



The Chronicles of Morshan

The Short Story Collection

Josiah DeGraaf

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Introduction to Morshan

Seventy-three years ago, the land of Morshan was on the peak of a new golden age. Gunpowder had been discovered, new agricultural techniques had been mastered, technology was at a high point, the kingdoms of the land were finally united, and the future could only be moving upward.

Then the gods descended.

Each god began offering noteworthy individuals a promise: serve one god above the others and they would be blessed with powers beyond human reckoning. To some was offered power over body. To others power over mind. To others power over nature.

Few who were offered these powers refused.

And society fractured.

It turns out the old saying of Morshan holds true: power always reveals what a man truly is like. And the essence of man is not kind. Within a matter of months, the unified land had broken up into warring factions, each led by one of the “god-blessed” trying to claim power for themselves. Within a matter of years, those factions had themselves split up into fiefdoms and sub-factions, countless lives and technological advances destroyed in the bloody aftermath.

Now, the once-prosperous land is a shadow of its former self. God-blessed war with each other in the ruins of a past civilization of glory while most peasants try to keep their heads low, serve a god-blessed who will protect them, and mind their own business.

But hope is not yet lost. There are still some who wish to use their powers for good. In the center of the shattered empire, a small group of god-blessed calling themselves the Heralds seek to reclaim the ancient ideals of chivalry and heroism for themselves.

But the times are dark and would-be heroes must face many enemies.

Time will tell if this is a new beginning for Morshan or one last dying gasp.

Fractured Masks

Grimweld heard the weeping before he saw the distraught woman pushing through the throng milling about in the market. She stumbled up the steps toward where he stood guard at the citadel's entrance. A small crowd followed her.

Grimweld readied himself. This was an opportunity to show the people how to be compassionate. To remind them that honor still existed in the war-racked lands of Morshan.

He stepped forward to meet the woman, who threw herself at his feet. She tried to stop sobbing long enough to speak. "My son ... the gods be with my son ..."

Grimweld knelt and removed his helmet, hoping that seeing his face would comfort her. He put his armored hand on her shoulder, conscious of the onlookers. "What happened?"

The woman shuddered. "We were coming home from the harvest festival last night with a couple friends when this—this *thing* lunged from the shadows. Ripped his throat open and left him to die!"

Grimweld considered the facts. "Where were you? Was this an animal? Human?" He paused. "One of the god-blessed?"

"We were in one of the alleys. I couldn't tell whether the thing was god-blessed or not. It looked human from a distance, but it had the teeth of a jackal and the claws of a lion." She grabbed his arm. "My son frequented some places he shouldn't, but who doesn't? He was a good lad, Herald! He needs the gods' justice!"

"We will do what we can to bring him justice." Grimweld stared her in the eyes. He needed to assure not only her, but also the growing crowd. "We built up this city for a reason, woman. We will not allow such beings to roam here unpunished."

Grimweld strode through the halls of the Citadel of Light. This was the third reported attack in two months—after they had enjoyed fourteen months without hostile god-blessed in the city. He had been standing guard when the first two incidents were reported as well. Some may have deemed it coincidence, but clearly Eldrin meant it as a sign that Grimweld should lead the investigation.

He opened the doors to Sindar's chambers and walked in. "Sindar."

Tottering bookcases crammed with aged books, decaying herbs, and pawnshop materials lined the walls of the room. A tall man in a dark blue robe turned from the ragged maps spread on the table in the middle of the room. "Grimweld." He cocked an eyebrow. "Why are you still in your armor?"

Grimweld mentally willed his armor to dissipate. It faded, returning to the void until needed again. "I forgot to dismiss it. I was standing guard when a woman reported that some

creature killed her son last night. None of the eyewitnesses got a clear view, but it sounded like that god-blessed rumored to be prowling the city.”

Sindar frowned. “A rogue god-blessed foolish enough to let himself be spotted killing a random citizen in this city? Was this woman’s son anyone important?”

Grimweld shrugged. “They were only peasants. I don’t know what this god-blessed is after or why he slaughtered her son. But I intend to track him down to find out. I’ll need a replacement at the gate.”

Sindar pressed a finger against his temple as he concentrated. After a couple moments, he glanced up. “Two of the new acolytes will stand guard in your absence. How much help do you need?”

“As much as possible,” Grimweld replied. “We can’t have a rogue god-blessed terrorizing the city. What will the people think of us?”

Sindar nodded. “Agreed.”

“I’m taking the new acolyte who can see memories and beginning the search now,” Grimweld said. “Can you inform the council and estimate how many men we can spare for this hunt?”

“It will be done.”

Two and a half days later, Grimweld surveyed the chipped and faded exterior of Thanax’s chapel. Its miniature turrets and carved exterior should have been demolished decades ago when the Heralds established their presence in the city. But they had forced Thanax’s worshippers to leave, but the superstitions lingered. So the building remained, abandoned but not forgotten.

Footsteps approached. About time. He rose from the bench he had been sitting on to confront Sian. “Uncover anything?”

Sian shook her head, swaying her auburn hair. “Only the vaguest memory traces from people’s imaginings about this god-blessed.” She leaned against a crumbling brick wall. “Everyone fears the creature, but no one’s actually seen him.”

Grimweld pursed his lips. “We should have investigated these rumors long before. I had no idea they were so widespread. What do the people think of us?”

Sian shrugged and tossed a broken piece of brick from hand to hand. “The people I talked to were just grateful someone was listening. Especially someone who can see memory impressions.”

Grimweld waved his hand. “Drop the brick. It’s unprofessional.”

Sian raised an eyebrow, but she released the chunk. “Sorry. Didn’t realize anyone cared.”

“Citizens would hardly have a high impression of our order from your appearance.” Grimweld gestured to her untucked shirt. “And if they don’t respect us, whom will they look to instead? Straighten your uniform—you shouldn’t present yourself in public like that.”

“People are less intimidated when I’m not put together,” Sian mumbled. But she did as commanded.

Grimweld sighed. His morning hadn’t been fruitful either. None of the law enforcement officers had any reliable information. In the distance, the noon bells rang.

“Let’s go,” he said.

“We pursuing another lead?”

“No. It’s time to attend the midweek service.”

“Oh.” Sian hastened to match pace with him. “I thought we wouldn’t be attending with the killer loose.”

“We’re not making any progress, and the people need to see Herald representatives at the service.”

A smile darted across Sian’s face. “People have told me you haven’t missed a service in *five years*.”

“That could be true. I don’t keep track.”

“No other Herald has a record even close to that.”

“And that’s an issue.” Grimweld halted and leveled his gaze at Sian. “Don’t fall into the trap of believing you can let observances slide because you’re a Herald. Too many problems have ensued when—”

An image of Sindar materialized in front of Grimweld. “We think we’ve identified the god-blessed,” the image said. “From the descriptions the woman provided, we suspect it’s Terix.”

Grimweld suppressed a gasp. After so many years, was his past returning to haunt him?

Sian wrinkled her eyebrows. “Are you all right?”

“Sindar bears news,” he explained. She nodded and moved to the side. Sindar could only appear to one person at a time.

“If that hunch is correct,” Sindar continued, “he may be attempting revenge, and the murder of the woman’s son was likely intentional. We’re sending men to interrogate the woman about her son.”

Grimweld nodded. “Sounds wise. I’m walking to the midweek service now, but will regroup at the citadel afterward.”

“Good. We’ll talk more then.” The image of Sindar vanished.

Grimweld rubbed his eyes as Sian rejoined him. “Well, that was enlightening. Sindar believes the god-blessed is Terix, who was one of our acolytes four years ago. Had a blessing from the goddess Alikana to be part reptile. Sharp teeth, retractable claws. Certainly fits the rumors.”

“Why isn’t he still a Herald?”

“We quickly discovered he was corrupt. He made mistakes, committed crimes, and was about to be disciplined. But before we could do that, he accused us of hypocrisy and escaped. If Sindar is right about his return, and he probably is, we should be wary.”

Sian nodded. “You don’t want to regroup with the others at the citadel now?”

Grimweld shook his head. “Don’t have time before the service.”

“We’re still attending after acquiring this new information?”

“I have a record to maintain, don’t I?”

To Grimweld’s disappointment, only one Herald besides Sian showed up to the service. He understood the Heralds were busy—especially with Terix in the city. But people would notice the vacancy of the Heralds’ pew at the cathedral’s center. And he hated that. Wouldn’t people decide worshipping the gods was unimportant if the Heralds didn’t set the precedent?

The priest prayed to the gods on the dais next to the large oil basin that burned over the cathedral’s central fire. Grimweld knew he should be devoting this time to praying privately to Eldrin. He bowed his head. *Don’t let the people consider us unfaithful. May we not mislead them. Help us locate Terix. Use this opportunity to remind the people that heroes still exist in this world who will defend them from those who manipulate the gods’ gifts for ill.*

The priest finished his prayer and silence reigned over the cathedral. Now was the time for the nobles and wealthy of the city to publicly offer up prayers. Grimweld waited for someone to rise, and when no one did, he stood. Perhaps through intercession he could circumvent the harm incurred by the numerous Heralds skipping the service. The eyes of everyone in the cathedral, who needed faithful role models to emulate, weighed upon him.

“Great Eldrin.” He raised his voice to sound throughout the cathedral. “Hear our requests. May we follow your path of honor and not be turned aside unto dishonorable pursuits. May we meditate on the good, walk in the light, and utter speech that befits the noble.”

Acting as a paragon for the people was a heavy responsibility. One misstep could disillusion them about the path they were called to follow.

After praying a bit longer, Grimweld concluded by praising Eldrin for his virtues and reseated himself on the pew, bowing his head. A few others prayed, the priest threw incense on the remainder of the burning oil, and then the service ended.

The people began to disperse, and Grimweld and Sian stood. As Grimweld's gaze aimlessly flitted around the crowd, he spotted the woman who had lost her son heading in their direction. He gawked—it almost seemed too coincidental.

“Herald!” the woman exclaimed as she neared them. “I knew I’d find you here!”

“Faithfulness reaps benefits,” Grimweld whispered before stepping into the aisle to intercept the woman. “How can I be of service, lady?”

“It’s been three days, Herald.” Unshed tears reddened the woman’s eyes. “I asked your friends yesterday and they said they didn’t have any update. But I knew *you* could help me.”

Grimweld guided her into a pew and sat beside her. “I’m glad you found me. We were looking for you. I want to hear more about your son.”

The woman wiped her eyes. “What about him?”

Grimweld strove to break it to her gently. “We think the creature was a god-blessed and deliberately attacked your son.” He refrained from mentioning the god-blessed was also an ex-Herald. “We’re trying to determine why the god-blessed would have targeted your son. Do you know anything that could help us?”

The woman swallowed and averted her eyes for a moment. “He ran in a group of friends... I don’t know what they did, but they frequently met in the chapel of Thanax.”

Grimweld’s eyes widened. “When you said your son spent time in places he shouldn’t, I didn’t realize one was the chapel of Thanax.”

The woman floundered to respond, tears spilling down her cheeks. “I—I’d just lost my *son*. And you were a *Herald*. How was I supposed to tell you that my son participated in dark practices?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Grimweld noted the number of bystanders transfixed by this spectacle. He didn’t wish to give the impression that he sanctioned involvement in dark practices. Yet she was hurting and needed help.

Grimweld touched her shoulder. “Don’t worry,” he said softly. “I’m not here to judge. I just want to capture the being that murdered your son so he never roams the streets again.”

“Thank you,” the woman said between sobs.

Grimweld turned toward Sian. “We should inspect the sanctuary.”

“I ... I should go with you,” the woman said. “I may recognize my son’s possessions if he left any there.”

Grimweld exchanged glances with Sian. Terix might be hiding in the chapel, which would make the area extremely dangerous. But if the chapel was empty, the woman’s knowledge could come in handy.

“We’ll need to clear the place first,” Grimweld finally said, turning back to the woman. “But we *would* appreciate your assistance.”

The floor of Thanax’s chapel glistened. Grimweld wiped his finger along a pew and lifted it up to his face. No dust. Even the low, vaulted ceiling was free of cobwebs.

“This place was allegedly abandoned decades ago,” Grimweld muttered. “But it looks as pristine as it would have been when people worshipped here.”

“Because someone’s been cleaning or because of dark influences?” Sian asked.

Grimweld frowned. “It bodes ill for us either way.” He marched toward the front of the chapel. “Come—if a group was meeting here, they would be in the basement.”

He pulled on a door in the wall, which opened without squeaking. Everything was too perfect. He peered into the darkness, glad he wore his full armor. “We need a light.”

“I have some supplies in my pack,” Sian said. A minute later, she handed him a lit torch.

“Stay behind me,” Grimweld ordered. Neither of them spoke as they descended the spiraling staircase.

When they arrived at the bottom, Grimweld prepared to defend himself, but the basement was deserted. Old books, alchemist materials, and other unsavory objects and designs of dark origin scattered the room.

Sian circled the parameter, carefully avoiding the pentagon sketched in the middle of the floor. “Looks like no one’s home.”

Grimweld glared at the dead candles and mound of supplies inside the pentagon. “I had hoped to end this affair with Terix here.”

“You may have needed reinforcements.” Sian picked up one of the books on the floor. “It’s not like I would be helpful in a fight.”

Grimweld shook his head. “Terix isn’t a challenge. I ... I mentored him four years ago. He’s dangerous. But he never outclassed me.”

Sian shot him a glance. “You didn’t mention you were his mentor.”

Grimweld didn’t answer. Long-forgotten memories were resurfacing. “If this is safe, we should bring the woman down here. See if she recognizes any belongings of her son’s.”

“All right.” Sian started to mount the steps, then hesitated. She glanced over her shoulder. “You ... you should know I think her mind has issues.”

Grimweld furrowed his brow. “She seems normal on the outside.”

“Her memories have a weird tint, and her internal feelings don’t match her actions. Like in the cathedral. She may have been outwardly upset, but I sensed an eerie stillness underneath. I’ve only gotten a conflicted impression like this once before—when I was talking to a lunatic.”

“Duly noted,” Grimweld said. “Thanks for informing me.”

He walked over to the stone altar as Sian ascended the stairs. Assuming he didn’t need his armor anymore, he dismissed it into the void. He picked up an ornate knife speckled with red. The stains didn’t appear decades old either.

They should have torn down this chapel long ago.

Grimweld sifted through the pile of herbs and animal body parts for anything that might provide a clue about Terix’s location. His mind kept returning to his time mentoring Terix, who had once held Sian’s position. Terix, like Sian, had never understood Grimweld’s devotion. But Terix was worse in almost every way. At least Sian had a good heart and righteous motives.

Grimweld sighed and rested his arms on the altar. Spending these past several days with Sian had been troubling. Her inattention to her appearance indicated that the Heralds were growing lax. They had forgotten the early days when everyone thought the Heralds were another group of power-hungry despots seeking a fiefdom to conquer.

Grimweld hadn’t been alive in those days. But he had been trained by those who were, and they had drilled the importance of honor and hope into him. A populace in times this dark needed flickers of light to ignite hope. Outside their city, the world was overrun with god-blessed who sought their own gain. The Heralds *needed* to be different. They were forgetting that.

Footsteps sounded from the stairwell, and Grimweld pivoted. Sian and the woman emerged.

The woman looked around, eyes wide with horror. “This ... this is what my son was involved in?”

“Appears so. Do you recognize anything?” Grimweld asked.

“I ... I don’t know ...” The woman scanned the room. “Wait.” She gestured toward the candles, books, and instruments strewn in the pentagon’s center. “Some of those may have been his.”

Sian caught Grimweld’s concerned glance. “No one else is here to use the pentagon. It’s harmless.”

“Just be careful not to cut yourselves on anything,” Grimweld said as Sian and the woman stepped within the pentagon. “You’re entering a dark field.”

They rummaged through the supplies, but nothing bad happened. Grimweld exhaled slowly and turned to examine the other items in the room.

The image of Sindar appeared. “I don’t have much time, so I’ll make this quick. Our men broke into the house of the woman who lost her son. They discovered her lying dead with similar wounds on her that she described on her son.”

Grimweld’s blood chilled. “*What?*”

“Return to the citadel as soon as you can and we’ll discuss the details more fully.” Before Grimweld could respond, the image disappeared.

The hairs on the back of his neck rose. They found the woman’s *body*? But the woman was sorting through the paraphernalia inside the pentagon with Sian. Grimweld turned.

His gaze met the woman’s as she picked up a rusty dagger. *Sian said something appeared off...* His eyes widened and he immediately summoned his armor from the void. The armor began to slowly materialize.

“Sian!” he yelled as he leapt forward.

The woman slashed the dagger across Sian’s arm. Sian gasped. Blood spurted out and dripped on the floor inside the pentagon.

The pentagon outline began to glow crimson. Grimweld skidded to a stop inches from the outline. The woman held a small bottle under the gash to collect Sian’s blood. “Fight her, Sian!” Grimweld shouted. But Sian’s eyelids were already closing and her limbs growing limp from the dark enchantment.

“Sorry,” the woman hissed. “You’re too late. She’ll survive. But I’m getting what I need from her.”

Grimweld’s jaw clenched, and his armor finished materializing around him. “What are you?”

A cruel smile spread across the woman’s face. “I thought you’d already guessed.”

“My friends found your dead body,” Grimweld said.

“Ah, that’s rather inconvenient for me, isn’t it?” Sian’s blood trickled into the bottle. “I hate it when I lose another body. It’s been a pleasure interacting with you over the past couple days. I only wish I could have witnessed you and Terix facing each other again. *That* would have been truly entertaining.”

“Where is Terix?” Grimweld growled.

The woman cackled. “Oh, he’s dead. I killed him. Over a year ago, actually.”

Grimweld stared at her as he tried to process this. The bottle nearly brimmed with blood, and though the woman promised Sian would survive, Grimweld didn’t trust her. He didn’t know what dangers would befall him when he intruded the pentagon, but for Sian’s sake, he had to try. He drew his sword.

The woman grinned. “What will the people think when they find you standing over a defenseless widow’s body amid evidence of cultic rituals?”

Grimweld swallowed, and for a split second he paused.

The woman screwed a cap on the bottle. “You’re exactly as Terix described—a hollow shell, driven by the whims of the populace.”

Her face began to contort and her skin hardened to resemble scales. Grimweld inhaled sharply as fangs protruded from her teeth and claws grew from her appendages, transforming her into the image of Terix.

The creature grinned. “Now you understand what’s happening.” Dropping Sian, it sprung toward the exit.

Grimweld chased after the creature, uninhibited by his weightless, god-blessed armor. He pounded across the room, up the staircase, and through the meticulously polished chapel. He needed to know what the shapeshifter intended to do with Sian’s blood.

The creature threw open the sanctuary doors and ran toward the center of town. Grimweld’s feet thudded across the threshold and onto the old cobblestone roads as he fixated on the inhuman creature darting through the alleys. As he turned a corner, he observed the hustle and bustle of the main streets ahead. The creature was trapped. An additional burst of speed fueled his legs as he neared the end of the alley.

Then the creature’s limbs shrunk and its body shape distorted. Grimweld shook his head and laughed. Was that the creature’s big plan? Shapeshift into something else and disappear? It couldn’t evade him. And he would have no trouble slaying it.

The creature finished its transformation only seconds before it skittered into the busy market street. Grimweld gripped his sword hilt, ready to behead the creature—until it spun around.

Grimweld gasped and screeched to a halt. It was a girl. A small, pre-adolescent girl with pigtails and tears in her eyes ran *toward* him and threw her skinny arms around his armored legs. “Herald!” she cried. “I ... I’m lost. Can you tell me where the carpenter’s shop is?”

The whole world seemed to slow around him. Grimweld felt the eyes of everyone in the crowd as they turned to look at this spectacle: a quivering girl requesting help from a Herald. His throat tightened. He must kill the creature. Yet, as he knelt and locked gaze with it, he realized he couldn’t bring himself to plunge his sword through a little girl’s heart. Not with the crowd watching and wondering whether he would exhibit nobility and kindness by aiding this little girl. They all expected him to do so.

If he executed her, the people would never recover from the shock. He could explain the situation as best he could. Maybe most people would believe him. But his public image would be permanently tarnished. People would remember him as the Herald who killed a helpless girl.

A tiny grin slipped out of the creature’s mouth. “Like I thought,” it whispered so only Grimweld could hear. “You’re a great moral example to the people. But are you anything more?”

A farmer stepped forward. “If you don’t know where the carpenter’s shop is, I can show her the way.”

Grimweld’s mouth felt dry. “I—It—”

“Where’s she going?” someone asked. Grimweld realized the girl no longer hovered around his legs. She was gone.

“Where did she go?” he asked as he stood and shoved through the crowd. “Where is she?”

A couple bystanders attempted to direct him, but Grimweld searched for ten minutes without seeing any sign of a girl with pigtails and tears in her eyes. The creature had changed shapes and fled.

Grimweld stood in the middle of the market, clothed in his glorious armor, attracting the attention of every passerby, and completely helpless to thwart this shapeshifter and its plans for Sian’s blood.

Grimweld tilted his head to the sky. “Eldrin,” he whispered, “I ... I’m trying to live as a man of honor.”

But the heavens gave no answer that day.

To Whom the Future Belongs

Serena could change the future.

Most days it wasn't all that interesting. She'd see a potential future in her dreams where she'd break a pitcher or lose a button and, upon waking, simply take a different set of actions to avert the mishap. A far cry from the days of her youth when a warlord had tried to use her powers to win conquests. But Serena didn't mind the slower pace. It was better when people's lives didn't rest on her ability to alter the future. She'd become accustomed to leisurely visions of village life.

But then she foresaw her son's death.

Serena sat on the edge of her bed, the battered wood rough against her stout thighs. Bells rang in the distance as she rubbed her cheeks. She'd went through this routine of sitting on her cot and rubbing her face every morning when she was in the warlord's employ. It helped her focus on changing the future. But she hadn't needed to concentrate this hard for a while, and the circumstances were different. Wrinkles etched her cheeks after many years of living on the earth. Her hands had toughened from being a washwoman since her husband's death.

And now the stakes were much more personal.

That night, a hostile warband would discover and raid their small village. Her son Terence would be at the front line of defenses, holding his own. Amid the chaos and clamor, he would face off against the warlord chief amongst glistening flames. In a rare stroke of luck, the warlord chief would slip on a pile of debris. Terence would pierce him with his sword and, by killing the warband's leader, save the village.

But as he impales the warlord, the warlord would tear open Terence's stomach. Serena would stay by his side the whole night, clutching Terence's hand as he gasps in agony. The village healer would desperately try to stitch together his internal organs, but the efforts would be to no avail. As the sun begins to rise, Terence would clasp her hands in his and tell her that he loves her. That he is sorry to leave her behind. Then his soul would pass into the great beyond. And Serena would be alone.

Beams of early morning light broke through the cracks in the shutters, illuminating the small upper room. Serena inhaled. Then exhaled. Then inhaled again. She still felt dizzy. *This wasn't supposed to happen.*

For years, her dreams had predicted that Terence would marry Greta, a local village girl, within the next six months. He had already fallen in love with her, and thanks to Serena's prodding, the betrothal was fast approaching. He would propose to her late one evening in the damp fields outside the village after a cool summer's rain. She would gasp in astonishment, then cry, then laugh, then say yes.

Serena blinked a tear out of her eye. She had always wanted a daughter.

She'd glimpsed how close her relationship to Greta would be after the marriage. She'd heard the long talks the two of them would have on life, marriage, and childrearing. She'd seen their first child—her first granddaughter. She'd felt the tears roll down her cheeks when she learned they were naming their daughter after *her*.

Serena leaned back in her bed. Her chest rose and fell quickly. Seeing two conflicting futures should have been impossible. The future only changed if she manipulated it. Hadn't she been careful to uphold this future? Or had she erred? Her stomach tightened. It couldn't be. She had been *careful*. But maybe Sapia, the goddess who gave her visions, had been feeding her false ones.

She *had* apostatized from Sapia years ago. And the priests *did* proclaim that heresy bore consequences. Serena had been surprised Sapia didn't immediately withdraw the visions when she renounced her. But perhaps this was the true punishment.

Serena rubbed her cheeks. She could try warning the village. But ever since she became a heretic, the villagers had stopped listening to her. She could try telling Terence what would happen. But she had taught Terence to value honor too much. He would lay down his life for the village if needed. Alerting him would change nothing.

If only I hadn't drilled honor into him so much... But, did she really want an honor-less son? Serena swallowed. One other option remained. If she could get him and Greta out of the village without mentioning the impending siege, she could save their lives. After all, her visions *did* always show them in a different city. This had confused her for a while, but now it made sense. They would live in another city because it was the only way to save Terence's life. The only way to preserve her future.

But every future had a cost. Serena closed her eyes. Without Terence, the village would be overrun. Houses razed. Goods stolen. Men, women, and children would die.

Serena exhaled slowly as she rubbed her face. Why did it have to be her? Why did the cost have to be so high? She only wished to save her son. Was this an act of the thirteenth god?

"Adolsin," Serena whispered. "Why have you forced me into this position?"

Serena first read the codes of Adolsin when one of his few followers in the village visited her shortly after her husband's death. The codes had been inscribed in a torn and ragged book. But the realization that Adolsin loved his followers, rather than merely tolerating or using them, had captured her. After a long period of questioning whether or not this deity existed, she finally relented and accepted him. She had felt such peace upon accepting him as her deity that, in response, she swore to be honorable. Faithful. Humble. Ready to sacrifice her interests for the good of others. Just like his code asked of her. Adolsin promised to bless those who followed him faithfully.

But now following Adolsin would cost the death of her son.

Scenes from her visions flashed before her eyes. The sheepish grin spreading across Terence's face every time he saw his wife. The journey to the nearby waterfall, when they would sit for hours in contented silence. The beautiful weight of her granddaughter against her chest...

Serena's hands felt cold against her cheeks. It wasn't just her son she would lose. It had been hard enough when her husband died ten years ago. But now she would be truly alone.

A forgotten, widowed washwoman in the back country of Morshan.

Serena slowly lowered her hands from her face and stood. She would tell Terence she wanted to go to the festival in the nearby town to buy items from the large market that she couldn't obtain in their little village. She would encourage him to bring Greta along. She wouldn't need to ask twice. They would be absent when the warband attacked.

And the future would be changed.

Serena slowly exhaled. If she did this, blood would be on her hands. No one else in the world would know. But when they returned from the festival, she would see the dead bodies, and she would know, carrying the guilt with her forever.

Serena quivered, and she almost fell back onto her bed. But if she didn't do it, an entire future would be erased. Years of promised dreams would never come to pass. She'd never see Terence and Greta's joy-filled eyes at their wedding. Never see Greta's stomach swell with her first child. Never see her granddaughter's chubby hands and freckled face.

Her eyes stung. No matter what her deity wanted, life was meant to have a greater purpose than washing clothes. She wanted to care for a young couple. Advise a daughter-in-law. Raise a granddaughter. Invest in people.

Serena tied a sash about her waist and fumbled around for her sandals before finding them next to the chipped dresser. She shoved her feet into them and gazed at the back of the polished steel plate to see her reflection. She brushed several strands of hair from her face and wiped her eyes. She hadn't cried yet. She could still present herself in public.

She stepped out of her bedroom and descended the stairs, the wood creaking under her feet. Terence would have already left to handle his duties at the cobbler's. His apprenticeship would be over in a couple months and he could run his own shop. He would start at this new town they were moving to.

Serena crossed the small kitchen, stirring dust beneath her feet. They were still saving up for a wooden floor. Not that there was any point in buying a wooden floor now. The house would likely be burned to the ground by the following day.

She pushed open the door. The twittering of birds filled the air. A couple children raced by her, pursuing a bouncing ball. Serena's stomach churned, and she staggered, tears blurring her vision. But she steadied herself and waited until the lump faded from her throat.

As she headed down the street, the smoke from a nearby blacksmith trickled into her nostrils. *Will the whole village smell like this after tonight?*

She shook her head. She couldn't think about that. Besides, the village wasn't *guaranteed* to suffer. She hadn't seen for sure how that future would unfold without Terence. The battle would be harder. The villagers would probably lose. But perhaps someone else would take his place and kill the warlord.

A young married couple strolled ahead of her. Serena couldn't hear their conversation, but she observed the way the man leaned over to whisper in his wife's ear. The way she wrapped her arm around his waist. The way their bodies moved together—the awkward pace of two people learning how to walk together. *Will that be Terence and Greta in a couple months?*

She emerged in the center of town. The sign for the cobbler's shop swayed in the wind ahead of her, just visible beyond the top of the village well. A young mother sat by the well, an infant in her lap. The child was reaching its tiny fingers toward the mother's face and trying to grab her lip, an expression of delight on his face. The mother smiled and bent her head to satisfy the child's explorative urges. The child grasped her lip. The mother laughed.

Something snapped inside Serena. Her knees buckled. She sank to the ground beside the well and stared at the broken cobblestones, blinking back a wetness she couldn't suppress anymore.

"I ... I only want to save my family," Serena whispered to Adolsin. "Is that so wrong of me?" But could she let the children playing in the streets, the couple in the throes of youthful love, and the mother playing with her child suffer the tragedy she dreaded for her family?

Tears trickled down Serena's cheeks. It was wrong. It was wrong to take her son and leave the villagers to be slaughtered. But how could she endure life without her family?

A couple passed her on the street. Both avoided eye contact with her. No one knew what to do with a heretic.

Especially a weeping heretic.

Serena slumped against the stones of the well. She could hear the mother nearby still playing with her child. No matter how much Serena longed to protect her family, what kind of person would she be if she were willing to sacrifice the lives of so many villagers for...

For...

For her *happiness*.

Serena's shoulders shuddered. This loss would be more painful than the bereavement of her husband. Because this time she had beheld the future she would never get to experience. And she was worshiping a god who claimed to care for the lives of his followers.

None of the twelve gods cared. They would honor the skilled few who sought them with blessings. But otherwise, they paid no attention to humans. Sapia hadn't cared when Serena's husband died. That was why she had abandoned her for a heretical god who promised to personally care for his followers.

But the problem with Adolsin was that he *was* personal. He *did* care about those who followed him. And it turned out that Adolsin was a cruel god. He wasn't content for people to follow him with lukewarm interest. In his code, he demanded everything from his followers.

She hadn't understood what that meant at the time. She was simply happy to have someone to console her after her husband's death. And he *had* comforted her when she prayed to him. Or at least she thought he did. Maybe it had just been her imagination. Because then her plight became harder. Adolsin's code had forced her to publicly profess her belief in him, which caused her to lose her job as adviser to the town mayor. Adolsin's code had forced her to apologize to community members she had uttered cruel words to. Even though *they* spewed crueller words at her.

And now, his code was forcing her to give up her future family. Sapia wouldn't have cared. Sapia would have let her sacrifice the community for her son without batting an eye.

But not only did Adolsin demand this, he could have prevented this. He was a deity, right? He could smite the warband down with lightning if he desired. If the code was correct, he would be aware of this situation. He could stop it. Yet, he left this choice with her. Because he demanded everything from his followers. He demanded they empty themselves to be the people he wanted them to be.

Apparently, that required the destruction of her family.

Serena trembled. "Why couldn't you have left me alone? What good does it do you for my son to die?"

She received no response. Not that she expected any. Adolsin declared that he liked to test his people's devotion to him. Perhaps she should have studied the code more thoroughly before swearing to follow him.

Serena wasn't sure she loved Adolsin anymore. It was hard to love a deity who continually took without giving in return.

Yet, the real question was not whether she loved Adolsin, but if she would obey his code.

Serena closed her eyes. The future that awaited her would be exacting. Not only would she be grieving the loss of her son, but she would be haunted by the future she was missing. The day of her son's wedding. The day Greta would announce her pregnancy. The day Serena would become a grandmother. And countless other joyful occasions. She had seen her future three years in advance. It would take an eternity to get over that.

But ... those weren't the only scenes she'd witness. She would see children playing in the streets. Marriages blossoming into deeper and deeper love. A whole community living and flourishing. Apart from the few villagers who followed Adolsin, most might not form a connection with her. They might continue to brand her as a heretic, awkwardly interact with her, and restrict her to washing clothes for a living.

But every day she would see their happiness. Even if no one else knew, she would forever carry the knowledge that she'd saved their lives.

Serena wiped her eyes. She had much to accomplish on her last day with her son. She'd cook her best meal, and she'd invite Greta to join them that night. They'd enjoy one last meal together while hopes of a future family were still running through their minds. Serena would do what she could to leave them with pleasant final memories together.

And then she would prepare for the inevitable heartbreak.

Serena stood and blinked away the last tears from her eyes. She'd have plenty of time to cry later. But now she had to seize her remaining time.

The mother was walking away from the square with her child. The child glanced over his mother's shoulder, and a smile appeared on his face as he looked at Serena.

Serena smiled softly. She hoped she would see the child again.

She'd need something to remind her she'd made the right choice when the darker days arrived.

The First God-Blessed

When the gods had begun “blessing” individuals with supernatural powers in exchange for loyalty, Clare was the first.

She hadn’t even needed to swear any devotion.

Because, unlike all the others, *she* had received blessings from multiple gods at once.

Clare strode out of her chambers. Her violet-tinted knee-high boots clapped against the stone floor, and servants turned their heads to get a glimpse of her. Nilde had recently ordered their craftsmen to design her a new outfit. It was ridiculous. She was supposed to be a warrior-ruler, not an emblem of fashion. But Nilde had insisted the boots and violet tunic would enhance public impressions of her. At least Clare had been able to keep the functional black-leather skirt.

Clare pushed through a pair of large iron doors and descended the tightly spiraled stairs into the stagnant depths of the dungeon. The door at the bottom was locked, but the guards recognized her pace and opened it before she reached it. Nodding briefly at them, she entered the dungeon.

Cells lined the right side of the hall; the wall on the left was bare, lit by occasional torches. Water dripped in the distance. Near the fourth cell, Riccardo was squatting and washing his hands in a basin of water. Redness still lined the creases in his palms.

“You’re finished already?” Clare asked. “I expected my presence would be needed to break the man.”

Riccardo stood. His curly hair clung to his sweaty brow. “Queen, I was about to summon you. He broke easily.”

Clare peered into the cell where a one-eyed man with a gnarly beard hung against the wall, legs limp and battered. He moaned softly.

She returned her attention to Riccardo. “You’re fortunate then. Are you desensitized yet?”

“I doubt I’ll ever get used to torturing people, Queen.”

Clare crossed her arms. “Forget about that—what did you learn?”

“Only that the couple and their children were insignificant.” Riccardo looked away. “He murdered them to make a statement.”

Clare clenched her jaw. “Should anything stop me from thrusting my hand through his heart?”

Riccardo shrugged. “The Rose hates you, not him. He joined simply for the pay. He was a street thug in Livorna who needed work.”

“Joining a group that hangs innocents by their entrails is how people obtain jobs in Livorna these days?”

“I never said he was honorable.”

Clare studied the prisoner. He didn’t look like a fanatic—just a pathetic man with nothing to live for. She turned back to Riccardo. “He’s not worth bloodying my hands over. Give him a public hanging. Ensure that a message is sent to the Rose. Did he mention any names?”

“We already captured the other members of his Rose group in Livorna. The only superior he spoke to was a man that went by the name of Kel.”

“Was it actually Kel?”

“The man wore a rose-petaled mask, but he didn’t bind anyone’s life to an object, so we can’t confirm his identity.”

“Did he have turquoise eyes?”

“Our prisoner didn’t notice.”

Clare pursed her lips. “Of course he didn’t.” She glanced at the man again and caught him staring at her. He quickly averted his eye.

After the violence the man had committed, he didn’t even have the courage to look her in the eye. Clare balled her hands into fists. “Maybe I do have something to say,” she muttered, and she walked into the cell. “You!”

The man’s head snapped up to meet her gaze for a moment.

“Do you know who I am?” Clare leaned close to him.

The man opened his mouth to reveal blackened teeth, but he kept his eyes downward. “Everyone knows who you are, Queen. You’re the First of the God-Blessed. I ... I just didn’t realize...”

“I looked so young? Yes. Eternal youth does that.” Clare put her left hand on the manacle holding the man’s right arm to the wall. “Will you look at me when I talk to you?”

The man slowly obeyed, his eye wide with fear.

“I have a name for people who presume they’re brave enough to cut a little girl open and hang her by her intestines.” Clare tightened her grip on the manacle. “Do you know what I call them?”

“I don’t need to hear it.” The man glanced nervously at her hand.

“I call them cowards.” Clare applied pressure to the manacle. It began to flatten, squeezing the man’s wrist.

“P—please.” The man cringed.

“Save your repentance for the gods.” Clare gritted her teeth. “I want to hear from your own lips why you did it.”

“I—I could be a great guard in your service. I’m a good fighter—just add me to your army.”

“After your savagery?” Clare pushed the manacle until it cut into the man’s skin. He yelped.

“What did the Rose promise you?” Clare snapped. “Four pieces of gold for each child you hanged?”

“They said we’d make a point!”

“Oh, you made your point.” Blood from his wrist flowed down Clare’s arm. “You’ve demonstrated how heinous the Rose organization is.”

The man writhed. “I don’t care about their aims!”

“Should have considered that before you started killing children.” Bones snapped. The man screamed.

Clare glared at him. “Would you like to divulge anything before I sever your hand?”

“Queen!” the man cried. “I—I could at least be a servant.”

“Tell me something.”

“They’ve sent men here.”

Clare paused, the manacle half-embedded in the man’s wrist. “Here?”

“Acropolis,” the man gasped. A tear from his sole eye ran down his cheek. “I don’t know anything else. I just know they want to make a statement.”

Clare grabbed the man’s chin and pulled his face toward hers. “Haven’t they already made a statement?”

“They want to prove you’re not invincible.”

“I never said I was.” Heat flushed Clare’s cheeks. One yank would crack the man’s jaw. But no. She was better than that.

Clare released the man, spun on a heel, and marched toward Riccardo. “You hear that?”

Riccardo nodded.

“Then do your job properly and don’t claim you’ve broken a man when you haven’t.” She normally wasn’t that harsh to Riccardo, but he needed to understand the danger. “Our citizens’ lives are at risk, and you would have killed this man before you discovered that.”

“I’m sorry, Queen. I made a mistake.”

“One mistake could cause our citizens to be slaughtered.” Clare narrowed her eyes. “Do you still have ethical issues with torture?”

For a long moment, Riccardo didn't answer. Then he spoke. "I'll do what's necessary."

"I hope so. If you stopped torturing him because you felt guilty, you can resign from your commanding position now."

"I'll try harder next time."

"You better." Clare slowly exhaled. "Don't you remember the numerous lives that were lost because of my mistake when I was young and naive about the ways of the world?"

"I remember."

"Trust me, Riccardo. Spilling criminal blood may make you uneasy, but the blood of innocents would weigh heavier on your conscience." Clare headed for the door. "Finish dealing with this man."

"Queen," Nilde said as she entered Clare's bed chambers. "An ambassador is here to speak with you about—"

"Don't have time." Clare continued to scrutinize the city map. "Or the patience."

Nilde hovered over her, clutching her quills and reams of paper. "Is something wrong?"

"The Rose is slaughtering my citizens to try to fracture our kingdom into chaos. The real question is if anything's right."

"Did you pry information from the prisoner?"

"Acropolis is next."

Nilde inhaled sharply. "They ... they're sending a group here?"

"Already sent. I'm surprised victims aren't dangling in the streets."

"Please tell me you found out where they're hiding."

"If I did, would I be poring over maps right now? The Rose keeps their members in the dark."

"Should I alert the guards?"

"Already done. They're raiding the crime district for anyone who's had their life bound to a stone or flame."

Nilde floundered for a response. "Well, then what can I do?"

Clare rolled her eyes. She liked Nilde, but her chamberlain had the annoying habit of attempting to involve herself in everything. "Just oversee the court. I won't appear publicly until this matter is resolved."

Wind thundered high above Acropolis. Clare gazed at the maze of buildings and streets below her. She didn't fly over the city as often as she used to, but occasionally she enjoyed

gaining perspective. Especially on days like today. She clasped her arms together as the gusts created goosebumps on her skin. Too bad the gods hadn't bestowed temperature resistance with all her other powers.

Clare shook her head. She couldn't let her concentration stray from the terrorists who had a cell in her city. If the past was any indication, the Rose would escalate their game. They had begun by hanging guards and burning buildings at the outskirts of her empire. As they moved inward, they had hung citizens. Then children. Now, if Kel was finally infiltrating Acropolis, the barbarity would intensify.

As if they could perpetrate worse crimes than mutilating children.

Hell has a special place for such people. But thinking did nothing. Only actions mattered. Clare spiraled back into the city, her sword swaying against her hip. If she were a disgruntled, amoral warrior trying to terrorize citizens with cruelty more atrocious than hanging children by their intestines, what would she do?

Clare swallowed as she realized the truth. The Rose wasn't composed of demons. They were fanatics striving to shatter the kingdom's peace by making people feel *unsafe*. The question wasn't what would be worse than hanging children, but what would accentuate her weaknesses as a ruler.

The conclusion was obvious.

"Nilde." Clare barged into her chamberlain's study. "Warn all my guards about the festival tomorrow. The Rose is going to target it."

Nilde spun around from the book-stacked table. Ink smeared her otherwise flawless cheeks and horror spread across her face. "You're sure?"

"They aim to destabilize me, right? If they're in this city, they want to do a terrible deed that multitudes will witness. That means attacking the biggest festival of the year."

Nilde gulped. "That ... that could be catastrophic. "

"You think I haven't already connected those dots?"

Nilde shook her head. "Of course. Do you know what the Rose has planned?"

"Killing? Causing terror? Seeding chaos? Do the specifics matter?"

Nilde slowly rose from her chair, set aside her books, and walked over to her. "I'm on your side, Queen. You know that, right? I'm not your enemy."

Clare hadn't realized until then how much she had been yelling. She avoided Nilde's gaze. "I'm sorry. Today has been stressful."

"You've been stressed for a while."

“For good reason.” Clare pursed her lips. “I should have restored order to Morshan long ago. Look at me, Nilde. I have impenetrable skin, superhuman strength, the powers of flight—oh, and let’s not forget that I don’t age. I’ve had my blessings for seventy-two years; no other god-blessed like me exists. I should be the ruler of the whole land like I was in the olden days before the world crumbled. But I can barely hold on to the small empire I have.”

“You’re gradually gaining ground.”

“And every time I do, I lose it again. First a god-blessed will-dominated me and used me as a human club to win him an empire. Then the Band of Seven opposed me for the crimes I committed when I was will-dominated. Now I’m being plagued by the Rose and this zealot named Kel who can create rock-men by binding men’s lives to stones. All I desire is peace.”

“Eventually you *will* achieve it.”

“At what cost?” Clare looked Nilde in the eyes. “Do you know how it feels to have the lives of a city resting in your hands?”

“Of course not.”

“I pray you never will.” Clare rubbed her eyes. “Follow me. We have a festival to protect.”

Sounds of laughter and piping musicians wafted up from the streets below her. The joyous festival to celebrate the beginning of planting season wouldn’t last long.

Clare’s throat tightened as she soared over the city, ignoring the happy exclamations from those who spotted her. They wouldn’t be cheering when the Rose unleashed whatever terror they had schemed. Her guards had found nothing—even after scouring the entire crime district. Not a single man with stone-skin or a flaming touch. The Rose was keeping themselves well concealed.

Except for the girl they’d ambushed and branded that morning.

Clare had been surprised when the guards reported the incident. Why would the Rose be foolish enough to risk spilling the cover? But then she perceived their unspoken message.

They could act with impunity against her subjects and she couldn’t stop them.

Clare swallowed as she scanned the city. With all her strength, she still couldn’t thwart a god-blessed whose only power was to bind people and objects together.

What kind of a god-blessed was she?

She was almost compelled to pray. But the gods were too unpredictable to trust.

A horn blew five districts away. Clare blinked. It was one of the guards’ horns. Could it be—

Clare zoomed toward the noise.

Fifteen seconds later, she hit the cobblestone ground. Stones cracked under the impact, but she didn't care. Time was too short for her to worry about keeping the surroundings intact. She'd landed in an alley far enough from the festivities that it was practically empty. Riccardo and another guard stood in front of a battered door. She could hear crashing and scuffling inside.

"The Rose is in—" Riccardo began. But Clare lunged into the building before he finished. Two guards fought a man with rocky skin in the middle of a narrow hallway. Kel relished making those men.

But they weren't equipped to defeat a god-blessed like her.

"Back off," Clare barked and charged forward. The guards sidestepped just in time for her to collide with the armed rock-man. She jabbed upward with her fist and his rocky head exploded. As she shoved his body aside, two Rose members dove around the corners at the end of the hall.

Two crossbows twanged. The arrow tips bounced harmlessly off her skin. She unsheathed her sword and spun it in her hand once before slashing through both men's torsos. They collapsed. She'd let them bleed to death. Compared to how they treated their victims, she was being merciful.

Clare ventured further into the storage room filled with dusty boxes and cobwebbed barrels. In the center, a rickety staircase spiraled down into the basement. She contemplated taking the stairs, but that would be too slow. She leapt up, then smashed down into the floor. The boards crumbled beneath her and she plunged into the cellar beneath, wood shrapnel raining all around her.

Dusty wine barrels littered the forgotten chamber below. At the opposite end, three men surrounded an open pipe of flowing water with a pile of empty bottles nearby.

Instantly, Clare flew toward them and locked her arms around one of the men's throats. She squeezed enough to illicit a scream, but not to cause damage.

"Start explaining now." Clare dragged her writhing hostage backwards, bumping into the bottles and sending them rolling. "What—"

Light from the nearby torches revealed the poison markings on the bottles.

"Thanax," Clare swore. "How long ago did you taint the water?" She gestured toward the open pipe—one of the few sources of running water they could afford in the city.

"Three hours ago, Queen," one of the men replied mockingly, a smile spreading across his face. "You—"

Clare jerked her arms, snapping her hostage's neck. The man's body crumpled. Clare moved forward and snatched the collar of the man who had spoken. She threw him against the wall. He slammed into it and would have fallen if she hadn't caught and pinned him.

"I don't have time for your insolence. Give me one reason I shouldn't kill you."

“If you kill us, you won’t be able to save your people.” The voice came from the other man, who wore a shaggy beard. His eyes glinted cunningly. Clare hated him already.

“Talk,” she spat. In the distance, Riccardo descended the stairs and approached.

“This pipe runs directly to the main fountain. Hundreds of people will have drunk the water by now and have the poison in their veins. You’re too late.”

“Well then—” Clare tightened her grip around the other man’s neck.

“But,” the cunning-eyed man continued, “you can still save them.”

Clare breathed heavily. “How?”

He lifted a bowl of green liquid. “We used thanasium. It takes hours to have effect.”

“You poured it in hours ago.”

“Which is why you must work fast.” He grinned. “People will start dying any moment.”

Clare tried to suppress the angry, murderous rages that threatened to erupt from inside her. “Tell me how to save my people, or I’ll rip out your friend’s arm.”

“The remedy is simple.” He held the bowl out to her. “Kel bound the poison to someone’s life.”

A basic image of a red rose hovered over the liquid. Clare stared at it, then back at the cunning-eyed man. Kel had never bound someone to a *liquid* before. “If this will save my people, why are you revealing this?”

The man laughed. “Would we have let your guards locate us if we didn’t have something we wanted to tell you?”

Clare raised an eyebrow at Riccardo.

Worry lines etched Riccardo’s forehead. “We found one of their men trying to abduct a kid. I didn’t think it was a facade... But when we pursued him, he *did* flee to this hideout.”

Clare turned back to the man. “Your men fought us. What kind of betrayal to the Rose is this?”

“I never said I was betraying the Rose. Just like you never asked who we bound the poison to.”

Clare strove to keep herself from gasping. “By the gods. You wouldn’t—”

“She’s playing with the other musicians in the center of town right now,” he said smugly as he folded his arms across his chest. “Pretty young lass with blond hair and a green dress. One of the up-and-coming lutists. Except now she has a rose branded into her right arm.”

Clare felt the color draining from her face. The girl from that morning. “Tell me she’s one of yours.”

He smiled. “Originally we were just going to poison your celebration. But when you broke our compatriot and started asking around about us, we realized what we wanted.”

“You’re a monster.”

“But who will be the monster in the eyes of the public?” He glanced at the man Clare still had pinned against the wall. “A pleasure working with you. We’ll die for a better world.”

Smart enough to know death was imminent. Wicked enough to concoct this plot. Clare knocked her captive’s head against the wall—but not hard enough to kill.

“You’re going to wish I’d slain you right here.” Clare stalked toward the cunning-eyed man and seized him by the neck. She clouted his ear; he hit the floor.

Clare’s hand itched, longing to inflict further injury. But now was not the time. She spun around toward Riccardo and suddenly realized how vulnerable she felt.

Vulnerable.

She hadn’t used that word to describe herself for a while.

“What ... what have they done?” Riccardo asked.

Clare avoided his gaze. “Connected an innocent girl’s life to this poison, apparently.”

“But ... what powers could she acquire from poison? When Kel uses rocks, he makes men like the one upstairs, but—”

“That’s not the point.” Clare pounded a fist against the wall. The wall shook and cracked under the force. “Now the poison’s existence is linked to the girl’s life.”

“You mean we can instantly cure all the poison already ingested if...”

Clare nodded.

“Thanax.” Riccardo began to pace violently around the open pipe. “But ... but that’s so...” He shook his head. “Are ... are you—”

“Do I have any choice?”

Riccardo’s silence signaled that he’d read her thoughts.

Clare had foolishly assumed that the Rose’s next tactic would be to increase the death rate. But no. The Rose weren’t demons. Only fanatics.

They wanted to force her to commit an unforgivable action.

“We agreed to torture criminals,” Riccardo whispered. “But the innocent? I thought we were good people.”

Clare shook her head. “We’re all flawed people living in a corrupted world. Some of us just try to lessen the turmoil.”

“How will you justify this to the people?”

“I don’t know,” Clare said as she trudged toward the stairs. “But hundreds of lives need saving.”

Four pipers and a lutist played near the poisoned fountain where people had gathered with their communal cups. On the stage, the blond-haired girl plucked at the delicate strings of the lute. She was so young. Surely she wasn’t the girl the men had branded.

Clare braced herself and flew down next to the stage.

Immediately, the crowd’s attention shifted from the musicians to her. Clare waved them off as she climbed onto the stage. The musicians gaped. Two stopped playing. Clare ignored them as she knelt by the seated lutist and put a hand on the girl’s shoulder.

The girl dropped her lute. “Queen,” she gasped. “I didn’t expect you to—”

“Hush.” Clare grasped the edge of the girl’s right sleeve. She began to pull the fabric upward. She had to see for herself. “Did you encounter anyone today who—”

The girl clutched the sleeve of her dress, a stricken expression flashing over her face. “Please, Queen,” she whispered. “Don’t uncover the brand in front of this crowd.”

“So they did brand you.” Clare’s blood chilled.

“I don’t know who they were.” Tears formed in the girl’s eyes. “They shoved me to the ground. I thought they were going to...” She swallowed. “I had no idea they would brand me with a rose. Do ... do you know who—”

Clare closed her eyes. “I...” Her mouth felt dry.

It was unfair to refuse to look on a girl she intended to kill.

Clare forced herself to open her eyes. Now everyone was watching them.

“I ... I need you to make a brave decision,” Clare whispered.

The girl wrinkled her eyebrows. “What ... what kind of decision?”

“I’m being choked!” A man screamed. The crowd separated as an older man collapsed, hands on his throat. He began to writhe. The thanasium.

Clare locked gazes with the girl and straightened. “We need to go.” She would do this in a more secluded place.

The girl slowly stood. “Go? Where?”

More cries rang out. People began falling to the ground. Clare’s throat tightened. By the time they moved to an isolated spot, multiple people would be dead.

Tears pooled in Clare’s eyes as she hugged the blond-haired girl. She didn’t even know her name. What kind of a ruler was she? She put a hand on the back of the girl’s neck as if to steady her.

“Would you die to save hundreds of lives?” Clare whispered.

The girl’s tear-filled eyes mirrored Clare’s. “I ... I’d hope so.”

Clare swallowed. It was the answer she needed. “Then I’m sorry,” she choked through parched lips. “I ... I wish...”

But wishes were futile in a broken world.

Clare touched the girl’s damp cheek as she tightened her grip on her neck.

She moved so fast that the girl never knew what happened.

A Wish Fulfilled

The god-blessed was hunched in the corner of the tavern again, his body shrouded by a gray cloak. His breeches disappeared underneath tall boots, and his tunic's sleeves extended to the fingers of his gloved hands. Perfect garb for winter.

Yet, outside, oppressive summer heat drove travelers to the tavern in search of a drink.

"Nothing good can come of him being there," Erich muttered as he sized the god-blessed up. "You don't linger in another god-blessed's town unless you're a troublemaker."

"You could report him." His daughter Erin cleaned off a glass. "Tanner would send men pronto."

"And if this god-blessed retaliates and ransacks our tavern?"

She shrugged and filled the glass with ale. "Better than facing Tanner's wrath if he learns you housed a god-blessed."

"He's not lodging here."

"He slept in the stalls the last couple nights. I doubt the authorities will care for nuances."

Erich dug his fingernails into his palm as Erin left to bring ales to the patrons. She was right, of course. If Tanner found out, their livelihood would be at risk.

But he couldn't just evict a god-blessed.

A crowd flowed into the tavern, so he busied himself with taking orders, assigning rooms, and pleasing customers. But the presence of the god-blessed weighed on him. How could he remove someone who might be able to burn his eyes to a crisp?

Finally, the string of customers at the counter evaporated, leaving the tables packed—all except for the five surrounding the god-blessed.

Erich rubbed his forehead. Patrons would gossip about the man with the turquoise eyes, and word would reach Tanner. To avoid a fight in his tavern, he needed to tactfully kick out the god-blessed.

He picked up a mug and poured in a stout from the tankard before slipping into the main room. Five hunters yelled and banged their table as they recounted the details of a hunt. He edged past them and a few other tables to approach the god-blessed.

Erich set down the mug and pushed it over to the god-blessed. "Can I help you, sir?"

The god-blessed raised his head, revealing a youthful face with barely any stubble. Beneath furrowed eyebrows, dark rings lined his unfocused eyes. "Am I causing a problem?" he asked in a gentle tone.

Erich's gaze drifted to the young man's dagger; he knew better than to trust an apologetic god-blessed. He plastered on a smile. "Of course not, sir. I noticed you didn't order anything today or yesterday and wanted to make sure your needs were met."

The crease in the god-blessed's forehead deepened. "So you brought me a beer."

"I'm eager to accommodate you in other ways, sir."

"So you can make me comfortable, or so you can bribe me to leave?"

Erich cautiously lowered himself into a seat opposite the god-blessed, hoping he wasn't violating boundaries. "If you're passing through, I'd be happy to provide you with whatever you need for your journey."

"Because you want me gone."

"Because I'd be *privileged* to serve a man beloved of the gods, and religion calls me to treat you with the reverence you deserve." Erich studied the god-blessed. The shape of his nose and the angle of his jaw seemed familiar. "I should have checked on you yesterday, but—"

The god-blessed waved his hand. "I don't need to hear it."

As he turned his face away, a name rushed to Erich's lips. "Damian—blessed Damian, I mean. You look exactly like your father."

Damian kept his eyes averted. "I hoped you wouldn't recognize me."

Erich's stomach knotted. Was that a threat? He shouldn't have spoken. He cleared his dry throat. "I didn't mean anything by that."

"It's been what—five years since I came here with my father?" Five years since the old farmer had died. He'd been a good supplier.

Erich swallowed. "I know your family has had struggles." Enough that this boy had become a god-blessed.

Damian shook his head. "That's not why I did...this." He gripped the mug but didn't raise it. As the silence dragged on, Erich began to evaluate escape routes.

Then Damian returned from his distant stare. "My father had a high opinion of you. You didn't cheat him when you bartered."

"Times are hard enough without people cheating each other." His tension began to ease. Perhaps Damian *wasn't* putting up a front.

Damian inched a glove off one of his pale hands. "May I?"

Erich jerked in his seat, and it squeaked against the floor. "May you what?" *What blessing did the gods give him?*

"I just..." Damian gnawed on his lip for a moment as if reconsidering his request. "May I feel your hand?"

Erich glanced down at his scarred knuckles. “I…”

Damian shook his head. “I can’t hurt you. That’s not my blessing.”

But Damian must be hiding his skin for a reason. “What do you want?”

“It’s…hard to explain. You won’t come to any harm.”

Erich lived by two rules: Treat people kindly, and never trust a god-blessed. He needed to end this conversation. Though Damian was polite, god-blessed were unpredictable.

But he couldn’t refuse one either.

Devoid of options, he pretended to relax and slowly held out his trembling hand. “If you must.”

Damian reached out, flinched, and brushed his fingers against the back of Erich’s hand. Erich experienced no pain or odd sensations, and he exhaled in relief.

But Damian leapt back, toppling his chair, and yanked the glove over his hand. Terror brimmed in his eyes.

“Are you all right?” Erich jumped to his feet. Was Damian about to unleash his powers? Where were the nearest authorities? “If I may—”

“No.” Damian snatched up his satchel. “I’m sorry I ever came here. You won’t need to worry about me again.” He rushed out of the tavern.

The eastern winds battered Gresald as she leaned against her wizened staff. *Draidra must be punishing the unfaithful tonight.* A storm brewed on the darkening horizon, and she’d be weathering its rage with only sheep for company.

Gresald sighed. Turbulence and solitude had become part of her existence. She crouched to avoid the high gusts and rummaged in her satchel for her whistle. The notes would get lost in the wind’s roar, but she had a tradition to keep.

As she pressed the metal to her lips, she caught sight of a black shape climbing her hill. Human or beast? She dropped her whistle and darted her hand toward the long knife strapped to her belt. Over the years, she’d fended off many hungry beasts and thieves, though she’d been much younger when she killed that mountain lion. More foolhardy as well.

She ducked behind the tall rocks that jutted from the hilltop. With her stiff joints, the element of surprise would be her sole advantage if the creature had nefarious motives.

As the figure neared, human limbs and a long cloak became visible. Upon finishing his ascent, the man stopped amid her scattered flock. A thief? Gresald clenched the handle of her knife. But then he pivoted toward the path leading to her village. Only a traveler.

Except for his flapping cloak, the man remained stationary, gazing at the scene below. After several moments elapsed, Gresald supposed that he posed no threat.

She stood. "It's an angry night for contemplation."

The man turned as a shaft of moonlight burst through the clouds. Fabric covered his body from his feet to his chin. On one of the hottest nights of the year. How odd.

"The weather's preferable to what I'll find in the village," the man replied.

Gresald stepped toward him. "What do you fear?"

"My lover."

She squinted at him as moonlight and shadows shifted intermittently across his face. "Damian."

"I'd prefer you didn't ask questions."

"I'd prefer you explain why you fear my daughter."

Damian's shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. "I just came to retrieve some possessions. Lila would be safer if she believed me dead."

"Care to elaborate?"

"A god cursed me."

Gresald waited for him to divulge more, but instead he moved toward the path. "You stole her heart, Damian."

"A decision I regret."

"And you'll abandon her without explanation?" She tightened her grip on her staff. Aged or not, she would be beating off travelers with it tonight.

"Gresald..." Damian looked over his shoulder. "You know I love her. Please trust me when I say that you don't *want* my explanation."

Raindrops pelted Gresald's face. She hefted her staff and veered in front of him. "Now, listen here, young man—"

A flash of lightning reflected in his turquoise eyes—the mark of a god-blessed.

Her staff clattered to the ground, and she staggered back. "What have you done?"

"Something I shouldn't have." He brushed past her and descended the hill to the village.

"Isn't often that someone enters the village this late." Aaron narrowed his eyes at the cloaked figure slinking along the streets. "Recognize him?"

Ruan shook his head as he leaned against the warped battlements. "Technically my shift is over, so he's your responsibility."

Aaron snorted. "As if I'm able to confront him single-handed."

“It will liven up your shift. Sometimes I prefer nights to be eventful.” The wood creaked under Ruan’s weight. If the boards cracked, it was a long fall to the ground.

The man crept up to Damian’s old house. He fiddled with the lock, then scanned the area. The night concealed his face, but his hood had fallen, and Aaron would recognize that clump of curly hair anywhere.

“It’s Damian!”

Ruan pushed away from the wall. “Well, I never... Where in Thanax’s name has he been?”

“I don’t know,” Aaron lied. He rubbed the back of his neck. “Lila will want to be informed immediately.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’ll wake her.”

Aaron placed his foot on the ladder’s top rung and hesitated. If he abandoned his post, he’d break the rules, but no one would notice at that hour. “I’m going to talk to him.” He clambered down followed by Ruan, who hurried home to alert his sister.

Aaron headed for Damian’s house. Had he made the right call? Damian didn’t plan to surprise his fiancée, did he? A smirk twitched at his lips. Damian? Creative? He chuckled at the notion as he reached the door. It hung ajar, and candlelight flickered through the crack, so he knocked twice before pushing it open.

Damian spun around, bumping into the open chest beside him. He clutched a wad of clothing.

“Damian!” Aaron exclaimed, spreading his arms to embrace his friend.

Damian discarded the bundle and put out his gloved hands as a barrier. “Please. Stay away from me.”

“But...” Aaron met Damian’s eyes, and his jaw dropped. “When you swore to hunt down your mother’s killer, I didn’t think you—”

“I didn’t want you to worry.” Damian avoided eye contact. “Perhaps I should have.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” He resumed digging through his chest and pulled out some pendants that he shoved into his shoulder bag. “Listen, Aaron, I... I don’t want Lila to hear I’ve returned.”

Aaron blinked. Did he actually have a surprise planned? “You don’t?”

Damian fished out two scrolls and unrolled one to skim the first few lines before answering. “I’m just here to grab my parents’ possessions and leave. Better to let her assume I died.”

What? His soul belongs to Lila. Aaron gaped at him as he closed and latched the chest. He struggled with the lock, and while his back was turned, Aaron placed a hand on his cloaked shoulder. “Damian, what happened?”

Damian lurched away. “Don’t touch me!” He slung his satchel over his shoulder. “I need to go.”

Aaron backed up and planted himself in the threshold. “What did the gods give you?”

Damian glared at him for a long moment. With a huff, he walked to a window and stared outside. If he intended to climb through, he’d never fit.

“Damian.” Aaron would wrest the truth out of his friend if he had to trap him in the room until dawn. “Which god did you appeal to?”

Damian paced back and forth, grumbling to himself, until finally he stopped. His shoulders slumped. “Karif.”

“Karif?” Aaron’s mouth went slack again. “The god who twists blessings?”

Damian cringed. “Aaron, please. He’s the only god who grants requests for specific blessings, and I needed—”

“The god who gave a man supernatural strength that broke his wife’s bones with a single touch.” Aaron left the doorway and advanced toward his friend. What kind of idiot—or monster—had he become?

Damian retreated, hands out. “I know—”

“The god who gave a man the ability to teleport to any place that flitted through his thoughts. He died when he heard a story about a volcano.”

Damian sidestepped to avoid tripping over the items he’d strewn on the floor. “I know how Karif hexes those who ask for blessings!”

“But you petitioned him anyway!” Aaron spat.

“I... I didn’t think he could corrupt my request.” Damian swiped at the perspiration glistening on his face. “I just wanted to learn which of Tanner’s soldiers murdered and...” He swallowed twice. “Murdered my mother.”

Aaron pursed his lips. “What did you ask for, Damian?”

“A power that should have been straightforward.” He tried to maneuver toward the door again. “I need to go before—”

Aaron blocked him. “What did you ask for?”

Damian’s jaw worked as he ground his teeth. Aaron was getting under his skin, but he didn’t care. When Damian at last unclamped his mouth, Aaron had to strain to hear his raspy whisper.

“To read minds...through touch.”

Through touch? But Damian had been adamant *against* Aaron touching him. He frowned. “Then why—”

Footsteps sounded behind them.

A willowy figure swept through the doorway, haloed by the moonlight outside. *No*. The one person Damian couldn't meet. The night had been a disaster. What had he done to anger the gods?

“Damian!” Her voice hung on the last syllable like the strum of a lyre. Gods, how he relished the way she pronounced his name. *And* the smile that curved her lips and lit her eyes as she approached him. And—

Damian shook away the thoughts. “Lila! Stop. You can't touch me.” He stepped back, brushing his heels against his family's chest. “I'm dangerous.”

Lila skidded to a halt mere feet from him. As she took in his attire, her joy faded. “Are you...unwell?”

“No. I...” Were those traces of tears in her eyes? Concern for him? If only he could wrap his arms around her slender body. He licked his lips. “I...um, I made some big mistakes, Lila.”

“What did you do?” Her breath came out heavy. “Is it related to your eyes?”

Damian searched for the right words, but he couldn't find them—or hold her gaze. “I... I need to leave this place.”

She swallowed and glanced at his bulging satchel. “For how long?”

He couldn't sugarcoat it. “Forever.”

She drew closer. “If you're leaving, then I'm—”

“No.” His tone sounded harsher than he'd intended. He closed his eyes, briefly to calm himself, and shut out Lila's pained expression. Why did she have to press him? “I love you, but...but you can't come with me.”

“Damian.” She emphasized that last syllable again, and a wedge hammered into his heart. Her lips trembled. “What are you saying?”

I'm trying to say that I'm breaking our engagement, but Selsia help me, I can't. “It'd be hazardous for me to—”

“Cut the dodging,” Aaron snapped, sliding an arm around Lila's shoulders to support her as she swayed. “How did Karif curse you?”

“Karif?” Lila's eyes widened for a second before she recovered. “Damian”—another pang struck him—“how could you?”

“Please believe me that it's better you don't know,” Damian said, a pit forming in his stomach. “Hate me. Curse me. I deserve it. But I can't stay here.”

Aaron clenched his free hand into a fist. “She’s your fiancée, and you won’t—”

“I know!” Damian yelled, and he instantly regretted it. “If you understood—”

Tears burst from Lila’s eyes. She flung herself at him.

Damian gasped as her body collided with his, her lithesome arms grasping his shoulders. Heaving with sobs, she buried her face in his chest. Her hands rested inches from the slit between his tunic and hood.

For a moment, he froze. Then he clasped his shielded arms against hers, but he couldn’t bring himself to push her away. Holding her warm body felt so right.

If he kept this up any longer, everything would fall to pieces.

“I wish to Selsia that we could be together.”

Her tears stained his tunic. “But...but why can’t we? Is your life in danger? Did you kill the wrong person?”

Her hands drifted closer to his neck, and he fought rising panic. “I... I need you to let go, Lila. Karif... Karif’s curse could hurt you if you cling to me any longer.” It was the first lie he had told her.

Lila looked up at him with red, puffy eyes. “You’re contagious? With what?”

He hadn’t contrived that part yet. “I’ll explain everything. I just need you to get off me. Now.”

Squeezing him tighter, she choked, “If I must.” As she pulled back, her hands shifted inward, and Damian realized too late what was about to happen.

Her fingertips grazed his exposed neck.

The room disappeared, and he plunged into the world of her mind. Thousands of memories ripped through him, overwhelming his senses.

Her childhood. The first time she successfully skipped a stone. The day they explored the waterfall. The moment she fell in love with him. Her daydreams of marriage and thrill when he proposed. The fretful longing during his absence. Her shock and confusion upon his return. He experienced all of it.

But he also saw her maliciously attacking Ruan with every effort her five-year-old body could muster. The taunts she hurled at the other village girls and her grin when they ran off crying. Her fury with him for forgetting their three-month anniversary and speculating that he despised her. The satisfaction she gained from plotting how she’d get revenge on him for rejecting her.

Damian inhaled.

Her fear for his life turned into doubt about his return, which morphed into hatred. The possibility that he had left her for another girl festered in her brain, and she nursed anger against this competitor. As she wallowed in feelings of abandonment, her interest transferred to...*Aaron*.

They shared conversation after conversation, and with each one her affection grew for this perfect man who lacked Damian's faults. When Aaron began to look at her with the same desire, she stopped pining for Damian. One night Aaron hugged her, and she refused to let go. She imagined slipping her fingers under his tunic, pulling it up, and—

Fantasies Damian would never forget streamed through his mind.

Even as she'd wept and embraced him, her past vengeful thoughts had been resurfacing, and she planned to hurt him before he departed. Her unspoken words burned into his mind.

The visions collapsed. Damian became conscious of the real world again and Lila pulling away from him. Only a second or two had passed.

One and a half seconds of eternity.

Your blessing is granted. Karif's words reverberated through his mind. *From now on, you will read someone's thoughts when you touch them.*

Damian's legs buckled. How could that face—that voice that clung to his name—mask such mental venom? She was just like the tavern keeper and the countless peasants and nobles he had tested his power on.

He had found the men who violated and killed his mother. But he'd witnessed the host of other crimes they had committed as well.

For a moment, Damian imagined staying and marrying Lila. She wasn't worse than anyone else. But he would know every time she harbored anger or longed for someone else. He would have to bear her spiteful thoughts and disapproval whenever he failed to meet her expectations. The mental fantasies she entertained would play before his eyes in vivid detail.

Damian grabbed his satchel and scrambled sideways. "Get away from me!"

Aaron caught Lila as she lost her balance. "But..." She rubbed her tear-streaked cheeks. "I just—"

"I can't!" Damian cried, sprinting out the door. He tripped on a stone outside, and his body hit the tight-packed dirt of the road. But the pain that blossomed in his ribs was nothing compared to the daggers needling his heart.

Aaron yelled from inside the house, but Damian bolted up and stumbled through the streets. Why had he risked coming back? He *knew* what would happen if he touched Lila.

Hurt was all any human relationship could bring him.

A Heretic's Sacrifice

Emiel was twice a heretic.

When he rejected the Twelve Gods for Adolsin, the church labeled him a heretic. And when he held onto the Twelve Gods' powers after pledging himself to Adolsin, even his fellow heretics called him a heretic.

The numerous enemies Emiel had gathered over the years caused many near-death experiences. But he didn't mind. Enemies made escapades more fun.

Emiel landed softly on the cold stone floor, his rope dangling beside him. He scanned the area. No guards this time of night. He stretched. Kesean always said he stretched like a cat. He was never sure whether she meant it as a compliment or not.

His back cracked. He grimaced. Hiding above the chapel's rafters for seven hours had stiffened all his joints. Orin had suggested that he disguise himself as part of the wall. Unfortunately, Emiel's shapeshifting powers didn't work that way.

Emiel padded along the stone floor toward the exit. A chill crept through his socks. He probably should have worn shoes. But shoes were so *unnatural*. How could he stay on his toes if he couldn't feel the surface he was standing on?

He arrived at twin doors adorned with fancy carvings intended to honor the Twelve Gods. As if the Twelve Gods gave a rat's tail for the happenings on earth. Emiel considered finding a knife to make some interesting changes to the carvings. But he wasn't sure Adolsin approved of vandalism—even if he would be defacing false deities. And Emiel had a job to do. He pushed the doors open and tiptoed into the main hall of the manor.

No guards in sight. Perfect. Emiel slipped down the hallway, winding the directions he'd memorized through his head. Turn right at the frayed tapestry, go straight past the double stairs (avoid being distracted by the gorgeous artwork in the entry hall), and descend the spiral stairs, then finagle his way past a couple guards, obtain the key, and get the goods.

Emiel turned at the tapestry and emerged in the upper part of the entry hall. Double stairs extended into the foyer below, where an immense painting of the Great Creation of the Twelve hung above three doors leading to the rest of the mountain city. Emiel blinked. So idolatrous. So beautiful. The Damian-era framing of the scene was breathtaking. People didn't produce masterpieces like that anymore.

Emiel forced himself to move on and ducked into the spiral staircase. He eyed the rough walls as he descended. No attempts to conceal the uncut stone here. As rumored, parts of the manor tunneled deep into the mountain. The staircase exceeded the length Emiel thought was reasonable for a treasury. How had they recruited the manpower to excavate the stone? A god-blessed? But Felnir took pride in being one of the rare "free cities" that hadn't been conquered by a god-blessed yet. How ironic if their manor had been built by one.

More likely, the staircase had been constructed by slaves. Thank goodness for “free cities.”

After Emiel had huffed and puffed down countless stairs, torch light glimmered ahead. He’d be in view of the guards any moment. He rubbed his palms together. He knew exactly who he wanted to masquerade as—the high-nosed, pale-skinned guard he’d seen earlier. Emiel didn’t like innocent people to get blamed for mischief he committed while impersonating them. But a jerk? That was a different matter entirely.

Emiel concentrated on his memory of the man’s appearance as he rounded the corner. The two guards blocking the treasury door spotted him immediately. His head began to ache. Cloaking himself was easy with only two people for an audience, but it did take a toll.

“If you would step aside for a moment,” Emiel said, trying to imitate the guard’s snooty voice. His blessing allowed him to change how others saw his appearance, but unfortunately didn’t affect his voice. He cleared his throat. “Lord Aren wanted me to—”

One of the guards stepped into the light, and Emiel stared into the dumbfounded face of the man he was replicating.

Oh.

“Well, it was worth a shot,” Emiel muttered. He grabbed the pike from the quivering hand of the snooty man’s comrade.

The snooty man opened his mouth. “Sto—”

Emiel rammed the butt of the pike into his gut. *What a dimwit.* The other guard reached for his horn, but Emiel kicked him. He was good at kicking. Except when he struck metal-plated greaves instead of bare shins. His right foot blossomed in pain.

The guard pressed the horn to his lips. Emiel pounced, bashing his skull against both the horn and the guard’s nose. The man toppled as he fumbled with his horn. Emiel threw a punch and knocked him out cold.

Emiel slowly brushed himself off. *This is why you shouldn’t let crazy men steal spears from you.* He quickly fished around for the keys, then unlocked the door to the treasury. He scampered inside and untied the bag from around his waist. The lord had so many excess coins that surely he wouldn’t mind if Emiel permanently borrowed a couple.

He filled his bag and slung it over his shoulder with a smirk. Orin had warned him that the heist might be dangerous. But Orin had failed to count on his courage and wit. Sneaking out would be a cinch. He spun the key ring around his fingers as he exited the treasury.

The horn blared.

Emiel whirled. The guard, still looking dazed, was blowing the horn so hard that his face reddened. All for some misplaced coins? Emiel snarled and ran up the stairs. They’d probably

made the staircase annoyingly long to hinder escape. Footsteps pounded above. Emiel swallowed. A normal man would be trapped.

But he wasn't a normal man.

The snooty guard would be the perfect disguise. He conjured up the image as he rounded a corner and collided with a group of guards. Emiel gasped and pointed downward. "The blond thief nearly killed me!" He adjusted his appearance so that blood oozed from his chest. "I barely escaped with my life." Projecting an illusion into the minds of six men intensified his headache. He clutched his chest and pressed himself and the bag against the wall to give the guards room.

The lead guard drew his sword. "Can you get to the infirmary?"

Emiel nodded quickly. "Go stop him."

"We will," the lead guard said. The group galloped down the stairs to capture the imaginary thief.

Emiel blinked as the headache faded. *So long, idiots.* He'd sounded nothing like the snooty guard, and why would they believe a man *fleeing* from the crime scene? Fortunately, when officials continually proclaimed that god-blessed couldn't enter the city, people believed it and didn't think to question peculiarities.

Emiel finished ascending the stairs and sped toward the entry hall. The bag of coins bounced and jingled on his back. If anyone was watching, the racket would be suspicious for a solitary guard. Perhaps he could say he had lots of change in his pockets.

But guards had no pockets. The stout merchant he'd seen setting up for market would have ample space for pockets. A merchant wouldn't be scuttling around a palace during a theft unless he was guilty though. And Emiel didn't like to incriminate innocent people.

A trio of guards burst out of a side corridor while Emiel was still debating. Their mouths dropped open.

Shoot. Too late to retract the questionable disguise.

"What are you—" A guard sputtered.

"Bye!" Emiel took off far faster than a stout merchant should be able to maneuver. The heavy bag of coins thumped against his back. The guards tore after him.

Emiel emerged in the balcony overlooking the entry hall and the magnificent Great Creation painting. Perhaps another day he'd return to steal it. That thievery would be harder to justify than the coins though. Especially with the idolatry.

Emiel hopped on the bannister and slid down, watching the steps whiz by below him. The guards weren't armed with any range weapons and couldn't shoot him.

But they could yell.

Emiel remembered why he was supposed to bypass the entry hall. Because guards were stationed by the doors.

As the doors swung open, Emiel resolved on his new appearance. Revealing his ability to change form was risky, but better than being caught. The guards sprang in from outside to get a once-in-a-lifetime glimpse at Lord Aren gliding down the bannister and leaping onto the floor with a loud jangle.

“It’s a coup!” Emiel yelled as he gestured toward the bewildered guards above who had just witnessed a merchant transforming into their lord. “Stop them!”

Amid the confusion trailing behind him, Emiel slid between the guards, out the doors, and into the darkness of the urban mountainside.

Emiel heaved the bag onto the sturdy wooden table. “Look who snatched Aren’s finest.”

Orin sifted through the coins in the bag. His black beard cast strange and amusing shadows across his face in the dim candlelight of the kitchen. “Did you run into any trouble?”

“Don’t I always?” Emiel rubbed his eyes. “I never get caught. But they know a shapeshifter stole their treasures. Which destroys the myth that all the god-blessed are afraid of Felnir. They never saw me in my true form though.”

“Does anyone?” Orin’s voice was gravelly, like stones falling over stones in an avalanche. He looked up at Emiel.

Emiel’s head pounded. Perhaps he should let Orin see his true form. Or not. “Do I look like the sort of man who wants to have someone else’s death on his hands? If you’re ever exposed, you’d be thankful to deny knowing my identity.”

“Hard to trust a man you don’t know.”

“You’re still taking my coins.”

Orin snorted. “You don’t need to trust someone for that.”

“No.” Emiel spread the coins out on the table. “Which is why you don’t need to know who I really am.”

“If you insist.” Orin leaned one arm on the table and scrutinized the coins. “How would you like us to distribute this?”

Emiel shrugged. “You’re more familiar with the community’s needs than me. Bless the people who need it most.”

“You’re not going to help? We must dispose of the coins fast.”

“Don’t you have two teenage boys to help you?” Emiel chewed on his lip. “I..I may or may not have accidentally copied the appearance of a local merchant during the theft. The guards may suspect him, and I can’t let someone die because of me. I need to find him tomorrow.”

Orin gaped at him. “You shapeshifted into whom?”

“It’s a long story that would bore you. But I need to get this merchant out of Felnir before Aren’s men arrest him.”

“How? Do you know this merchant?”

Emiel shook his head. “Never talked with him, actually. He was just memorable because of his chubbiness.”

Orin rolled his eyes. “I forgot I’m dealing with a kid.”

“I’m an adult.”

“Barely from the looks of you.”

“You don’t know what I look like.”

Orin didn’t respond. He just stared at the table. Some people had odd habits.

Emiel contemplated how he’d locate the merchant. He’d have to wander around the marketplace, which wouldn’t be the most efficient tactic to outmaneuver the guards. He’d hatch a plan. He always did.

Orin tapped his hairy fist against the table. “You surprised me, Emiel.”

Emiel turned back to him. “What?”

“Mistakes aside, you *did* rob Aren successfully. I doubted you. I was wrong.” Orin crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Have you ever considered using your talents more effectively?”

“What do you mean?”

Orin stroked his beard. “Stealing tax money and saving people from nobles is admirable work. But, if you can rob the governor, you could launch a coup and lift our oppression instead of patching up a flawed system.”

Emiel dug his right foot into the ground. People were never satisfied with one caper. Once they saw his craftiness and daunting persona, they always wanted more. “It’s not that simple.”

“Listen.” Orin looked straight into Emiel’s eyes. “You, me, and a couple of my friends could start a revolution.” He gestured toward the coins. “Give the people of Felnir more than the occasional treat.”

Emiel shook his head. “I told you that I don’t stay in one place long.”

“You’ve been in Felnir a month and a half.”

“Which is already too long,” Emiel said. “I need to travel. Find another place where I can do good. Especially now that Aren realizes there’s a shapeshifter in town.”

“You can do good *here*.”

Emiel shook his head, finished pouring the coins out of the bag, and draped the burlap over his shoulder. “Too much risk. People obsess over big, dramatic feats like overthrowing kingdoms and rulers. But when all is said and done, one tyrant just replaces another.”

Orin sighed in resignation.

Emiel picked up a coin. “Small kindnesses are what causes change. Relieving a starving widow or cheering up a penniless child means more than a fancy, official proclamation.” He glanced out the window. The sun would be rising in a few hours. “I need to go.”

He walked to the door and bowed briefly to his friend. Orin and his family were good people, although a tad idealistic. But they were essential for him to help the people of Felnir.

Orin shook his head. “Have a blessed evening.”

Emiel hurried through Felnir’s crowded streets. The early morning sun filtered through the ridges surrounding the mountaintop city. Emiel narrowly avoided getting his bare feet crushed by all the heavy shoes around him. Why couldn’t walking barefoot be the national pastime? And where was this unfortunate merchant?

“Excuse me. Passing through,” he called as he wove through a tight cluster of market customers. His head ached from maintaining an illusion to shroud his turquoise eyes from hundreds of people. He couldn’t cloak his appearance in a crowd, but he had to hide the telltale trait of a god-blessed. Why did the blasted gods instill their gifts with frustrating limitations?

An executioner’s block had been erected in the town square. On a market day? Emiel shook his head. What a twisted sense of entertainment. Better to have unusual entertainment.

He paused in front of the platform. He had been hunting for half an hour without success. The guards couldn’t have found the merchant *that* quickly, could they? He bit the inside of his cheek.

Hey, Adolsin. I haven’t talked to you as much as I should, but, uh, I need help. An innocent man may be in trouble, and you’re the protector of the innocent, right? Well, I could sure use some help to be your effective instrument here. If you could help me find this merchant before the authorities, he and I would greatly appreciate it.

Emiel blinked and resumed searching. Adolsin didn’t always answer prayers promptly, but he needed to allow some space between himself and a god.

Two guards marched by hoisting their silver-tipped pikes. Emiel smirked. The people of Felnir had so many ridiculous superstitions. He was tempted to reach out and touch one of the blades to prove that god-blessed were not repelled by silver. Lord Aren swore that his guards and security measures steered god-blessed away from Felnir.

Emiel knew the truth. Nobody cared about a small, isolated city on the outskirts of Morshan that was prone to volcanic eruptions and earthquakes. Including god-blessed. Except for weird ones like himself.

As the guards moved on, Emiel decided on a new tactic. Puffing himself up with an air of confidence, he approached a merchant's booth and leaned on the counter. "Hey, companion."

The merchant's bushy eyebrows merged in a frown. "Who are you?"

"Doesn't matter," Emiel said. "I was just wondering if you know a rotund merchant who was selling his wares yesterday. Wore a fancy green cloak and looked important."

"Nope."

How rude. "Thanks for the encouragement and support, friend." Emiel sidestepped to the next stall and made eye contact with the new merchant. "Excuse me—"

"Back off. I didn't know him."

Emiel opened his mouth to unleash a sarcastic remark, then snapped it shut. That was an odd use of past tense. "You *didn't* know him?"

"I know what you're up to." The merchant lowered his voice and leaned toward Emiel. "One of your buddies came by earlier to interrogate us. You tell Aren we don't know anything about this god-blessed's activities or how he infiltrated the city."

Emiel blinked. "Tell Aren?"

"Or whatever guard hired you. Word of advice: if you're fishing for information, don't be so obvious. None of us helped him. Just be content that you managed to catch a shapeshifter."

Catch a shapeshifter? But...

Oh.

Emiel burst into the woodcarver's workshop as he finalized his altered appearance. "I need some of those coins I delivered last night." The breeze sent dust flying through the air, and the scent of pine filled his nose.

Orin stopped chiseling a chair leg and glanced around, but no one else was in the shop. "What's wrong?" His deep voice boomed.

Emiel panted. "They've caught the merchant."

"The merchant?"

Emiel fumbled for words. "Yeah. You know—the one I accidentally impersonated in the palace. They think he's the shapeshifter."

Orin inhaled. "Latch the door behind you."

Emiel hurriedly complied. His movement stirred more dust, and he sneezed.

Orin slowly laid his knife beside the wood shavings on his workbench. “Are you certain about this?”

“I think they caught him last night. The other merchants are scared stiff. I need some of those coins.”

“For what?”

“A bribe to rescue him.”

Orin tapped his fingers against the wood for a moment. Emiel cocked his head. Why the delay?

Orin looked up. “You realize this could be a feint.”

“A feint?”

“A trick to draw you out. Why would they assume the merchant was the perpetrator rather than a victim? Unless they’re using him as bait.”

Emiel shrugged. “If he’s bait, they win. I won’t let an innocent bystander die on my account.”

“Do you *know* they’ll kill him?”

Emiel hated when people treated him like a kid. Just because his brain wasn’t screwed on straight didn’t mean he had the naïveté of a youth. “Listen. Felnir’s citizens gloat over the fact that a god-blessed has never conquered their city. Of course they’ll publicly execute him—turquoise eyes or not.”

“Unless they know he’s fake and this is a feint.”

“They don’t know my true form or how my powers work. Since most of the guards saw the plump merchant first, that’s the face they’ll associate with the shapeshifter. People aren’t used to dealing with beings who can radically change their appearance.”

Orin pursed his lips. “I’m not persuaded.”

Emiel threw up his hands. This is why he had trust issues. People took stuff he gave them and never reciprocated the favor. “Look. I don’t know their plans. But I can’t risk him dying because of me.”

“Fine. Assume they’ll kill him. How will you free him?”

Emie rolled his eyes. “I’ll shapeshift.”

“And get spotted like last night?”

“They believe they have the shapeshifter. They won’t be prepared for another.”

Orin scratched his beard. “Is one merchant worth endangering your life for? If you’re captured, think how many people you *won’t* be able to save.”

“An innocent man might *die* because of my mistake.”

“You’re being a fool.”

“I didn’t ask your opinion. I hear enough insults elsewhere, thank you very much. I came because bribes aren’t cheap and I have a right to some of my spoil.”

Orin fell silent again before speaking. “I don’t like equipping youth to make rash decisions.”

“I dislike helping someone who won’t help me in return.”

“You could save more than one merchant if you remain in the city with us.”

“Do you think I’d continue helping you if you won’t help me when *I* need it?”

Orin picked up a tool and chipped at the chair leg, grumbling to himself. The corners of Emiel’s mouth twitched. *Ha! Trapped you.*

“You will be careful if I relinquish the money, right?” Orin asked without pausing his motions.

“Would I want to die?”

Orin sighed. “I suppose you have a point. It *is* your rightful spoil anyway.” He tugged at his beard, probably still looking for an excuse to deny Emiel’s request.

But eventually even stubborn men have to admit they’ve been beaten. Orin set down his knife. “All right. Follow me.”

Emiel hefted the last barrel higher on his shoulder as he hauled it down the stairs to Aren’s wine cellar. He had persuaded a servant to hand over his job unloading wagons in exchange for three months’ wages. He hadn’t mentioned that he would be borrowing the man’s appearance as well.

Emiel lowered the barrel and rubbed his shoulder. His job was beginning to feel repetitive and boring. He’d invaded the same place two nights in a row, with virtually the same plan. Find the dungeon, surprise the guards, grab the keys, free the man, and run.

But this time he’d make sure the guards stayed unconscious. All that was left was to choose a person to replicate. One of the shocked guards from the previous night would work—as long as he didn’t run into his doppelgänger again. He fixated on his memory of the man’s face as he climbed the cellar stairs.

Emiel stepped into a hall in the lower level of the manor. The flicker of torches was the only movement. Perfect. According to the directions he’d bribed from the servant, he had to travel two doors down, then turn left. The servant probably thought he’d gotten the deal of his life.

His master would disagree after Emiel accomplished his mission.

Emiel veered left and glimpsed the line of cells through the open door. Most dungeon entrances were kept locked. Odd. Did Aren *want* someone to find the dungeon? Was he walking into a trap?

A scream ricocheted off the walls.

Emiel hesitated briefly. But trap or no trap, he had a duty to this merchant. He strode down the corridor and gripped the knife strapped to his belt.

The hall of cells jutted left and Emiel peered around the corner. The merchant was chained to the wall with a silver pike impaling his arm. Lord Aren and four guards surrounded him, silhouetted by a crackling furnace.

“Yes. Scream. Let the silver poison your blood,” Lord Aren hissed. “But screaming won’t tell me where my coins are.”

Emiel swallowed. Such ridiculous superstitions about silver. Such horrible torture for an innocent man.

“I swear I’m not one of them,” the merchant cried. “I told the guards to look at my eyes.”

“As if a shapeshifter’s eyes matter.”

“How do you know the god-blessed didn’t impersonate *me*?”

Emiel’s ears perked up.

“A shapeshifter wouldn’t pick such a preposterous disguise unless it was his actual form.”

Or the shapeshifter is an idiot. Emiel stepped back and pressed himself against the wall. His stomach churned. Vomit would be an improvement to the dungeon floor. He swallowed. An innocent man was being tortured for his mistake and he needed to stop it.

“Please,” the merchant begged.

Emiel blinked. He couldn’t overpower five men at once—not even with deception. He wasn’t *that* skilled at fighting. Two opponents were his max.

“Give me another pike,” Lord Aren said.

Adolsin, Adolsin, Adolsin, grant me strength. Don’t let this man die because of me. Emiel glanced around the corner as Aren raised the pike above the merchant’s right hand. His stomach lurched. He needed to reveal himself. He could save the merchant’s life at the price of his own. That’s what he’d told Orin he was willing to do.

Adolsin, please. But how could Adolsin rectify this situation? Adolsin worked through people. And an honorable man would accept his own punishment to prevent someone from suffering in his place.

There was a thud, followed by an ear-splitting howl. The second pike. Sweat drenched Emiel’s cheeks. It was time. One step into the open would save this man.

His feet didn't budge.

The merchant screamed. Emiel's arms shook. If they tortured the merchant to this degree, how much agony would they cause Emiel? Aren wanted his money. Was Emiel willing to betray Orin and his friends? If not, was he willing to endure hours of torment?

One step into the open would plunge his life into hell.

Adolsin, Adolsin, Adolsin, I can't do this. Help me. I can't do this. Give me another way.

You know what you need to do.

Emiel's throat tightened. Was that Adolsin's voice? Or his mind playing tricks on him? He hated when his mind played tricks. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Why am I such an idiot?*

"Put the pike in the furnace," Aren said. "We need to escalate."

The merchant's pleas for mercy became unintelligible.

Emiel felt like screaming.

One step.

Living hell.

By the Twelve, he couldn't bear pain for someone else—even if the situation *was* his fault. He'd sneak into the cell after Aren and his guards were finished and save whatever was left of the man from death. *I'm a wretch. I have absolutely no defense.*

A blade sizzled.

Emiel stared at the ground. He didn't have enough strength to stop five men, nor the wit. Only enough cowardice to let the innocent suffer.

"You'll die tonight," Lord Aren said. "Whether you tell the truth about the coins determines whether it's a slow, painful death or a quick death."

His hope of saving the man crumbled. Emiel closed his eyes. Would he give himself up or flee?

Emiel's cheeks burned as he fled the dungeon.

"So the merchant's still in the dungeon?" Orin eased into a chair at his kitchen table.

"Or dead." Emiel refused to sit. He stared mindlessly at Orin. The shadows flickering around his bearded face weren't as funny this time. For the second night in a row, Emiel had returned to him to admit defeat. This time was worse.

Orin raised an eyebrow. "I thought you wouldn't let an innocent person die on your account."

"I thought I knew who I was." Emiel swallowed. "I was wrong."

Orin's face softened. "I'm sorry. That's a heavy burden to carry. Especially for one as young as you look."

Emiel glanced away. "I don't need reminded of my age."

Orin answered with his usual silence.

Emiel shook his head. "Aren won't even consider the possibility that the merchant was framed."

Orin shrugged. "Does he need to?"

"Shouldn't he want the truth?"

"He's the ruler. If he believes this merchant could be the culprit, it's his right to execute him."

"Idiotic is what it is."

"Do you see why I want to raise a revolution?"

Why that topic? "I don't—"

"We could achieve so much with you, Emiel." Orin slapped his palm against the table. Passion seeped through his gravelly voice. "We could depose this tyrant and set up a new society."

"And how many more innocents would die because of it?" Emiel dug his nails into his palm. "What if we fail?"

"Every exploit has risks."

"I've already attempted one too many stunts." Emiel frowned at Orin. "That man wouldn't have been tortured if I hadn't waged this big theft. I should have turned myself in."

Orin shook his head. "And sacrifice all your potential for one merchant? You aren't responsible for Aren's stupidity."

"I *am* responsible for my mistakes."

"Dying for a merchant is inane."

Emiel pursed his lips. "I never said I would do it."

"But you—"

"I said I *should*." Emiel's voice broke and he gripped the edge of the table tightly. "That doesn't mean I'm willing to do what's right. I'm not ready to be tortured and killed."

"Help us launch a revolution to depose this tyrant, Emiel, and the merchant won't *have* to die in vain."

"Stop." Emiel's words dripped from his mouth. His jaw clenched. "I know what you want—and my answer. I'm leaving tonight."

"You're *what*?"

“I’ve done enough damage here.”

Orin scooted his chair away from the table and stood. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Don’t get what?”

“You told me that you don’t do great things because you’d rather do small deeds. I suspect that’s not the real reason. You don’t do great things because you’re a coward. And your cockiness is a guise.”

Emiel avoided Orin’s gaze. “Well, maybe I am. Everyone’s born with a fault.”

“You could change.”

“If I really had courage, I wouldn’t be joining your revolution.” Emiel grabbed his satchel. “I’d be turning myself in. That’s why I need to leave.”

The sun rose behind Emiel as he trudged down the road. The merchant was probably dead already.

A pit remained at the bottom of his stomach, but he refused to look at the mountain and city behind him. He had made his decision and couldn’t allow guilt to consume him. Even if he was imperfect, even if he was a coward, he could still do good things. Couldn’t he? Adolsin couldn’t be *terribly* angry with him as long as he used his powers to accomplish good.

If only he could forget about the merchant.

Visions of Grandeur

By tradition, the healer's tents were located at the back of the army. When Sian passed through them to enter the playing field of war, screams of pain assailed her.

Images of raw agony, grotesque disfigurements, and gaping wounds flooded her mind and multiplied by the dozens. She pressed her hands against her ears, regretting her blessing from the gods. Some minds she hated seeing into. She crouched, shaking, as the muffled noise caused the images to fade.

"I'm sorry; I'm sorry," Sian said to Cedric, her escort. "I didn't expect this to happen."

Cedric's youthful golden curls hung in his face as he looked down at her. He gave a reply, but Sian couldn't make it out with her ears covered.

"Can we move beyond these tents?" Sian gestured with her head. "I can't be near them."

Cedric's lips moved again, then he gently took her elbow. Sian slowly stood and let herself be led away. Once she was far enough from the tents, she hesitantly removed her hands. She could still hear screams, but not enough to visualize the minds of the injured.

Sian exhaled and turned to Cedric. "I'm sorry. If I'd known I would be overwhelmed, I would have warned you."

Cedric stared at her as if she had been possessed by a demon. "What in Thanax's name was wrong with you?" She sensed confusion and a hint of terror emanating from him. He was a new recruit and not used to being with the god-blessed.

Sian rubbed her right ear self-consciously. "My memory impressions. The screams of the wounded triggered them, so I glimpsed their thoughts. Gods, it was awful."

"Don't you need to see someone to get impressions?" Curiosity floated through his mind.

"Normally I do. But, if someone is loud enough, I'll get a vague impression anyways. Even vague impressions of those soldiers were unnerving."

"If you say so," Cedric said. More tension pervaded his memory impressions, as if he had raised a shield against her. Sian understood why. She hadn't mentioned her ability much on their week-long trek, because it sometimes disconcerted people. Cedric's increasingly romantic notions about her proved that he'd forgotten her blessing. She should probably discourage him eventually.

Sian cleared her throat. "You want to show me where the general is?"

"Oh—yes," Cedric stammered. "I'll show you right to him." But his memory impressions revealed the way before he'd taken a step.

"Never mind." Sian waved a hand. "I know where I'm going."

Cedric coughed. "What?" Jumbled images wove through his mind.

“You pictured the route to the general’s tent when you spoke to me.”

Cedric narrowed his eyes. “How much can you see of my thoughts?” His memory immediately conjured up the romantic fantasy he’d been cultivating.

Sian debated about lying. But that generally didn’t work long term. “Not much. But enough. I’m afraid you’re not my type.”

Sian hurried away. If experience had taught her anything, he would shun her once he realized how much she perceived his thoughts. But, after the awkwardness of traveling with him while he was developing romantic feelings for her, she didn’t care.

This wasn’t the first relationship she’d killed with her powers.

She approached the general’s tent. Her mentor, Grimweld, would want her to make a grand yet humble entrance befitting someone who has not only received a supernatural blessing from the gods, but was also part of the Heralds—one of the few groups who used their powers for good. But she wasn’t Grimweld, and he wasn’t around to criticize her.

Sian walked up to the two guards. “Hi, I’m Sian the god-blessed. General Helder has requested my presence?”

They snapped to attention. “Yes,” one said. “He mentioned you would be arriving any day.” His memory impressions were strange, involving sealed orders and people yelling at others. “I’ll check if he’s free.” He pulled back the tent flap and disappeared inside.

Sian turned to the other guard. “How has the war gone?”

“Uhh.” The guard averted his gaze. His memory impressions swirled with people dying, trumpets blaring, and promises binding his lips from spilling the general’s secrets.

What kind of secrets was the general hiding?

The other guard poked his head out. “Go right in, milady.” He held the tent flap open. “The general would be delighted to see you.”

“Fascinating talk.” Sian winked at the tight-lipped guard and sauntered into the tent.

Three men surrounded a table covered with maps. One wore the traditional general helmet. That would be Helder. Beside him stood a lieutenant and a turquoise-eyed man Sian had never met before, but she recognized him as Rexin from descriptions she’d heard. Muscles bulged under his red shirt. According to hearsay, Rexin could summon flames to scorch the earth around him and consume nearby enemies with fire. A terror on the battlefield, he was one of the most powerful god-blessed the Heralds had on their side.

Helder looked up. “Sian, can you break into people’s minds?”

Sian cocked an eyebrow. “No introductions?”

“We don’t have time,” Rexin growled, folding his arms. The dull rumblings of a volcano filled Sian’s mind. So he was one of those people with symbolic memory impressions.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” Rexin continued, “we’re in the middle of a war.”

“Sorry.” Sian snorted. “Thought this was a peace conference.”

Rexin’s volcano erupted. “You—”

Helder lifted a hand. “Stop. She hasn’t been trained as a soldier and lacks discipline.” His voice was calm, carrying an impression of a tower built firmly in stone. He locked gaze with Sian. “Back at the citadel, perhaps you enjoyed relaxed interactions with your superiors. But any god-blessed who leaves the citadel for the front lines becomes a soldier, whether you fight or not. Soldiers don’t use sarcasm with superiors.”

Sian’s cheeks burned. “Yes, sir.”

“Back to business,” Helder said. “Can you penetrate minds?”

Sian swallowed. “I can see only mental images, sir. I can’t directly read thoughts or manipulate them.”

Helder nodded. “Pity. I suspected as much, but I had hoped.”

“What is this all about?” Sian asked.

Helder leaned across the table. “Do you know what we are fighting?”

Scenes of death and soldiers with frenzied stares flickered through Sian’s mind. What was Helder thinking about?

She shook her head. “I know it’s another god-blessed...”

“His name is Zeskar. He can control the minds of every soldier under his command, but we’re not sure how.”

Sian tried to keep her mouth from dropping open. “He can control the whole army?”

“We doubt he can control individual movements, but he can sway motivations.” Helder swept his hand across a map. “He conquers fiefdoms and soon his enemies become avid supporters of him. Each day we’re forced to kill good people whose wills have been overpowered by this monster. We believe he possesses a clarestone that’s amplifying his blessing.”

In Helder’s memories, frenzied men viciously attacked the Heralds’ forces. As a sword impaled one man, the frenzied glaze left his eyes, replaced by shock at what he had done. This horrified expression repeated itself a hundred times over.

Sian shivered. “I can’t believe you have to fight that.”

Helder sighed. “Wars are usually complex, but this is far worse. That’s why you’re here.” He leveled his gaze at her. “We must break Zeskar’s control. We’ve captured several of his men. We hope that the memory impressions you get from questioning them will provide insight to thwart Zeskar.”

Sian slowly nodded. “That’s a tall order. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

“Every god-blessed who serves with the Heralds inevitably reaches a point where they must stretch their abilities to discover their limits,” Helder said. “I realize you’ve never trained for this. But the alternative is for us to continue killing innocent men who have been dominated by Zeskar.”

Images of the dying inundated Sian’s mind.

She swallowed. “Understood.”

A man with stubby cheeks and hair the color of storm clouds jostled the chains that held him to a post. Prisoners were normally kept near the sick tents, but Sian had requested they be moved to a different place when she examined them. She knelt to peer into the man’s brown eyes.

He stared back at her. “What do you want?” The words dripped from his mouth like the poison in his memory impressions. Did the dripping poison represent his disgust toward her or Zeskar’s control over him? Images didn’t always interpret themselves.

Sian tucked her hair behind her ear. “Just to talk, if that’s all right.”

“And if I say it’s not?” More poison oozed.

Sian shrugged, feigning indifference. “There are dozens more captives. Someone will talk.”

“We’re loyal to Zeskar,” the man snapped. “We won’t spill nothing.” Sian caught snatches of plans the man had overheard that he didn’t want the Heralds to know about. She filed them away. If she couldn’t figure out how Zeskar controlled his men, perhaps she could deduce their plans later.

“I’m not here to interrogate you about Zeskar’s plans,” Sian said calmly. “I’m here because I’m curious.” She let the words hang in the air.

The man took the bait. “Curious about what?” Murky clouds, caused by either confusion or suspicion, formed in his mind. Sian always struggled to distinguish those two types of impressions.

“About you. You’re a farmer, right?” She gestured at his calloused hands, but the guards had already told her his occupation. “Zeskar conquered your country; why did you join him?” She had no idea what to expect—was Zeskar’s control so complete that he’d influence this man’s answer?

“That’s what you’re fishing for?” The man laughed. Sian saw an image of farmers listening intently to Zeskar speaking atop a horse. “He’s creating an empire. And *I’m* going to be a part of it.”

A war scene unfolded in Sian’s mind, but not the nightmarish chaos she’d beheld before. Instead, soldiers in gleaming armor cut down their opponents with ease as they marched under

golden banners. The image seemed...contrived. Sian couldn't pinpoint why, but she'd glimpsed artificial images like this before when a shapeshifter had shrouded its true emotions. What was this man concealing?

"Why does this empire appeal to you?" Sian asked.

The farmer grinned. "Why *wouldn't* it? Would you rather aimlessly work the ground year after year just to survive, or live and die for a worthwhile cause?" His memories of his onerous farm life seemed tainted as well. Zeskar had tampered with these memories.

"Do all of Zeskar's followers hold this view?"

"Not everyone is a farmer. Some are blacksmiths, shopkeepers, or soldiers. But the same vision connects all of us: a unified country free from wars of the god-blessed." He smiled. "One war to end all wars."

She'd ascertained Zeskar's motivations at least. But she was no closer to learning how Zeskar persuaded his men to believe and spout this nonsense.

Sian shifted her weight from one knee to the other. "Does everyone Zeskar speaks to embrace this purpose?"

"Of course." But the farmer's memories contradicted him. Zeskar sat atop a horse addressing the farmers. But then one man raised a commotion and the other farmers gored him with pitchforks.

Sian grimaced. "You're lying."

The man blinked. "No, I'm not."

Sian leaned closer to him. "When you noticed my turquoise eyes, did you wonder what blessing the gods gave me? I perceive memories. Right now I see you and your farmer friends skewering one of your own because he spurned your master's message."

The man's brow knotted. "You lie." But the scene replayed in his mind again and again.

"No," Sian said firmly. "I know what I see. You murdered one of your friends."

"He wasn't a friend." The man's lip curled. "He was a selfish traitor who refused to accept the cause."

"Why did he reject it?"

"How should I know? All that matters is his refusal."

Zeskar's powers had cracks. But what was the difference? How could he subjugate some men but not others? Could he only control a limited number of people at a time?

"Maybe you're lying to me again."

"Maybe I am. But I'm not telling you psychics anything." His memory impressions matched his hair—billowing black clouds ready to unleash lightning.

Sian wouldn't be drawing any more information from him.

General Helder turned as Sian entered his tent. "Your report?"

Sian held herself straight in an effort to exhibit the military bearing Helder preferred. "I spoke with four men. From three I gleaned that other men initially defied Zeskar's control and were killed. None of these men admitted that. But I saw it in their memories."

Helder's eyes lit up. "So it *is* possible to resist." Victory marches flashed in his mind.

Sian nodded. "Yes—but I don't know *how* they did or *why* Zeskar's power faltered. If our goal is to liberate men from Zeskar's control, we aren't much closer to succeeding, besides surmising that it *is* perhaps possible."

"It's a start," Helder said.

A soldier poked his head into the tent. "General Helder. The supplies are here." Visions of fresh corn and apples filled Sian's mind.

Helder motioned to Sian. "Let's move." He headed toward the opening of the tent. Sian followed him outside.

"Did you learn anything about Zeskar's plans?" Helder asked as they wove through the tents of the camp.

"Only that he has grand plans for conquest," Sian replied. "He views the Heralds as his greatest threat."

"As he should."

"Their next attack will be tomorrow."

Helder nodded. "Our spies suspected that, but we didn't have confirmation. I'll prepare accordingly."

"He also promised his men that he would soon control other god-blessed."

Helder exhaled. "So the god-blessed aren't immune to his powers."

Sian envisioned Rexin turning mid-battle and incinerating his own men. She shivered. "It seems not."

Helder stopped and scratched his neck. "That knowledge will save lives." He paused. "I'll have to consult Rexin about this. We may need to pull him and our other god-blessed from the battle. Zeskar doesn't normally enter the fray, but we can't let him control any of the god-blessed." Blackened battlefields scattered with scorched troops plagued Helder's mind.

"If I may make a suggestion—"

"You may."

“The prisoners I examined were brought under Zeskar’s control after he spoke to them. I don’t know whether my sample was representative or not, but if the god-blessed put wax in their ears to stifle the noise, Zeskar may not be able to control them.”

“A good thought.” Helder rubbed his neck again. “Unfortunately, deafness is disastrous in battle. However, it *would* be better than Zeskar controlling them.” He resumed walking. “I will consider it.”

They neared the middle of the camp. A train of wagons loaded with produce rumbled in. Soldiers stared greedily at the provisions, but no one approached the wagons.

The lieutenant leading the convoy walked over to Helder. “General, some nearby farmers generously donated supplies to our war effort.” Sian saw different images in his mind. Soldiers seizing food from crops. Farmers begging them to stop.

General Helder nodded. “Thank you. They have our gratitude. Bring the food to the cooks and have them send me a message once they have made accurate supply counts.”

The lieutenant left to tend to his orders.

Sian swallowed, then glanced up at Helder. “With...with all due respect, sir, I’m pretty sure that man is lying.”

General Helder turned toward her. “I know.”

Sian frowned. “But that means our men are stealing food from farmers and lying to you about it!” She remembered Rexin’s rebuke from the day before. “Forgive my outburst. But this seems reprehensible.”

Helder smiled. “Believe me, Sian, I understand your concern.” He studied her a moment. “You’re being trained by Grimweld, aren’t you?”

“I’m being trained by all the Heralds in the citadel; Grimweld’s my mentor.”

“I see...” Helder’s gaze flickered away before returning to her. “Although Grimweld is an honorable man, there’s a reason he guards the citadel and doesn’t pursue many outside missions anymore.”

“What are you saying?”

“Grimweld is an idealist. He desires a world where every Herald performs unambiguously righteous deeds. It’s a noble vision. But you can’t fight wars that way. Whenever conflict arises, situations become messy. If we don’t obtain enough food, the army starves and dies. Would I prefer a world where we didn’t need to raid farms? Of course. But that’s not the world we live in.”

Sian pursed her lips. “I don’t agree with Grimweld on everything. To be honest, I disagree with him often. But I struggle to believe that maintaining ideals during war is impossible.”

“We don’t abandon ideals,” Helder said. “But we need to be wise about their application. Take our position now: we’re forced to slaughter men whose only fault is being mind-controlled by a god-blessed. The paradigm of heroism doesn’t exist here.” Helder gazed into the distance, his memories displaying overcast skies above fields littered with bodies. “But we do still believe in ideals, and that’s why we brought you here. Maybe you can stop the massacre.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “If Zeskar’s troops will be marching on us tomorrow, we need you to find a solution before then.”

Sian slumped against the post and wiped her damp face as the soldiers removed the fourteenth prisoner she’d questioned that day. Men’s lives depended on identifying a vulnerability in Zeskar’s power. But what if she *couldn’t*? They needed someone else for this job. Someone who could actually influence minds.

The soldiers dragged another prisoner toward her and shackled him to the post. He tilted his shaven head to glare at her. He looked like little more than a boy.

“If you think I’m going to talk, you’re wrong,” he said through clenched teeth.

Sian saw images of Herald soldiers decimating the boy’s allies. Did those memories belong to the boy, or had Zeskar implanted them?

“Why do you think we’re fighting you?” Sian asked, taking a different tactic than before.

The boy smirked. “Right. Because how could I possibly fight against the illustrious Heralds? Well, maybe there are more heroes in this world than you.” His mind flashed an image of Zeskar’s troops lining up for battle and radiating brilliance so pronounced that it was almost comedic.

Sian shuddered and backed away. That image couldn’t have been natural.

“What? Is that revelation so horrifying?” the boy asked.

“Shut up,” Sian snapped, aware that she was breaking her interrogation powers. She hastened to an isolated spot and sat on the ground, massaging her forehead. How had she missed it? If Zeskar was controlling the men, she should have sensed resistance.

Even worse, she wouldn’t have realized the relevance of this if Zeskar hadn’t shown her a ludicrous image. Granted, the image wasn’t as outlandish as it could have been. But it bent the laws of natural belief enough to reveal the truth.

Zeskar didn’t just control people’s speech—he controlled their memory impressions.

He was aware of Sian’s activities and was planting images that coincided with the men’s words.

Sian swallowed. All the images she had seen were fake. The plans she had overheard might be false. The men who’d resisted Zeskar’s control *certainly* hadn’t been real. Maybe

people could resist him; maybe they couldn't. But what if Zeskar was showing her defections so she'd believe they had a chance of breaking his control when they didn't?

He had succeeded at causing them to waste their time.

Sian lifted the blanket she'd kicked aside hours ago and fanned her face with it. Military regulations required her to sleep fully clothed the night before a battle, so the breeze didn't reduce her discomfort much. She rolled over in her cot, only to come face to face with a woman snoring heavily.

Sian turned over again and stared at the ceiling. Grimweld had warned her that the first several missions outside the citadel would be rough. She'd known success would take a while, but she hadn't expected to flat-out fail. Her powers were supposed to help her understand people. But every time she went on a mission, she messed up. In her first mission, she didn't recognize a traitor lying to her. This time she'd distracted a general with false hopes for a full day because she didn't recognize a mind-controller's trickery. She couldn't do anything right.

Sian sat up and drifted her legs over the edge of the cot. The Heralds' troops would be going to war tomorrow, and they would be forced to slaughter innocent people. Maybe she couldn't have stopped that. But...she wished she could have. She would have to return to the Heralds at the citadel with news of her uselessness. Again.

Perhaps she should have asked the gods for a different blessing.

Sweat beaded on Sian's arm. She slipped on her sandals and walked outside, where she drank in the cool night air. Her muscles relaxed. Maybe her frustration had just been the suffocation talking. The other Heralds would understand that she'd done her best.

She began to pace around the women's tents. Up on the hill, light glowed inside the general's tent. Helder must still be planning for the upcoming battle.

Sian paused, then trudged up the hill. If Zeskar had been transmitting false memories, her theory that he controlled through speech was likely incorrect. She should have realized that when she informed Helder of her failure. Rexin and the others didn't need wax in their ears. The least she could do was prevent her erroneous advice from harming them in battle.

Oddly, no guards were stationed outside the tent. Why wouldn't Helder post guards during night hours? Maybe they had been called inside. She hesitated, her hand poised to lift the tent flap. Entering unannounced seemed forward. But what other option did she have?

Sian brushed the fabric aside. Helder was conversing with a goateed man in gray garb that indicated he was a messenger. But he had turquoise eyes. What kind of a god-blessed was he? The two missing guards stood nearby.

Sian cleared her throat and stepped inside. "Forgive my interruption, General. But I just realized something about Zeskar. Is this an appropriate time for us to speak?"

The god-blessed in the gray garb smiled. “Now is the perfect time, child.” His voice had an edge, but all his memory impressions rang of tremendous thoughts, like an army marching in to free an oppressed people. “What do you know of Zeskar?”

Sian glanced at Helder. The dichotomy between the man’s thoughts and words discomfited her. “If Zeskar was implanting false memories in people’s minds, he probably doesn’t control with his voice. You don’t need to worry about that in the battle tomorrow.”

“My friend here has helped me solve that problem, actually,” Helder said. “We don’t need to worry about Zeskar.” But visions of Rexin frying his own men still haunted him.

“Are you sure?” Sian asked. “Your memories—”

“You’re the girl who can see thoughts.” The stranger’s smile widened. “I was about to search for you. How convenient.” He...he wanted her. He had visions of the two of them, side by side, directing legions of men, who—

Sian gasped. Zeskar.

“Guards,” Zeskar called. Immediately, the two guards flanked her, swords drawn.

“If you scream, I will order them to rip open your stomach and leave you to bleed.” He advanced toward her, his threat casting gruesome images into Sian’s mind. He nodded to the guards. “Tie her to the main tent pole.”

The guards jerked Sian back to the pole and cinched her arms together. Her stomach tightened. Zeskar was going to control her—just like Helder. The rest of her life would be governed by Zeskar’s whims. Maybe she should scream. Slowly dying of a gash seemed like a better fate than the worst form of slavery.

“I’ll make you the same proposal I offered Helder,” Zeskar said. “I want to show you a vision: a vision of a united country. For too many years, the land of Morshan has been divided. Hundreds of god-blessed constantly war with each other to try to expand their dominions. But I can restore peace and prosperity by persuading the god-blessed to cease fighting each other.” Rippling fields of corn, glistening cities, wondrous new inventions, and majestic trade ships appeared in Zeskar’s mind. Sian wished she could see all memories this vividly.

“I could accomplish numerous campaigns with you on my side.” Zeskar spread his arms. “Alone, my influence has limits. But a woman who can perceive thoughts accompanied by someone who can control them could unite the nations and end the bloodshed.”

Sian saw her and Zeskar standing in front of a magnificent army. Her. Leading an army alongside a warlord. Triumph and admiration shone in Zeskar’s eyes. He looked so proud. So noble. So—

Then Sian stared into the real Zeskar’s eyes and the vision shattered.

She strained against the ropes that bound her. Why wasn’t Zeskar just controlling her and putting an end to this?

Zeskar turned to Helder. “It isn’t working.”

Helder coughed and stepped toward her. “Listen. I know you’re going to disregard my opinion because Zeskar is ‘controlling’ me. But I swear that this comes from my own heart. We can make his vision happen.” His memory impressions mirrored Zeskar’s, albeit vaguer. He led Zeskar’s troops into battle.

“You’ve always sought to do the right thing, Sian,” Zeskar said. “I commend that. That’s why I urge you to reconsider what is right. The Heralds have struggled for decades to unify the land under a righteous kingdom. We both desire the same result: a Morshan where people live in harmony.”

As if in a dream, Zeskar soared over a flourishing country free from wars. Or maybe she was the one soaring. Musicians played in the streets, children giggled as they chased each other through the meadows, and the scent of flowering trees wafted on the breeze. Her heart ached, and the next instant she was raising a sword alongside other courageous men and women.

Sian shook herself, her eyes widening. “You—you can’t actually control minds.”

Zeskar raised his eyebrows. “Did you really believe I could? Of course not. I’m just an exceptional communicator who has the power to show others his thoughts.” He pictured himself giving speeches that stirred the masses. He could lead like no one else could. He simply spoke and—

No. Those were Zeskar’s memories, not hers.

Sian’s mouth felt dry. “So you thrust your vision on others until they can’t distinguish it from their own.”

Helder laughed. “All of us who follow Zeskar are *genuine*. The glowing images in the prisoners’ minds were their *honest* impressions of Zeskar. You’d understand if you’d embrace his vision.”

“I can’t.” Sian dug her fingernails into her palms. “This...this is *wrong*. He’s a manipulator.”

Zeskar sighed. “I knew that speaking with you would be a challenge, Sian. You’re used to seeing thoughts in a way that many people cannot.” He signaled to the guards.

One guard clamped a hand over her mouth while the other whipped out his sword and slid it across her stomach. The cold steel ripped her tunic and sliced into her skin. She shrieked into the guard’s glove.

“You hate me now,” Zeskar said. “But this is only a flesh wound. If you continue to resist, we’ll cut deeper. Sometimes pain weakens mental defenses.”

The guard removed his hand from her mouth. Sian blinked back tears. “You’re a *monster*.”

“Put yourself in my shoes. I want to create a united, prosperous country. What if this is the best way to achieve it? In five minutes, you could be *thanking* me for hurting you because you’ll understand I freed you from backwards thinking.”

“I. Will. Never. Join you,” Sian forced out, tempted to scream but not wanting the guard to slash her again. Blood dripped down her tunic.

“That’s unfortunate.” Zeskar’s brow furrowed. He glanced at Helder and then back at Sian. “I don’t have much time to recruit the major players of your army before I must return to my camp. I’m going to take the guards and find Rexin. If you’re not ready to submit to my vision in five minutes, I’ll have to kill you.” He swept out of the tent, the two guards following.

Helder positioned himself beside Sian, his expression stern and his sword drawn.

Sian suppressed a sob. “How—how can you listen to this man?”

“Sometimes you need to be brave enough to admit that your loyalties were misplaced.” Helder’s gaze softened slightly. “I don’t want to kill you, Sian. I need you to join us.”

Sian bit her lip. “How can you say you were fighting for the wrong side? After everything you did with us.”

“I was part of a kingdom that preached heroism, but behind our public image, we pillaged local farms and committed other crimes whenever necessary. Zeskar doesn’t stoop to those tactics. His people *willingly* follow him and hand over supplies.”

Sian winced at the pain burrowing into her middle. “Torturing victims isn’t a low tactic?”

Helder glanced at her blood-soaked tunic, then looked away. “In a strange way, he’s being merciful. He’s trying to save your life.” But his mental picture of Zeskar dimmed.

“You don’t believe that,” Sian said. “I can see it.”

Helder shook his head. “Don’t manipulate me, Sian. I may not fully understand Zeskar’s plan, but that doesn’t mean I distrust him.”

Sian saw how he viewed her: a naive, stubborn child who wouldn’t listen to wisdom. Was she being foolish? What if Zeskar *could* unite Morshan? Didn’t she want peace? She could join him and still be a hero.

The thought rolled around in her mind. The boy who stubbornly clung to an artificial vision, the farmer who saw an alternative to drudgery, and Helder who believed he had found a path without sacrifice. Wasn’t that what they also wanted?

Zeskar inspired everyone he spoke to. But what if the frenzied look in his men’s eyes wasn’t frenzy?

It was purpose.

That was Zeskar’s secret. He wasn’t just thrusting memory impressions on people.

He was giving people what they wanted most.

Sian slowly lifted her head to look Helder in the eyes. “Are you a hero?”

Helder’s forehead wrinkled. “What?”

“If people respect and obey you because they have no choice, are you a hero? That’s the legacy Zeskar has promised you—the destruction of autonomy and a legion of sycophants.”

Helder’s knuckles whitened around his sword hilt. “We’ll be ending universal suffering.”

“Will you?” Sian gritted her teeth as the burning sensation in her stomach increased. “Do you remember the faces of Zeskar’s soldiers as they were struck down? Why were they so horrified? Weren’t they courageous soldiers dying for a noble cause?”

Helder broke eye contact. His vision of glory began to blur.

“Maybe they realized that their ideals of heroism were empty. Heroism isn’t all power and prestige. Sometimes would-be heroes die in the mud. Sometimes doing what’s right means rejecting grandeur.”

Footsteps crunched outside and Zeskar pushed through the tent flap, followed by Rexin, whose eyes blazed with a new vision. Sian’s knees buckled. That hadn’t been five minutes. She glanced at Helder’s expressionless face. Had her words been enough?

Zeskar looked Sian in the eyes. “Have you decided to join us?” A golden banner fluttered in his memories.

Sian swallowed. “I—”

“She’s refused and has tried to convert me to her side.” Cold iron, the symbol of duty, filled Helder’s mind.

Sian’s hopes deflated.

Zeskar gazed at Sian mournfully. “I had high hopes for you.”

Sian’s chest tightened. So this was what it felt like.

“I’ll do the honors.” Helder raised his sword.

Sometimes would-be heroes die in the mud. She had predicted her own fate.

Helder looked Sian in the eyes. “I hope you’re ready.”

Sian wasn’t. But maybe that was the point.

Helder thrust his sword forward. It ripped through the side of her tunic, brushed against her skin, and kept going to sever her bonds.

Sian blinked. Helder had *freed* her.

“Get the horn,” he whispered. Then he spun and lunged at Rexin.

Sian dashed toward the back table to grab the horn. Her fingers curved around the smooth, cool metal as she raised it to her lips and blew to awaken the army. People yelled in the background.

Flames exploded from the ground all around the tent and licked at the ceiling. Sian stumbled backward, covering her face with her arms. Helder was likely dead, and soon Regin's fire would envelope her too.

But then the heat subsided.

Sian peeked through her arms. The flames had died to a smolder that spread across the blackened grass. Two guards were sprawled near the tent's entrance, baked in their own armor. Zeskar had disappeared.

At the center of the tent lay two figures—a scorched Helder, and Regin with Helder's sword through his heart.

Sian's heart wrenched. She ran through the embers and grabbed Helder's arm. She felt for a pulse on his unarmored wrist.

Helder coughed. "It's too late, Sian. Better for me to die now than over a couple days from the burns."

"But—but—"

"You've saved our armies," he rasped. "That doesn't mean you can save everyone in them." The corner of his lip slowly turned upward. "Sometimes would-be heroes die among the flames."

The moon shone down upon the troops as they systematically retreated to distance themselves from Zeskar before the day dawned and he discovered their departure. Sian clambered up the rocky outcropping and scanned the weary but determined faces of the soldiers. She had hoped for another option. But, without their general and best warrior, they needed to find the nearest defensible position and wait for reinforcements.

Sian glanced back at the lights flickering in their previous encampment. That encampment, along with the surrounding countryside, would be overrun by Zeskar's men. A couple scouts had been dispatched to warn the nearby farmers. But they wouldn't be able to save all of them from Zeskar's illusions. Zeskar's land and army would grow over the next week.

Sian climbed down to join the rest of the army. The war would not end soon, or easily. Maybe someone in the future would stop Zeskar. Maybe someone wouldn't.

But at least Sian had done what she could to resist.

The army continued on under the light of the half-moon.

In the Shadows of the God-Blessed

“Alright, next dilemma.” Tobias tapped his finger along the table in thought.

Kristen couldn’t decide whether to sigh or not. His attempts to carry on a conversation were almost cute. Not that debating ethical dilemmas was how a girl wanted to be wooed. But at least he was trying.

She allowed a smile to break out of one corner of her mouth. “Hit me with your best.”

Except for the two people murmuring to each other on the other side of the tavern, they were alone. Usually the tavern was crowded this time in the evening, but Kristen welcomed the quiet. It enabled her to chat without being hollered at by a needy customer. She fingered the wet rag she’d brought with her when she joined him at the table.

He cleared his throat. “You’re serving tables one night when a family with young children comes in seeking refuge from Lord Felnor’s men. Feeling compassionate, you hide them in the basement. But, ten minutes later, Kornich enters with ten soldiers and demands to know the family’s whereabouts. If you don’t answer immediately, he’ll kill you. The catch is that Kornich has already set his tracker on the family. They’ll find them regardless. Do you tell or not?”

Kornich was Lord Felnor’s personal, god-blessed minion who could somehow trace people to their location. Kristen normally objected when Tobias brought the god-blessed into his ethical dilemma games. They always complicated the scenario and made it weird. This one was simple though.

“If Kornich is involved, I spill. No point dying for nothing.” Kristen crossed her arms, pleased with herself for answering quickly. Maybe he’d be impressed for once.

Tobias wrinkled his brow. “Really?”

Kristen snorted. “What—would you refuse to tell? They’d find the family anyways.”

“If Kornich handed you a sword and commanded you to kill the family or he’d kill both you *and* the family, would you obey? Would you slaughter a family just to save your own life?”

Kristen let the sigh escape from her lips this time. Why did Tobias have to be so interested in these ethical dilemmas and stubborn about whichever side he favored? The two of them rarely chose the same side. And each discussion ended with Tobias making Kristen feel guilty.

“Look,” she said. “That’s different.”

“How?”

“If I reveal where they are, I’m not personally killing them.”

“Is there a difference between personally and impersonally killing someone?”

“You never *said* Kornich planned to kill them.” Kristen grabbed the rag and began to wring it. “Maybe it’s just prison.”

“Let’s say he’s going to kill them.”

A puddle formed on the table as Kristen squeezed the rag tighter. Why did Tobias need to change the rules? She pursed her lips. “This is a contrived situation. Why does it matter?”

“Quandaries like this help us determine where our moral positions are,” Tobias said. “Plus, I can discover details about you that I wouldn’t otherwise.”

Kristen supposed that, somewhere in Tobias’s mind, he thought that last line would sound flirtatious. She leaned toward him. “If you really want to learn more about me, I could suggest some conversation topics.”

“I already know the obvious.”

Kristen considered tossing the wet rag at him. “Then predict what I’m feeling right now.”

“That’s hardly fair—”

“Tell me.”

Tobias sighed. “I guess you’re annoyed because you dislike disagreeing with me.”

It wasn’t a terrible answer. But no. She preferred to be courted in a different way. But she couldn’t voice it because Tobias hadn’t confirmed his interest in her.

“I’m annoyed because I don’t like this game,” she finally said.

Tobias frowned. “I thought you enjoyed it.”

This was why she needed to break her habit of encouraging everything he did. “I like talking with you. But my enjoyment of spending time with you is *in spite* of the game, not because of it. We could discuss more interesting subjects.”

“Like?”

Was Tobias that dense? How about discussing his goals in life, or her hopes to someday leave the tavern, or what their families were like? Even asking how her day went would be better conversation fodder.

“I shouldn’t have to tell you,” Kristen said. Did he even know how to pursue a girl? If he ever mustered the courage to admit he liked her, she had a *heap* of work ahead.

“That doesn’t make sense.” Tobias rubbed the back of his neck. “How can I do what you want if you never indicate what it is?”

The classic male response. Kristen narrowed her eyes. “It’s called intuition. I know you like to think logically and rationally, but there are other ways to view the world

Tobias opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the door swung open and cold air rushed into the room. Kristen turned, recognizing the newcomer with only a glimpse of her straight black hair and unfeminine gait.

Tera marched over and grabbed a seat. “Thought I’d find you here. You mind?”

Kristen had wanted to argue her point more, but she doubted Tera would move if she asked. “I suppose not,” she muttered.

“Maybe we can get your input on the conversation we’ve been having,” Tobias said to Tera.

Tobias wanted to bring Tera into *this*?

“What’s the topic?” Tera asked.

“We were analyzing hypothetical scenarios and disagreed on whether ethical dilemmas make good conversation,” Tobias replied. “I think they do, Kristen thinks they don’t.”

That isn’t the issue. The question is if you ever intend to act on our mutual interest and deepen it into a meaningful relationship.

Tera shrugged. “I think most ethical dilemmas are either not actual problems or are easy to solve.”

“Really? Tell me how you’d handle this one.” Tobias briefly related the dilemma he had posed to Kristen.

After he finished, Tera laughed. “I’d do neither. Instead I’d kill Kornich and move on with my life.”

Tobias raised his eyebrows. “Kornich is surrounded by guards. You’d die.”

Tera smirked. “Not if I’d already become a god-blessed.”

Tobias rolled his eyes. “That’s cheating.”

“No, it’s not. You can avoid that sort of situation if you’re strong enough.” Tera flexed her muscles. Kristen noticed Tobias glancing at her biceps. He probably wished he had muscles like Tera.

“But sometimes you get caught in situations where you’re helpless. Even if you’re a god-blessed.”

“Depends on how smart you are. You’re only helpless if you allow yourself to be.” Tera shook her head, and the stud in her right ear glinted in the firelight. Kristen loathed that earring. It represented everything she hated about how Tera had changed herself since her father was captured by Lord Felnor’s men.

“You’re missing the point,” Tobias said.

“Maybe it’s because your dilemmas aren’t worth discussing,” Kristen cut in. She winced as soon as the words left her mouth. She hadn’t intended to be that harsh—especially in front of

Tera. Tobias's cringe indicated that he took the comment personally. Ouch. Now who was the incompetent conversationalist?

Tera laughed. "Look who's spitting fire tonight."

"I didn't mean it like that..." Kristen mumbled, looking directly at Tobias.

Tera cocked an eyebrow. "Can't say I disagree though."

Tobias shifted in his chair and glanced away.

"I'm sorry. I went too far." Kristen pulled at a splinter in the table. "But—I mean, you're a baker's apprentice and I'm a barmaid. Neither of us will amount to anything in the broader scheme of life or be likely to face these scenarios. Maybe if Tera becomes a god-blessed, she should think about this, but why should we?"

"Because we *aren't* god-blessed." Tobias thumped his hand on the table. "We *don't* have the power to slay Kornich. I'll admit some of my dilemmas are contrived. But yesterday I observed Lord Felnor's men beating an old woman because she cursed at them. I stood by and did nothing. Shouldn't I have stopped them?"

"You can't take on Lord Felnor's men solo," Kristen said.

"But is it right to ignore cruelty just because you can't prevent it? All..." His voice cracked.

Kristen leaned closer. "What?"

"All I want is to do what's right, Kristen. I know I'm only a baker boy. I can never be one of the god-blessed and become a hero—if any heroes *exist* among the god-blessed—but there's too much suffering in the world for me to mind my own business. I ... I want to be a hero where I am now."

"You *could* always become a god-blessed if you tried hard enough." Tera flexed her muscles again.

"Shut up, Tera." The last thing Kristen wanted was for Tobias to imitate Tera's obsession with becoming a god-blessed. How long had she missed the cues that he was troubled? She reached out and clasped her hands around his fists. More forward than she normally allowed herself to be, but now she understood why these dilemmas mattered to him.

"Listen." Kristen gazed deep into Tobias's eyes. "No one is blaming you for what happened with that woman."

"I am."

"Well, you shouldn't." Kristen squeezed his hands. "I don't think being a hero is about making the right big decisions."

"What then?"

“The right small decisions. Speaking kindly to people around you, doing your work faithfully, showing love to the people closest to you—all these actions surpass whatever big dreams you have. Few people will notice and you won’t gain fame. But they have significance.”

Tobias met her gaze and wrapped his hands around hers. “I know. But sometimes you need to evaluate the extreme cases to resolve the tricky small ones.”

Silence settled between them as they looked at each other, absorbed in contemplation. Tera got the unspoken signal and muttered an excuse to leave the table.

Kristen had never dwelt much on the powerful beings that surrounded them. They were just a part of life. She also hadn’t considered any recourses besides keeping her head low—or Tera’s ambition to become a god-blessed. Was she supposed to stand in evil’s path even if she would be destroyed by it? Was that honorable?

Kristen didn’t know. But she understood why Tobias asked these questions.

Not to test her.

To test himself.

Maybe he acted confident and controlled because he believed those traits defined manhood and heroism. Could his disappointment with her answers be aimed at himself? Kristen almost wanted to slap him and tell him to stop beating himself down for not being a hero and accept being ordinary like the rest of them. But that wasn’t what he needed.

He needed a friend to walk alongside him in his regret. Kristen exhaled. This wasn’t how she had planned to spend this evening.

But perhaps this could be an unconventional route to the relationship she’d been longing for.

Tobias’s hands warmed hers. She liked the way that felt.

Kristen tossed her hair away from her face. “Alright. What’s the next dilemma?”

Author's Note

Thanks for stopping by and reading my short story collection! It means a lot to me that you've read through it, and I hope you've enjoyed the stories.

I have a lot of plans with this story world: part of it includes writing more short stories set in this world, and part of it includes writing a series of novellas that unite all these different short stories into a master story plot.

As a subscriber to my mailing list, you'll be the first to know whenever I release a new short story (I try to release one every couple months), and I'll also keep you updated on that novella series as I work on outlining and developing it.

Special thanks go to Brianna Hilvety for being my awesome and tireless editor for these stories. I am consistently impressed by her ability to focus and refine my storytelling. I don't know what I'd do without her sharp feedback.

Thanks again for following me in my journey as an author. Feel free to contact me at josiah@josiahdegraaf.com if you ever want to reach out.

Josiah DeGraaf

Writing Stories that Matter