists” were a Purgatory or not, he had simply assumed himself dead, or as good as dead, where his home was concerned. The thought that all he knew might not be lost to him was as stunning as a thunderbolt.

He let none of this show upon his face, let Violca see no sign of his growing excitement. Home.... Yes, he would go home, now that he knew it to be possible. But he would not go home defeated, and he would not go home alone....

Fifteen

As Diederic had anticipated, Parsimol resembled a dozen other communities through which he'd traveled. Larger than Birne, it boasted primitive fortification: an old abatis of felled trees and sharpened branches circled most of the town. Portions of the wall had begun to rot or boasted large gaps where a trunk had gone missing, and nobody seemed in any rush to shore it up. Roofs of thatch and clay shingles peeked up over the wall, as though checking to see if it were safe. In the distance, some several hundred yards through the thick trees beyond the town, an old, decrepit tower emerged shyly from the foliage. Few details were visible from afar, but it was an angular, blocky sort of thing, very much unlike the cupolas and cylindrical towers of modern Church construction.

Several large gates, little more than wide gaps in the abatis, provided ingress for the main roads, and if Parsimol had any sort of standing militia, clearly examination of travelers was not among their duties. Diederic and Violca entered the town without incident, save the reactions of a few of the villagers who scowled or spat upon recognizing a Vistana in their midst. Violca refused to acknowledge their existence.

Instead, after scarcely a minute, she laid a hand on Diederic's shoulder. "Do you see it?" she whispered.

He frowned, and cast his eyes about. There was something off—something to Parsimol the likes of which he'd never seen before—but it took him long moments to put his finger on what it was.

The buzz of conversation in the markets was muted, the occasional laugh short and weak. The people went about their daily lives, but many of them moved slowly, with the extra care of men unsure of their steps.

"They look tired," he said finally, as much a question as a statement. "Worn down."

Violca nodded. "And the crops, as we entered?"

Diederic glanced back, peering through the gap in the wall.

The fields were healthier than most across Malosia, though not so lush as some he had seen.

"I think," he observed, "that we've come to the right place."

The following hours were a blur, returning to him slowly in bits and snippets as he sat huddled in the heavy wicker cage, infused with the scent of thick soil and thicker smoke.

He remembered an inn, or perhaps a tavern, for those had seemed the most likely places to question the locals. He recalled that the nostril-tickling mix of alcohol and sawdust, the hum of dull conversation, and even the layout of the common room were so much akin to those of the village he and Viola had departed days earlier that he'd actually stuck his head back through the door, just to confirm that he was where he thought he was.

He remembered suspicious gazes cast Viola's way, whispers of "Vistani thief" and "gypsy whore." He could not remember whether she had reacted.

Like wisps the memories came to him, bits of vapor carried on the wind. For the life of him he couldn't remember the faces of any of the folk to whom he'd spoken, yet he recalled multiple conversations. He'd talked to them of Parsimol, the town's history, the state of affairs in Malosia, even the weather—everything a man could think to cover before finally getting around to an uncomfortable point.

Had he been careless? Asked the wrong questions of the wrong listener? He didn't know; it refused to come back to him.

He remembered a round of drinks, purchased by God knew who. And he remembered Viola, smaller than he, succumbing first to whatever had been added to the ale. He stood, his chair falling back, and even as the room tilted he had drawn his axe and backed against the wall, daring them to come for him.

And they had: half a dozen men whose faces would not return to him. They had neared, bludgeons in hand, but refused to step within reach of his axe.

Each and every one of them had begun to melt!

Diederich trembled as the memory flooded through his mind, as intense now on recollection as in the moment of experience.

Their flesh had melted, flowing from their bones, dripping over their coats and tunics. It pooled on the floor, grown black and foul, and smelled not of flesh, but of heavy swamps and stagnant pools. Their eyes floated loose in their sockets, bobbing like dead fish upon the waves, and as they neared they sang an ancient lullaby in the voice of an adolescent child.

He had recognized it to be false: illusion, hallucination. Even so, his axe had fallen limply from his hand; the wall shoved him away to land on his knees. The drug, or herb, or whatever he had drunk, rose up to claim him before the first bludgeon fell.

And now, now as he struggled back toward consciousness, swimming up through the darkness that clouded his senses and weighed on his thoughts, a part of him wished those men had finished the job.

Stripped of everything but his clothes, he sat hunched in a small but sturdy cage, its bars made of heavy wicker. Violca huddled across from him, her knees pressed against his own in the cramped quarters. Above, the moon shone faintly through a circle in the trees; they were in a clearing of some sort, distant from the village itself. That same tower—even more dilapidated than it had appeared from afar—loomed over them, so that it seemed to balance the moon atop its crumbling parapets. A simple pattern of marble shapes, like tombstones but far smaller, spiraled out from the clearing's center, where a large bonfire burned in the midst of a blackened iron frame. A heavy rope and pulley dangled from a bough above, and Diederich could not help but note that the iron stand in which the fire burned was of the perfect size and shape to hold the cage itself.

Above the crackling flame, he heard the constant slow beat of a nearby drum. Around and along the spiral of stone, a dozen figures danced, clad in simple robes of white. The flickering shadows hurled strange shapes and images across the celebrants, transforming this one into a hideously clawed nightmare, that one into a cowering sheep. Above them all, the trees ran thick with owls and crows, an inhuman audience that should have been frightened away, but seemed instead to gather in hopes of an entertaining show.

"Whatever you said to them," Violca offered, her voice small, "doesn't seem to have gone over well."

Diederich grunted and rapped his knuckles up and down the bars. He might break them, given time and a willingness to mangle his hand, but under the eyes of a dozen sentinels, he rather doubted he could manage it.

“You cried out a time or two before you awoke,” she said to him, her eyes tracking his progress. “Do I understand that you saw more than I before we were taken?”

He grunted once more and continued his efforts, refusing to meet her eyes. “I have... visions, waking nightmares, when confronted with witchcraft. I’m told that some men can look back into the spirit world when that world looks upon them, but I’ve no idea why I should be one of them.”

“Perhaps because this witchcraft comes from the book which bridges Malosia to your world?”

Diederich shrugged. “I’m not certain it matters. I—”

A low moan arose from the assembled dancers, a breath of awe and ecstasy. They dropped, all of them, to their knees, bowing toward the rickety tower. Diederich and Viola looked up, the Vistana twisting and squeezing beside her companion so she might see in the proper direction.

Some twenty feet up, a gaping hole in the stone tower revealed a landing on the stairway within. Standing upon it, so near the breach it seemed she must topple outward, was a tall woman clad in a robe of dull brown. It looked, to Diederich’s eyes, very much like the robes assigned to prisoners in Perdition Hill, save for its darker hue. A heavy blindfold of gray covered her eyes and tied her platinum hair back from her face. Behind her, near enough to reach out to her if need be, stood a pair of large men. They were heavily muscled, clad only in kilts, with heavy sporrans hanging from their waists.

And the moans and gasps of the assembled throng transformed themselves into a spoken name, chanted over and over like a holy mantra.

Bellustaire.

She stood for long minutes, basking in the adoration of her congregants, head tilted as though she might see through her heavy blindfold. Then, with a raised hand, she called the assembly to silence and bid them rise.

Her voice was strong, surprisingly deep. It carried over the crackling flames and the beat of the unseen drummer who had never silenced his instrument. At first, Diederich

thought the words she spoke to be some language the likes of which he had never heard. It took him a moment to recognize that she recited a litany of names—horrible names, inhuman names—on whom she called to bless their gathering.

“We take from the earth,” she intoned.

“*And to the earth we must give.*” The response came from every one of the assembled throng.

“From the spirits above, from the demons below, we take.”

“*We must give above. We must give below.*”

“From the demons, power. From the spirits, life.”

“*So power, and life, we offer in turn.*”

“Blessed are those whose lives and souls feed the spirits above, and the demons below.”

“*We offer them thanks.*” Every eye in the crowd turned at this last line, to stare intently at the caged pair.

“Think nothing of it,” Diederich mumbled sourly.

“I have questions,” Bellustaire intoned, her voice slipping out of ritual cadence. “You will answer them.”

“And if we do, you’ll let us go?” Violca called out.

“If you do, I will see to it that you are strangled before you are burned, so you need not feel your sacrifice to the flames.”

Violca and Diederich exchanged glances.

The blind witch waved a hand, and one of her congregants stepped forward. With a sudden shock of returning memory, Diederich recognized him as the barkeep at the inn where he had been drugged. He was a balding fellow, rotund and vaguely greasy—the exact sort of person one would picture standing behind a bar in a tavern.

“You do not look like Inquisitors,” he said, his voice as unexpectedly high as Bellustaire’s was deep. “Why do you seek us out?”

Diederich gave a mental shrug. It wasn’t as though he could get in any *more* trouble. “I want the Laginate Grimoire.”

A gasp shook the crowd, and even Bellustaire recoiled. “How do you know of the Grimoire?” she hissed.

“I’ve met the man who holds the remaining pages. I was rather hoping to kill him.”

“You lie! The lost pages were destroyed, ages gone!”

“No. They were not.”

“And who is this man?”

“Lambrecht Raes. A priest.”

Another gasp and a rising din of whispers and mutters, silenced once more by a wave of the witch’s hand.

“Of course.” She tilted her head down to address her flock. “That is why our rituals fade early, my children, why our incantations prove ineffective! The Church seeks to steal our magics, to drive a wedge between us and our masters! They have not abandoned us; they simply cannot hear us!”

For all his hatred of Malosia’s Church, Diederic recoiled at the invocation of demonic masters. “Lambrecht is priest of a land far from here,” he called out, “with no ties to the Empyrean Church. Is it so unthinkable that the Church simply found its own means of dealing with the likes of you?”

The drums went silent. Even the birds in the trees ceased their calls, and the gathered coven seemed no longer even to breathe. Only the fire spoke in its dry and crackling tongue.

“What do you think you know of the Empyrean Church?” Bellustaire demanded, leaning impossibly far out from her platform. “God Most High, and his Six Scions? An old bearded man in white, dwelling in the topmost Heaven, and the sons he sent to guide the poor lost souls of Malosia?”

“A mask they wear, built on millennia of lies! Trust me when I tell you ‘tis better to serve the darkest demon than a faith built on a foundation such as that which holds aloft the Church! The demon offers magics and fortune—and at least you know, come day’s end, what it is the demon wants in return.”

One final wave, more tired than those before, and the assembled throng moved toward the cages. “If it helps ease your passage,” she said, the blindfold turned to Diederic as though meeting his gaze, “I fully intend to find this Lambrecht Raes and take the pages from him. Doubtless he will object. He’ll not long outlive you.”

Nearer they came, an inexorable flood of men and women. Some approached the cage, hands grasping to hold it still, while others reached for the dangling ropes. The rusty tackle swayed and creaked as the iron hook descended, and Diederic knew he and Violca had but seconds remaining.

Just before the first of the heathens’ fists closed upon the wicker, Diederic bolted upright, ducking his head against the low ceiling. His muscles tensed as he yanked Violca upright

as well, ignoring her startled cry. With the ferocity of a wounded bear, he wrapped her in his arms, lifting her bodily off the floor of the cage. Screaming in fury, he hurled both of them into the wicker bars. They creaked and refused to give. But then, shattering them had never been his intent.

Jarred by the impact, the entire cage—constructed so as to be easily moved—toppled over into the raging bonfire.

Propped against the side of the metallic framework, it wobbled once, twice, and held. The flames licked eagerly at the wood, as though tasting it before they committed to its consumption. Diederich hunched, his back to the flames and as far from the fire as he could move without tipping the cage back over, shielding Violca from the growing heat. Several spots on his trousers and his tunic began to smolder, and he felt the skin on his calves and ankles burn; he held his awkward pose.

Around the cage, the congregants milled, uncertain now what to do. Some edged near the burning wicker, thinking perhaps to pull it from the fire. But why? Just to lift it up and drop it back in? It hardly seemed worth the pain of charred hair and burnt flesh. Within, Violca remained utterly still, terrified even to move lest the cage fall deeper into the bonfire. She knew, or thought she did, what Diederich intended, but she could not see how well it was working, dared not twist in his grip to look.

When he could stand no more, when his clenched teeth could no longer dam the scream of pain, when the flames rose high around his calves, Diederich hurled himself and his companion to the side once more. The cage rolled, awkwardly, slowly, trundling from the edge of the bonfire to come crashing down to earth.

And the wicker bars, their strength eaten away by the blazing fire, gave way beneath the weight of the cage, splintering into blackened bits. The bulk of the framework rolled aside, edges burning bright, to leave Diederich and Violca huddled in the smoldering grass.

A dozen cries combined into one as the gathered worshippers surged forward once more. Ignoring the pain of their burns, Diederich and Violca swept burning brands from the edge of the fire and stepped up to meet them. They were hurt, tired, outnumbered six to one.

Then again, their attackers were neither trained warriors,

driven by unrelenting obsession, nor the victims of persecution across a dozen domains, finally offered the opportunity for some small amount of payback. Branches landed with jarring force. Flickering embers disoriented staring eyes, burned exposed and bruised flesh. Four men struck the earth, clutching broken bones and singed extremities... five... more. A quartet of men and women fled shrieking into the forest, leaving Diederic and Violca free to approach the tower.

There, at the entrance from which the door had long since rotted and fallen, they found the coven's ritual supplies, and with them their own confiscated possessions. Diederic hefted the axe from the pile, lamenting that he hadn't time to don his armor. With Violca beside him, blade in hand, he slipped inside the tower.

The air within was musty, the heavy perfume of neglect. Diederic's gaze took in the shaky stairs that spiraled upward, the layers of leaves scattered across the floor, and he could not help but shake his head. First the farmhouse by the orchard, now this? Was *everything* in this godforsaken domain decrepit and run down?

Dust sifted from betwixt the bricks as the staircase shifted beneath their weight—shifted but held. It seemed that nothing but the tower's own weight and sheer stubbornness held it together, for in numerous spots no mortar remained between the stones, and many strands of ivy wormed their way through from outside. Scanning the winding steps ahead, Diederic noted that while the wall itself might be crumbling, the bolts that held the stairs to it were relatively new.

Moonlight illuminated the landing from which Bellustaire had guided her heathens in ceremony. It was empty now, as they had expected it would be. Yet in the scuffle below, neither had seen the witch or her attendants step through the door. Assuming no use of magic far greater than even Violca had ever seen, they must remain within the rickety structure.

Higher they climbed, and Diederic noted the arrow slits carved into the walls at every floor. Once, when it stood strong and whole, this had been a structure meant for war.

"Who built this thing?" he breathed to Violca as they completed another circuit along the stair. Even though his voice was soft, as silent as their careful tread, he was overheard.

“Why, the royal architects.” The reply filtered down from above, from the light-haired woman in brown and gray. As before, the two kilted men, bodyguards perhaps, waited behind her. “From days long gone, when Malosia still had a noble caste. Before your precious Empyrean Church usurped it all.”

“Hardly *my* Church!” Diederich began as he lunged up the stairs, but he completed neither sentence nor step before something wrapped about his waist and tugged him fiercely back. From the wall behind him, the vines that had violated the stone writhed in the air. Like hungry serpents, or perhaps the tendrils of some horrific predator of the deepest seas, they quested, testing the air around them. They wrapped tight about the waist, the legs, the wrist, the throat, and for every one hacked away by a lucky twist of the axe or the knife, two more sprouted, hydralike, in their place.

Diederich and Violca stood, struggling but immobile, scarce able to breathe, as Bellustaire and her associates descended the steps until they stood no more than ten feet distant.

“You silly fools. I have served the demons of the wood, sacrificed hundreds in their names, spread wide the teachings of the Grimoire—as did my mother, her father before her, his mother before him—and all within the shadow of Caercaelum itself! How, then, could two clowns such as yourselves possibly have taken from me that which is most precious?”

Though the pressure on his throat was so great the effort nearly choked him, Diederich could not help but laugh. “There is nothing mystical about your avoidance of the Inquisition. From this tower, you can see every road that comes anywhere near Parsimol, and I imagine the stones in the clearing are easily moved. Let a patrol of Redbreasts draw near, and I’ll wager you hide like frightened rats!”

The witch clenched her fist, and Diederich groaned, the vines jerking tight about his waist and stomach. He gurgled once, then retched down the front of his tunic as his last meal was physically wrung from him.

Still he would not stop. “The villagers,” he gasped, spitting to clear the foul taste from his mouth. “That’s why they seem so worn, is it not?”

“The price they pay for serving two masters. Let them mouth their empty words in their false churches during the

day, for the sake of passersby. They know where their true duty lies, come the night.”

“They seemed to fare rather poorly with those duties to-night,” he taunted around a sickly grin.

“Bah. I’ve dozens more where they came from. Perhaps you’ve done me a favor after all, refusing to be put to the flame. You can serve as more than a sacrifice to my masters. You can be a lesson, an example of the power that perhaps I’ve not shown my followers in far too long.” Again she squeezed her fist, and again the vines tightened their grip, until Diederich’s bones creaked and his face reddened.

Even through his blurred vision, he saw the witch’s robe drop away, revealing parchment-like flesh, shrunken and wrinkled. Sores across her body oozed a thick and viscous pus, always in pairs, like the bites of some terrible predator. As it leaked, the drops grew long, until they were not pus at all but white worms writhing across her skin. From beneath her blindfold, bloody tears trickled down her face, and where they landed upon the filthy steps, maggots rose and squirmed determinedly toward him, ready to feast upon his flesh, lacking the patience to wait for him to die.

He lacked even the energy to blink away the hallucination, though he recognized them now; for he knew the truth was scarcely more pleasant.

But even as Diederich had taunted their captor, drawing her attention, Violca had cast her eyes downward, forced her lungs to pump calmly, steadily, despite the unnatural grip crushing down upon her, and the fear that beat mercilessly at the inside of her skull. Inhale... exhale... be calm. Be calm.

Gradually, oh so gradually, Violca raised her head to gaze upon the witch who held their lives, literally, in the palm of her hand. And she Saw.

Saw how a blind woman could sense her foes to work her magics upon them, Saw the occult ties that bound her to her two large associates, Saw the channel that permitted Bellustaire to view the world through their eyes.

As she had done months ago, when she sent her Vision forth to scour the newly discovered domain of Malosia, Violca extended her senses, extended her Sight, until it seemed she stood directly before the witch.

And as she had hoped, the Sights grew tangled and twisted

about one another. She briefly saw herself from atop the stairs, seeing through the witch's own magic. Then, for a single precious instant, both magics went dark.

Bellustaire screamed, the cry of a hopeless child, as the world around her blackened. The clinging vines whipped about, thrashing wildly, and though the larger bruised bones, and the smaller bloodied the flesh like a lash, their grip on the captives went slack. Her kilt-clad companions stared about in confusion, uncertain what had just occurred.

With a strained shout, Violca yanked herself free of the loosened bonds, a confused and disoriented Diederich an instant behind. She spared a single breath for his befuddled look, gesturing vaguely with her blade. "They are her eyes!"

And then, with the crushing blow of an axe to one side, the murderous slash of a knife to the other, those eyes were forever shut.

Her commanding tones reduced to a whimper, Bellustaire retreated upward, shuffling her feet to find the edge of each step before progressing. The hand she waved before her might have been simply to detect an approaching foe; the words she opened her mouth to utter might have been mundane. But Diederich was unwilling to chance that she might cast some new invocation. In two bounds he was before her. His backhanded fist was furious, punishing. It spun the witch about, sent her plummeting over the railing to land on the next flight below. The entire stairway shuddered at the impact, sending a tiny avalanche of loose rock and dust cascading down the walls.

Diederich noticed none of it, staring instead at the woman who lay perhaps fifteen feet beneath him. Her limbs were splayed, one leg clearly broken, and her blindfold had been knocked loose by the blow.

Her eyes looked inward.

Between wide-open lids, Diederich saw only a thin layer of reddish pink. A bloody bundle of flesh and nerves protruded from the center of each eye, folding back upon itself to slide under the lower eyelid, leaving an obscene bulge in the skin, as it wound its way back toward the witch's brain.

He thought he might be hallucinating once more, but a glance at the sickly pallor that had come over Violca's face was enough to convince him otherwise. Too shaken to simply

vault the railing, Diederich proceeded swiftly down the stairs until he stood over Bellustaire.

“Where is it?” he asked, his voice gruff.

The witch laughed, a horrible wracking noise that spattered blood across her lips and chin. “It will do you no good. Our teachings have spread far—too far to be reined in.”

“That’s nice. I cannot tell you how much I don’t care. Where is it?”

Her smile fell, her unseeing, unnatural eyes growing wide. “You cannot. You cannot give it up to the Church! You’ve no idea what they could do with it, the doors it could open for them....”

“Listen, witch. I’ve told you already, I hold no allegiance to the Church. Now I’m going to ask you exactly one more time: Where is the Grimoire?”

Her answer came in phrases unknown, words that Diederich could not interpret. Some he recognized as ancient Greek, others were so utterly foreign he could not begin to imagine them as a language at all.

With an inward sigh, he brought down his axe on Bellustaire’s chest, and the witch spoke no more.

A scowl plastered across his face, dried vomit flaking at the corners of his mouth, Diederich turned to rejoin his companion. She was no longer there. He heard noises up above, and raced to the landing to find her triumphantly pulling a scroll from the sporran of one of the dead men.

“I knew she’d not let it far from her side,” the Vistana told him with a smile.

His hands shaking, Diederich reached for it. The pages had been reordered, carefully stitched together to form a single length of parchment, and wrapped about a wooden spindle, but still he recognized them. Truly, these were kin to the pages Lambrecht had wielded against him deep beneath the Holy City. And they represented what that bastard wanted most in all the worlds.

But even as he rolled the crackling parchment through his hands, exposing the ancient words to the air, Violca recoiled with a shudder, a low moan escaping her lips. Curious, he turned toward her.

“Please be careful with that, Diederich,” she whispered, unable to tear her gaze from it.

“Relax, Violca. I know how dangerous it is. And I’m no witch, no magician. I’ve no intention of using—”

“No! No, you don’t understand.” She swallowed hard, straightening herself with great effort. “The Grimoire.... I think it... the incantations within don’t just allow a sorcerer to command their power; they *bind* it! They hold it back.

“I can See the Grimoire, Diederick, and it is no mere book. It is a—a bandage, binding a terrible wound in the world. And like any deep wound, it seeps.

“The powers bound in that book, Diederick, do not care about your intentions. They *want to be freed!*”

Images of Jerusalem, of chaos and bloodshed and madness unexplainable, assailed him. And he thought, perhaps, he understood the truth of Violca’s words.

And yet....

“We should hurry,” she said, unable to repress a shudder of revulsion, “and deliver this to my people as swiftly as possible. With luck, Madam Tsura can read its connections to your world without calling on the book itself. You could be back home in mere weeks!”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Violca, if I return home, what of Lambrecht? Will he travel with me?”

“I couldn’t say for—”

“The truth, Violca.”

The Vistana sighed, though her face had grown pale. “No. He will remain here, with his portion of the Grimoire. Two halves of the book, bound to two worlds, and to two travelers. Only with both would we have even a chance of forcing him back with you.”

“Then I cannot leave until we have both, can I?”

“Damn it, Diederick! You’ve spared your world any more of Lambrecht’s evil! And he will be forever trapped here! Surely that must be justice enough!”

“It is not! Lambrecht *must not* escape me, Violca! I have to see him pay for what he’s done!”

Violca’s head dropped. “Then I must go with you.”

“Not at all. I would appreciate your assistance, assuredly, but if you wish to leave—”

“I must. The Vistani must learn what becomes of Lambrecht

and of this strange land without a lord. Our understanding of the Mists is already shaken; we cannot leave in ignorance.”

“Then I am pleased to have you beside me.” Slowly, pain and fear of the unstable stairs slowing their steps, they proceeded downward, their footfalls echoing in the silent tower.

“Diederick!” Violca clasped his arm and pointed. “Look!”

In one of the wall’s gaping holes, a black crow calmly perched, staring at them with glossy, mirrored eyes.

No, not just a crow. Even without his companion’s Sight, Diederick knew it to be the same one he had seen on the road to Parsimol, and undoubtedly one of the many that had flocked to the trees above their wicker cage.

In its beak it held one of Bellusaire’s terrible backwards eyes, a few liquid strands all that remained to connect it to the socket from whence it came. The crow bit down, hard, and the orb burst like an overripe grape. The bird tossed back its head, shook itself, and slurped down its foul repast.

Horrified beyond rational measure, Diederick drew his axe once more, determined to cut the crow from its perch. Before he took a single step, the feathered creature hopped from the breach to land beside the witch’s broken leg. It disappeared beneath her gown, a simple bulge in the cloth that grew nearer and nearer the corpse draped within.

And then, with the wet sound of stretching and tearing skin, and a new trickle of dead blood staining the robe, the bulge moved inside the body itself. Higher it slithered, flesh and cloth protruding and subsiding: a living hernia that slouched from groin to chest before finally subsiding into one of the body’s empty cavities.

Dead lids blinked rapidly over a pair of empty sockets, for the crow had consumed the first of the witch’s eyes before the witnesses arrived. Lungs ruptured by the fall of Diederick’s axe pumped once more, sending foaming blood up through the fatal injury, not in order to sustain life, but purely to empower the dead thing to speak.

Slowly, it rolled over, propped itself up on extended arms, and smiled. “Salutations, Sir Knight.”

The voice was Bellustaire’s, but the accent, the tone... those belonged to another.

“Lambrecht...” Diederick’s own voice was hoarse, barely more than a whisper, so tightly did his jaw clench. The veins

stood out on his neck.

“In the flesh, Sir Diederic. Or someone’s flesh, as it were.”

“What in God’s name have you done, you bastard! How could even you have stooped to—to this!”

“What have I done?” The corpse smiled, smiled so wide the bones of its jaw shifted and creaked. “Only what I always swore to do, Sir Diederic. I have led the Church into her glory days, her days of victory against the heathens and the here-tics. The witches.”

“You cannot!” Diederic limped forward, so that the corpse had to all but break its neck and back to look up at him. “You cannot have grown so powerful so swiftly!”

“Can I not? Perhaps some day I’ll show you my quarters in the Basilica, if you ever feel inclined to visit.”

Diederic scowled, his fingers clenched so tightly on his axe that they ached. “And if you’ve so much authority, why have you not sent anyone to retrieve the remnants of the Grimoire for yourself?”

“Oh, but I have, Sir Diederic. Why... I sent you!”

Shrieking his rage to the heavens, Diederic brought the axe down on the neck of the laughing corpse. The head rolled aside, thumping its way down a handful of stairs to land on the floor beneath. It landed upright, its empty eye sockets piercing Diederic’s soul, its mouth stuffed with glossy black feathers.

And still it laughed.

Sixteen

“You’re a lunatic, you are! A madman and a fool!”

Diederich merely sighed. “What would you have me do, Violca?”

“You’re giving him precisely what he wants, *giorgio!* He’s *told* you what it is, and that he’s manipulated you into it, and *still* you plan to do it!”

“Would you take the Grimoire from me, then, Vistana? Pass it on to your family, your Madam Tsura, for safekeeping, and assume Lambrecht’s reach is too short to harm them? Shall I offer it to some complete stranger, neither knowing if he can be trusted, nor able to make him comprehend the danger? Leave it hidden and unattended, trusting that eyes that see through corpses and crows cannot find it?”

“But gods, Diederich! Bringing it to Caercaelum? Even if, by some miracle, Lambrecht does not wind up with both halves of the most potent occult tome I’ve ever seen, the repercussions of having them both so near, amongst so many people.... The magic *wants to be free*, Diederich!”

The knight could only shrug. “I neither know nor really care what that actually means, Violca.”

“Diederich,” she said, as serious as he’d ever heard her, “Lambrecht may be a bastard, but he at least knows what he’s doing. He has control over his portion of the Grimoire. You do not.

“Would you find yourself again in a city of lunatics, slaughtering each other and themselves because of a *book*? Their blood would rest on your hands, Diederich.”

“No! Not mine; Lambrecht’s! It is he who forces me to do this, and he *will* pay for it!”

And that, in a word, was that. Violca could hardly stop him from hurling himself into the heart of the enemy’s stronghold, nor could she permit him to go alone. So she traveled with him, the mere handful of days from Parsimol, and all the while she fretted. She needed no Sight to see that this could not

end well.

Even the weather sensed that all was not right, and railed against the coming mortal storm. The days came over gray, as though sickened unto death. The skies held no visible clouds, simply a corpselike pallor that blurred into the horizon. Nighttime was little better, for the gray did not depart but merely settled. The Mists rose, heavy and hungry, so that little of—or on—the earth could be seen. But the moon and stars gleamed bright and eager.

On the afternoon of the last day, as they neared the towering walls of Malosia's beating heart, the skies wept for what was to come. The rain fell, blinding, bruising... a veritable wall of water, save when the petulant winds gathered it up in huge fists and hurled it like a javelin at the miserable travelers, at the canvas and wooden walls that made up the peddlers' park.

Caercaelum's southernmost peddlers' park was a thriving community, nearly a town in its own right. Here the goods were of greater variety than in most of its sister markets, and far more expensive (albeit cheaper than within the city itself). Today, nobody was buying.

Huddled deep within their cloaks, meager armor indeed against the stabbing rains, Diederic and Violca strode the highway, passing through the peddlers' park. They squinted, trying to peer their way through the deluge. One stubborn vendor, selling God-knew-what from his waterlogged stall, shouted at them to stop, to defy the weather by taking a gander at what goods he had to offer. His calls turned to curses as they passed him by, and a heavy rock hurtled past Diederic's head.

To his left, obscured by the pounding storm, a young couple huddled in the doorway of one of the park's few solid buildings. Even as Diederic glanced that way, he saw an old man, his feet and his walking stick slipping about in the mud, scuttle into the doorway for shelter, squeezing in beside the couple. And he saw the young man shove the old man out, while the girl yanked from him his cane and brought it down heavily upon his chest and head, again and again and....

Diederic turned his eyes back to the road and clenched his fist tight on the leather pouch containing the pages of the Grimoire. He said nothing to Violca.

The storm's fury was a child's tantrum: harsh but short-lived. It failed in the hour between the peddlers' park and Caercaelum's gates, sputtering, returning, then fading. Finally, nothing remained of a proper rain, though the air itself was soaking, pregnant with waters not yet shed, and smelling of further storms to come.

And now that he finally could do so, Diederick stared in wonder at Malosia's great Heavenly City.

The walls stood tall and proud, the weight of ages only adding to their imposing mass. Dull stone rose from the earth, twenty feet or more if it was an inch. Even during the terrible storm, men in the white tabards of Church regulars or the crimson of Inquisition soldiers remained at their posts, manning the watchtowers that protruded at regular intervals from the mighty bulwark. Now that the storm had passed, other soldiers emerged onto the wall itself, walking their patrols with careful steps, pikes and bows ever at the ready.

Beyond the walls, and the imposing gates of oak and bronze, Caercaelum languished like an aging queen upon her divan. Where the watchtowers of the bulwark were squared and simple, the heights of the city reached skyward with cylindrical fingers and rounded minarets, whitewashed and gilded. The roofs of the faithful sloped together, creating waves and crests of clay and shingles.

And in the midst of it all, the crown on Malosia's head: Scions Mount, on which sat the sprawling Basilica of the Emyrean Church. Dozens of buildings in one, linked by covered passageways, the Basilica boasted a larger population than many towns. In the center rose a golden dome, unimaginably large—an earthbound second sun to reflect the glory of the one that rose above.

Long did Diederick stare, wiping from his eyes the water that dripped from his sodden hair. It was Jerusalem, and Rome, and more besides.

And Diederick hated every stone.

Though the great gate stood open, wide enough to admit two large wagons trundling abreast, it was far from inviting. The gleaming tips of the heavy portcullis above, and the pikes and swords of the soldiers posted below, seemed to Diederick to be little more than teeth in the city's gaping maw. Even in this horrid weather, the wide gates were full of travelers and

merchants moving in and out—hundreds, if not thousands, per day. The sentinels gave each one a cursory glance, as if foul intentions might somehow register on a person's face, and waved everyone through. Their eyes downcast, as though with the fatigue of travel and the chill of the rain, Diederic and Violca took their place in the swift-moving queue.

"Is this entirely wise?" she whispered to him while several paces from the guards. "If Lambrecht holds the authority he claims, could he not just order us arrested as we enter?"

"He'll not take the chance." Diederic sounded confident, though his hand never strayed far from his axe. "A struggle here, and we might escape out into the countryside. Doubtless he's ordered the guards to report the entrance of anyone matching our descriptions, that he might deal with us within."

"Hmm." Violca grinned suddenly, though Diederic mistrusted the rather nasty quirk to her lips. "Perhaps we ought not give them what they're looking for." So saying, she delivered a sharp, swift kick to Diederic's ankle. He knelt with a shout, unheard in the tumult of voices, impatient horses, and creaking wagons, and tried to massage out the worst of the pain. When he glanced up angrily, Violca was gone.

Grumbling, he rose and moved with the crowd, now limping notably. Over the heads of those before him, he caught a quick flash of dark hair and a white tunic. Unnoticed in the press of humanity, Violca attached herself to the rear of a merchant's entourage, adding what looked, to Diederic, a blatantly unnatural sway to her hips, smoothing out her soaking tunic so that it clung, revealing the bulk of what it was intended to hide.

Then Diederic understood, and despite the pain in each step, he chuckled.

And so they passed separately into great Caercaelum. Where the guards might have looked for the grizzled knight and the young Vistana traveling together, they scarcely noticed the sellsword limping on what was doubtless an old war wound; while they likely *did* take note of the traveling merchant's strumpet, odds were strong that they paid little attention to her face.

"Watch it!" The shout came from behind, within the gate. "You just about rolled over my foot, you damned idiot!"

"What did you say to me? You dare *speak* to me?"

The voices rose in pitch, the words devolving into meaningless shrieks. The sounds of leather gauntlets tightening on pikes, swords sliding from scabbards, punctuated the growing din.

Diederich hunched his shoulders and refused to look back.

She waited for him a block down, a few paces into a smaller side street between what looked to be a cobbler's shop and one of half a dozen taverns.

"You might at least have warned me," he complained, though the pain had already begun to fade.

"And yet."

"Hmph." Then, after a moment, "This is the heart of the Emyrean Church. Were you so certain that the guards would not object to your presence?"

"And are your holy cities back home so holy that no whores walk their streets?"

"Hmph," again. Then, for lack of anything else to say, Diederich stepped from the side street and began pushing through the crowd.

"Lambrecht will assume that I'll head pretty directly toward the Basilica," he explained to Violca, barely audible over the throng. "Not *too* directly, mind. He knows I'm no fool. But he'll expect me to want to learn the layout of the area as swiftly as possible."

"And?"

"And normally he'd be right, but I'd as soon twist him up a bit. Since that's where he'll have the bulk of his eyes watching, I suggest we find somewhere to wait in the poorer districts, away from the towers and the Redbreasts. We can take our time, survey from there."

Nor did it prove terribly difficult to find their way. Much as it had been in Jerusalem, Diederich found that while the main roads of Caercaelum were cobbled or paved—providing solid footing from gates to markets to Scions Mount, and stable ground for the merchants' carts and the nobles' carriages—the lesser quarters of the city had to make do with roads of packed earth.

As they progressed along those roads, now made serpentine trails of muck by the recent downpour, Diederich found himself lost in unpleasant reverie. The mud clinging to his boots, the fights breaking out around him, minor and con-

tained so far but sure to spread.... He found himself wondering if the past months had mattered at all, or if he was damned to find himself fighting the same battles, and the same chaos, time and again, without end.

Only slowly, as the reality surrounding him penetrated the fog of memory, did Diederich come to realize that Caercaelum was truly a city gilded, not one of gold. Invisible from beyond the walls, hidden away from the main cobbled streets by blocks of buildings, the common folk of Malosia finally reared their heads. Here the homes did not stand tall, but were modest hovels of wood or rough and inexpensive stone. No shingles of clay protected their roofs, only simple thatch. Windows were oiled paper at best, gaping wide more commonly; and leather curtains served frequently as cheap doors. Men and women went about their daily lives in drab and colorless clothing, patched and mended a dozen times over, and a dozen times again. Theirs was the poverty, not of homelessness and starvation, but of daily exhaustion—a life that ground down the fingers and the feet and the soul with endless, thankless labor.

Here, in the shadow of the Church's greatest pride, blinded by the light reflected from the golden domes and minarets, the forgotten majority of Caercaelum had the temerity to be poor.

"Vistani!"

The call came as they traversed the center of a market, one far different than the rich and bustling public spectacles found just inside the city's every gate. Here, the vendors sold gamey meats, slightly stale pastries, and tin utensils from the backs of wooden carts or rickety structures that served as both shop and home. The neighborhood was redolent with sweat and smoked fish, so pungent that even the recent downpour had scarcely sweetened it.

Violca rolled her eyes heavenward and sighed deeply. Diederich frowned at her.

"Do you know this fellow?"

"I might as well."

Pushing through the bustle came a heavysset man, his head and face surrounded by a mane of brown hair that would have been right at home on a lion—assuming the lion cared little for hygiene. He wore a butcher's apron, and idly

scratched at his back with a heavy cleaver.

"This is precisely what I was talking about," Violca muttered to Diederic, shaking her head. "He'll accuse me of theft, or my family of taking his child, or perhaps cheating his grandmother out of some heirloom. You'll probably have to hurt him."

"Vistani!" he called again as he neared, pointing with his other hand, his finger as round and rubbery as the sausages doubtless hanging in his wagon.

One hand hanging casually near her blade, she finally turned. "That's *Vistana, giorgio*. Or are you so drunk you see two of me?"

For a moment, separated from them by perhaps a dozen feet, the man came to a halt. He blinked twice, scuffed his feet a bit in the dirt. Then....

"Sorry, miss. I'm not terribly familiar with your language."

In the face of all the terrors they'd seen, the nightmares of the passages in and beneath Perdition Hill, the grotesqueries of Bellustaire both living and dead, Diederic had never seen Violca quite so thoroughly stunned as she was at that moment.

"I—That is... did you just apologize to me?"

"Yes, miss. Had some of your people come through a while back, and they seemed quite taken with a particular meat pie of mine. Said it reminded them of a traditional dish, though I'll confess I couldn't recall the name if you paid me. Business has been wretched, and I thought you might be good for a sale."

Diederic scratched vigorously at his cheeks and chin, hoping to hide his desperate struggle not to laugh.

The attack Violca had anticipated, when it finally materialized, came not from the butcher before them, but from passersby on the street behind. The first was a short man in a filthy tunic, both hands wrapped around a rake. Voice high, nigh inarticulate, he screamed as he charged; the only intelligible words were "Vistani," "traitor," and "wrath of God." The butcher himself flattened the attacker with a heavy backhand, but by that point two others followed in the footsteps of the first.

Startled but undaunted, Diederic stepped in to meet them, tripping the first with a low kick, driving the second to the

ground with a heavy punch to the gut. The man he had tripped stayed down, for Violca had stepped heavily on his throat. The butcher, face red and suddenly screaming with his own rage, rushed into the road like a maddened bull, fists and cleaver flailing at everyone in sight. Bodies fell, blood flew; men and women suddenly poured in from all sides, each shrieking his or her own imagined slight, and the brawl seemed ready to swell up and burst into a full-fledged riot.

Diederich's hand tightened painfully on his companion's wrist. "Time for us to be off!"

"But—that man...."

"Was surprisingly polite to you, yes. Is that worth being here when the soldiers arrive?"

Violca's expression was sour enough to spoil fresh cream, but when Diederich dashed for the nearest alley, she willingly followed.

For a time, once the rising discord of the street had faded behind them, the only sounds were their labored breaths and the splattering of their boots in the muddy road. Only when they were quite certain they were well away did they stop for a moment, panting, in the doorway of what appeared to be an empty house.

"That was peculiar," Violca commented suspiciously between gasps.

Diederich shrugged. "As you said, lots of folk don't care for your people. Apparently, the poor man angered some of them by speaking with you."

Had he not been bent over, hands on his knees as he caught his breath, Violca would never have had the mass to overwhelm him. As he was, however, a simple shove was enough to send him face first into the mud. He thrashed wildly to his feet, spitting and sputtering.

"What in God's name...!"

"Do *not* lie to me, Diederich! Not about this! Don't you dare!" Her fists clenched, she stepped before him, glaring up into his filthy face. "It's the Grimoire, isn't it?"

From a mask of muck, he glared back, then sighed once and seemed to deflate. "Several times already. I thought it better not to bother you with it, since there's not a thing we can—"

"You *idiot!* How could you be so stupid!"

“Don’t push me, Violca.” His voice was harsh now, ragged, angry. “You couldn’t have prevented—”

“I told you what that book is, Diederic! I told you!”

“You said the magic ‘wants to be used.’ I heard you the first time.”

“The madness *is* the magic, Diederic, and you’re the one leaking it! To anyone with even the simplest spell of Sight, you’re glowing like a Scion-damned beacon! I can See it myself, now I know to look for it, bright as if you were on fire!”

Beneath the clinging brown, Diederic’s face went white. “Then Lambrecht....”

“Can find us at any time, and all our efforts at stealth have been worth about as much as the mud you’re wearing.”

Suddenly Diederic saw spies in every shadow, the gleam of Lambrecht’s watching eyes in every scavenging bird, every scurrying rodent.

“We’d best keep moving, try at least to keep his people from catching up with us.”

Violca scowled. “We’ll be damned lucky, *giorgio*, if it’s *people* he sends to find us at all.”

Whether due to their refusal to stay in one place, or for other reasons only Lambrecht himself might have explained, nothing untoward befell them the rest of the day. They moved briskly through poverty-stricken neighborhoods, occasionally stopping long enough to pore over the wares in some shop or other, so as not to stand out from other citizens. Time and again, they heard the growing sounds of a fray from the markets and streets they left behind, but Diederic could only give thanks that the chaos and carnage were sporadic and localized, not the citywide butchery that had swept Jerusalem. He remembered an entire city, stinking of blood and echoing with the shrieks of the murderous and the murdered, and he shuddered.

Night fell and the mists rose, each hurrying to meet the other halfway. The mists rose from the city’s deepest wells, from the streams that trickled and gurgled nearby, from the gutters that ran along the main streets, even from the mud of the unpaved roads, leaving behind a surface cracked and dried as any arid wasteland. They wriggled and writhed their way skyward, reaching out to embrace the low-hanging

clouds, to blot out the moon and obscure the stars, until nothing remained but gray.

They came with the fog, as Diederich had known in his heart that they must. Featureless shapes in the haze, visible at first only where they blotted out the diffuse light of nearby lanterns and torches, they shuffled and stumbled: slow, awkward, inevitable.

No accusations. No cries of anger. No maddened shrieks. No lunatic giggles.

“Well,” Diederich offered through clenched teeth, “I believe we can rest assured that these folk, at least, are not mad.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I’m fairly certain that they’re *dead*.”

They stood back to back in the soupy fog, struggling to see as the bodies neared. The stench reached them first: the miasma of new decay. These were freshly dead, or so it would seem. Diederich choked; Violca’s stomach roiled. Both stood firm, but Diederich began to sweat.

Nothing, in all his years as a soldier, had taught him how to kill something already dead.

As the corpses solidified from the mists, they somehow frightened him more than even the phantoms beneath Perdition Hill. These? These were meat. Muscle and bone and humors and *no soul*—no life. Nothing to speak with, nothing of humanity, nothing to kill. They would keep coming and coming, and they would tear him down.

Lambrecht would win....

From behind, he heard Violca whisper, “How can we kill the dead?” And somehow, the question steadied him. As his own nightmarish fear, the bodies were unstoppable; as a tactical problem posed by another, it suddenly laid itself bare to answers.

“We don’t!” he breathed, struck by sudden inspiration. He shifted to stand beside the Vistana, rather than behind her. “Violca, your staff! Just shove them away afterward!”

“After what?”

No time. The first of the shambling corpses was upon them. She looked almost normal, save for the formality of her gown, as did the old man behind her, and the younger fellow behind him. Their features were sallow and sunken, their eyes pale and dried. They approached with mouths agape and hands

raised into tearing claws. The reek of the grave came with them.

Diederich, when he struck, aimed not for the head, nor the chest, but for the knee. Flesh tore, bone splintered, and the corpse began to fall.

And Viola understood. With a desperate thrust of her staff, she sent the unnatural thing toppling away.

Over and over they worked, so methodically that it became mechanical. The dead approached, mindless, unable to adapt. Diederich struck, Viola shoved. With each attack they retreated a step or two toward the nearest crossroads, leaving a trail of twitching bodies in their wake.

The dead did not give up. The fallen continued to advance, dragging themselves along the ground once their legs refused to support them. Most were too slow to catch the retreating pair, and those that were not found their arms gone the way of their knees. Diederich's axe acquired a patina of rotted, viscous blood, dulling it until it could barely cut flesh. Yet still it rose and fell, crushing where it could not slash.

To Diederich and Viola, retreating before them, they seemed an endless tide. In truth, it was the last of only about a dozen or so at which they hacked and thrust as they emerged into the larger street.

And into the gathering crowd.

Diederich feared for a moment that they were more of Lam-brecht's legion of the dead, for he could see little but their general shapes in the mists. He was swiftly disabused of that notion, however, as he heard their whispers and their cries.

"What are they doing?"

"Dear Scions, they just killed that poor woman!"

"Get them!"

Worse, above it all, above the calls and the sudden running feet, they heard the faint jingle of harnesses and the *clop-clop* of hooves. From the fog they sounded: a patrol of soldiers, distant but drawing ever nearer.

Diederich and Viola backed away once more, their eyes wide as the crowd surged forward.

"Can we run?" she asked desperately.

From both sides of the street they came, and Diederich shook his head, defeated.

"The dead," Viola hissed. Diederich stared until compre-

hension dawned, then nodded once. They were off and running, mere steps ahead of the enraged crowd.

They ran back the way they had come, their eyes cast not ahead of them—for the curtain of fog made that useless at best—but downward. Lumps and protrusions in the road appeared from the mists, bodies and parts of bodies that heaved and slouched with unnatural life. Most they dashed around before the mutilated things could move to react; a few they hacked and beat as deathless grips closed about ankles or trailing cloaks. From behind came the first shrieks of dismayed horror as the pursuing throng encountered the crawling dead. It was, perhaps, a terrible thing to do to these citizens of Caercaelum, Diederick acknowledged; but it was Lambrecht, not himself, who had orchestrated it.

Besides, as the cries of fear rose in crescendo to inhuman screeches, and one man began to laugh hysterically over the sudden sounds of tearing flesh and chewing, Diederick knew that the people who pursued them were swiftly becoming worse than the walking dead themselves.

On they ran, avoiding the last of the moving bodies. The corpses and the crowds might slow the soldiers, but doubtless not for long. They needed a place to hide, but where could—?

“Sister! In here!”

He stood in a narrow doorway in a rickety wooden wall, one that sealed off an equally narrow alley between two dilapidated tenements. Had he not opened it just as they passed, neither Diederick nor Violca would have seen it. Even without the added concealment of the fog, it blended perfectly into the rest of the filthy and rotted wood behind heaps of broken lumber and old garbage. Although clad in the same dull tunic and trousers as half the other poor citizens of Caercaelum’s shunned districts, his raven hair and moustache, and the swarthy hue of his skin, clearly marked him Vistani.

“Do you know him?” Diederick asked as they skidded to a halt.

“I don’t believe so. Does it matter?”

“Not at the moment.”

They squeezed through the doorway, Diederick offering a nod of thanks, and found themselves sandwiched between the two buildings. The alley was ankle-deep in refuse, thank-

fully old and dried enough neither to stain nor to stink. Carefully the Vistana clicked the portal shut and gestured for them to remain motionless as he placed an ear against the wood.

“Do not mention my family name,” Violca whispered, her breath warm in Diederick’s ear. “We’ve enmities and rivalries among the tribes of the Vistani, same as any other people. If we’re to discover that this man is an enemy, I’d prefer to wait until after he’s through helping us.”

“I’m not certain it’s wise to share our names *at all*,” the knight hissed in reply.

For minutes they sat, hunkered down amidst the rubbish. The strange Vistana, truthfully, needn’t have made such a production of listening. Even away from the doorway, Diederick and Violca could clearly hear the distant sounds of struggle, the cumbersome tramp of horseshoes and heavy boots.

Only when it was clear that the soldiers were not approaching the hidden alley did the stranger stand and usher the others to move along with one finger held to his lips. With every crunch and shift and thump of refuse he rolled his eyes or shook his head, but they had attracted no attention by the time they reached the alley’s far end. Here he crouched beside another door and fiddled with a pair of slim wires and a rusty padlock until it popped open.

Beyond awaited a dusty storage chamber, replete with boxes and barrels that had doubtless admitted no curious eyes in years, coated in cobwebs that were the ancestral homes of a thousand generations of spiders come and gone. Bits of fuzzy black mildew spattered the walls in large spots and random patterns; Diederick couldn’t help but feel it looked as though someone had detonated a cat in the room.

A single lantern, glowing dully atop one of the boxes, provided the room’s only illumination. The strange Vistana stepped over to it, that his “guests” might see him clearly, and bowed.

“I am called Tobar,” he said, his deep voice far more thickly accented than Violca’s own.

“I am Violca,” she replied, bending low but not quite matching his bow. “My companion would, I think, prefer to remain nameless for now.”

Diederick nodded, then bowed more deeply. “I thank you for your assistance, friend.”

“But not so thankful that you trust me with something so simple as your name?”

“Not yet, no.”

“I see.” He turned his gaze back on Violca, a smirk beginning to form at his lips. “Your companion, you said?”

Her eyes went dark. “I’ve had more than my fill of such assumptions from ignorant *giorgios*, Tobar. I need none from a cousin, however distant.”

Another bow, this time in apology.

This close to Tobar, sheltered from the obscuring haze of the mists, Diederich could examine their rescuer more closely. He did not care for what he found. The Vistana had narrow, shifty eyes, and the smirk he’d directed at Violca never seemed entirely absent from the crook of his lips. He smelled unpleasantly of sweat and perfume, as though desperate to hide the filth he could not be bothered to wash off. Something of him engendered an immediate distrust deep in Diederich’s gut, and if he was a more traditional Vistana than Violca herself, then for the first time the knight understood the common folks’ dislike of their presence.

“We’d best go,” Tobar demanded as he rose from his bow. “They’ve missed the alley for now, perhaps, but if they’ve patrolled this neighborhood before, one or another should remember it before long.”

Waiting for no reply, he glided across the room to stand before a door not quite cater-corner to the one by which they’d entered. Like the first, it was locked with an old rusty mechanism; and like the first, the Vistana had picked it in a matter of moments.

It opened into a second alleyway, separated from the other by a rough brick wall. It was far wider in scope, a small road unto itself running between and among old buildings of questionable stability. Few windows overlooked it, and the garbage littering it, while fresher and more pungent than the refuse of their prior hiding spot, was minimal. A scrawny dog darted from their path, and Diederich, now ever suspicious, hurled a loose brick at a small gathering of crows that had alighted on some rotting scraps. They squawked indignantly as they scattered, but none seemed unusually eager to stay, or to watch.

“Not that I’m ungrateful,” Diederich began as they scurried

through the alley, hard on Tobar's heels, "but why exactly are you helping us?"

Again that ugly, self-satisfied smirk. "I am not aiding you, *giorgio*. I'm aiding *her*. I've seen what befalls those of my people who fall into the Church's hands, and I would spare her that. That my actions assist you as well is entirely your own fabulous good fortune, and no concern either way of mine."

With that, the Vistana broke into a light jog, not so fast as to make undue racket, but laborious enough that further conversation would prove difficult.

They slowed only when the detritus grew thick and threatened to turn an ankle, or for Tobar to burgle their way past additional doors. Storerooms and cellars, back alleys and abandoned shacks—these made up their highway as they fled from pursuit. It wasn't long at all before Diederick and Violca found themselves lost and turned about, utterly dependent on their new guide to lead the way.

Violca, now breathing heavily, tugged on Diederick's sleeve and pointed to the wall beside which they ran. Although it had long since faded, a few remaining traces of whitewashing had bravely survived the years-long struggle against dust and rain.

Only then did Diederick notice that the alleys had grown cleaner, the buildings taller and sturdier. Even the noise of the city had changed. Its voices were less strident, the sounds of footsteps now audible on cobbled main thoroughfares.

Tobar was slowly and circuitously leading them away from the poor quarters, and back toward the more opulent districts of Caercaelum. It was perhaps a wise idea in the short term, for the soldiers would not likely think to look here for the troublemakers, but Diederick didn't think it a safe place to spend much time.

At the knight's gesture to slow for a moment, however, the Vistana shook his head. "Just ahead," he said between gasps, pointing vaguely. "A cellar.... We can rest there.... Talk freely."

His definition of "just" proved a bit looser than Diederick's own, for he kept them running another several minutes. At the end of the small street, however, he did indeed slow and turn. There, a pair of storm doors, their handles wrapped in an old

chain, led downward. Tobar yanked the links aside with a dull clank and threw wide the doors.

“Swiftly now!” he breathed, glancing furtively over his shoulder. “This street is far more exposed than I would like!”

Violca and Diederick shuffled past, exchanging a knowing look as they set boot to wooden stair. They would, indeed, hurry below before anyone else spotted them, but once inside, they would go not one step further until Tobar had provided some answers.

The stairs wandered deep below the building. Halfway down, Diederick’s nose and lungs were filled with the aroma of old, dry earth.

By the time he detected the scent of oiled steel beneath it, there was nothing he could do.

Seventeen

Instantly, they were surrounded. Redbreasts with pikes, with swords, with bows, emerged from every corner of the spacious cellar. Two carried lanterns. The flickering light, glinting from their polished armor and crimson tabards, suggested a constantly shifting patina of blood.

Behind the rows of soldiers, a second set of stairs led upward, presumably into whichever of the nearby homes this cellar truly belonged. Diederich eyed the Redbreasts and the distance to the door. If he and Violca tried to retreat the way they had come, the pikemen would cut them down, or the archers perforate them before they'd gone halfway. If they could break through, however, take the stairs just beyond the archers, they might avoid the clearest lines of attack....

With the heavy tread of booted feet upon those distant stairs, Diederich's half-formed plan shifted from foolhardy to suicidal. Defeated for the nonce, he let his shoulders sag and stood motionless, awaiting the appearance of this newcomer.

He was a large man, in all senses of the word. He wore a heavy hauberk, custom-suited to his substantial girth, over which he sported a black tabard, trimmed in crimson and boasting the ensign of the sixfold sun in richly embroidered gold. As he reached the base of the stairs, Tobar darted by the prisoners to stand at his side.

"Here they are, your worship," Tobar simpered, "just as I promised. I told you that you needn't send out so many to search for them, that it would be I to find them, did I not?"

"You did." Even from afar, Diederich and Violca heard the tone of revulsion in his words. With a twitch of his fingers, he called over one of the guards, who dropped a small leather pouch into Tobar's waiting palm. It clinked loudly as it landed.

"Stay a bit, Tobar," the man ordered. "I may have further use for you.

"My name," he announced, raising his voice until it seemed to force the air from the cellar, "is Oste van Brekke, First Con-

fessor of the Emyprean Inquisition, Right Hand of his Eminence the Pontiff Cornelis Antheunis the First, Defender of Malosia's Faith.

"And you," he continued without so much as a pause to think about it, "would be Violca Hanza and 'Sir' Diederic de Wyndt."

Diederic caught himself just before he glanced worriedly at his companion. If nothing else, he would deny this man the satisfaction of seeing him surprised.

Instead, he asked, "And what would a fellow of such impressive stature want with us?"

Van Brekke scowled beneath his beard. "The Vistani woman claims unnatural powers of sight. You appeared to my men out of an empty bank of mists. You slew several of my soldiers in your escape from Perdition Hill, others in the Forest of Cineris, and while I can offer no proof of it, I suspect more murders in the weeks since."

It was Diederic's turn to scowl. "You'll not take either of us back into those dungeons of yours, van Brekke. We'll die, the both of us, before that happens, and I swear to my God and yours, we'll take more than a spare few of your Redbreasts with us!" Several of the soldiers snarled, claspings hands on hilts or stretching bowstrings back with an ominous groaning of wood.

"Oh, still your axe and your tongue both, de Wyndt! I'd like nothing better than to see you both burnt and broken before being stretched by the neck from the rafters. But I've not had my own people watching the Church soldiers, nor paid spies scouring every spot of trouble in this city, just so I could kill you first!"

Van Brekke trundled into the center of the cellar, shouldering his way through the wall of soldiers, and motioned his "guests" to join him. Suspicion warred with curiosity within Diederic, but as curiosity had the Redbreasts on its side, it swiftly won out. He advanced to roughly a spear's length from the First Confessor; the looks on the Redbreasts' faces told him that any closer would be unwise. Violca remained at the base of the stair, seemingly deaf to the conversation.

"There is a poison within my Church, de Wyndt," van Brekke told him without preamble. "A toxin that rots away the Emyprean heart, and threatens to bring down all that I honor,

all that I love.”

Despite the blades threatening him, Diederick smiled. “Lambrecht Raes.” It was not a question.

Van Brekke nodded. “None other. We share an enemy, de Wyndt. Yet so long as he operates under the auspices and approval of the pontiff, my own oaths bar me from acting against him.”

“You’re perfectly willing to send another to act in your stead, though. Tell me, van Brekke, is hypocrisy something they teach in the seminary? So many priests I’ve met seem well educated in—”

“If you would prefer, I am quite happy to lock you away, or watch you die trying to stop me!”

“Ah, no. No, I’d rather not.”

“So.” Van Brekke paused a moment, waiting for his breath to slow, the angry red in his face to fade. “You will remove Lambrecht from my Church, de Wyndt, or at least provide the means whereby I can act to do so myself. You will *not* harm any more of my men, nor any members of the clergy, and most especially not the pontiff, in the process.”

“I’m not certain that’s going to be possible—”

“Once you succeed—*assuming* you succeed, and *only* if you succeed—you will be permitted to depart without further prosecution by myself or my soldiers, and will remain free of said prosecution so long as you never again violate our laws. The slightest such violation, however, renders all such pardons and indulgences void. Am I clearly, completely understood?”

“I should think so.”

“Excellent. Tobar here will lead you and your companion into the grounds of the Basilica—yes, Tobar, for an additional fee, of course. From there, you’re on your own. My command over the Inquisition is absolute, but I have less influence over the Church regulars, and any attempt to reduce or remove the guards would draw far too much attention.”

“My, but you’re helpful,” Diederick spat bitterly.

Van Brekke ignored him. “While I can make no promises as to Lambrecht’s location, I strongly suggest trying his quarters and his office. He’s rarely elsewhere, unless meeting with the pontiff. He—”

“*Traitor!*”

A bowstring thrummed, an arrow pounced: a striking serpent with fangs of steel. Van Brekke's speed belied both girth and age as he twisted aside, but he could not wholly avoid the attack. Chain parted, flesh parted, and the arrow settled into the meat of his upper arm with a dull thump.

Even as he staggered back against the steps, a trio of Redbreasts leapt upon his attacker, dragging him down before he could nock a second arrow, ignoring their blades to pummel him with fists. Over and over their hands rose and fell, until even the man's mother could scarcely have recognized the bloody, pulped mass that had been his face.

On and on they pounded at him, their indignant cries rising to a fever pitch, until they were little more than squeals—animal calls without anything so coherent as words within.

Other Redbreasts dove into the fray. Perhaps they sought to pull their companions off the mangled corpse, or perhaps they agreed with the first attacker that the First Confessor's words amounted to treason and heresy against the Church. It mattered little. One soldier reached out, placing his hand firmly upon the shoulder of another who crouched over the body, and abruptly found a sword protruding from his thigh. He fell with an angry cry—a cry that became an obscene giggle as his head struck the floor. Blades, nails, and teeth alike reddened with blood, and what had been a disciplined assembly of the Church's finest soldiers degenerated into an abattoir of madness and gore.

Across the cellar floor that was swiftly turning from dirt to mud—that same scarlet-tinted sludge that had clung to Diederic's boots in Jerusalem—van Brekke propped himself up on the steps, surrounded by a trio of soldiers who tended his wounds, their expressions grim, refusing to be drawn into the chaos while their commander needed them. His own face pale, coated in a film of sweat, his body shaking, the First Confessor gestured up the stairs with the thumb of his good hand.

"Go!" he ordered, whatever pain he felt utterly absent from his commanding voice. "Go, now, while you can!"

Diederic and Viola, already edging away from the carnage, broke into a dash. The knight lashed out as he ran, snagging Tobar by the collar, dragging the Vistana along as they pounded up the steps, through someone's kitchen, and

out into the streets.

“Perhaps,” Tobar suggested as they slowed their pace, “I should receive my payment now. If, gods forbid, van Brekke should be slain below—”

“Should van Brekke be slain,” Diederick snarled, “then the Inquisition will be thrown into chaos. You’ll have to consider *that* sufficient payment, if you receive no second bag of silver.”

“I could refuse to guide you....”

“Yes. Yes, you could do that.”

In those words, the Vistana heard the emptiness of the grave. Swallowing once, he smiled.

“But of course, I would do no such thing. I understand the importance of what we do here.”

“Then lead.”

Tobar led. Diederick glanced at Violca, opened his mouth to ask some question, and closed it again with a sharp clack. Her face was as rigid as stone, her eyes locked straight ahead. It occurred to him only then that she had not said a word during the discussion below, had barely seemed to register the goings-on at all.

Had she gone mad too? Is this what the bloodlust of the Grimoire looked like on a Vistana? Diederick didn’t think so—she was too controlled, too contained—but before he could again attempt to question her, to speak to her, to simply gain her attention, she was off and following Tobar as he slipped and twisted through the crowds of pedestrians. With a grunt, Diederick followed, but his gaze remained locked on his companion, rather than their guide.

Another roundabout odyssey ensued, traversing major streets and back alleys alike. As before, Tobar sometimes led them through small storerooms or old houses. Once or twice he even led them through underground passages, ancient halls of stone whose purpose in Caercaelum had long been forgotten. Several times Diederick asked the Vistana how he knew of such places, and several times he found himself brushed off with such meaningless replies as “We Vistani know many things.”

They emerged from an old storm grate to find themselves at the very edge of the Basilica’s grounds. From beneath the surrounding wall, they peered past an old tool shed and over

the single most important piece of property in Malosia entire.

Grasses of the most impressive springtime green stretched over the rolling, wavelike slope of Scions Mount. Pebbled pathways wound around tiny hillocks, burbling fountains, tiny orchards of rich fruit trees, and imposing marble sculptures of pontiffs and Church luminaries past and present. Pikemen in the white and gold of the Church livery stood at their posts, still as those statues, or walked the walls and the paths, alert for trouble but rarely expecting any. Pages darted back and forth on errands for men far more important than they could ever dream of being, and priests clad in black and crimson strode the grounds, heads down in thought or raised in philosophical debate.

Rising above it all, the walls of the Basilica itself—or rather the outermost buildings attached to the Basilica: libraries and dormitories and workrooms and shops, all intended to service the clergy so that none need ever descend into the city proper. Even these walls were whitewashed, so as to blend with the marble walls of the cathedral itself, and gleamed in the reflected gold of the minarets and domes above.

“I fear I can bring you no nearer,” Tobar whispered. “None of the passages I know of travel directly beneath the Basilica. You’ll have to—”

“Tobar?” It was the first word Viola had spoken since they’d entered the cellar. So startled was Diederick that he turned in answer too, as though she’d called his own name.

Thus he was able to watch, slack-jawed, as Viola sidled up to Tobar and slid the entire length of her wicked knife into his gut.

Tobar’s entire body shuddered violently, and he doubled over, only to catch himself in Viola’s embrace. His mouth moved, gasping and fish-like, but no sound emerged save for a single bloody cough.

“*Vishnadd lunadi*,” she hissed. “Let justice be done! You are no Vistana!” Viola thrust higher even as Tobar folded, her blade ripping, tearing, puncturing. When she finally withdrew, knife and wrist covered in warm blood, there was nothing left in Tobar to hold him upright. Eyes still unblinking, she knelt beside the fallen body, calmly wiping her weapon clean on his tunic. Then, as an afterthought, she slipped from his waist the coinpurse given him by van Brekke.

At Diederic's incredulous stare, she merely shrugged, rising again to her feet. "No Vistana betrays another to *giorgios* without suffering for it," she told him, her voice absent of any remorse, of any emotion at all. "If it makes you feel any better, blame it on the book.

"In the meanwhile, tell me how you plan to get us across dozens of yards of open grass, let alone the twisting halls of the Basilica itself."

"Actually," Diederic said, giving himself a mental shake, "I have a thought about that." For a long time he said nothing more, staring out over the grounds, timing the paths of the various soldiers on patrol. Hours drifted by and the sun had grown low in the western sky, when he finally nodded.

"Lend me a hand," he ordered, bending down to lift the dead man from the floor, "and be ready...."

"Stop fidgeting! This is going to be difficult enough to manage without you twitching like a beheaded chicken!"

"What do you want from me, *giorgio!* I've never worn one of these damn things before! I feel like my shoulders are going to fall off."

Both clad in the hauberks, tabards, and—perhaps most importantly—helms of the Church guard, Diederic and Violca strode across the grounds with military posture and precision. Or at least Diederic did. Violca seemed to be having issues.

This, the knight bemoaned mentally, for the umpteenth time, *is never going to work.*

Indeed, his desperate plan left far too much to chance. Violca's face was partly hidden within the helm, and the hauberk and tabard concealed her more feminine attributes, but her unfamiliarity with the armor showed in her posture, in every step, and anyone who cast her more than a passing glance might well notice that the entire ensemble was too large on her.

Nor was the Vistana the only potential flaw in the scheme. Diederic himself looked more the part of a Church soldier, and indeed made efforts to keep himself between his companion and any observers. But he didn't know his way around the Basilica and remained ignorant of any potential passwords or customs, any one of which could expose him. Further, while the bodies—Tobar and the two soldiers they had

lured from their patrol with the Vistani corpse—were hidden deep within the storm drain, there was still no telling if and when they might be discovered, or the two guards missed.

So they made their way across the wide property, their shadows stretching beneath the setting sun, and prayed to God or gods that they might go unnoticed just a few moments longer....

And strangely enough, they did. The grounds began to empty, priests and messengers retiring to their evening meals, neither giving the guards so much as a second glance. More suspiciously, at least to Diederic's eye, the soldiers began to clear too. Patrols grew less frequent, but those that remained now moved about in larger numbers, and the assembly of sentinels at the gates to the Basilica grew thick. The ambient noises of the night—birds and insects—grew faint beneath the low but constant rumble of hushed conversation from the guardposts.

"What's happening?" Violca whispered, glancing about as much as the confining helm would allow.

"They're readying for an attack!" Diederic answered, his voice worried. "The soldiers.... They're moving from a ceremonial patrol pattern to duty stations. We'd best move faster, before some officer decides we belong at one of the gates."

Fortune was with them again, and they arrived at the complex before such a fate could befall them. Wide stone steps led to a towering portal of brass, standing open a few more moments before it would be shut and barred for the night. The sentinels beside it scarcely acknowledged Diederic and Violca at all, save with a distracted nod that the two imposters swiftly returned.

Despite the pressing need for alacrity, neither could help but halt and stare for a moment upon passing through the door. The hall was formed of perfectly aligned bricks, fit together so tightly that the addition of mortar had been little more than a formality. A rich crimson carpet stretched to infinity, running down the center of the hall, and glass lanterns hung from intricate sconces at regular intervals. The passage smelled thickly of incense, doubtless added to the lanterns to overpower the oily smoke. Doors of rich wood and additional hallways provided dozens of means of egress, and both newcomers suddenly understood that the various sayings com-

paring the halls of the Basilica to the winding streets of a small town were no hyperbole at all.

Around them were even more soldiers, pages, and priests, all scurrying this way and that. Bits and snippets of conversation drifted to Diederic's ears, and they were enough to chill his blood. The Basilica had indeed gone on the defensive, due to growing riots and random bloodshed in the streets of Caercaelum.

The madness of the Grimoire was spreading.

It was that realization that offered Diederic the inspiration he needed to find their way through the winding halls. Reaching out, he gruffly snagged the collar of a passing pageboy. The child yelped sharply, but drew himself to shaky attention at the sight of the soldier who had grabbed him.

"I've vital information regarding the riots, boy," Diederic rumbled in his best battlefield tone. That announcement drew curious and frightened attention from other passersby in the hall, but there was no helping that. "You will escort us, and announce us, to the Pontiff. At once!"

Why do you not report to your commanding officer, and have him funnel the intelligence upward? Why do you require an escort, or a herald? Why me?

All these questions, and more, Diederic saw flashing in the boy's eyes—and, as the knight had expected, they stayed there, without ever reaching his tongue. Too well trained to question the orders of a superior, any superior, the page spun about and proceeded through the hall with Diederic and Violca at his heels.

Diederic dropped back and gestured for the Vistana to do the same, allowing the page to move a few paces ahead. "It would have been far too questionable," he whispered to her, "had I asked to be taken to Lambrecht's quarters. I would have no conceivable business with him, nor way of knowing him. As an advisor to the pontiff, though, his chambers should be nearby. We can find them from there."

"Yes, thank you, Diederic. I had, in fact, come to that conclusion myself."

The knight glowered, but said nothing more.

At any other time, he would have loved to explore, to examine the Basilica's wonders. As they neared the center and climbed stairway upon stairway, it only grew richer and more

fantastic. The walls were no longer brick, but marble—or at least faced in marble. Niches in those walls held intricate busts of saints, fabulous tapestries depicting scenes and passages of the Septateuch hung from the walls, and the lantern sconces were replaced by hanging chandeliers of brass and crystal.

When the stairs climbed no higher, and the brass on the chandeliers was replaced by gleaming gold, they knew that they were close indeed. Nudging Diederick to draw his attention, Violca gestured at the pageboy's back and frowned. Diederick nodded once.

"This'll do, boy," he commanded. "We can take it from here. Return to your duties."

"But you said... that is, yes, sir." Puzzlement clear on his young features, the child slipped past them and vanished once more down the stairs.

Even standing on the proper floor, in the general vicinity of the Basilica's highest quarters and offices, they had a fair bit of searching to do. Thus it was some minutes and many hallways later that Diederick and Violca turned a corner and found themselves face to face with half a dozen guards.

They wore neither the white tabards of Church soldiers nor the crimson of Inquisitors, but rather gold, the sixfold sun emblazoned across their chests in deepest red. One of the lot, boasting a gold feathered crest on his helm, stepped to meet them.

"Nobody sees the pontiff right now," he announced from behind a bushy mustache. "He's holding emergency consultations." Abruptly, he cocked his head to the side. "What are you doing up here, anyway, soldier? You should be on station! Why...?"

His eyes drifted to Violca, and suddenly narrowed. The Vistana had been discovered, and she knew it. She had only one option left to her.

"Halt!" She kicked at the back of Diederick's leg, and he dropped to one knee before her, shouting more in surprise than in pain. With the rasp of steel on leather, her sword was in one hand, held at Diederick's throat, just beneath his helm; the other hand clutched the top of that same helm, forcing his head back. "One false move, and your man dies!"

Faster than the eye could follow, all six soldiers bristled with

blades, broadswords and hand-axes ready to slay. At their officer's gesture they flowed forward swiftly and competently, two on each side of the hall, one with the commander moving down the center. Some two paces from the stranger and her "hostage," they stopped.

"I haven't the first notion of what you hoped to accomplish here, woman," the officer said calmly, "but it's clearly failed. Let him go, and perhaps we can discuss possibilities for you to leave here alive."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you both die." His tone was chilling, unwavering. He might as well have been discussing two potential options for supper. "We all know the risks we take when we swear to serve God, Scions, and Pontiff. Should he fall here, he will be well rewarded in Heaven. Will you?"

Violca shoved Diederick from her with a cry. Even as he tumbled, the knight tensed and lunged, pushing off from the leg on which he knelt. He crashed into the calves of the two men in the center of the hall, bringing them down in a single jumbled mess. His dagger in hand, for there was precious little room to swing an axe, Diederick stabbed once, twice, and stood alone when he rose to his feet.

Four against two: still poor odds. He had to be fast—faster than ever before—and trust Violca to follow his lead. His dagger spun through the air, and he had his axe in hand before the blade struck its target. It careened, harmless, from a third soldier's armor, but that was enough. Distracted by the sudden attack, the soldier failed to note the approaching Vistana until her stolen sword slashed deep, below the trailing edge of the hauberk, severing tendons at the back of his knees. Even as he toppled, screaming, she shoved him forward with a shoulder so that he fell at his companion's feet. It wasn't enough to trip him up as she had hoped, but it kept him from dancing aside as Diederick's axe swept in to crunch through his protective mail. The sound was not unlike that of a bird biting into a beetle.

The final two guards were upon them from across the hall, and the battle became a furious dance of steel on steel, broadsword on axe. Inexperienced in such matters, Violca held back, watching wide-eyed as Diederick parried blows intended for both of them, and knew that he must inevitably

slip, react that split second too late.

Better, then, not to wait. She crouched low behind her human shield, waited until the man to her left swung once more, and reached out with the stolen broadsword and stabbed him hard through the foot.

He cried out despite himself, dropping his weapon to clutch at his mangled limb—and that was the end of it. Focusing on one man alone, Diederick stepped in and guided his axe through an intricate whirling pattern that ended deep within his foe's throat, then turned and ended both surviving soldiers' suffering for good measure.

Carefully he wiped his axe clean, replaced it in the loop at his belt, and only then did he allow himself to collapse to his knees, gasping and panting for air.

"That was impressive," Violca complimented him, stepping around pools of sticky crimson to put a hand on his shoulder.

He had no reply for her as he struggled to catch his breath, but the glare in his eye was answer enough.

"What would you have had me do?" she asked with a shrug. "It's not as though I could have taken the time to explain what I was about to do, could I?"

Still he glowered, an expression that slowly grew less angry, more puzzled, as the burning in his chest finally eased. "Where's everyone else?" he asked.

Violca instantly took his meaning. She turned about, surveying the empty hall. "The doors look thick enough," she said finally. "Perhaps nobody heard?"

"Or perhaps they're cowering in wait, while additional guards are on their way." Diederick rose to his feet. "We haven't the time to search every one of these doors, Violca. How do we find him?"

Pointedly, the Vistana faced the door at the very end of the hall, a door bound in gold and covered in intricate carvings of the sixfold sun. The door before which the guards had originally stood their post.

"We go," she said, "and we ask someone who knows."

Diederick followed her gaze uncomprehendingly, and then suddenly paled. "You're jesting!"

"Who better to know where to find his chief advisors?"

"Please tell me you're jesting?"

"It's even possible Lambrecht is in there with him, you

know.”

Diederick shook his head, but he had no other ideas.

“If this isn’t Hell,” he muttered as he approached the door, “I’m certainly going there now.” Placing one hand on the knob, he was unsurprised to find it latched. He hurled his shoulder into the heavy wood. The door itself was solid enough to withstand any such battery, but the ornate ceremonial latch was not. Once, twice, and it gave. Muttering further under his breath, he advanced to interrogate the Pontiff of the Empyrean Church.

He wasn’t all that impressive to look at, especially when viewed by one who had been present at Pope Urban’s powerful, soul-stirring call to retake the Holy Land. He was old, this Pontiff Cornelis, and he wrapped his years about him, hanging from his shoulders, as thoroughly as he did his cloud-white robe of office. His hair was gray and wispy, protruding only in tufts from an otherwise balding head, and his ancient fingers shook as they clasped the arms of his thickly cushioned chair. From his neck hung a heavy gold chain, on which dangled the ubiquitous sixfold sun, and on the table before him sat a red shawl and skullcap—the other accoutrements of his office.

He seemed to shrink back as his door exploded inward, as though trying to vanish into the cushions themselves. The lines and wrinkles of his face cast the illusion of wisdom, but in his eyes there was only an ancient fear.

Diederick found himself faintly disappointed.

Still, this was a man who ruled a Church, a Church that itself ruled a nation, and he was not about to let himself be cowed. Rising to his feet, supported by the heavy arm of the chair, he pointed furiously across the table.

“How *dare* you, either of you! Do you know who I am? Do you know the wrath and the terror you’ve brought upon yourself with this intrusion?”

“I know, your Eminence,” Diederick began, bowing low. “And I apologize, but—”

“Who are you? Where are my guards?”

“My name is Diederick de Wyndt, your Eminence. And your—”

“De Wyndt!” Despite himself, the pontiff quailed, though he steadied himself with a breath. “I know you. I know of your

witchcraft, and your heresy! So you thought to bring your evil here, did you? I'll have none of it! I shall personally watch as van Brekke breaks your joints and burns your flesh, and you will *beg* my forgiveness, and God's, and his Scions', before you perish! And just perhaps, I will be merciful enough to offer it!

"Now *where are my guards!*"

Viola, long run out of patience for the old man's shouting, shrugged at Diederick. "Guards? What guards?"

The knight, too, found his awe and respect rapidly overshadowed by his growing irritation. "I think those would be the corpses we passed in the hall."

"Ah, those." She offered a condescending smile to the old man. "Not very effective guards, corpses. You might consider hiring the living instead."

Perhaps it was the cavalier tone in which they spoke of murder, but the fear roiling within Cornelis finally broke through into his expression. His jaw sagged, and he staggered back to sit within the deep chair.

Amid all the anger and the indignation and the frustration, Diederick felt a slight twinge of guilt.

"Listen, your Eminence," he said, somewhat more softly, "we've no intention of harming you. That's not why we're here. All we want is to find one of your associates."

"Father Lambrecht! He warned me about you, told us all about your wicked ways! He...." As though recognizing the obvious for the first time, the Pontiff gazed fearfully across the table at which he sat. "He was right here...."

"Oh, I'm here still, your Eminence. I would never abandon you to the likes of these."

Diederick's soul turned to ice at the sound of that voice. Lambrecht stood in the open doorway, though he could not possibly have slipped past them. He wore a white robe, much like the pontiff's own, albeit trimmed in black; and about his neck he wore a crucifix in lieu of the sixfold sun. One hand fiddled idly with the dangling icon, while the other held something to his mouth—something Diederick could not see, something on which he chewed that squished juicily with every bite.

Diederick never paused, never spoke, hardly even drew breath. Between one heartbeat and the next, he was pound-

ing across the floor, his footsteps muffled in the heavy carpet. He raised his axe high, fully prepared to spill Lambrecht's life upon the floor before the foul priest could speak a single word of plea or incantation. He could feel the exultation rise within him, the sheer unmitigated bliss of finally ending the bastard once and for all. No sudden escapes, no spells, no rising mists. With a mighty swing, the blade descended....

And froze with an arm-bruising clang as a heavy broadsword flickered over Lambrecht's shoulder to intercept.

Feet dragged and armor clanked, as first one, then another of the dead guards from the hall shuffled into the room. They made not so much as a moan as they came, nor drew breath through gaping jaws. Still they surrounded Lambrecht in a protective ring as swiftly as they had moved when yet they lived.

An animal snarl rumbling in his throat, Diederich was forced to retreat, moving out of reach of the dead men's blades.

"Perhaps corpses are not so useless as you implied, Vistana," the priest observed. He bowed his head. "Apologies, your Eminence. I know these men were loyal servants and friends." Standing so near him, Diederich could see the fresh blood that stained Lambrecht's teeth a sickening pink.

"Save your apologies, my son," the pontiff commanded, though his face, already pale with fear, had now turned shades of sickly green. "Do what you must, and we will deal with the consequences later."

"Oh, there won't be a later," Diederich growled. "You think I cannot take six of your abominations, Lambrecht? Violca and I have battled worse. We—"

But Lambrecht was gone, vanishing abruptly from the doorway. Three of his corpses followed, while the others raised their blades and began an unsteady advance.

"Oh, no! Not this time!"

Diederich lifted one of the heavy chairs and crashed into the trio of dead men like a great tide, hurtling them back and aside. He left them there, struggling to rise, as he pounded after the retreating priest, Violca only a step behind.

Timidly, but determined to see what happened, to know the fate of his greatest advisor, Pontiff Cornelis followed after.

A door slammed at the far end of the hall, one far smaller and more plain than those that led into the clergyman's quar-

ters. Bits of dust sifted from the frame, suggesting that the room had seen little recent use. Again Diederich did not slow, slamming into the door with a hauberk-covered shoulder, then dropping into a forward roll to avoid any lurking ambush.

None came.

Instead, Diederich and Violca found themselves in what could only be another storeroom, albeit one with far fancier occupants than those through which they'd passed on their way here. Long tables, perfectly good save for small ground-in stains; sturdy chairs whose only flaw was a slightly flattened cushion; crates of tools and utensils grown discolored through years of usage.... All these and more stood like symbols of the Church's past, a history of indulgence writ large, then locked away.

The dust was a carpet unto itself, and the entire room was obscured with layer upon layer of cobwebs. From wall to floor, from ceiling to crate, they hung like rotted silk—ghostly curtains to protect the privacy of the Church's own ghosts. They looked....

They looked not entirely unlike mist.

Diederich and Violca peered through the wavering shroud, blown this way and that by the breeze of the open door, and both wondered at the same question.

How had Lambrecht and his creatures passed through without disturbing the webs?

As if in answer, Diederich felt a sudden pressure against his wrists, his arms, his legs, even his face. The webs held him tight, ever tighter, where he stood. It wasn't that they wrapped themselves about him, exactly, so much as they always seemed to grow thickest in whatever direction he tried to move. He could not raise a weapon to cut them away, could not take a step to free himself from their grasp, could not even shout; for he could hardly breathe at all against their rising pressure.

Lambrecht strode through the shroud of cobwebs, and the strands flowed around him as though fleeing from his path. In his hands, raised before him like a beggar, he carried his pages of the Grimoire. He flowed toward them—ignoring the pontiff who stood wide-eyed and staring in the doorway, ignoring Violca—to move straight to the knight himself.

"I told you," he whispered, his lips pressed almost lovingly

to Diederick's ear, "that you would bring it to me."

From Diederick's pouch, he pulled Bellustaire's scroll. A horrible moan erupted, not from any man present, but from some far, far distance and yet emanating from the book itself. Again it moaned, and again, and behind that voice were all the screams of the dead, the dying, the damned. And beyond even that: terrible cries and alien words voiced by inhuman throats, unintelligible to human ears and unimaginable to human minds.

Stitches popped audibly, separating the pages from the scroll. Like dying birds they flapped, one atop the other, forming half-recognizable patterns of percussion.

And then the moaning, the screams, the snap of parchment on parchment was gone, and there was just the Laginate Grimoire, whole and unmarred, in Lambrecht's covetous grasp.

"Thank you, Diederick." Again he slid through the webs, neither touching nor touched, until he stood once more beside the pontiff. "Your Eminence?" he asked. "Do you mind? They are far too dangerous to risk a second escape."

The pontiff nodded, though he'd paled even further. "As I told you, Lambrecht: do what you must."

The priest whistled—just whistled—and the webs began to quiver. Through the strands, Diederick could hear the scuttle of tiny legs. He recalled once more the swarm beneath Jerusalem, the sentries of Birne's orchard, and still he could not scream. He twisted about, desperate to escape, but his thrashing was for naught, only digging him ever deeper into the web.

Then they were there, scuttling over his exposed flesh and Violca's as well, disappearing down collars, up sleeves, into ears and noses and mouths. Spiders there were, absolutely, but other things as well; things with too few legs to be called spider, or things with far too many, things with hot and fetid breath, things that moaned and giggled obscenely as they sank mandibles and teeth and tongues into quivering, helpless flesh.

And all Diederick could do in these last moments was listen, listen to the whispered prayers of a terrified old cleric, and the low chuckling of a man who, with Diederick's horrible death, would have everything he wanted in this world.

Eighteen

He would not laugh for long.

From the far end of the hall came the sudden tramp of heavy boots, echoing in the cramped confines of the stairway. The priest and the pontiff spun as one, confused as to who could possibly be intruding on this terrible, wonderful moment.

The first were a pair of Inquisition Redbreasts, swords held low and unsheathed in their fists. Both were coated in a patina of sweat, both showed dings and scrapes upon their armor from recent combat, but both stood tall and strong, ready to fight once more.

Behind them, somehow larger and more purposeful than he had been, strode Oste van Brekke, First Confessor of the Emyrean Inquisition. His armor showed signs of recent abuse too. His black tabard was ragged, torn, bloodstained, and his left arm hung in a makeshift sling at his chest. But his right hand clutched a heavy flail, a chain-mace with a head larger than a cantaloupe and bristling with studs, to which shards of bone and strands of bloody hair still clung. Behind him came two more Redbreasts, and two more beyond them; the latter gripped neither sword nor axe, but short recurved bows, arrows nocked and ready to fly.

“Van Brekke?” Cornelis demanded in a quavering voice, “What are you doing here? We are grateful if you’ve come to protect us, but I think you’ll find it unnecessary. If you would please—”

“I would not, your Eminence. I have heard enough.” Dismissing the old man, van Brekke directed his attention onward. “Lambrecht Raes,” he announced, the smile that he kept forcibly from his face making itself apparent in his tone, “by the authority of the Emyrean Inquisition, I am placing you under arrest on charges of heresy, witchcraft, necromancy, and the deliberate temptation of others to follow you into said crimes.”

Lambrecht only smiled in turn. “You lack the authority to arrest me, van Brekke, and you know it. The pontiff—”

“Can no longer protect you.” The First Confessor gestured around the haft of the flail; his archers stepped forward in response. “If he refuses to cooperate,” van Brekke told them, “bring him down.”

The priest’s smile faltered as he realized that the Confessor was entirely serious. He stepped back, away from the Red-breasts, placing the pontiff between himself and the arrows.

“Van Brekke,” the old man shouted, pointing, “I am now *ordering* you to stand down! You will leave us, and report to me later, where we may discuss your lack of—”

“You have no standing to order me about any longer, your Eminence.” Where his arrest of Lambrecht had been delighted, even taunting, now van Brekke’s tone fell. A single tear rolled from an eye to lose itself in the forest of his beard. As he spoke, however, his voice hardened once more, and by his final word, his face had reddened with growing anger. “Cornelis Antheunis, by the authority of the Empyrean Inquisition, I place you under arrest for willing collaboration with witches, and failure to either report or attempt to stop the practice of black magics, in violation of the dictates set forth by your *own Inquisition!* You will be taken into custody, stripped of all rank and privileges, and made to answer for your actions.”

Cornelis staggered as though struck, pale as his robes of office, one hand clutching his chest. Behind him, Lambrecht fled with a wordless cry. The walking corpses burst once more into the hall, three from the pontiff’s office, three more from the chamber adjacent to the storeroom in which Diederick and Violca helplessly thrashed and silently screamed. They formed two lines across the passage as they advanced, a shield of armor and bone for the running priest.

The first archer loosed his arrow rapidly but wildly, cursing as it skimmed past the cowering pontiff to embed itself uselessly in a shambling corpse. The second, a seasoned veteran of a dozen campaigns, dropped to one knee and waited... waited....

Now!

As Lambrecht stepped toward the door, his legs carrying him out from behind his bastion of rotting flesh, the archer’s weapon thrummed. Straight and true the arrow flew, mere inches above the floor, passing between the legs of the walk-

ing dead. Lambrecht slammed into the doorframe, shrieking, dropping to the floor to clutch at the shaft of wood protruding from his calf.

Beside him, its pages flapping wildly though the hallway lacked any sort of breeze, landed the Laginate Grimoire.

Van Brekke and the Redbreasts surged ahead, and the dead moved to push them back. The First Confessor shouted at his men to beat the corpses down, to clear a path, to reach the black sorcerer before he could escape. Yet try as he might, though his flail crushed bone, and he hurled his great bulk against the undead bulwark time and again, Lambrecht's puppets would not permit him passage.

His hands wet with his own blood, his nose filled with its metallic scent, Lambrecht yanked the arrow from the wound. He screamed with the pain—a seemingly endless sound—until his lungs refused to produce any further breath. He sat, panting, struggling to tear strips from his robe to bind the agonizing wound. The pain... oh, God, the pain wouldn't end.... But he could walk upon it, he thought as he wrapped it tight, if it meant avoiding the fate his enemies planned for him.

Whimpering softly, he stretched forth a hand to reclaim the Grimoire....

And shrieked once more, recoiling as a Vistani blade spun from the web-shrouded room to slice the flesh and the tendons at the back of his hand.

Through tear-blurred eyes, he stared at Viola, her flesh torn by a hundred tiny bites, a dozen narrow trickles and tributaries of blood flowing down her limbs. Somehow she had twisted about, in spite of the heavy webs that held her, had found (or Seen?) her way between the strands, inched about and loosened her bonds until she had enough slack to strike.

With his wounded hand pressed to his chest, the fabric of his robe held fast to his skin by the growing stain of sticky blood, he pushed himself upright against the doorframe, straining with his one good leg. He struggled to maintain his balance, hobbling, limping, reaching once more toward the book for which he had sacrificed so much.

Another arrow split the wood beside him, quivering, aggravated that it had failed to bite into something far softer and more yielding. Two of the corpses fell as one, their legs

hacked out from under them by Inquisition blades, and from between them charged Oste van Brekke, his chain-mace held high and spinning fast.

Sobbing in impotent frustration, Lambrecht stumbled, empty handed, back into the pontiff's quarters. The heavy door slammed shut behind him, and though the latch had disintegrated beneath Diederic's earlier assault, a heavy chair propped against the wood would provide a few moments' delay.

Well, let him wait.... Let him fester and stew and bleed. Van Brekke waved most of his men over to him, leaving one to continue hacking at the downed corpses until they were so many harmless, twitching parts. Five Redbreasts survived, and the First Confessor shut his eyes and offered swift rites over the man who had fallen. Three of the soldiers he ordered to stand guard over other doors in the hall: rooms that connected to the pontiff's suite and might provide a means of escape for Lambrecht. One stood behind Cornelis himself, holding the old man by one arm so he might not flee, and though his expression was ashen at the thought of laying his hands on the pontiff, he obeyed.

With the fifth, van Brekke peered into the web-strewn storage room, gagging at the sight of the vermin scuttling across the two bound prisoners.

"Sir?" the soldier questioned.

Van Brekke hesitated only a moment. He had no doubt that they deserved to suffer for what they had done, and his anger only grew when he considered that it must have been they who had slain the pontiff's personal guards. Alas, until he had Lambrecht in chains, and had cast the Grimoire to the hottest flame, he just might need them still.

And besides, nobody deserved to die from the workings of black sorceries. Let their execution come honestly and purely at the hands and tools of man.

"Cut them down," he ordered.

It was no difficult task. The strands parted beneath the soldier's blade as easily as any normal cobweb. Violca tumbled free the moment he began, and the filaments holding Diederic grew weaker and lighter the deeper the Redbreast moved into the room. By the time he had closed to within a few feet, the knight had freed himself.

He stumbled from the storeroom, every inch of skin an angry red from the bites of creatures no longer seen. Blood from tiny open wounds dripped down both arms, both legs. Even his infected wrist had been chewed open, leaking thick, foul humors across the back of his hand. Loose strands of web dangled from his fingers and his hair. A moment passed before he found the wherewithal to speak.

“Not that I’m ungrateful, van Brekke,” he began without preamble, “but what exactly are you *doing* here?”

The First Confessor harrumphed. “Did you really think I was going to turn you loose in the upper echelons of my Church, de Wyndt? I figured you’d cause enough trouble that Lambrecht would be forced to expose himself, and I could justify taking him regardless of the pontiff’s protection. And you’re fortunate we got here when we did, given that I had to kill over half my own men to escape that cellar.” He frowned abruptly. “I’d hoped not to have to arrest the pontiff himself....”

“Yes, fine.” Diederic glanced over Violca once, as though to assure himself she was all right—or as all right as he, at least—and was puzzled to find her already kneeling beside the pontiff’s door, examining it closely, as though attempting to determine the best way in. She looked back at him and mouthed a single word, so that none of the others could see. His eyes widened in understanding, and he nodded.

“Very well, van Brekke. Let’s do this before he finds some means of escape after all.”

Between Diederic and the soldiers, the door proved no more an impediment now than it had earlier. Save for a few drops of blood on the wooden table, they saw no sign of Lambrecht’s presence. Swiftly they fanned out, the First Confessor guiding them through the layout of the chambers beyond the main room, the paths by which the priest could have slipped into adjacent suites. They searched in every room, under every piece of furniture, behind every curtain, without success. Diederic’s and Violca’s efforts left bloody handprints scattered across otherwise pristine walls. The remaining soldiers, set to guard the various doors, swore to the First Confessor’s face, in the name of God Most High and the Six Scions, that nobody had snuck past them.

Diederic’s growing fury was palpable as he scoured the

rooms again and again, hurling chairs aside, slamming his axe through the doors of cabinets and cupboards. Splinters flew, and each time the guards moved as if to stop him, then thought better of it.

The First Confessor leaned idly upon the heavy table, his good hand clasped thoughtfully to his chin. “De Wyndt?” he called softly, and then, when the sounds of violent rage did not abate, more loudly. “*De Wyndt!*”

“What?”

“I believe I know where Lambrecht’s gone.”

The knight stormed from the adjoining room, his posture a model of childish temper. “Where, then?”

“In the Church’s earliest days, we lacked the military power we have today. In case of an attempt on the pontiff’s life, several secret means of escape were hidden about his quarters and his office.”

“And you’re only just telling us this now?” Diederick demanded.

“I’ve only just thought of it, de Wyndt. The passages are all but forgotten. They haven’t been opened, let alone used, in generations. Even the pontiff probably didn’t know they existed; I only know myself thanks to a passing mention in some treatises on the defense of the Basilica, writings that I’ve studied as First Confessor. I cannot for the life of me figure how Lambrecht learned of them, but clearly he did so.”

“Fine. So where are the entrances? Every moment we stand here talking, he’s getting farther away.”

“Ah, yes. You see, de Wyndt, there you’ve hit upon it. I don’t *know* where the damned entrances are.”

Five pairs of eyes flickered about the room, taking in its ornate structure, the niches and protrusions, the shelves and tapestries, any one of which could have concealed a doorway. Diederick groaned.

“Violca, your gift? Might you somehow See your way to the entrance?”

Van Brekke opened his mouth to object, but he needn’t have bothered. The Vistana shook her head. “The Sight doesn’t work like that, Diederick.” She paused thoughtfully. “Although....”

She approached the nearest wall, her eyes cast downward. She moved around the room at a slow but steady pace, finally

stopping with a wide grin.

“Here.”

The men clustered about her like a pack of hounds as she gracefully gestured to the floor. “I knew trying to spot Lambrecht’s blood in this carpet would be difficult, but it occurred... if the doors, and the mechanisms, had gone as long as the First Confessor claims without use...”

There it was, beneath a small gold icon of the sixfold sun: a small but notable constellation of white powder—dust and ground rock—scattered across the crimson carpet.

Diederick smiled broadly at his companion and twisted the tiny statuette. It turned leftward with a dull grind. A large shelf against the wall beside it slid smoothly backward, leaving a gap just wide enough for a large man to slip through if he turned sideways. It opened onto a staircase that plunged sharply into darkness. The air beyond was stale, but carried on it the lingering scents of smoke and lantern oil. Here, where the floor was uncarpeted, they could clearly see a man’s footsteps outlined in the dust, escorted by an uneven line of bloody smears.

“Very well,” van Brekke announced. “We’ll proceed forward as a group. De Wyndt, you—”

“No.”

The larger man’s face reddened once more. “I beg your pardon?” His tone was dangerously calm, belying his expression.

“Van Brekke, think a moment. If you do not accompany whomever you send to lock up the pontiff, he’s never going to see the inside of a cell. Or do you really believe that every guard and every priest between here and your dungeon is going to believe the pontiff guilty of heresy on the word of a few Redbreasts?”

The First Confessor chewed his beard for a moment, considering. “Fine,” he conceded at last, “but you’ll not be running off on your own, either. Lieutenant Merfleur!”

The first of the Redbreasts, who had aided in their search of the suite, snapped to attention. “My lord!”

“You will accompany de Wyndt and the Vistana on their hunt for the witch. Your authority is as mine. Do what you must to ensure that Lambrecht Raes does not escape our justice.

“And keep an eye on these two while you’re at it.”

“Aye, my lord!”

His face a mixture of warring emotions, van Brekke gazed long at the pontiff to whom he had dedicated his life, now nothing more to him than another old man, quivering in anger at being caught, and fear of the coming consequences. With a grunt and a wave, he departed, two men guarding their prisoner, the others carrying the body of their fallen companion.

Diederich did not wait to watch them go. Ignoring Lieutenant Merfleur, he yanked a lantern from the wall and handed it to Violca, pulled down a second, and proceeded into the hidden corridor. Though most of his wounds had clotted of their own accord, a few wept still; the lantern sizzled sporadically as drops of blood splattered across the glass.

Guided by shadows that pranced about them mockingly, the trio began the long march down the narrow stairs. The lanterns did little good, for the ancient darkness was too old, too stubborn, to step aside for such feeble lights. As their boots echoed on the stone, obscuring Lambrecht’s prints with their own, Diederich again wondered if he was fated ever to travel in circles, continually returning from whence he came. The stairway reminded him greatly of the passages beneath Jerusalem. A world away, yet he swore they could have been carved by the same tools, wielded by the same hands.

A dozen feet down was far enough, he decided. Van Brekke and the others had had plenty of time to leave the room, and were unlikely to hear any commotion.

He knelt, setting the lantern beside him, and fiddled a bit with his boot as though adjusting it. There he remained, long enough for the Redbreast—Mer-something—to pass. Then he reached out and wrapped his arms about the man’s head and neck in a vicious chokehold, leaning backward as he did so.

On even ground, the Inquisitor might have countered the sudden assault. With steps below, however, and dragged backward and upward until his feet left the stone, he lacked the leverage to act. For a moment he kicked feebly, thrashed so far as Diederich’s grip would allow, and then plummeted into unconsciousness.

Diederich laid him down carefully upon the steps and nodded

to Viola. "He should be out for some time." The Vistana rolled her eyes.

"Let me see it, Viola."

From her pouch, her hand quivering at the pages' touch, it appeared: the Laginate Grimoire, which she had swiftly hidden while crouched outside the pontiff's door lest van Brekke spot it.

He took it without asking, staring at the heavy parchment, then shoved it violently into his own pouch. The Vistana considered protesting, then thought better of it. Had Diederick been paying any attention to her at all, had he not been so wrapped up in the thought of his vengeance and his voyage home, he might have seen the lines of tension around her temples, the hard line of her mouth, the constant flickering of her gaze.

"Have we any need even to continue this chase?" he asked, eyes as bright as the lantern at his ankle. "We have both halves of the tome. You said that your people could use that to send us *both* back home."

"I said they *might* be able to, Diederick. Remember, I made you no promise."

"I remember." He pondered a moment. "And if it does work, Viola? He and I will return together?"

His face fell at her hesitation, for it seemed reply enough. "Viola? I've told you before. Do *not* lie to me. Not about this."

"I do not know the ways of the Mists, Diederick. Nobody truly does, though my elders know more than most. I cannot say for certain. *But*," she continued as he drew breath to argue, "I think your answer is no. I would imagine that whatever distance separates you on this side of the Mists would remain on the other."

"Then we continue. He must not escape me, Viola. He *will* not!"

She knew she should refuse, should insist that Lambrecht's injuries and his loss of the Grimoire must be punishment enough, should argue on behalf of the men and women of Caercaelum who even now suffered and bled and died beneath the madness that leaked from that accursed book.

She knew, as well, that any such pleas would fall on deafened ears. Furthermore, she lacked the energy, the focus, to make her arguments persuasive. Something beneath them,

something as thick and pervasive as the darkness, pressed painfully on her head. For the first time, she *felt* the presence of her own Sight as an alien weight behind her eyes.

There was something deep in the shadows that wanted to be Seen.

The stairs terminated in a heavy door, standing ever so slightly ajar. Diederich shoved it open, and Violca bit her lip until it bled to keep from crying out as the pressure on her mind increased five-fold.

Revealed in the light of their dancing lanterns, an old, rat-eaten carpet of dull gold stretched through a hallway walled in marble. Ancient paintings, their subjects indiscernible beneath layers of grime, hung at irregular intervals, and several unlit chandeliers dangled from the ceiling. Their arms were draped in cobwebs, and Diederich could not help but cringe from them, hunching his shoulders.

If this hall was indeed an escape route for fleeing clergy, its builders obviously meant for them to flee in comfort. Dear God, did it really *matter* to the ancient priests how fancy an escape tunnel might be! The entire passage was a monument to waste, to opulence for opulence's sake, and the grizzled warrior could not keep a curl of revulsion off his lips.

No time to waste in contemplation, though. Even had this not been the only route, Diederich would have known Lambrecht had come this way. His prints showed in the dust-choked carpet, his blood and sweat hung on the stagnant air. Onward Diederich strode with nary a glance behind, or he might have seen the pain and terror that slithered occasionally across Violca's face.

She could no longer be certain that what she saw was real at all. Things moved in the flashes of darkness between the flickering of the flame, things with faces distended in agony and older than the stone that pressed in around her. She saw the images in the paintings, beyond the mask of dust, and they stared back at her with accusing eyes. She looked deep into a filthy mirror that hung precariously on the wall, *saw that the reflection of Diederich's wounds left a trail of blood across the inside of the glass*, and she trembled.

She struggled, for she did not want to See....

Round and round they traveled, following the subtle curve of the passage as it wound through the bedrock of Scions

Mount. From the main hall, narrow passages branched at seemingly random intervals, tributaries from the primary flow. But Diederic ignored them. Only when he came to an enormous door, solid oak and bound in bronze, did he halt. Now that he was forced to slow, he saw that Lambrecht's prints did not end at the portal, but turned back upon themselves. Apparently the priest had struggled with the door—struggled with it and lost.

Brushing past Viola without so much as a glance, Diederic tracked the limping steps back, until they turned off into a tiny passage. Nothing differentiated this one from any other, leading him to wonder whether Lambrecht had chosen by design or by chance. Either way, there was nothing to do but follow.

A second stairway led them down, and a third not far beyond that, so narrow that even turned sideways, Diederic felt his hauberk scrape against the stone. He marveled at the depth to which they had already traveled, akin to that of Perdition Hill, and prayed they had not much farther to go. Behind him, Viola stumbled, her eyes squeezed shut until they ached, one hand on the wall to guide her. Over and over, under her breath, she repeated every traditional Vistani chant, every meditation, even the nursery rhymes of her childhood—flimsy bulwarks to keep the weight of ages at bay just a few moments more. She no longer remembered how to speak anything else, could not have told Diederic of her suffering even had she wished it.

Finally the narrow confines opened into a passage that did not wind, did not twist, but cut through the rock like an arrow. No carpet muffled their steps, no marble façade hid the rough-hewn stone. Lambrecht's trail in the film of dust grew thin, and Diederic increased his pace once more, terrified of losing his quarry after having come so close.

So focused was he on moving forward—so distracted was Viola by the images she fought not to see, the calls and the chants and the screams she struggled not to hear—that neither noticed much of the hall around them.

They failed to notice that their shadows had begun to move.

With each step, each flicker of the lanterns, Diederic's and Viola's shadows pivoted around them. No bend in the hall, no movement of the light, could account for it; the shadows

moved utterly independently of the fire.

Subtly they rotated—slowly, inches and degrees—and for a time they went unnoticed. And even once Violca saw it, peering about blearily during a lull in the visions, saw that their shadows no longer stretched out before and behind but fell across the rightmost wall in utter disdain for the lanterns, she held her tongue, convinced that these must be nothing more than effects of the pressures weighing on her Sight.

When she'd finally determined that she had better say something, had finally drawn breath to speak, or perhaps to scream, it was too late.

The shadows shifted to fall directly, impossibly, across the lanterns that cast them. And where they fell upon the fires, they snuffed those fires out. With a hiss, the passageway descended into a darkness blacker than death itself.

With the loss of normal sight on which to focus, the mundane to shield her from the visions beyond, Violca lost what defense she had against the images assailing her mind. Her shrieks echoed long and loud through the endless corridors, until Diederic thought his own ears would burst.

And just as suddenly, they ceased.

For a moment Diederic stood frozen, awaiting some sign of attack, or for the telltale thump that would indicate his companion had fallen. Neither came.

"Violca?" he whispered finally. "Violca, are you—*Jesu!*"

He literally scraped his helm on the low ceiling, so violently did he jump at her touch. She said nothing, merely clung to his shoulder with a single hand, but he recognized her voice in the harsh, raspy breathing that was her only answer.

Perhaps Diederic might have said more, might finally have asked her what was amiss. As his eyes adjusted, however, he came to notice that they did not, after all, stand in absolute darkness. At the hallway's distant end, there was light: scarcely more than the faintest glow, but light nonetheless.

His axe clutched in one fist, the other hand on the wall, he moved slowly toward it. Violca's hand dropped from his shoulder, but he heard her steps as well as his own, and knew that she followed.

As they neared the luminescence—a strange blue radiance—it grew brighter, and the archway at the corridor's end became clear. Glyphs were etched deep in the stone around

and above the opening. They seemed too organic, too random, to be language—less runes than they might have been trails left by worms as they crawled across the living rock. Still they held meaning, legible to the most primal instincts if not to the conscious, civilized mind.... Meaning enough that, despite his obsessive need for vengeance, Diederic had to force himself with iron will not to turn tail and retreat into the comforting dark.

Beyond the door lay a cavernous chamber, massive, imposing, and very much like one other Diederic had seen before.

It was nearly identical to the unholy cathedral beneath Perdition Hill. Again the many rows of seats rose upward and outward along the many walls, and again he found himself standing halfway up the manmade slope. Again the ceiling was covered in etchings and carvings, the stars of the heavens, circles and runes of foulest power, the shapeless mockery of the sixfold sun.

One difference, however, attracted his eyes instantly, despite the hypnotic draw of the images above. Where the priest's steep stair in the other chamber had climbed from a simple stone altar, here the center of the room was occupied by a pyramid in miniature, a structure of six sides and six steps. Each level held its own manacles, its own tiny channels through which the blood of the slain might flow.

On the pyramid's lowest step a lantern flickered, clearly out of place. It was that tiny fire, gleaming from the metallic floor and the lapis lazuli of the inscriptions, that had drawn Diederic's notice from the darkened hall. The reflected blue from above was somehow sickening to the eye, poisonous to the mind. It cast the far reaches of the chamber in deep shadow, so that only the central portions of the room remained visible.

Despite that cloak of darkness, Diederic knew that he and Violca were not alone, knew that Lambrecht lurked in the black—would have known even had the lantern been absent. He *felt* the bastard's presence.

Whether Lambrecht would have sensed their presence in turn, Diederic would never know. For even as he tensed to make his way around the chamber, to find the priest wherever he hid and drag him screaming from the shadows, Violca fell to her knees. Her mouth gaped wide, her jaw

popping audibly with strain, and what came from within was the sepulchral moan of a dozen voices. Her head was tilted upward, but she saw nothing at all, for her eyes had rolled back in her skull, revealing only the whites and the pink flesh beneath.

Her words, like her groan of lament, were spoken not by any one voice, but by a veritable chorus of the ancient damned.

“As beneath the skin of the world, so too beneath the flesh of men, do nameless godlings gnaw. They grow fat upon the stuff of souls.”

Diederich remembered the inscription by the shrine beneath Perdition Hill—“Prayer is the repast that fattens men’s souls for consumption”—and he trembled.

“What trickery is this, Diederich?” Lambrecht’s voice, oddly shaken, emerged from the dark, echoed from the walls, as though his presence filled the room entire. “You had best—”

“You call them Scions!” the voices that were Violca screamed to the heights of the vaulted chamber. *“You call them sons! They are all of them as children, and they play with us and break us as their toys. Scions of the gibbering moon; scions of the sickened blood. Scions of the outer darkness; scions of the inner void. They are the wriggling spawn of the One Beyond. His shadow is the fall of night, his breath the creeping mists. We are as less than ants to him, and as less than ants he treats us. He walks betwixt the worlds, Diederich de Wyndt. His breath obscures the ancient seals, Lambrecht Raes, throws wide the doors between. Can even your God do thus?”*

“Can your God set us freeeeee....” Their final plea trailed away into a wordless shriek. It rose higher than any human voice, carried longer than any mortal breath, until Violca fell, senseless, to the stone floor, blood trickling from her throat and across her lips.

“I don’t... I don’t understand....” Lambrecht gasped, his breathless voice nonetheless carrying to Diederich’s ears.

“Don’t you?” the knight demanded, his expression growing cold as he cast about for his foe. Finally he understood, truly understood how Violca could believe Malosia to be a new and unnatural land. For only now did he realize from whence the shape of that land must have come. “This is *your* prison,

Lambrecht! A world crafted from your own soul! Who but you could envision a Church based on so loathsome a foundation?"

Silence—a silence as thick and heavy as the shadows themselves. And then, finally, "Who indeed, Sir Diederic?"

For a fleeting instant, Diederic swore he saw movement, saw Lambrecht atop the high priest's stair. And then the chamber echoed with the slam of a ponderous door.

Diederic ran—ran as never before—pounding across the metallic floor, scrambling up the narrow steps. But his heart was heavy, hopeless. He knew, even before he tried it, that the door would refuse to budge, the clasp refuse to turn in his grip.

Atop the stair was no room to charge or to break the portal down. And the ceremonial door was gilded in brass, not thick enough to *stop* an axe blade, but enough to dull it horribly, to render it useless in chopping through the wood beneath.

Cursing, his entire body shuddering with rage, Diederic slumped beside the door and wept.

Violca heard the shrieking voices that wriggled like worms from her throat and across her tongue, and she could not stop them. Though her eyes were closed, she saw things that slouched through the darkness, moving not through the angles and spaces and dimensions of her world, but *between* them. She saw them, and she knew that they were ancient, truly ancient, in a way Malosia was not, and she could only pray they took no further notice of her, lest her mind be pulped beneath the weight of their attentions.

But these were not all that she saw.

Beyond the things she could not truly comprehend, as though they were merely shadows cast across her vision by something greater, she saw a dozen faces, a hundred, a thousand and more. She saw a man and woman, burning alive yet refusing to die, and facing them a quartet of men in chain armor, each bleeding from his skull. She saw a dozen Redbreasts, mauled and mangled, across from whom stood a pair of men, one clad as an Emyrean priest, one wrapped in bandages. All of them flickered, reflections of a dying flame cast in a filthy mirror, vanishing the moment she saw them, reappearing again whenever she dared blink.

And behind them all, hundreds upon hundreds of faces, their eyes stretched wide, their mouths agape and drooling. Madmen and lunatics, murdered by a variety of uncountable wounds, covered not only in their own blood, but the blood of friends, neighbors, and families whom they had slain in their delusions.

They gathered together, waiting, always waiting. For what, Viola did not know.... Not at first.

And then she Saw beyond them, Saw the rolling fields and high peaks, the deep dungeons and the high minarets, and she knew that these men and women were the afterbirth of Malosia's genesis, that it was the domain itself that waited.

Malosia was an empty land, but it would not remain empty much longer.

She Saw two final figures, looming over the dead. She recognized them both, just as welcome, blissful unconsciousness finally claimed her, and she Saw no more.

Nineteen

“Gods, Diederic. So many....”

After Diederic carried her from the lowest level, Violca had awakened and insisted on walking under her own power, though she swayed a bit and her eyes would not focus. He said nothing, did not inquire after her, but stared fixedly ahead, his fists clenching and unclenching around the lantern.

“I saw them, Diederic. All of them. Men, women, children... the ghosts of Scions Mount are beyond counting. But I understand, now, I think. I understand how the ‘God Most High and the Sixfold Scions’ were born.” Again she had shuddered. “I mean, would *you* worship those—those *things* if you knew what they truly were?”

Still he said nothing, failed to acknowledge that she had spoken at all.

“They must have come to believe the lie,” she mused. “I’d be surprised if anyone today knew how their Empyrean faith began....”

Again he refused to answer, and Violca ceased trying to draw him out. She’d hoped to segue from what she had learned into what had happened down below. The Vistana needed someone to speak to about what she’d seen, what she’d felt, what had been done to her, someone to help her make sense of it, as Madam Tsura would have done.

But Diederic was all she had, and for now, his thoughts were far from kindness or support.

Thus they had traversed the rest of the way in silence, until emerging once again into the Basilica’s upper levels. There he paused only long enough to wipe the worst of the blood from his limbs, tossing her a sheet off the pontiff’s bed that she might do the same, then continued through the holy structure’s winding halls. Only when he had hurled open the outer doors and plunged out into the night did Violca finally speak once more.

“Diederic, where precisely do you think we’re going?”

At least this time he didn't ignore her entirely. "We are going," he told her without stopping, "to speak with someone who can tell us where Lambrecht may have gone."

Violca blinked. "Who would know that besides the pontiff?"

The cold expression he cast her way was more than answer enough.

Who, indeed?

They swept across the Basilica's open fields, and through the streets atop Scions Mount. Caercaelum below was brightly lit, not merely by an abundance of lamps, but several fires spreading out of control in the poor neighborhoods of wooden buildings. The chaos seemed unwilling or unable to encompass the Mount itself—held back, perhaps, by the sheer accumulation of a single, focused faith—but even that, Diederic knew, would hold only for a time.

Van Brekke appeared mere seconds after the guards announced their arrival at the Citadel of Truth. No longer clad in armor but instead his blackest ceremonial robes, he looked to have come straight from prayer. He was clearly not pleased to see them, an emotion that only deepened when they told him their purpose in coming.

"You're mad, de Wyndt!"

"I've been told that a lot lately. I still must speak with him."

"Not a chance! If you think I'm going to permit him to be interrogated by outsiders, as though he were some common prisoner—"

"He *is* a common prisoner, van Brekke! You said so yourself! Besides," Diederic continued, lowering his voice as the assembled Redbreasts glared, "you yourself said that Lambrecht cannot be permitted to escape. This may be the only way to prevent that."

"Because *you* lost him!" the First Confessor accused. The slump of his shoulders, however, was sign enough that he had relented.

"De Wyndt... will Lambrecht's death end the madness afflicting my city?"

"Absolutely." Diederic met the old man's gaze, and did not so much as blink. "I believe what we're seeing out there is Lambrecht's vengeance on all of us."

Behind him, Violca looked at the floor and scowled.

"All right, de Wyndt. Follow me. But God and Scions, try to

show some respect!"

They hurried through halls of heavy brick, a welcome change for Diederic, who was sick of underground passages of hewn stone.

"Incidentally, de Wyndt...."

"What?"

"Where's Lieutenant Merfleur?"

"Lying unconscious on a stairwell. He went mad, attacked us as soon as you were out of sight. Don't concern yourself, he'll be fine. I made sure to do him no permanent harm."

"My, how generous of you."

They passed a dozen guards along their way, and a dozen more, until finally they entered the dungeons of the Citadel of Truth.

He huddled in a smaller cell, bereft of any other prisoners. The straw upon the floor was fresh and clean, the chamber pot pristine, the scraps of food remaining on his plate evidence of beef and roasted vegetables, rather than the gruel other captives choked down. He was clad in a traditional prisoner's robe—again, far cleaner and better kept than any Diederic had seen during his own incarceration—and held an old copy of the Septateuch in his lap. His lips moved in prayer as he read, and he seemed content to ignore the men who had appeared in the doorway.

"Your Eminence," Diederic greeted him, his only nod toward courtesy. "We need to find Lambrecht."

The pontiff turned a page of his holy text, refusing even to glance up.

"People are dying outside, old man! Swept by a madness caused by Lambrecht's own sorceries! Surely you still care for the well-being of your flock!"

His eyelids twitched at that, his fingers paused as they traced his place in the book, but he would not speak.

"He's been like this since we brought him in," van Brekke told them. "He prays, he studies the Septateuch, and nothing more. I think he expects he will be freed from here, exonerated and returned to his position. Or at least that he will die here and receive his just reward in Heaven, for I doubt not that he maintains he did no wrong."

Her eyes sunken, lined with exhaustion, Viola slipped by them and stepped into the cell. Van Brekke moved to stop

her, but pulled up short as Diederick threw an arm across his chest. "She won't harm him," he hissed at the First Confessor.

The Vistana knelt beside the old man, straw crunching loudly beneath her knees, and leaned over so she might whisper in his ear.

"You know what I am?" she breathed, so that even at this distance, the pontiff had to strain to hear her words. "I am the chosen heir of the *raunie* of my tribe. I share her blood. I share her gifts.

"Tell me, old man. Does the pontiff of the Emyrean Church wish to meet his God and Scions with the stain of a Vistani curse upon his soul? The gaze of the Evil Eye piercing the core of his being? What torture can your First Confessor threaten that compares to what I can do to you?"

Gracefully she stood, and Cornelis's eyes rose with her. "You have," she told him in a more normal tone of voice, "until I reach the door."

"Church."

The answer came just as her steps would have carried her to Diederick's side, pushed through parched and tired lips.

"I don't understand. Explain. What church?"

The old man tightened his grip on the pages, as though they might save him from his fate. "I bequeathed Father Lambrecht an old church, where he might pray and preach as he saw fit. I assigned him a pair of underpriests, to prepare and maintain the chapel at need. It stands in the tanners' quarter, near Old Potter's Road."

Van Brekke's mouth gaped, his muscles tensed, as though he had been struck by some mild fit. "You—you gave a church to a *heathen priest!*" His voice rose high in incredulity, cracked on the final word.

"You never understood, van Brekke! His faith is not so different from ours. I told him so long as he preached our shared gospels, spoke of his *Jesu* as one of our Scions, he might guide his flock as he liked. He might have saved us, van Brekke! He might have saved us, had you in your narrow-minded ignorance not—"

He ranted on as the First Confessor stormed from the cell, Diederick and Violca close behind. The crash of the door finally put an end to his diatribe.

"Would Lambrecht actually take sanctuary at his church?"

Violca wondered. “Even if he thinks it a place of safety, he must know we would eventually find him there.”

“He might assume he has some time, though,” Diederich offered. “And in either case, he’s no more interested in fleeing the city than I am. Not without”—he glanced at the First Confessor, idly tapping the pouch at his side—“everything he considers his own.”

“He ran because he was outmatched, ill-prepared. But he’ll *want* us to find him, Violca. Make no mistake. He wants quit of this game as much as I.

“Van Brekke? Old Potter’s Road?”

“My men will show you the way.”

Indeed they did, a score of them. A tide of steel and crimson, they washed through the streets of Caercaelum, as around them madness raged.

In the middle of the road, a pile of cradles burned, the shrieks of the infants drowned out by the roaring flames and their parents dancing around the fire. A trio of Church soldiers ran pell-mell through the streets, cutting down any living thing to cross their path, until they clashed with the advancing Redbreasts and were left bleeding on the ground. Crouched behind windowsills, warring neighbors hurled rocks and knives and dismembered bodies at one another, their voices raised in gleeful laughter.

Strangers called to Diederich, to Violca, to the Inquisitors, called to them by name, in the tones of loved ones long gone. They promised them joy, promised them pain, promised them favors carnal and profane, if only they would stop and listen. One of the Redbreasts gave in, his mind splintering like a dropped vase, and the procession left him behind to rant and rave with his new brethren. There was nothing to be done for him, nothing save ending this nightmare for good and all.

A dozen times they were attacked, and a dozen times they pressed on. A woman lunged from an alley, screaming at Diederich, wielding the body of her child like a club as she hacked at him. He simply caught her wrist and tossed her aside, leaving her for the soldiers to deal with. From the shadows came an old man with a meat cleaver, cut down without a second’s hesitation. Nothing would stop Diederich

now, not so close. Nothing. A teenage boy armed with a stolen sword, a seamstress with her left hand stitched in a bloody mess to her face, her right clutching a large pair of scissors, some godforsaken fellow, his entire body set alight, still possessed of enough malice, enough control, to wield a weapon in anger... all these impeded Diederic's advance, and all were hacked down or tossed aside for the Redbreasts to put out of their misery.

He knew they had entered the tanners' quarter not merely by the terrible scents in the air but by the feel of the road beneath his feet. The cobbles gave way to sucking mud, mud with that same crimson tint that haunted Diederic's nightmares. He pressed on.

Four men, their expressions vacant and bestial, stirred a great tanning cauldron in the nearest shop, the skins of their wives growing soft and supple in the boiling oils. And Diederic pressed on.

A score of children swarmed like ants over a heap of corpses, each tearing some body part from the pile and wandering away to play with his new toy. And Diederic pressed on.

Violca took no part in the slaughter, allowing the warriors around her to deal what death must be dealt, and glared at Diederic's back. She felt the urge to warn him of what must come, but quashed it before it could take voice. He'd never listen, now. And it was already far, far too late.

Only when the church loomed before him, a great structure of rich timber and heavy woods in the traditional barn-like shape, did Diederic stop and look around him. Violca still stood at his side, for which he was grateful, and most of the Redbreasts as well, though they had lost a handful of their own along the way to madness or sudden violence.

Lights flickered in the church windows, though barely visible, for all were shuttered. Sounds emerged from within too, the faint susurrus of many voices speaking, chanting, giggling, as one.

Axe at the ready, Diederic marched up the steps to the front doors. It was time, finally time, to end this.

They flew open with a heavy kick, scattering bits of paper and parchment that had lain strewn about the entry. A hanging lantern cast its light upon the center of the sanctuary while

two iron candelabras, each the height of an upright lance, burned beside the altar. Rows of wooden pews extended to either side of a worn central carpet—pews that seated perhaps two dozen men and women, all rocking gently in apparent religious ecstasy. Only as Diederich drew near, strode past them, did he note the grotesque cast to their expressions, the wide and staring eyes, the silent gibbering of their lips as what little remained of their humanity begged to be set free from its prison of insanity, of flesh, of bone.

From the wall beyond the altar hung a great bronze crucifix, a simple sculpture of the Savior. Easily twice the height of a man, it dominated the church entire, held in place by heavy ropes that ran through a number of hooks to wrap about a single anchor at the floor. Even now Diederich felt the ingrained urge to cross himself, to prostrate himself before the icon of his God. He did not, for he would not grant Lambrecht even that much control.

And there stood Lambrecht himself, facing the altar, his back to the door. He moved carefully, favoring his injured hand and leg, as he lit another of the many candles that stood atop the holy shrine.

“I’ve given some thought to your words, Sir Diederich,” he said without turning. “And I’ve come to the conclusion that you truly are a fool.”

“Is that so?” Diederich strode down the central aisle, alert for attack from either side. None came.

“Indeed. My Church is naïve, perhaps. Foolish and set in her ways. Weak, unwilling to do what must be done to protect herself from the heathens and the heretics and the witches at the gates.

“But she is not evil, Sir Diederich. She is not a deceiver. She is not built on a foundation of lies. Of the two of us, my idiot friend, it is not I, was never I, who saw her thus.”

Halfway across the chapel, now. Keep talking, you bastard, keep talking....

“How did you enjoy my webs, Sir Diederich? How did it feel, motionless, helpless? Did you feel the bite of the spiders? Did you feel the sting of things neither insect nor vermin, things more spirit than ichor and chitin, things not of this world?”

Almost there, now....

“Tell me, Sir Diederich: When the webs gave way, where do

you suppose those little beasties went? Can you feel them still, their tiny legs brushing against your flesh, against your soul?"

Diederich raised his axe. Only a few more steps....

"Diederich? *Stop.*"

He froze so suddenly he nearly toppled over, his balance gone. Every muscle, every joint, tingled and began to ache, deeply, horribly. He felt as though something had thrust itself between every bone, poured sand in his joints, preventing him from so much as shifting his weight.

And oh, dear God, the things inside him were *moving!*

Violca had frozen as well, two steps behind, only the fearful flicker in her eyes suggesting that she still lived. The soldiers darted from the door, only to find their passage blocked as every crooning, swaying madman in the church rose up to intercept them. Swords and axes rose against teeth and fists, and blood spilled heavy across the church's wooden floor.

Lambrecht finally turned from the altar, his robe swirling dramatically about him. In his good hand, he held a pair of figurines, sculpted crudely from the wax of the dripping candles. Each was roughly humanoid—one broad and burly, one lithe and feminine—and each held within a dead spider, preserved as though trapped in amber. The heretic priest raised them with a smile, to ensure that his foes could see clearly, then tucked them into one voluminous sleeve. "I had feared," he confessed, "that you might find me here before I'd had the opportunity to complete these. Thankfully, God and fortune stand with me.

"Now, Diederich, Violca. Drop your weapons and step forward."

He refused to move. *He would not move!* Alas, though he screamed and railed in silence, everything that was Diederich stood helpless, powerless, before his enemy's commands.

He felt *things* moving about in his body, passing horribly through meat and bone, legs skittering on layers of tissue, splashing through veins of pumping blood. They pressed upon his muscles, plucked at tendons like harp-strings, and Diederich's body moved. He heard his axe clatter to the floor, heard men fighting and screaming and dying behind him, and could not even turn to look as he stepped spastically, awkwardly, to Lambrecht's side.

The priest placed a hand, almost affectionately, on Diederich's shoulder. "My poor, foolish friend. I have had *months* to study the Grimoire! I know it as well as I know my Bible, my catechism! To think that I would be helpless without it...." He clucked his tongue, shook his head in mock sadness.

"Still, there is much to the book I've yet to learn. And with that in mind... hand it over, Diederich, if you would be so kind."

No! No, I will not!

But he did. Again, the skittering, slithering things within his body guided his limbs like a marionette. Shaking, sweating, he reached into his pouch and handed the Grimoire to Lambrecht.

"Marvelous, Diederich! Simply marvelous." He clutched the book in his good hand, caressing it lovingly, sensuously, with the other. "Kneel beside the altar, both of you, and do not rise until I command it. I wish you to witness my ascension back to glory!"

As ordered, Diederich dropped to his knees beside the stone altar, eyes cast downward and ahead. Beside him, Lambrecht's voice rose in an unholy chant, a mix of Ancient Greek and other, older tongues. Behind him the battle raged, and even across the church, Diederich could smell the spilled blood, the excrement purged by the dead.

God help him, what could he do! It couldn't end like this! It could not—

He saw it, behind the altar where it sat contentedly, patiently awaiting its part in the next service. A stone basin, simple, unadorned, less than two feet in diameter. He saw it, saw the great icon of *Jesu* reflected in its contents, and knew that *this*, this was his final chance.

He had been ordered not to rise, and he would not, could not. But sluggishly, awkwardly, he reached to his belt, pulled from its ties the tiny clay mug that had served as his only utensil around many a campfire. The things inside him did not move to hinder, for he violated no order, but he kept his movements small, agonizingly slow, for fear of attracting the notice of the heretic beside him.

He almost failed, even at the last, almost could not reach without rising from his crouch. Desperately he stretched, clutching the mug from the bottom with the very tips of his fingers... and *finally*, he dipped its lip just below the surface of

the font.

Praying as he had not done in many a year, Diederic bent his head, slipped the cup to his lips, and drank.

Lambrecht gasped as the ecstasy of the incantation rippled through his body. He felt the tendons in his hands knit themselves together, the torn flesh of his calf meld into a seamless whole. Behind him, one of his enslaved lunatics cried out and collapsed, Lambrecht's own wounds opening inexplicably across her flesh. But so be it. She was merely another of the unimportant masses over whom he would soon rule.

Exulting, he turned to watch the deaths of the traitorous Inquisitors who had sided with his foe.... Turned and cried out in agony at the sudden pain across the back of his head. He felt the bone give ever so slightly, felt the blood pour down his neck. The book and the wax figures both toppled from his suddenly nerveless hands, and he staggered forward, shaking, nauseated.

Who had... *no!* No, it could not be!

Behind him, Diederic de Wyndt stood tall, lips twisted in rage, a bloody candlestick clutched in his fist.

"Not... not possible!" Lambrecht gasped, the gorge rising in the back of his throat.

"A good friend of mine," Diederic told him, stepping between the priest and the fallen book, "once showed me that holy water does wonderful things against spirits and specters." He handed his cup down into Violca's grateful grasp. She tossed the drink back and rose to her feet.

Lambrecht lashed out, flinging a palmful of his own blood at Diederic's grinning face. The knight cringed away, wiping the foul stuff from his eyes, and in that moment, the priest tottered unevenly down the aisle, away from the altar, to stand in the midst of his remaining lunatics—of the dead and of the dying.

"Surrender now, Lambrecht!" The knight dropped the candlestick in favor of his axe, which he scooped up from the pew upon which it had fallen. "There's nowhere left to go! Look!" He pointed at the chaos, slowly and finally subsiding, by the church's door. "You've few minions left to fight for you!"

Indeed, of the several dozen "worshippers," perhaps five or

six remained. They had, alas, done their damage in the process, for only eight or nine Redbreasts stood against them.

Lambrecht refused to concede defeat. "Ah, Sir Diederic, always failing to peer beyond the obvious! Perhaps it is you who should look more closely!"

The dying fell motionless, as the last of the life drained from them—but the dead, in their turn, had begun to twitch, to writhe, to rise. Worshipper and Redbreast both, it made no difference now. They staggered, in ones and twos, to their feet.

"I've had *months*, Diederic, to prepare for this moment! Every corpse to fall in this church must rise again, and all with but a single purpose: to bring me my book!

"Against how many dozen of the walking dead can you stand, when you've nowhere to retreat?" And Lambrecht, though it sent spikes of agony through his injured skull, could only laugh once more.

Roughly half the surviving Inquisitors broke, scrambling madly for the door—a door that, Diederic noted dully without surprise, now refused to open. They desperately pounded at the unyielding wood, until they were pulled down from behind, hacked and torn by shrieking madmen and the silent dead.

The remaining four dashed along the sides of the church, hugging the walls, keeping as much distance between them and the abominations as possible, until they had joined Diederic and Violca at the altar. "What now, sir?" the first asked, his face and lips as pale as the corpses that shambled toward them.

It was Violca who answered. "Fire! If we need to put them down and keep them down...."

Diederic was already nodding. "You!" he ordered the nearest soldier. "Search behind the altar! There must be oil for the lanterns! The rest of you, kindling!"

They had mere moments as the dead crossed the length of the church, Lambrecht moving with them, remaining in their midst. Axes chopped splinters from the nearest pews, desperate hands yanked the cloth cover from atop the altar. Even the pages of the Septateuch itself, with much apologizing and prayers for forgiveness, went to join the swiftly growing pile.

"All right!" Diederic ordered, and for a moment he was back on the battlefields of the Holy Land. "You two! Push the altar aside, try to create a bulwark, then guard the flank. Any of

those things try to get around us, your job is to drive them back in line!” Turning to the remaining pair of Redbreasts, he gestured at the towering candelabras, long shafts of iron. “Those are your best weapons,” he told them. “Axes and swords if they get inside your reach, but otherwise, you use those to push them into the flame, and to hold them there!

“Violca, your knife! If any of the dead win past the Redbreasts, you may need to slow them down.”

“What of you, then, Diederic?”

He merely smiled.

It seemed impossible at first. The hastily-shifted altar provided a bit of shelter from the left, and the fire burned to the right, but there was little to prevent the shambling creatures from proceeding up the center aisle, where the altar had been. The soldiers could only trust that Diederic knew what he was doing as he barked his orders, that he had some plan in mind.

They had no idea.

Twisting his axe in sweaty hands, he waited—waited as the mob of the dead moved nearer, and nearer still. And then, with a shout, he struck.

Not at the nearest corpse, against whom it would prove little use. Not at Lambrecht, who stood beyond his reach, protected by a bastion of flesh.

He struck at the ornate webbing of ropes that held the great crucifix to the wall.

Ropes snapped and tore with deafening pops, flung aside to kick dust from the wall, so hard did they impact the wood. As though suddenly animate, the sculpture seemed to push itself off the wall, to plunge downward with conscious intent. The base of the cross rang like a great bell as it gouged deep into the wooden floor, launching a veritable geyser of splinters. Jammed deep in the earth, the enormous icon paused, teetered, and then toppled forward, ponderous and inevitable.

The entire structure shook as it crashed to the floor, blocking the corpses’ path. Shingles slid to the ground outside, and several of the rafters collapsed. A number of men, living and dead, were knocked from their feet at the terrible impact, and the air grew thick and blinding with wood dust.

Knocked to his knees, his arms raised to protect his face

from flying splinters, Lambrecht squinted through the cloud. The floor around him felt tacky and wet, and he slowly realized that he knelt in a layer of humors spilt from the pulped remains of the dead men who had preceded him. All he could see was the top of the great bronze icon, pointed accusingly at him, mere feet from where he knelt.

And then something moved in the dust, crossing the fallen crucifix like a great bridge. Lambrecht struggled to rise, to turn, to flee, but his hands and feet could only scabble for purchase in the mess around him. He had to move, to get away, before....

Diederich was upon him. Lambrecht found himself hauled upward by the collar of his robe, lifted until his feet dangled, kicking above the floor.

“God,” the knight told him, his eyes and face alight as he stood atop the fallen cross, “has brought me to you.”

Lambrecht tried to speak—to plead perhaps, perhaps simply to taunt—but no breath would come. His thrashing grew only more violent as he realized that Diederich had no plan to put him down, nor to carry him before the Inquisition. The knight adjusted his grip, tightened it, tightened....

“You were sentenced to hang,” Diederich snarled, kicking out as one of the corpses tried to scabble up onto the fallen icon, sending the body back down to join its fellows. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of justice!”

No! No, not like this! This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen! He had too much left to do! Too many victories lay ahead, too great a purpose! God was on his side! He would prevail! He would....

Lambrecht kicked once more as his face purpled terribly beneath Diederich's choking grip, once more again—and fell limp. Still Diederich squeezed, months of pain and fury in his clenching fists, long after the priest hung limp and lifeless. Only when he felt the flesh give beneath his fingers, felt bone and cartilage crumble beneath his grip, did Diederich allow the body to fall.

If he had hoped the death of their master would send the dead back to their eternal rest, Diederich was sorely mistaken. Onward they advanced—on him, on his companions by the altar. The aroma of roasted flesh filled the church, and the flames began to spread as the wooden floor beneath the pyre

finally caught. But the dead came on. Diederich turned and strode back across his bridge of bronze to rejoin his allies, to stand beside them as they thrust body after body into the spreading flames.

“Diederich, behind you!”

Violca’s shout, barely audible above the clatter of steel and the crackling fire, came a fraction of a second too late. The knight had turned halfway around when a heavy weight struck him from behind, sending him sprawling across the great crucifix. A knee landed upon his infected wrist, sending agony coursing through his arm and chest.

Lambrecht lay across him, his jaw distended in a silent scream. His head hung loosely, impossibly, upon his neck, yet his hands scrabbled across his foe, one hand clutching for Diederich’s throat, the other digging furiously in the pouch at his belt.

It could not be! Diederich had felt the life drain from the priest, had crushed it from him with his own hands! Lambrecht could not live!

And of course, he *did* not. Even as Diederich wrestled with hands grown impossibly strong, struggled to keep those fingers from closing about his throat, he remembered Lambrecht’s own boast.

“Every corpse to fall in this church must rise again....”

Animated by his own magics, Lambrecht held Diederich tight to the fallen sculpture, even as he yanked the Laginate Grimoire from the pouch at the knight’s side. Yanked it free....

And froze.

“... and all with but a single purpose: to bring me my book!”

Whatever malign intelligence drove Lambrecht’s corpse onward, it knew not what to do next. Its purpose was fulfilled, the commands of its master and creator followed to the letter. Slowly, like bubbles rising to the surface of a great lake, awareness and intelligence began to return to Lambrecht’s eyes, the living corpse drawing upon the power of the book to remember who and what it was.

And all too late. Diederich thrust the suddenly immobile body aside, scampering roughly to his feet. Before him, the bonfire had grown wider; flames were licking at the nearest walls.

With a mighty heave, he lifted the body of Lambrecht to its feet once more.

“Rise from *this*, you bastard!”

The corpse had regained just enough awareness to scream a final scream as it plunged headfirst into the fire.

For a single, frozen moment, it looked as though the Grimoire, skittering from Lambrecht’s convulsing hand and beyond the edge of the fire, might survive, might provide Diederich his passage home. It lay upon the wooden floor, pages splayed, resembling nothing so much as a wounded bird.

Then, as twice before, the smoke that rose from the blazing inferno grew pale and transformed into the whitest haze. It poked and prodded, testing the air and ground before it, until it laid a single finger of fog across the ancient parchment.

A flash, blinding and burning to the eye, and the fire had traveled across the insubstantial bridge of mist. As before, the pages of the book curled under the pounding heat, but this time it had nowhere else to go.

With a crackle, a shudder, the faintest of screams, the Laginate Grimoire burned to ash and was gone.

All that remained was silence. The walking dead collapsed in mid-step, nevermore to rise. The sounds of chaos faded outside, leaving only the cries of the injured and the puzzled calls of the formerly mad. Even the fires within the church guttered and died, as though the Mists had stolen away their vital fuels.

The soldiers glanced at one another, uncertain of what to do next. Diederich stared in growing horror at the pile of ashes upon the floor, ashes that had once been his only route home. And Violca....

Violca nodded once, as though in final understanding of some long-pondered dilemma, and walked toward the door, picking her way through the fallen bodies and heaps of rubble.

“Violca? Violca, wait!” Diederich scrambled behind, trying to keep up, though exhaustion tugged at his every limb. “Perhaps... perhaps there is another way? Can your people find me another path home?”

“I think not, *giorgio*.” She laid a hand upon the door and turned back to look at him with a mixture of pity and fear. “But then, I expect that even with the book, we would have failed. Malosia was never prepared to let you go.” She turned the latch, which functioned perfectly now, and pulled the portal

open.

Outside, the men and women of Caercaelum stared in wide-eyed wonder at the figures emerging from the smoldering church. They gasped as one, and bowed their heads to Diederic, offering tearful thanks and praising his name although as of yet they knew it not.

"I..." Diederic swallowed, hard. Somehow, of all he had seen in this terrible realm, this frightened him more than anything else. "I don't understand, Violca."

"They praise you, Diederic. They know not that you brought this violence and horror among them, only that you have somehow saved them from it. Congratulations. Go... go and meet your citizens."

"Violca, please... don't go."

But already the Vistana had disappeared into the crowd. Only her voice lingered behind, a phantom on the cool night winds.

"I cannot stay, Diederic. I have learned all that my people must know. Malosia is no longer hollow."

As the people surged toward him, sobbing their gratitude, Diederic felt his legs grow shaky. He sat hard upon the steps of the smoldering church, heedless of the residual heat upon his back, his head resting heavily in his hands. Long and long he laughed, until he could scarcely breathe, though his eyes leaked bitter tears. It was all too much, too hard to comprehend at once....

Even for Sir Diederic de Wyndt, Dark Lord of Malosia.

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