

THE  
OF JOURNALS  
RAYMOND  
BROOKS

AMIT BOBROV  
VOLUME I



**Amit Bobrov**

# **The Journals of Raymond Brooks**

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Dedicated to  
Julie Faith Owen  
My number one fan



# VOL. I



## PRELUDE

“Are you sure I'm interviewing the right person?” Asked the interviewer through the microphone on her blouse signaling with her hand to cut the cameras. "This teenage girl couldn't possibly be ..." she added. She looked again at the person before her, blinking twice to make sure she wasn't imagining. Up on the chair bounced a petite teenage girl, smiling charmingly. She seemed ordinary to the interviewer — beautiful to be sure, but ordinary; nothing but grayed hair to signify Jaunee's true age. The cameraman nodded his approval; it was her. She had a chiseled heart-shaped face, almost symmetric, and her skin was of pale complexion, without blemish. As she was drawn by a master artist rather than born. Were it not for the sadness in her eyes, and the worry-lines around her lips anyone could easily mistake her for fantasy in flesh. She however was very much alive and trying her best to put on a show.

“So ah, Jaunee ...” The interviewer began nervously, sipping a glass of water.

"Yes Ma'am" replied Jaunee with a slight French accent.

"You're the world's smartest woman according to the Guinness book of records." The interviewer said.

"So I've been told," Jaunee replied with a confident smile.

"And that you're a scientist, a philanthropist and ah ..." The interviewer sighed nervously.

"A thousand-year-old monster? It's okay. You can say it." Jaunee completed the interviewer's sentence.

"You don't look like a monster," the interviewer replied awkwardly.

"And I'm not really. I'm just not human but once we get past that, you'll see I'm just like a regular person. I mean, I love coffee in the morning, I do yoga ... I've also been alive for a very long, long time." Jaunee said cheerfully, trying to dispel the tense feeling in the air. She could hear the rapid heartbeat of both the interviewer and the cameraman; hear their frightened little thoughts; smell the fear and a dark part of her loved it. She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She must remain here and now, it's her only chance.

"So you're immortal?" Asked the interviewer, trying to dispel the tension in the air as well.

"Not for long," replied Jaunee with even tones, hiding her own fears of what she had just admitted. She was dying and there wasn't much left for her to do, except this ... finish what her step-father had begun but never been able to complete.

"Would you care to elaborate?"

"About my health? Non. Suffice to say that even the immortal, the powerful and the wise cannot elude the touch of death forever. And I have still more to accomplish before I have drunk my fill of the cup of life." Jaunee said then brightened up and added in more cheerful tones "So...You've got yourself an

immortal who has lived for a thousand years, willing to talk. Are we going to talk about my health, favorite cinematics or about stuff that matters?

"I don't think the audience has ever heard the story of people living for thousands of years." The interviewer said.

"Exactly" Jaunee added.

"Why is that?" The interviewer asked in calmer tones, excitement replacing fear.

"Well ... in our society, secrecy is an imperative. It is the one law which we all abide by. You see there's a lot the public doesn't know; whole worlds hidden from your eyes. It's like the mother of all conspiracies and just about everyone in power is involved. I'm a dead person just by talking to you, but I'm dying anyway so, you know..." Jaunee explained getting excited herself.

"So is this why you're doing this, confessing, breaking the rules, telling us mortals what's really going on?" The interviewer asked.

"No actually, you see, in every past instance where — let's call us the others. I mean, you'll probably call us supernatural, but we're not really supernatural. Anyhow, whenever we tried it in the past, it always escalated into a war."

"Whenever you tried revealing the truth?" The interviewer asked.

"Oui, whenever anyone tried to reveal the truth; to create a different society, it just didn't work. Humanity can be left-wing liberal until it realizes it's not at the top of the food chain. The only time you'll see the whole of humanity come together for a joint cause is when one of us tries to make contact on a grand scale. Swords are drawn and blood is spilled, ours and yours. Besides, it's not like humanity or the others are unified. In many ways we are just as diverse as you are. There is no

single government, or a single belief system. Most humans would have us all destroyed to maintain the dominance of their species, regardless of the benefits peace offers. I'm sure you can well-imagine how diversity and power conjoin and then escalate into chaos and war," Jaunee said.

"So why are you doing this now; escalating the whole world into chaos? Didn't you say you're a peace-loving creature before this interview?" The interviewer asked, angry and frustrated at what she was hearing. A creeping thought entered her head: 'when the interview is over – destroy the recordings and report this dying teenage girl to someone, anyone. With all due respect to professional integrity, she's not about to throw the stone that would open World War III, just to satisfy her professional pride. A large part of her wanted to disbelieve what she was hearing, and she began to rationalize herself. It's a hoax, orchestrated by a seventeen-year-old girl.

"I sympathize with your feelings, truly." Jaunee said sadly "However this is no hoax, it's real. I'm not seventeen or seventy or even seven hundred for that matter." Jaunee replied to the thoughts in Daina's head. In turn the interviewer's expression turned to that of a frightened mouse.

"Please calm down Ma'am, I had to demonstrate Siddhi, what you would call magic to prove the validity of my claim. I assure you. You will leave this interview very much alive and in good health." Jaunee said and Daina calmed down, transfixed by Jaunee's eyes. 'I will leave this interview very much alive' she repeated in her mind.

"Where was I?" Daina asked.

"You were asking why I'm doing this interview, telling the world what's really going on." Jaunee replied.

"Right, I kind of lost my train of thought for a moment,

thanks....so why did you?" Daina asked.

"I was hiding in plain sight, with that whole 'World's smartest person' routine. But the fact of the matter is that we are not alone; as in humans are far from being the only sapient species out there. And some things are uninterested in emancipation, peace or even world domination," Jaunee replied.

"So you're telling us this in preparation for ... the apocalypse?" The interviewer asked.

"It doesn't have to escalate that far. My step-father Raymond; he wrote a Journal as a way to reveal us to the general public — to show that there is no reason to panic; we've lived alongside of you since the dawn of mankind and you're all still here thriving. He believes humanity is mature enough to know the truth." Jaunee explained.

"Wait, are you implying we'll be causing the apocalypse?" Daina asked, deeply troubled.

"Once you know what's going on, with your advanced weaponry, you hold the power and the responsibility to make a difficult choice." Jaunee explained.

"What choice is that?" She asked.

"Will you destroy us, then be destroyed by what may come next, or will you stand with us, bravely forging a future. We have so much to offer...I have so much to offer. I can open new horizons for scientific and medical advancement. I can teach you so many things that were lost to the pages of history. I've been to places you couldn't even imagine. The children of Adam and Lilith can finally forge a covenant together. Resolving strife born before our days in the sun. We could have peace!" Jaunee said passionately, and concentrated deeply. While she hated manipulating minds, there was too much at stake. For this to work, the interviewer had to focus on the positive.

[Adam...Eve...Lilith...is the bible true?]

“Wait, Adam, Lilith? That’s from the bible. Are they real? I mean, is the bible true?” Daina asked, ignoring Jaunee’s focused gaze and the sweat streaming down her brow.

“Finally a good question.” Jaunee Began, “Some revelations are true, but they were given to primitive men. You couldn’t really explain the Universe, Quantum Physics and Advanced Medicine to people who barely know how to start a fire. So you tell them you come from the sky, tell them to be good people, not to murder and steal and to rest every few days. God or Gods exist, It or They are superior beings who desire the wellbeing of inferior lifeforms, like you humans show compassion to dogs and cats, but in a more sophisticated way.”

“What about Adam, Eve, Buddha, you know?” Diana asked, trying to understand where science and faith come together.

“Some of them are real, though like Greek Mythology fact, parable and fiction came together to form myriad ideas, some of them reflecting the culture of the time, others universal truths.” Jaunee replied.

“What about magic?” Diana asked.

“Manipulation of the self, others or the environment through ritual or act of will, entirely possible. Shooting fireballs from your fingertips, more of a Hollywood fab.” Jaunee replied.

“How do I know any of this is true?” Diana asked.

“You conduct research.” Jaunee replied.

“Very well, can I ask you about Raymond? He was killed, was he not? Where was your magic then?” The interviewer asked bluntly.

“Oui, he was; and I couldn’t save him. I’m not all-powerful you know...” Jaunee replied sadly.

“Will you tell us about it?” The interviewer asked. Jaunee took

a deep breath, trying to maintain concentration despite the throbbing migraine and she wondered; would she get to finish the tale, or would she die here, tonight, being interviewed by the media. It was something she'd longed to do for decades now; tell the truth. In the end, she knew, this interviewer would be left with a terrible choice; a burden few could handle.



Not long ago my stepfather died, and on that day Benny approached our house carefully, avoiding dry leaves and twigs carefully with his feet, as he'd been trained. Covering his army gear, wore black camouflage trousers, a shirt and a long coat. It was the middle of the night, and everyone had retired to the safety of their homes. They did not realize that we, my stepfather and I, had made our home amongst them, pretending to be human. The settlement which my father chose to call home was nested in a secluded location, far from any major city. Small houses and caravans coexisted amongst a natural forest which predated the settlement. Raymond, my stepfather had loved the countryside settings while I ... I loved Raymond, and so chose to share his home before my own demise.

As far as the killer of my father was concerned, this was the ideal place for monsters to make their home. As he made his way to our home, his heart raced, pounding in his ears. He felt alive now for the first time since his brother died. The freezing November wind, and even the heavy fog, hindering sight, and

giving the settlement a haunted look did not deter the killer. He was determined to finish the task he had started earlier that night. He would find, and kill, me too.

Benny was approximately thirty years old. His features would have been handsome had he not neglected himself. A few years ago, before his brother died, he was quite popular with the ladies. His résumé included service as a sniper, later an officer in the army and later still a career as a police detective. The man was smart; one might even say a genius. He was clever, fast and strong, coming from a successful military family. As a result of the many blessings bestowed upon him, he was not used to failure. He was not used to losing. He was not used to not getting what he wanted. His brother's death and the police investigation leading nowhere was the first time the rising star experienced the darkness of this world, and it fractured him.

Unable to cope with the loss, our hero decided to crack the case and bring the murderer to justice, and so like a man possessed, he made his own inquiries leaving no stone unturned. It is uncertain exactly when this possessed hunter discovered the existence of supernatural creatures in the world. I would assume a young and weak creature got careless and made their existence known to Benny. That was likely the first time the detective had killed something not human.

How he came about the knowledge of my father's existence is beyond me. Why he would then spend a few years tracking down my father to kill him is even a greater mystery. I would assume that either Benny came to the conclusion that we are all monsters, and my father is one of many. Or worse, he believed my father is the killer of his brother, the one he was truly after.

Regardless of the choices which led him this far, he was determined to invade our home and slay anyone residing

there. The fallen hero drew his gun and checked the magazine for ammunition. He holstered his gun again and made sure the leather holster was supple enough and ready for a quick draw. He then made sure his Kevlar vest was securely fastened, and that his grenades were all where they should be – within easy arm's reach. Ski-mask on, he carefully made way to the seemingly abandoned house.

The house was slightly larger than the rest and as the sniper approached; his trained eye spotted hidden cameras nesting amongst the trees surrounding the house. They were all made useless as he sabotaged the power-supply prior to making his assault. There could be no mistakes as far as Detective Straus was concerned. He was a mere mortal, and I, an ancient and powerful monster. He knew without a doubt that even the tiniest of mistakes would lead to his inevitable demise. Part of him longed for that outcome. Part of him longed to be free of the hatred, the pain, worry and sorrow that his chosen lifestyle had brought to his life. Secretly he yearned to die, but not before he took as many of us with him to the grave as possible.

Entry through the door seemed impossible — it was too sturdy and the lock too advanced. Cold nitrogen proved an efficient tool in breaking the window bars. He was inside the house within moments, silent like a trained assassin. He carefully drew his gun and prepared for what might come: I would awaken; I am already awake; I would sense him. Luckily for him the worst had yet to happen.

The mortal man strained to hear something — anything, but the living room was as silent as a grave. The furniture was hand-carved, not that prefabricated junk everybody seems to fancy nowadays. Everything appeared to be orderly and clean, and it was hard for anyone to believe century-old monsters

lived in this house. For an instant our hero paused to consider the ramifications of his actions, and the choices that lead him down this bloody path.

This is not how this once proud man envisioned his life. When he grew up he wanted to be an air-force pilot. He never once even imagined that at the age of thirty, he'd be a vigilante hunter, tracking down and killing monsters, fighting some invisible war the vast majority of humanity isn't aware of, and stubbornly refused to be made aware of. The various TV shows and movies never once expressed the true horror and fear confronting what the unknown supernatural world entails: to discover that the whole of humanity is living a lie; that the fabric of society is being manipulated by alien monsters. No one could help him; he could not even share his tale without being committed to a mental hospital. He realized he was all alone; his brother dead, and not a single person in the whole wide world knew the truth and perhaps never will.

The burden of his misery was too much for him to handle. He shoved the stray thoughts away, locking them deep behind walls of hatred, pride and pain. He checked that his gun was ready to fire again.

'No time for self-pity', Benny reasoned. 'It's time for the hunt'.

He checked the kitchen; it was a fancy kitchen with a professional stove and a variety of chef's cooking tools neatly organized. Then he checked the fridge — no human body parts, no unusual food stored. The detective breathed a sigh of relief. Gun leading the way, he checked the pantry to make sure petite, little me wasn't hiding there. Again, food products were neatly ordered. Nothing out of the ordinary. He checked the upstairs bedrooms. They were neatly ordered and cleaned out of any personal belongings. That was when our clever detective

realized I had probably known he was coming, and made sure to leave a house dispossessed of all evidence as to our existence. He was right at something.

I made a single mistake though. In my hurry, I neglected to clear the basement floor. He found the hatch, and listened carefully for any sign of movement. Benny didn't trust his night-vision goggles well enough and had to be extra careful. The basement housed two more bedrooms, a second kitchen and plenty of storage space. It appeared to him that this was where we really lived, judging from the disarray.

The hunter was very alert now. At any moment I could jump him. He found my bedroom — a larger room with a hand-carved medieval looking bed. The room was as silent and dark as a bat cave at dawn, and he shivered realizing just how alone he was. In the darkness, no one would hear him scream. His breath quickened, and turning left behind the open door, he saw my toilette, my perfumes and makeup. Next to them was a closed bathroom door. Turning sharply right he saw my closet. He searched for me under the bed, then in the bathroom. Afterwards he opened the closet. There were a variety of dresses and sexy women's wear there. Some scarves, hats and a few too many shoes. Noting standard size, he must have realized I was really small or appear to be in my teens.

The other adjoining bedroom belongs to my late father. It housed a simple, single-sized bed, a smaller closet and a few personal belongings. The room appeared mean compared to my magnificent bedroom. It's true; Raymond settles for the bare minimums while lavishing everything a girl could ever want on me.

Obviously I wasn't hidden there either. The rest of the three bedrooms were likewise empty.

In the last room of the house, he found a writing desk with a battered old laptop on it and shelves full of books lining the walls. He checked the books and read the titles. There were some rare edition novels, but no occult books and nothing out of the ordinary. Disappointed, the hunter nearly despaired. He had gone this far, and killed a century-old butcher, only to miss his demonic daughter by a couple of hours. Silently, he prayed for a miracle, even though he was an atheist. His prayers were apparently answered by the battered laptop. As he checked the laptop he discovered it still had battery-power and no password.

Benny carefully searched the browsing history, emails; anything that would give him a hint as to my location. The computer was empty save for a few mp3s and a document entitled *The Journals of Raymond Brooks*; it was the last opened document. Bingo! Our hero had hit the mother lode. He reasoned that the stupid monster had left a journal, no doubt recounting the atrocities he had inflicted upon humanity.

Like a man possessed, Benny began reading the journals I had left, about his fallen adversary, hoping to find clues about my whereabouts and any other creatures such as myself. I left him there reading the journals very much alive and unharmed. It took a great deal of strength on my part to leave him still breathing after what he had done. Though I'm not a violent creature by nature, even the most docile of beings can be pushed to extremes given the proper circumstances. I know I should have killed him there and then. However, I wanted him to understand. There was a dire need in me to educate him, to make him understand what it is that he has done, who he had killed and what my father meant to me. I wanted him to know us, and so he lives, and I flew far away, perhaps losing my chance for vengeance forever.



## The Journals Begin

### **Dear Diary,**

If you are reading this, then I fear the worst has come to pass. I have set off to fight an old-world monster of untold wickedness, and presumably failed. With this journal, I would like to tell you, my anonymous reader, about me. By no means do I profess to be the all-knowing sage. I shall not pretend to hold the secrets of life or even the wisdom of the ages. Though I have lived long, I have not always lived wisely. This journal for me is an end to a long odyssey... a story of how I grew from a frightened and angry orphan, into a mythical figure, both frightening and revered.

My name is Raymond Brooks — at least that's the name I go by today. My original name — my birth name, was Adam. I'm about six feet tall, very strong, with an athletic build, brown hair and brown eyes. I look like one of those people you wouldn't want to come across when you're alone at night, though I'm always polite and sociable. I live in one of the smaller settlements in Israel now. For me, it is a retirement, a closure for a very long and bloody story.



## CHAPTER I

# FIRST DAY IN DRENTWYCH

I'd like to begin my story with my arrival to Drentwych, a town in England that immigrants and the unwanted washed into from whatever life they had left behind. Many hoped that a fresh start in a new place would alter their fate. That was the hope my parents held in their hearts when we boarded the ship that would take us far away to this strange and barbaric land now called England. As for me, I was too young at the time to have any clear thoughts regarding the transition.

I reached Drentwych, more than fifty-five years before the Norman Conquest. Then, it thrived as an immigrant town. I say 'I' because my parents became gravely ill during the journey to England and passed away shortly after our arrival. I was a boy of eight winters then, freshly orphaned and lost.

Drentwych was like a bizarre dream to me, it resembled nothing I knew in my homeland. The trees were towering and huge, dwarfing any man who stood before them. The surrounding stone walls and tall, armed guards speaking in their barbaric language gave me a very strong feeling of being a miniature man surrounded by man-eating giants. Then there were the cold, chilly winds and the snow. It was the first time I'd ever seen snow, and I tried to grab a few flakes to study, wondering all the while why snow turns to water upon touch. I was tiny compared to all of this. I was just a small boy. My parents had just died, and I really did not know how to cope with that — with everything. In my own way I concluded that people are like snowflakes; unique and fragile. I couldn't really think about anything else.

I walked rather aimlessly around town, uncertain of my steps, and lacking the adult direction which all children take for granted. I was awed, at first, by all the novelty around me. Yet as the spell lifted, I saw the place as it truly was: wretched, just like my homeland only in a different way. It was like a story being repeated by a dull bard, where the characters have different names, and the scenery is different. Yet somehow, they all play the exact same role as the sad stories you've heard before. A smelly bucketful, which may or may not have been dung, poured out a window, broke the spell of childish wonder. I noticed how the snow mingled with the filth, becoming an oozing, repulsive substance which I did my best to avoid. I nearly bumped into a stump-footed man lying in the snow and waste — probably half-dead by the looks of him. He was covered head-to-toe in filthy rags, and underneath them he wore a dirty soldier's uniform.

Obviously he had been injured in battle and left to beg for

alms. My heart went out to him and I felt my own misery more keenly. Tears welled up in my eyes and I forced myself to look away, only to see a young maiden with a raven-black mop of hair, green teeth, and a slightly swollen belly leaning against a door dyed blue, offering whatever hidden wares she had to offer. I wondered as to her wares, and why some people gazed at her with disdain while others studied her as one would a horse. Needless to say I did not realize the significance of the blue-dyed door. I actually found myself leaning against a wall, staring at her, until time and would-be clients made me reach the simple conclusion that the wares she was selling were her own body. I knew girls like that in my homeland too; they were shunned by society who took no pity on them.

I hurried to get away from all the wretchedness, passing by a larger house when a wooden sign, portraying a large drink-filled mug, creaked on its hinges, and then a strange sound caught my attention. In a ditch to the left of the house a man leaned down and vomited, coughing and spitting. No one seemed to care, so I too decided it best to leave him alone. I felt ever so sorry for stepping foot in this town. My parents had died for nothing, I realized. This place is no heaven, but an icy version of hell.

I wandered aimlessly through town, too proud to beg for food and refusing to submit to the misery that surrounded me. In a way, I saw myself as Aladdin, a young idle boy waiting for his wizard to unknowingly fulfill his dreams. In the merchant's quarter I finally rested, too cold and weary to go on. I sat on a barrel and watched the world go by, waiting for the dream to end and for me to wake up back home. At some point I must have fainted, for I woke up the next morning in a bed. A man whom I recognized to be the smith from the merchant's quarter gave me a bowl of unidentified food. I thanked him gratefully

with a nod and a warm smile, and cherished the feeling of warmth in my palms as I held the bowl.

When I had finished eating he took the bowl and said something in his strange language. I held my palms up in reply, signaling that I did not understand. Eventually, after several awkward attempts at conversation, he pointed to his chest and said, "Ivar." I mimicked the gesture, pointing to my chest and saying, "Adam."

He gestured for me to stay put, pointing at me with both hands and then pointing down. I did as instructed, and sat upon a barrel feeling an immense sense of gratitude. I thought to myself that there was indeed one admirable man in Sodom. Ivar descended some stairs. I discerned this from the sound of his footsteps, and shortly afterwards I heard the sound of hammer on anvil, and understood that he had gone to his place of work. I rested for some time, and then followed him downstairs.

I wanted to thank him in some way, so I decided I'd pay him back by working. His old face seemed surprised to see me up as he took a break from work. I smiled at him, and looked about the room. Finding a broom, I commenced cleaning his smithy, purposely ignoring anything he said. I had to pay him back somehow, and quite frankly I also had to prove my usefulness, else I feared I would fall from his good graces. He resumed work.

As soon as the place was clean I dared to look at him. He paused his work and smiled, saying something which I believe was a thank you. I found a corner to sit in and waiting for the first sign of work which I could do. That day I learned how to carry two water-buckets on a cane across my shoulders, as well as other menial tasks. In the evening he offered me food again, which I took gratefully, and in the morning we both woke at dawn and began our daily work. That's how I was adopted by

Ivar, the man who became a father-figure to me, who taught me the common language of this strange new land, and eventually his craft. Our relationship was one of few words — initially, and many deeds.

If there is anything I learned from this chapter of my life it's this: There are two kinds of people in this world, those that had the privilege of living sheltered lives, and those that had to fight for shelter. Regardless of the circumstances of one's birth, prosperity can be obtained by those of tenacious nature. Though I didn't appreciate it at the time, I was happy living with Ivar.



## CHAPTER II

### **IVAR THE SMITH**

Three years after Ivar first took me in, my life changed again.

“Adam,” Ivar began the conversation, taking a deep breath when our day’s work was done.

“Yes, Master,” I replied, as I always did when he spoke to me.

“It’s been, what, three winters since I took you in, yes?” He asked.

“Three years,” I agreed, and nodded my head.

“And in this time you’ve grown taller and stronger,” he continued.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“I’m not done, boy,” he answered angrily, so I kept my mouth shut.

‘This isn’t a complimentary conversation — best to be on my toes,’ I thought.

“And as you’ve grown taller and stronger, so have the stories of your various adventures,” he said with a smile that hinted that he knew everything. I raised my brows innocently, silently challenging that knowledge.

“You don’t know what I’m talking about, do you?” He asked. I shook my head innocently.

“I’m talking about the miller’s boy you beat up last week. Last I heard his eye was swollen shut, and he only managed to open it yesterday,” he said.

“May I defend m’self?” I asked in a strained civil tone, clenching my fists under the dinner table, the innocent façade quickly fading.

“By all means, please do,” he answered, and smiled, as if it were a challenge of some kind.

“Inius Miller tried to nick a coin vich you gave me to perchis bread. Now I couldn’t ha’ let him steal from you like dat, not without a fight,” I replied proudly.

“So you were actually protecting me from the miller’s boy by hitting him so hard that he can’t open his eye anymore,” he commented, playing with his thin beard. “Very well, what about little Tymon and Gerelde, the butcher’s boys, two weeks ago?” He asked.

“Dat’s not fer! Dey both made fun of me noz bein’ too big. I told dem I was born dat way, but dey wouldn’t stop,” I replied, hoping he would cease this line of conversation.

“So you broke Archie’s nose and intimidated his little brother so much he couldn’t stop crying for hours,” Ivar replied.

“Serves ‘em right for making fun of mi noz!” I replied, raising my voice more than I intended. Ivar smiled a crooked smile as I raised my voice. By breaking my calm, he had proven his point: I’m a bully and I’m quick to anger at the slightest provocation.

“Alright, what about Calin from across the street, what was his crime?” Ivar asked, leaning forward on the table.

“Calin started it, he’s two years older dan I am. I was fightin for my life, honest!” I replied, trying to sound more like a victim. Damn it, I knew he was right, but for the life of me I didn’t want to admit it.

“Adam, every child in Drentwych is scared of coming near you,” he said in fatherly tones.

“Good!” I replied, proud of my accomplishments.

“Even children bigger and older than you would rather not cross your path,” he continued.

“Didn’t know I left such a good impression!” I boasted, growing happier still, though I knew it wasn’t appropriate.

“And now you boast of your bullying instead of asking for forgiveness. That’s hardly honorable of you,” Ivar said.

“Master, these people are all tieves, liars, and bullies, and I take pride, not shame, in actin’ out against them,” I replied.

“In that case, it’s good that you set them straight, right?” He asked.

“Of course!” I replied.

“So you’re the champion of the people, are you?” He inquired.

“I should hope to be so lucky,” I replied happily.

“Adam, you speak well,” Ivar said, and changed his tone. “You’re probably the toughest boy in Drentwych.” He said and I smiled proudly. “But this is a small town and you’re no warrior. You lack a warrior’s restraint,” he continued, and my smile vanished. “A warrior without restraint is nothing more than a bully at your age, and a shameless villain when he’s older,” Ivar said.

“Wait, I...!” I began.

“Shut up, I’m not done. Respect your elders!” Ivar commanded,

and I complied, clenching my teeth.

“Older warriors of your type are often murderers, cut-throats, and brigands, and they rank lower than thieves in honor,” he said.

“I’m not a murderer! You wrong me!” I replied too quickly, raising my voice.

“Do not raise your voice at me. Be silent and listen, boy!” He yelled back, and I immediately sat down and lowered my eyes.

“Adam, you let your emotions cloud your judgment. You anger too quickly and strike out at the slightest hint of provocation. I’m trying to teach you how to be a better man, but you don’t care to listen,” he said, and leaned back in his chair, crossing his hands in front of his chest.

“What ever happened to the lost child I picked off the street?” He asked, his pride wounded.

“I’m sorry, Master,” I replied, truly ashamed of myself.

“A warrior should not only be strong and win fights, he must act with honor and responsibility at all times,” Ivar said, and I nodded in my understanding.

“A warrior is above the common man, and should act accordingly with nobility and more importantly, with restraint, otherwise, he’s nothing more than a rabid dog and should be dealt with as such.” Ivar explained.

“I understand,” I said.

“Killing is easy, anybody can kill ...,” Ivar explained emotionally, “... but who amongst us can raise the dead? Who can bring a man back to life once his life’s spark has been extinguished?” He asked with a passion I recognized, one which struck a chord.

“A simple flower, once crushed, cannot be revived even by the wisest of men,” he continued as my thoughts wandered elsewhere.

“You’re right, Master,” I said, and tried to choke down my tears.

“You need to consider your actions carefully and you need to take responsibility for what you say and do. The Gods are watching us and our ancestors are watching us; think of this before you dishonor them,” he said.

“Yes, master,” I replied obediently.

“I’m not angry at you for beating those boys. I’m actually proud you’re growing strong. I’m angry because you make shameful excuses for your actions. I’m angry because you allow yourself to be weak and to let your emotions control you. That sort of thinking is suitable for a woman, not a man,” he said and I stared silently at him.

“Now, since you’ve grown so strong,” he went on in lighter tones. “I’ve decided it’s time to teach you how to fight.” He smiled.

“Wh-what?” I asked, not sure of what I had just heard.

“Losing our hearing in our venerable old age, are we? I said you’ve grown strong enough and its time you learned to really be a man, so tomorrow after work I’m going to teach you how to fight,” he said.

“Thank you, Master!” I replied, overjoyed.

“Control yourself, Adam. You can never expect to master a sword before you’ve learned to master the spirit which commands it to action,” he reprimanded, angry that I acted emotionally once more.

“Yes, Master,” I said more calmly. Thus I became Ivar’s apprentice, and there was no man prouder to be called a blacksmith apprentice in all of Drentwych.

I am never certain as to the cause of my anger during my teenage years. Perhaps it was the injustice that had sent my real parents and I on the voyage that would later be their ending, making me an orphan in a foreign land. Perhaps it was the continued injustice and misery I saw every day of my life. The wretchedness of the common man, the cruelty in which men of higher positions treat their lesser. I could never find closure or solace with my parents; they're gone... Every time I had to cope with the world, I was filled with wrath, and sometimes this wrath, like an overflowing volcano, spilled and lashed out at all who were near me. I was mighty fortunate to be cared for by noble Ivar who as if I was his own, for whatever altruistic reason he held in his heart. I had never properly thanked him, the first, foremost and greatest of my regrets.



Meanwhile, not far away a lone figure made his way to the fortress of Wist Hill which ruled over the whole of the land. His pacing hastened as his eyes gazed upon the Fortress under the light of the full moon. In his grim and determined mind he heard the whispers — voices who echoed the betrayal he had suffered at the hands of those closest to him. It was a chilly, star-filled night, yet the lone figure suffered not from cold or fatigue. The undead rarely suffer from these things which may cripple the living. Edmund Ironside would have his revenge.

Edmund was of an unrecognizable age, his features once

plain, now had taken on a grayish pale hue, like a dying man. His hair, once groomed, now was dust colored and hanging about him unkempt. It wasn't long ago — perhaps a few months, when Edmund was a living King. As he traveled to the realm he decided to hide in nearby Drentwych before extracting his revenge. As his feet carried him to Drentwych, his mind drifted past the endless whispers which infested his mind; to what was another lifetime; to a time when he was a mortal man teaching his children how to hunt.

Happy thoughts were soon replaced by infernal wrath, and Edmund's knuckles would have whitened even more if they could under the powerful flex of his clenched fists. His eyes lighted and beamed in unholy rage. The whispers in his mind rose in volume, becoming screams of dying men and burning fire, of sword and spear piercing tender flesh.

Edmund was betrayed by those closest to him, and he would never see his children again. He could have rescued Britannia. He could have defeated King Cnut the Great. He could have saved his family. He could have vanquished the Viking horde. He could have been the hero England longed for since Arthur ... but he was betrayed, beaten and murdered. With his dying breath he swore an oath of vengeance. His oath was heard and accepted, by whatever forces lord over death. Now, not even death would stop him. In Drentwych he will begin preparations for a vengeance that would shape the future of the world. In Drentwych, the voices whispered, is a spy of Cnut, a smith ... Ivar, the voices whispered ... his name is Ivar.

'I will make him pay, I will make them all pay for what was done to me!' He thought. Edmund had but one dark deed to do, to make this spy suffer as he had suffered.



Present day...

As Jaunee was being interviewed, a voice spoke on Daina's headset as she listened to Jaunee's story.

"Keep her talking for as long as possible," the voice said amongst static interference. Daina for some reason did not notice the radio static.

"Wait a minute," The interviewer paused Jaunee's story.

"Qui?"

"From what I read of the two published Journals," Daina began. "Adam was born human, yet you mentioned him in modern day. Can someone transform from a regular person into a supernatural one?" Daina asked.

"Qui" Jaunee replied. "Some can transform people, as you call it." She explained.



## CHAPTER III

### **INGRID**

I was approximately at the age of fourteen winters when Ingrid came into my life. This was an event that broke the quiet routine I had adopted for myself under Ivar's care. It was after a brief lunch that a young woman came and stood by the closed smithy. I was occupied in the smithy with my own food, while Ivar ate the filthy communal meal with the rest of the townsfolk.

I had never been able to bring myself to eat the disgusting common Fayre with the rest of them: In a huge cauldron that was rarely washed, was boiled vegetable and herb and whatever other scraps the cook saw fit to throw in. To this was added any meat that could be found. I made it my own habit to eat only what I could identify, and to wash my hands prior to any meal. Therefore, I often ate alone at the smithy while Ivar and the

rest of the townsfolk ate their questionable shared meal in the town square.

I was quite surprised by this strange young woman who stood by the door, not even bothering to knock. It seemed that she was waiting for someone, and I was quite intrigued. So, hidden in the smithy, I studied her carefully. She was two heads taller than I. Fairly long blond hair, almost white in shade, reached half-way down her back. It was braided into one pigtail, and tied with a simple leather ribbon. Her face and frame were wider than mine and fuller, with a chubby, porcine nose that at first glance made her resemble an unattractive beast. Despite my initial exaggerated reaction, she was quite fair upon the eyes. With blue eyes and an absent-minded expression, she cast her gaze towards the town's square. I could not take my eyes off her.

When Ivar finally approached she smiled broadly, going to him and speaking in a language I'd never heard before. I walked towards the window to catch a better view. Ivar appeared stunned, then, after recognizing her, smiled broadly. As they embraced I found myself walking backwards, deeper into the smithy, as if the power of their affection physically drove me back. For a moment, I thought she was his bride, and I knew what envy was.

'How unfair that a man of his age should have a young maiden for a wife!' I thought.

"Adam! Come on out!" Ivar called, and I lost the train of my thought obeying his command absentmindedly.

"This is my daughter, Ingrid! Is she not beautiful?" He asked, on the brink of joyous tears. My eyes moved from him to her, and now it was her turn to study me. I didn't like the small shifts in her facial features as she studied me. She probably thought

me coarse, brown, and dirty. I smiled, ashamed of myself.

“Ingrid, this is my apprentice Adam, who seems to have gone mute all of a sudden,” Ivar said, and my embarrassed smile grew.

“It’s a p-pleasure to meet you, Mistress,” I said. She smiled at my words in a way that revealed her open distaste of me.

“Adam, fill a couple of buckets at the well,” Ivar commanded. I obediently complied with his order.

“A bit too raggedy to be a smith, don’t you think?” Ingrid told Ivar, ignoring my presence as I walked away.

“Perhaps he is, but he does his work well,” Ivar said. As I entered the smithy I paid heed to the first part of the sentence describing me as being too scraggy. My fists clenched, and my knuckles whitened as I walked to the table. In my mind I had another enemy now, one that I could not pummel into submission.

Losing my appetite, I tossed my meal aside. I picked up the buckets and the yoke, and left the smithy, hearing their laughter behind me. They were probably making fun of me, I thought. I carried the buckets as if marching to war, trying to figure out how I was going to tackle this new enemy. I barely registered a lone figure — armored and covered in rags, studying me. I figured he had the plague, or was disfigured somehow. My mind drifted back to my own little world, unaware of the mortal danger I faced.

Upon returning I heard them laughing still. I opened the door and pretended the buckets were as light as air as I lifted them again to enter the smithy. Unfortunately, I nearly dropped both buckets and spilled the water. Ivar got up from his seat to help me while Ingrid just laughed and gave me that expression again, as if I were some sick puppy.

‘Great, Adam’, I told myself. ‘Try to show that you’re strong and you end up showing just how clumsy you are!’

“You should be more careful, Adam,” Ivar told me.

“Yes, Master,” I replied.

“Remember what I taught you. If the buckets are heavy for you, place yourself in a balanced position, mind your breathing, and lift carefully,” he said, and I grew angrier still.

“Yes, Master,” I replied, and hoped he’d leave me be.

Later that evening I waited outside with my wooden sword for Ivar to give me another fencing lesson. God knows I had plenty of rage in me to work out. Was that lone figure still lingering outside? I couldn’t tell, as if under a spell of some kind. My mind drifted back; I wanted to fight. I noticed something was wrong when Ivar didn’t bring his own sword.

“Adam, put the weapon away, we need to talk,” he said. I did as instructed, frustrated and scared of what he was about to say. I looked nervously at him as he began.

“Adam, Ingrid is not for you,” he said flatly. It took me a few moments to understand what he was saying, for my mind had been expecting news of another sort, such as ‘now that Ingrid is here, we’re not going to train anymore’ or ‘now that Ingrid is here, I’m not going to have enough room for you, too’, rather than this; Ingrid not being for me. I couldn’t have cared less. Yet my face flushed red as if burning up and my fists clenched of their own accord.

“We come from different places — you and I, so I don’t expect you to know this,” Ivar said.

“Know what?” I asked.

“Where we come from — Ingrid and I, it is considered ...” Ivar said, looking for the proper word “... very wrong for a woman of her stature to be involved in any way with someone like you.”

“Someone like me?” I asked, not really sure what was wrong with me, but angry nonetheless.

“A low-born orphan,” Ivar explained.

“She’s noble?” I asked, understanding full well the difference between nobility and commoners.

“In our race, yes, she’s high-born, and you’re not of our race,” Ivar said.

“I understand,” I said.

“It’s not that I don’t care for you, but some things shouldn’t be; some things can bring shame to my family.”

“I understand,” I repeated a bit more loudly, and I fully did. Where I come from, I was the high-born — the chosen, while she would have been the low-born — the outsider.

“Good night, Adam,” Ivar said. He turned and went back to the smithy. I was angry — as angry as I had ever been. It seemed that everything angered me: the very face of Ingrid, the way she spoke to me as if I was beneath notice; Ivar’s ‘talk’ with me. I knew she was taking over my life, pushing me away and depriving me of what little I had. I could hear them laughing inside, probably making fun of low-born me.

So I left the smithy and in the darkness fought against my shadow, imagining the faces I had now come to hate. If only I could pound someone. Was I being followed? How my blood raged for a fight, and for what? I was overreacting; I was half-past crazy. I realized that nothing I had done or thought since noon had made any sense. My rage was gravely misplaced. Ingrid is Ivar’s daughter; she doesn’t even know me; so why would she belittle me? And dear Ivar, who has shown me only kindness over the years; surely he’ll not forsake me now that a closer kin has reappeared in his life.

I walked alone, traveling the dark, muddy roads and alleys,

thinking, trying to understand — trying to make sense of everything. Tired and cold but then calm, I went home to the smithy. Ingrid slept in my bed, and Ivar pointed with his finger for me to go downstairs. I slept in the smithy that night and those that followed.





## CHAPTER IV

# THE THORNS OF LOVE

"Adam, my daughter will be staying with us now," Ivar explained to me come morning. I nodded my head in understanding, trying to dispel that irrational anger bubbling up inside of me once again.

"So you will sleep downstairs in the shop, I will sleep in my usual bed, and Ingrid shall sleep in the attic," Ivar continued. He paused to stare thoughtfully into my face then went on after taking a deep breath. "It's improper for a girl her age to sleep in the same room with a young man, and I won't have her sleeping in my shop with tools lying about," he said in firm tones. I nodded my understanding. His words made absolute sense: his house was fairly small, a girl should not sleep near a man, and the shop was the last remaining spot in the house where one could sleep. Yet somehow, despite all common-sense, I felt I was being robbed of my bed, being driven away, even banished from my domain. I know it doesn't make sense, but this is how

I felt. I fought my rage and tried to master my thoughts.

With my eyes to the floor I gathered my few belongings and made room for myself in the smithy. Ingrid watched me, yet I could not bring myself to return the gaze.

“What kind of name is Adam?” She suddenly asked, as she watched me walking about.

“W-what?” I asked, surprised by the question.

“I am soorry,” Ingrid said, drawing out each syllable slowly as if I was dumb or deaf. “My father told me that you don’t speak very well,” she said, nodding her head up and down.

“Yes,” I replied, taking a deep breath. My patience was growing thin; I wanted her away from me.

“What kind of name is Adam? I’ve never heard it before,” she asked.

“It means ‘Man’,” I replied, speaking plainly, trying to overcome my accent.

“That’s it?” She asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Do you know what my name means?” She asked, obviously wishing to tell me. I had no idea, but I played with the thought of her name meaning ‘in-greed’, ‘inbreed’, or any such wordplay.

“You’re quite odd, being so stiff, and then smiling all of a sudden for no apparent reason,” she said, and I turned red.

“It means ‘beautiful’,” she boasted after an awkward silence.

“What?” I asked, not following her thoughts.

“My name, Ingrid, it means ‘beautiful’,” she said.

“It fits,” I replied.

“What?” She asked.

“The name beautiful fits you, you are beautiful,” I replied, only now realizing the truth of it.

‘Why the hell would I have said something like that? I hate

her!' I thought.

"You think I'm beautiful?" She asked.

"Yes," I replied. "No!"

"Well, how can you tell if you keep looking at the floor?" She asked, and I raised my eyes to look into hers.

"I fink you're beautiful, Ingrid, daughter of Ivar," I replied, feeling my heart beat too fast and my face grow a shade too red. I looked away like a frightened mouse cornered by a cat.

"Oh, will you stop pestering the boy!" Ivar called, and I took my opportunity to get away from her as quickly as possible while they exchanged loud words in a language I could not understand. I hated her for sure, and wanted her gone; that's why she put a spell on me back then, to force me to love her. I've heard before about the spells women can cast, I was always certain I could resist, I didn't even like them. They were loud and annoying.

Days passed, and my fears came to pass. Ivar spent his free time with Ingrid, exchanging words in their native language. Though he kept his word and continued to teach me both his craft and the sword, his affection shifted to his daughter now. I felt discarded, and resented them both for it. Silently, my dissatisfaction grew day by day, and a selfish rage consumed me. I worked harder every day and tried to excel at everything I did, yet Ivar's attention and praise remained focused on his daughter, and I ... I felt like a strange-ling amongst them, more now than ever. Is it so surprising that upon feeling discarded, I thought of my parents once again, and the life I had before Drentwych? The more I thought, the further away from them I wanted to be. But I couldn't leave; there wasn't a place for me to go, and the world outside is cruel and harsh.



Despair, injustice and the cold hand of vengeance can sway even a noble man to do dark deeds. ‘Sacrifices must be made!’ Edmund told himself, as he choked the life out of Ingrid’s mother. He watched, with a morbid appreciation no mortal man can fathom, the final moments before life is forever extinguished. He gazed into her eyes, and was saddened for only a moment. For with her dying breath all Ingrid’s mother could think of was her poor daughter, and the fate she’ll face with the eternal absence of her mother. Ingrid was young; only a child. But Edmund too, had children, and this woman’s last desperate thought suddenly rekindled a feeling he had not felt since his undeath. It was as if the roots of a delicate seed pierced a hard and cold rock to find sustenance below — an ember of hope, a spark of the noble man he once was, before falling to darkness.

“I’m home, Mama!” Said Ingrid as she opened the door. Her eyes widened with terror as she saw her mother, lying lifeless on the floor, her eyes open, gazing into nothing. Luckily, Ingrid failed to register the looming shadow, which departed through the window.

“Mama!” Ingrid screamed, and ran to her mother while Edmund fled into the shadows of darkness. Yet, in his way, he had shown her mercy.

Now the Undead Lord gazed at Ivar’s smithy and the children there. He had come to know them: Ingrid, pretty and proud and Adam, thin and angry. Edmund was always of a patient nature; he had time, all the time in the world. He would study his prey

and his family. He would wait for the proper moment where he will strike like a venomous serpent, extracting cold vengeance in the manner that will hurt the most. All who were responsible for his demise will suffer — each and every one of them, from the high Cnut to this smith.



Present day...

It was late evening; the school on Isserlis street in Tel-Aviv was completely vacant. Across the street from the school stood a commercial building housing several companies, including a Publishing house and a TV studio where Jaunee was now being interviewed.

“Strike Team Alpha; move to position.” Was heard over a secure radio channel, and armed soldiers quickly cut the fence and entered the empty school. “Taking positions on rooftops and behind windows.”



It was a calm day like those that had come before. A warm spring had arrived and all the snow had melted. The ground everywhere was sprinkled with the green of grass, and wild

flowers. I loved that season and the relief it brought from the terrible winter that had just passed. Winter always steered sad thoughts into my mind.

As I worked with Ivar in the smithy upon a cozy noon, a messenger came and informed Ivar that the Lords wish to see him at once.

“Adam, I have to go, I shall return within a week or so. In the meanwhile, you are in charge of the smithy and my home,” Ivar said, and fondly slapped my back. I nearly toppled over, unbalanced by the casual strength the old smith had in him.

“I shall not disappoint you, Master,” I said as he swallowed his laughter at seeing me nearly topple over. Then his tones turned serious and he gazed into my eyes.

“Adam, you’re the man of the house now, and I expect you to care for Ingrid as I would. You know, she has lost her mother to the plague and grows quite fearful when she is alone.” My eyes widened with disbelief; no, I did not know her mother had died. Neither of them had ever spoken of it, at least not to me. My shock was not for the fact her mother had died — I had assumed something was amiss when the young maiden suddenly came to live with us, but from the realization that Ingrid has feelings beyond that of superiority over me.

“I shall not disappoint you, Master,” I replied sternly.

“Good, and you shall make no attempts to woo my daughter,” Ivar added.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied. He snorted, and then gave me a crooked smile

“Of course not. You’d never dishonor me after all I’ve given you,” he said. “I have complete faith in you,” he added and left.

I took his tools and continued his work, proud to be given this opportunity to be self-sufficient, both as a smith and as a man.

As I worked, my mind began to wonder at the puzzle that was Ingrid. I remember this day in vivid clarity, for it was the first of mysteries I tried to solve. It set my mind thinking.

'I know that Ivar is a nobleman, or was a nobleman yet makes no mention of it while he works as a common smith. There may be many reasons for that, from loss of status to simple humbleness. He often discusses honor and proper conduct, so it is safe to assume his loss of status is not due to shameful acts on his part. Why he does not live with his wife and daughter is a mystery.

'I had assumed Ingrid was a bastard child, which would explain her obnoxious behavior and why Ivar would not live with her and her mother. Yet Ivar perhaps has no wife at all. So why not live with his daughter and her mother? It's a mystery I cannot answer. Having no-one else in the world, it's quite clear why Ingrid would come here, and Ivar, being of a generous nature would take her in, despite a loss of status in Drentwyck. One piece of the puzzle, though, doesn't make sense. There was a man in dirty armor and clothes, who sometimes watches the house. While he speaks not a word and always departs when he is noticed, his first appearance coincided with Ingrid's first appearance, so it is safe to assume both are related'. These were my thoughts as I wrestled with the puzzle.

I decided to address the man when next I saw him, now that Ivar wasn't around to scold me for doing so. I closed shop as usual, waiting for the opportunity to solve the enigma.

After I closed the shop Ingrid said she was going to wash in the river, and requested that I guard her. I nodded my consent and followed her when she was ready. I was silent, proud, and stern as I accompanied her, feeling quite pleased with myself for acting in a chivalric manner. As she washed I did not peek

even once, trying to be as virtuous as I knew I should. After she dressed herself loosely, she sat by a tree and requested that I come closer.

I did as instructed, yet kept my eyes firmly on the grass. She sat near a tree with her back to me, and I took careful, nervous step after careful, nervous step towards her. Something in the way she sat and the way she spoke seemed out of place to me.

“Yes Mistress?” I asked, as I stood behind her nervously, trying to banish the inappropriate thoughts which stirred in me.

“Do you find me beautiful?” She asked, looking into the blue river as the sun was setting behind us.

“Wh-why do you ask?” I stuttered nervously.

“And why do you always answer a question with a question?” She replied, quite angry at my response.

“It’s a habit of me people, I can’t help it,” I joked.

“What?” She asked, obviously not having considered the idea that I, too, might have a ‘people.’

“I find you beautiful, Mistress,” I replied honestly. She was indeed fair upon the eyes, with her blond hair and an absent-minded expression that made her blue eyes seem a bit dreamy. Even her nose which wasn’t pretty, gave her some character; a measure of humanity.

“So why don’t you ever say anything?” She asked.

“Because usually, I have nothing to say,” I replied honestly. I did not understand her question the same way she did, for she was the first maiden in my proximity, I did not know they like to be flattered.

“Oh! Never mind!” She spat out angrily.

“What did I say to upset you?” I asked, frustrated. I did not understand this girl, nor what she was trying to tell me.

“Nothing, comb my hair,” she replied, disappointed. Caught

somewhere between anger and frustration, I grabbed the comb and held it as tightly as one would hold a sword. Yet, as I touched her hair and combed it, I did so as gently as I could.

"You have quite the gentle touch for a boy," she commented as I worked, and I took it as an insult.

"Yes, I'm quite frail as well," I replied bitterly.

"I don't think you're frail, you seem to be growing stronger daily," she responded, trying perhaps to mend broken pride.

"I do try," I said, still taking her every word as an insult.

"I know, I see how you fist-fight your shadow at night when you think we're all asleep," she said, laughing. "And how you pretend your broom is a sword and fence against your shadow when you're left to clean alone." I grew deadly silent.

'My secrets so openly revealed!' I thought. My mind flickered between shame and rage. She must have read my face, for she looked at me, puzzled, her laughter dying on her lips.

"Why are you always so angry? I wasn't trying to offend you, I thought it was funny," she said as her eyes sought mine.

"tis' not funny," I replied. I wanted this exchange of words to be over with, but I wasn't in control here, and it drove me mad.

"Alright, I apologize. Now will you tell me why you are always so angry?" She asked.

"I don't know," I told her, looking at the grass. There were many reasons and she chief amongst them.

"So why don't you try talking to me instead of sulking all the time?" She asked.

"What do you want me to say?" I asked honestly, hoping for once she would reveal to me what she'd like to hear and be done with it.

"Whatever is on your mind that's causing you to be so angry every time I come near you," she replied.

“I fink I love you,” was my simple reply. “And I know I should not,” I added bitterly. As these words were finally spoken out in the open, I felt as if a great burden has been lifted off my shoulders. I was surprised at myself; I did not realize I cared for her in any positive way until I confessed it, both to myself and to her.

She blinked twice, perhaps stunned by my answer, and I lowered my face, feeling ashamed of myself. With one finger she touched my chin and lifted my face so that my brown eyes could look into the blue of hers. My heart raced ever so fast, and I felt like a mouse trying to escape a hungry cat.

She looked intently into my eyes for a few moments, and then, after making some sort of silent decision, she closed her eyes. She moved her face so close to mine that I could hear and feel her breath. I closed my eyes then, and felt her lips touch mine. It was as if a feather had touched me, so light a touch that I was uncertain as to whether or not she had touched me at all. Her lips were chilly and soft, a wonderful, tender sensation such as I had never felt before. It was as if for a moment we both ascended to the heavens, so light we were.

Her right hand, which before had held my chin, now caressed my cheek, and somehow my right hand mirrored her own and caressed hers in return. Her fingers felt so soft as they touched my skin, and her cheek was likewise so smooth and delicate, that I took enormous pleasure in her touch. The world spun and faded away, all wrongs were made right, and I felt a moment of almost perfect happiness. The bitter notion that I had betrayed Ivar’s trust stung my heart, yet my mind quickly sought ways in which to set things right with him — perhaps there would be a way for him to accept and endorse our love.

Ingrid then moved her head back, opening her eyes, and I did

the same after sensing her movement. We sat there for a long time, silently looking into each other's eyes. It seemed we'd shared a silent bond; the kind no words could ever achieve. I wanted so much to tell her how I felt, to confide in her about my hopes and dreams. I wanted to openly bare my soul and let her see the purity of my feelings. I wanted to sing of love and forget all that is dark. But I had no words for these things, so I watched her silently and hoped she would understand.

We did not leave the river until night had fallen and it was too cold to remain outside. Though we slept apart, she, so far above and I, so far below, she was never far from my thoughts, and I would have almost slept in peace that night, if only I could have forgotten that I had betrayed Ivar's trust.

On that evening when young love first bloomed, the dark figure appeared again, watching us. Ingrid was fast asleep while I battled my shadow outside, wooden sword in hand. I could always tell when he was about, as the hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood upright, and a chill penetrated my bones. I have always had this feeling — always when he was about, even when I couldn't see or hear him. This time, as I practiced my swings, I tried to focus, to listen and feel the movement of the wind, to sense his position.

Promptly, without warning I turned to him as he hid in the darkness, observing me. I walked quickly towards him and he slowly retreated towards an alley. Little did I know at the time, that he only observed the house to gauge whether or not Ivar had left the smithy that had been prompted by the latter. Edmund retreated deeper into the alley as I closed in. I was like a fly assaulting a spider's web.

"Hey you, who may you be?" I asked. The figure gazed at me for a moment, making a decision. Then he started walking

slowly towards me. I could sense the eagerness, and how he tried to hide his eagerness with slow steps. I held the sword in front of me, in a defensive position.

“You watch us constantly, I know!” I said, and he halted, realizing something was very wrong. He seemed surprised I could see him, yet it was clear to me that he was constantly there. I had not realized at the time that I had the cursed gift to sense creatures such as him despite their attempts to obfuscate and misdirect my senses.

“Who are you?” I asked again, feeling my heart pound within my chest. The thought that perhaps it was folly to approach him finally penetrated my thick skull.

“I am Edmund Ironside,” he said, and obviously expected some reaction. The fact of the matter was, I had no idea this was the previous, now dead king of England.

“Alright,” I said, registering the name “Why are you watching the Smithy?” I asked, truly oblivious to what was supposed to be common knowledge. He closed the distance between us with impossible speed, and grabbed hold of my sword-arm.

“Revenge,” He said venomously, expressing each syllable to give it meaning.

I acted out of instinct, trying to pull my sword-arm free while punching his stomach with all my strength. I wasn't nearly strong enough to wriggle my hand free, but when my fist connected with his armor I hurt him. There were little whiffs of smoke coming out from beneath his clothes. He let go of me, took a few steps backwards, and from beneath his mask I could see his eyes glowing in hatred and shock. Little did I know, I had somehow hurt the revenant with a mere punch. I was too frightened to actually process the myriad of thoughts going through my head. I fled as fast as I could to the smithy. I barred

the door and remained awake, vigilantly guarding our home.

‘Revenge,’ he had said. Surely I was not his target. I may have been an angry bully, but surely I’ve made no offense which warranted the attention of this Lord.

Likewise, Ingrid, while annoying in the extreme when she was not perfectly lovable, could warrant no such dire enemy. It was only then that I solved the puzzle. Ivar kept his distance to protect his family, and then traveled to Drentwych to protect himself. With the death of Ingrid’s mother, accidental or intentional, he was left with no choice but to accept Ingrid into his fold. Perhaps this was why he insisted that I be ever vigilant. Perhaps this is why he had taken me in, in the first place. He did seem proud that I was strong, and he did train me in the use of a sword ... no, I’m getting ahead of myself. Ivar was not the cunning sort; surely a scheme of this magnitude could only live in my mind.

‘I best not delve into the matter any further,’ I thought.

Come morning, I opened the smithy and worked as usual, hiding from Ingrid and the world what had transpired. As I struck hammer to anvil my mind drifted to many thoughts, trying to make sense of things which could not be explained. By evening I decided that I probably had a vivid dream, and that none of this is real. I slept soundly that night, and resumed normal life the day after.



Edmund fled this horrid child, in the darkness, taking off his armor and shirt, to inspect his injury. Beneath his armor his skin was gray and dead, and yet there was a scorch mark, where a child's fist made contact with his armored flesh. As far as Edmund knew, he was virtually immune to harm. He could survive cuts and bruises easily, as he has done when attacked by bandits. His flesh easily knitted together and he did not bleed. Yet, this child, this skinny, brown child had struck a blow, and it hurt like an inferno burning his flesh. Edmund reasoned that perhaps there were limitations to his powers. Perhaps God or the Devil, for their own reasons had made him vulnerable to the innocence of children. Though he could probably endure many such blows from children, Edmund would not take the chance. He would wait and study. There were questions that demanded answers. How could the boy have sensed him, when no-one else could? How could he have been damaged by a child? Edmund decided to postpone attacking Ivar...for now... the dead has time.

When Ivar returned the following week he had no idea that his daughter and I were in love or that we were in any mortal danger. We kept a façade of 'business as usual', up trying to prevent his knowledge of and subsequent interference in our romance. I knew that I had gravely wronged him, and the rational side of me screamed every time my eyes met his. But that other, irrational side of me believed that love conquers everything and that Ivar too, once he witnessed the purity of our love, would come to accept it and approve.

"How fared you handling my shop?" Ivar asked with a raised brow one day, as I held a slab of iron with his pliers and he worked his hammer on it.

"I fink I fared well," I replied between blows.

"I see you've managed to make a barrel on your own," he replied.

"Yes, I have," I replied, and smiled proudly.

"And how fared you handling my daughter?" He asked in the same light tones — yet he stopped hitting his hammer as he spoke and waited for an answer.

"I fared well handling her," I said, and smiled, then blushed, apprehending what I had just said and quickly correcting myself. "I mean, Master, she fared well and gave me no trouble, Master," I quickly added, glowing a shade too red.

"Is that so?" He asked, and raised his brow.

"Yes, she only requested my assistance in combing her hair and other such menial tasks," I quickly answered.

"I see. Very well, then," he replied, and resumed his hammering, satisfied for the moment. Yet fear came to nest in my heart once again, fear that our love would be discovered and the happiness I knew would be over. Ever since the day I had combed her hair I was in heaven and held no other thought or desire in my heart, save that of marrying Ingrid someday. In my mind, I saw myself telling Ivar of my humble request, and imagined that he would slap my shoulder, smiling.

"Of course, Adam, your love is true, and I trust you will take great care of my daughter," he would say. Then I would take her in my arms and kiss her. When he would grow old and retire, I would take over his trade and provide for him and my wife and all of our sons and daughters. We would all be one happy family. In a bold, unthinking moment my mouth opened of its own accord, fueled by my hopes and dreams.

"Master," I began, taking a deep breath.

"Yes, Adam," he replied, and paused his hammering again. I took a moment to steady myself.

"I would like to marry your daughter," I said, raising my voice more than I intended to in my excitement. He gazed deeply into my eyes, and I forced myself to meet his gaze, as a man.

'He'll never accept me if I'm not a man,' I thought to myself.

"Absolutely not!" He replied sternly, holding back a rage I had never before seen in his eyes.

"Why not? I will provide for her, and for you when you grow old, I will be faithful ..." I began.

"I said no, Adam!" He repeated.

"What's all the fuss about?" Ingrid said as she approached, overhearing our raised tones.

"Adam, I'd like you to leave my home now and never return," Ivar declared in restrained tones, holding back his anger.

"Ingrid, I ..." I began, as my face flushed red and my eyes burned.

"Now!" Ivar roared.

"Goodbye, then," I blurted out, discarding the tools and walked away.

"I asked one simple thing of you ..." Ivar said to my back, "... and you betrayed me!"

"Father!" Ingrid called.

"She is a high-born girl, not fit for the likes of you!" He proclaimed. I turned around, outside his shop now. My fists clenched, I looked him in the eyes, full of spite and rage.

"I would have treated her as a goddess, she'd have had no want in life as my wife," I avowed.

"Begone!" Ivar yelled.

"Adam!" Ingrid called.

"Farewell, Ivar, farewell Ingrid," I said, turning around and walking away feeling the tears welling up in my eyes. Ingrid tried to rush to me, but Ivar grabbed her wrist and restrained

her, and I kept on walking, not looking back. My lack of patience ruined everything. My wrath, once coiled in its cave, now sprang forth, and would not subside.



Present day...

“Adam — Raymond; your step-father: He's not a very likable person, is he?” Daina asked.

“No, I don't suppose he was in his adolescence. We're not all born with social skills or a stable temperament. But for me that just makes him a true hero,” Jaunee replied.

“Why?”

“Because it's a longer road to find your compass when you're really lost. I mean, he was a troubled child in an unforgiving era. It's practically a miracle that he not only survived, but eventually grew beyond his low character. As a wise person once asked ‘What is better – to be born good, or to overcome your evil nature through great effort?’”

“That's very deep, who said that?”

“A dragon from Skyrim,” Jaunee replied with a smile.

“Where's Skyrim?”

“It's computer game,” Jaunee replied with a smirk and Daina laughed.

“You have a very diplomatic tongue. And you play computer games.” Daina smiled.

“I also cook, clean and read comics, sometimes I do other

mundane things too. What can I say, I'm an eternal geek.” Jaunee replied. Daina laughed and found her spirit lifted.

‘This ancient creature is a perfectly likable person,’ she thought to herself.

“Beta Team in position,” was heard over the radio, as more soldiers hid behind road blocks sealing the area. Meanwhile Jaunee and Daina kept on talking, unaware of the danger.



## CHAPTER V

### **PATH OF THE TAVERN-WARRIOR**

Feeling a deep sense of rage and loss, I sought refuge in the worst possible place. I went to The Black Sheep Tavern at the docks of Drentwych, where many dangerous ruffians spent their free time and hard-earned wages on cheap whores, cheap liquor, and gambling. It was a place seldom visited by men and women of reputation. In fact, only a hardened criminal or a man with a death wish would ever want to visit the place — and I wasn't a criminal.

The Tavern was poorly lit, with a few torches attached to the walls and a fire under the kettles. A pig was roasting there, filling the poorly-aired room with smoke. Yet the warmth of the Tavern proved an allure I could not deny, for it was an especially chilly night outside. A gap-toothed barmaid greeted me with a smile. Though I found her unattractive, I allowed myself a nervous half-smile in return. Behind her I met with the suspicious expressions of the patrons, as more than one

dangerous-looking ruffian sized me up with his eyes. I clenched my teeth and gave them all a challenging glare. The danger excited me and I welcomed the prospect of a brawl. I wanted to be lost in an ocean of oblivion, for violence to provide me with sweet release. So I sat down and joined a game of cards at a table of cutthroats. One had a tired looking whore sitting on his lap; she reeked of stale ale, amongst more foul scents. The knave fondled her intimately as he leered at me, boasting of his conquest.

“Are ye going to deal me some cards or what?” I asked one of them, as I sat and waited impatiently to be included in the entertainment.

“Got anything to wager on?” The ruffian holding the tarot cards asked.

“Just deal the bloody cards,” I spat impatiently.

“He’ll pay up later,” added the sweaty thug with the whore on his lap. Seemingly convinced, the dealer dealt me some cards.

“You go first,” I told the third player, a skinny, toothless man in rags, as I wasn’t sure how to play the game. He began, and by the third round I got the hang of it. As I was playing, however, I noticed a shadow looming over me as someone approached from behind my back.

“What do you want?” I spat, without turning, trying to erase any trace of fear or insecurity from my pose.

“Say, aren’t ye Adam, the smith’s boy?” He asked.

“What of it?” I admitted.

“Heard you’re a pretty decent brawler,” he replied.

“I assume this is going somewhere?” I replied impatiently, obviously not pleased with the direction in which this conversation was heading. The patrons at the table started laughing.

“Tis’ a fierce one!” Remarked the whore-lapped brute, and laughed.

“I wanna see how good ye are! There’s even coin to be made if you can beat me,” said the man behind my back.

“Very well,” I resolved, as I got up and turned around. I’ll beat him senseless, get paid and get some respect for once in my life.

He was a bit taller than me, and clearly stockier. His hard face hinted that this wasn’t to be his first brawl, and he showed no trace of fear. My stance was more feral as I leaned forward like a predatory beast. The patrons around were taking wagers. I turned my attention to him fully and we locked eyes. He raised his hands to protect his face and I did likewise. Then out of the blue, I kicked him in the groin, felling him. All those Angles and Saxons — they’re quite big and strong, but they don’t kick or know how to defend themselves against lower body blows. And the Albions, they’re just miniature wimps. As he grabbed his crotch I turned back, a very content smile on my face, and sat down. The patrons at the table all cheered and laughed. The whore winked at me, silently promising something I didn’t care to sample, even though I was a virgin. I knew I had humiliated him, but it served him right for trying to pick a fight just to see who’s stronger. I took up my cards again, pretending to be at ease, and watched his shadow carefully.

As my adversary arose from the floor, trying to gather whatever dignity he had left and retaliate against my dishonorable blow, I elbowed him again in the groin before he managed to strike, felling him to the floor once more, and winning yet another round of applause from my audience. He was carried outside by his friends and I had coin with which to wager.

Later that night my new-found buddies retired one by one to

their lodgings, leaving me with a few more pennies than I had started off with, which wasn't hard, considering the fact that I had started with none.

Intoxicated with a fatal combination of sleep deprivation and cheap ale, I was seriously considering a career in gambling as I left the Tavern. I swaggered left and right as I made way to Ivar's smithy, even half preparing a speech to recite when I got there. This was why I didn't see my assailants coming — all I heard was a sound of rushing feet before a heavy blow to the head stunned me. I dropped like a log to the ground, feebly trying to defend my face with my hands. My assailants proceeded to strike me with a thick wooden branch and a hail of kicks, until I lay in a pool of blood and vomit. Though I never got to see their faces, I made a fair assessment that I'd been accosted by my adversary from the Tavern, and his friends.

As I laid there in the mud waiting for death to claim me, I could not suppress the laughter in my belly. The irony stung me too damned much. Of all the ways I could have died, this had to be the most meaningless. To be beaten and left for dead in the mud on account of a tavern-brawl. When I was done laughing, I tried calling for help, but it was too late. I was half frozen and my voice too weak to be heard over the sound of the rushing wind. My body grew numb and I resigned myself to oblivion, and fell asleep, only to wake very much surprised and in pain.

The first thing I saw as I opened my eyes was a golden halo which I mistook for that of an angel. I smiled, stupefied; what else could I do?

"You're awake!" A familiar feminine voice called. As my vision cleared I realized that the golden halo was in fact Ingrid's golden hair. My heart raced with excitement.

"...Ingrid!" I exclaimed.

“Be quiet, Adam,” she replied, and changed the cold rag on my forehead.

“I’m sorry,” I continued.

“Shh,” she murmured as she placed a finger on my lips.

‘Ingrid,’ I thought to myself as I allowed sleep to claim me again. ‘I’ve got her back.’

When I awoke next it wasn’t as pleasant. This time Ivar’s frown replaced Ingrid’s smile, his frown deepened when he saw my stupid smile.

“Happy now?” He asked sternly.

“What?” I replied.

“Are you happy you scared her half to death?” He asked.

“No,” I replied, surprised and angry he would think that of me.

“So what was that all about?” He asked. Before I could answer he continued, “You go off trying to get yourself killed, so she’ll find your bloody carcass in the morning when she’s going to gather water!”

“No, I got into a brawl!” I protested.

“You always get into a brawl, that’s no excuse! If your mind is set on death, find a more convenient spot,” he replied.

“I’m sorry,” I answered.

“Sure you are,” he said dismissively. “Now you listen here boy,” he added in stern tones. “You’re gonna recover quickly now, even miraculously so, then you’ll say your pretty farewells to both me and my daughter, and you’ll disappear— go someplace else. And my daughter will never know what went between us, understand?” He demanded.

“Yeah,” I replied.

“What was that?” He asked.

“Yes, Master Smith,” I corrected myself, as the full implications

of his words settled in. I am dead to him, and can have no hope. I felt my eyes sting.

“Adam ...” he began in softer tones. “Look, I do what I do not out of spite for you, but out of a dire need to protect my daughter,” he said.

“Protect her from what? Am I such a lowly vermin?” I asked, full of pain.

“No, boy, you’re not vermin,” he said apologetically “But you don’t understand. You’re not of our people. You’re low-born, and if I was to endorse your marriage, it would ruin our reputation,” he explained.

“I understand I’m not of your people; my own people would’ve treated you the same,” I replied. “So I hold no grudge against you for it,” I continued. He snorted at my statement.

“Then do the honorable thing and leave, our blood cannot mix,” he said. I stared at him for a moment, looking into his eyes. I clenched my jaw as I made my final decision. I strained a bit to sit up, and then gathered myself, fighting nausea, and got up on my feet. I couldn’t manage to stay on them for more than a moment and had to retreat back to bed. I stayed that way for a couple of days, pretending to be asleep whenever Ingrid came by. Once I regained enough of my strength I said my farewells to Ivar and left.

I couldn’t bear the thought of being near Ingrid yet so far away, and I had no strength to fight further with Ivar. All I really wanted now was peace and to be left alone. I suffered two days confined to a place where I did not want to be, relying on the kindness of a man who did not want me around. As soon as I was able to be up I found my way back to the Tavern, and as I walked in, I clenched my jaw, straightened my pose, and did everything in my power to hide my sickness and injury. The

Tavern was nearly empty at this hour, so I sat at an empty table and ordered myself a meal and some ale. My game partners entered later that evening and were surprised to see me. They waved and joined my table.

“You look like hell,” the skinny ruffian commented.

“Tanks,” I replied and ordered some milk. I needed to keep sharp for what I was about to do. Finally, they entered, my enemy and his buddies. I smiled as I saw their stunned expressions, feeling my body come alive with an inner fire that staved off the ache in my joints.

“Take it outside!” The bartender barked as I got up, ready for a brawl. My enemy and his buddies nodded agreement and turned to leave, and I did likewise. My own companions were quick to follow, catching me by surprise.

A moment later we were all outside forming a circle in the mud, joined by the patrons and sailors passing by who stopped to watch the action.

“Caught me by surprise the other day,” I commented venomously, through clenched teeth, to my enemies. I then caught sight of Ivar, who had also joined the crowd, though further back.

“You fight dirty,” my enemy replied.

“Put yer fist up and quit yapping,” I replied as I positioned my fists to protect my face. And so the fight began.

I storm-paced to my enemy, locking gazes with him; slightly intimidated, he failed to respond as I smashed his face with a left swing. He feebly jabbed me with his right, too stunned to put any real force behind his blow. I ignored his jab and proceeded with a right swing, then a left. He spat some blood and teeth as he fell backwards to the ground. I dropped onto him, taking only a moment to mount him as he struck at my

kidneys. I once again ignored his blow and proceeded to pound him left and right, left and right, until his face became a mash of blood. Someone lifted me off of him as I tried to lay another blow.

“He’s almost dead!” Called one of his friends. I lunged towards him, showing him my bloodied fists.

“You’re not!” I roared as I charged him. He managed to place his hands in-front of his face as I gave a straight punch with all my strength. I hit his arm, which bounced and hit his face, injuring his nose and sending him to the ground. I fell on top of him as other arms tried to grab me. Another punched me from behind and I turned my face — still mounted on my adversary, to block a kick aimed straight at my face. I responded with a direct punch to his groin while the short distance gave me a favored position. Then someone threw pot at one of my adversaries. As the pot hit his chest I turned to see who threw the projectile. I saw one of my card buddies holding a chair and charging towards one of my enemies.

When the brawl ended I sat with my buddies drinking ale, wiping our bloody faces, and boasting our victory. The only sour moment that evening was Ivar coming to our table.

“So this is what you want for yourself,” he said. I turned to him. “To be a tavern drunk and a brawler,” he continued.

“I am what I am,” I replied tersely as I turned back to the table and sipped my drink. I tried to bury my face behind my mug to hide those treacherous tears which sought to appear on my face.

“You can be better than this!” Ivar protested.

“I don’t want to,” I replied, and with that he left. We resumed our drinks and our boasts, though I lost all satisfaction from both.

'Why did he have to come and ruin the one bit of solace I had won for myself?' I asked myself.

Finding no answer, I resigned to a bed I was offered by the bartender.

Come morning I felt both better and worse. On the one hand, I wasn't sick anymore. It seems booze and brawls keep the disease-demons at bay. On the other hand, I was sore all over from far too many blows. I forced myself to get up and bought myself a meal, paying with the last penny.

A man stood above me as I ate my breakfast. I peered at him from my right eye, because the left was swollen shut. He wore a soldier's uniform with chain mail and leather armor and had behind him several foot soldiers. His boots were shiny; I coveted them.

"Adam?" He inquired in a commanding voice.

"Yeah," I replied sternly, though deep inside I was worried that he'd come to arrest me.

"You're charged with disturbing the peace," he said.

"Who laid the charges?" I asked, feeling my heart race in dread of incarceration.

"You know who, you bloody broke his face," the Sheriff replied. I laughed as he mentioned a broken face.

"T'was a bloody good fight," I replied and got up in a non-threatening fashion.

"Indeed," he replied as he motioned me to start walking and followed closely behind. My legs shook and I worked to hide it every step of the way. I wanted to go to prison with dignity.

"You know ..." the Sheriff said when the barracks were in sight, "... we could use someone like you."

"What do you mean?" I asked, too frightened and angry to attribute any meanings to his words.

“I mean ...” he began, “... there’s really no reason for you to walk in as a prisoner when you can be a soldier instead.” The full implication of his words suddenly became clear to me. I’d heard the rumor once that some hardened criminals are given the choice to be soldiers instead of going to prison.

“Enlist me,” I replied, smiling. This is how my short career as a tavern-brawler ended and another career as a soldier began. I dreamt of becoming a Chevalier and marching on Jerusalem, conquering it from the hands of Al-Hakim bi-Amr Allah.



## CHAPTER VI

### **PATH OF THE SOLDIER**

After signing up I was shipped, come morning, to Wist Hill — the nearest castle, for basic training. I was sent with three other recruits, all of whom were criminals. I was glad to be away from Drentwych, and I really did hope that a change of scenery would make for a refreshing new start. All things considered, being a soldier didn't sound too bad, and it certainly beat the alternative. I was rather disappointed with basic training though. I really had hoped to be suitably instructed and taught military secrets. Instead, I was given a couple of lessons on how to use a spear and shield. I was taught how to tell the rank of soldiers and, most important, I was taught that my job was to accompany the Tax-Collector and make sure commoners didn't give him any trouble. To say the least, I was displeased with my new job. I was stationed at Over Hampton, a mining community not far from Wist Hill. Most of my fellow soldiers allowed their fitness to slacken, content with spending their days beating

commoners, taking additional “taxes” for their hard work, and then spending those hard-earned taxes on cheap liquor and women. I tried to be numb to their deeds, telling myself that this is the way things are, and always have been, but I took no joy or pride in my work, or in my fellow soldiers. I reminded myself that it’s a harsh world and that it’s beyond one man’s power to change it. But, deep inside my work took its toll on my soul. I was as malcontent and angry as I’d ever been, quick to lash out at anyone who stirred my wrath. I felt as if, step by step, my journey was taking me deeper into an abyss. Worse still, I knew no better way. Every choice I made seemed to be the wrong one, and I had only myself to blame. This is the part of my life that I now think of as the time of numbness. Time flew by; days became weeks and weeks became months, until finally a change did take place. I may have grown numb and uncaring, but the commoners who were constantly robbed by the Tax Collectors were not.

The miners often complained to the protecting Lord by proxy that they were being robbed by the Tax Collectors. But the Lord, for his part, never bothered to investigate. Either because he was bribed by the Collectors or simply because he didn’t care, regardless of his reasons, no action was taken. In my heart I sympathized with the commoners, though they loathed me for the fact that I was a soldier. I kept silent on my political opinions though, since any person, soldier or otherwise, who dared say anything, was charged with treason and promptly put to death in the most gruesome fashion. They used to tie the victim to a wheel, then spin it while striking hammer to limbs. If they were merciful, you’d be hanged, suffocating to death.

It was one such political execution that triggered the riots. A miner was hanged in the town square on the charges of

disturbing the peace. His daughter pleaded with the Lord for a pardon while her father waited with the noose already tight around his neck. The Lord, for his part, forced her to watch as her father choked to death. He then charged her with acting rebelliously and sentenced her to “amuse the soldiers” before being executed the following morning. She died with a curse upon on us all on her lips.

The riots broke out at noon, a few hours after the poor girl died. A Tax-Collector and his two bodyguards were doing their ‘honest’ work, collecting from the commoners, when an owner of one hovel claimed he had nothing with which to pay, and offered his daughter’s virginity as payment instead. The trio were quick to accept, and were greeted by armed men with knives, instead of a girl to deflower in the bed chamber. Initially we just heard that a Tax-Collector and his guards had been brutally murdered, and we were sent to arrest the killers, but the affair had turned into a full riot by the time we got there.

We were greeted by screams everywhere. Some cried for blood, while others cried because they bled. It was a cacophony of sounds most terrible and dreadful, a prelude to the true hellish nature of war. I didn’t want to fight. I felt that it wasn’t my fight; I didn’t believe in this; I didn’t want it. Killing civilians is far from the reason for which I had enlisted. I wanted to protect our borders, to win respect and glory in war. Not to turn sword and spear against commoner. Nothing I have ever done had prepared me for work of this type, for mass murder. I was rough, yeah, and sometimes cruel, but this, this was evil! I was fighting for the wrong side. Only now did Ivar’s teachings sink in. Oh, how easy it is to lose one’s humanity in war.

I remember that at the fateful moment, when we were given the order to attack, my thoughts were all in a jumble; I didn’t

know what to do and I couldn't think clearly. It didn't make sense — nothing did. Yet I charged with the rest. Some of my comrades had been my enemies only a few days before, some perhaps even friends. Most I didn't really know. They were just masks, faces I'd seen here and there in town. Now we were all blood brothers, fighting, for we were told our cause was just, while our hearts screamed otherwise.

War is the purest form of insanity, hatred, and cruelty on the face of this earth, I know this now. Yes, I who have fought countless wars and have killed thousands, would like nothing better than to live my life in peace, and I do hope with all my heart and soul that all humanity will someday loathe wars as I do now, a thousand years of life.

Only in fairy tales are battles neat and clean; in real life they're gruesome and chaotic. There is a time to die, for everyone, and everything. We live our lives, ignoring the terrible truth of our mortality. Death lurks in every corner; in sickness, in health, in joy and sorrow. Death comes to everyone in its time and its place. In war you witness the workings of Death first-hand, as every sword swing, every arrow cruising through the air may mean the death of someone; maybe you, maybe me. Every soldier; every man and boy, says his goodbye to the life he left behind, for a man of arms, more than anyone else, is aware of how fragile life is. I was thinking of my family when I went to war, and grieved for all the things I should have said and done. But this sorrow I felt inside, threatened to consume me if left in such fertile soil; if only I allowed myself to pay it too much heed. Instead, I clung to another type of poison; one much deadlier than self-loathing. Anger... Rage was my guiding light; my shining star. Anger overpowered every other feeling inside of me, burning deeply through all the weakness, ruling

my thoughts and guiding me to victory and sweet release.

It takes a great man to conquer his inner demons. I was not such a man, yet.



## CHAPTER VII

# THE MADNESS OF WAR

The fighting periodically broke out and then receded for three days in a row. The town was divided, each half governed by an opposing side. The rebels were mostly miners, people of strong build who were used to daily hardships. Most of the soldiers, on the other hand, were idlers. However, we were better armed and armored, and commanded by a Lord who was a formidable warrior. On the third day, we were moving in for an all-out fight.

We pushed the rebels back only to be snared by a fire-trap. The rebels had cleverly dug a trench, filled it with oil and water, and lighted it as soon as we marched forward in our Roman formation. I remember the flash of light blinding me and the feeling of heat suddenly surrounding me. I remember the screams deafening my ears and, most vividly, recounting the chaos that only moments before had surrounded me, and now enveloped me.

I can't seem to recall much of what happened afterwards. I do

remember running, though — running as hard and fast as my feet could carry me. I also remember the screams throbbing in my ears, echoing in my heart; the screams of dying men. So I wondered, and dreaded that I might be next.

I remember rain washing over me as I kept running. The searing heat of the fire combined with the freezing cold of hail and rain made me feel I was truly and utterly in hell. I wasn't so sure anymore that I was even alive. Perhaps I did die that day, and my restless ghost lingers in the battlefield, suffering for the crimes I had committed.

Regardless of my thoughts, I ran until deep forest encompassed me for many leagues, and there was a peculiar sound of ringing bells just before my head hit the ground. I felt muck soak my face, and muted, watched a horseman who raced past me. I was struck by him. The utter dread of death claimed me, and in a desperate act I held still and would not move, hardly breathing, my eyes open, gazing into nothing. Transfixed on whatever was in-front of me. I had hoped and prayed inside for him to think me dead. Perhaps he left. I was so transfixed that I no longer registered the outside world. Eventually, exhausted, I fell asleep.

When I woke up a person stood above me. He seemed rather old and forest-worn, yet not so old as to be weak. His hawk nose attracted my attention the most, as it seemed too big for his face. His dark eyes were somewhat sunken and his leather cap gave the impression that he was half-hawk and half-man.

“Boy, are ye alright?” He asked, in an accent that reminded me somewhat of a person I knew yet could not recollect. I tried to move, yet felt too numb and heavy to accomplish it. I opened my mouth to speak, yet could not remember the word ‘yes’ in the common tongue. I strained to think, yet could not focus on

anything except his face and the forest glade I was in. There was dry blood in my hair; I wondered where it had come from. I quickly realized that I had no idea what was going on.

“Who’d be hunting ye, boy?” He asked after studying my tattered uniform, looking over his shoulder.

“Eini Zoher,” I said to him, those were the only words which sprang to my mind.

“What’s that? Some sort of password? A chant?” He asked, puzzled. I strained and gestured with my hands that I knew nothing. He held my head and gave me some water from his water-skin. I was grateful, and so very thirsty. I wanted to thank him but knew of no way to give thanks.

He paid me no heed, and looked about as if he heard something, then lay perfectly still on the muddy ground, planting his ear deep in the mud. Then after a few moments he rose and wiped the mud from his face. He smiled this strange smile that people often have when they are content with some secret knowledge. I grew too tired and heavy to think, my eyes shut against my will and I faded away.

I woke up in a cabin, lying on a straw bed. I looked around, trying to gather my bearings. Not recognizing the place, I moved to a sitting position. My right hand hurt and the pain increased as I awoke. I studied it, not knowing where the bandages had come from. I tried to think of where I had hurt my hand, but could not recollect. My head, too, was wrapped up, and no memory of any injury came to mind. Not knowing anything made me feel quite agitated.

“So you’re finally up!” A voice spoke, and I turned my attention from my hand to the direction of the voice. It was the old forester. I recognized him quite quickly and was proud of myself for the accomplishment. The forester’s face seemed

glad, and I smiled when seeing him smile. In his hands he held a bowl and in it some food, as my sense of smell told me.

“Hungry?” He asked, and presented the bowl to me. I smiled broadly.

“T-T-T-Tank you,” I said, stammering and suddenly shaking all over.

“Haa, don’t sweat it boyo, it’s my pleasure, now eat up before it gets cold!” He gently slapped my shoulder. His eyes keenly studied my gestures, though I tried to hide them. He ignored my shakes and my obvious look of fear. I couldn’t remember why, but I knew it was improper for a man to show fear, so he maintained my honor by not seeing that I was terrified.

He let me eat in peace and I kept my gaze upon my dish, yet from the corner of my eye, I spied his look of worry, and that made me somewhat relieved — he seemed to care. He tended to the kitchen fire, whistling a child’s lullaby I thought I recognized, yet could not remember from when or where. My thoughts turned to the food, which up until then I had eaten without noticing what I was doing. I couldn’t recognize the taste of it, for, to me, there was no taste to anything. When I was done eating, the forester was quick to notice and was there to take the dish away. Everything he did, he did with an honest smile.

“Now boyo, my name is Raymond o’ the Brooks, this being near the brooks, thus my surname,” he said, laughing to himself at some sort of private joke which was funny only to him. He continued, “Can you tell me your name?”

“I... I don’t know!” I said growing agitated by the fact I could not bring my name to mind. “I can’t remember,” I continued.

“Do you remember who was chasing you? Or how you got injured?” He asked, and my worry grew. I shook all over as fire

and screams flashed through my mind and my eyes darted everywhere like frightened hen searching for a place to hide.

“Calm down, boyo, you’ve been here for two days, nobody’s after you now. You’re safe.” He said soothingly, “You just rest for as long as you need, I’ll take care of everything.”

“There was fire, and screams,” I said many minutes later. I grabbed his arm when he got closer, an act which brought back the images of fire and slaughter. “They were everywhere and I tried to get away,” I continued. These words struck a core of terror in my heart, and I hung on to his hand in dire need of support.

“Hell,” he said under his breath, not intending that I hear him. But I did. I didn’t know what ‘hell’ was, for I had no memory of such a place name.

“By Mary’s grace, no fiend can harm you here. This is a Christian home and no unclean thing can trespass here,” he said. I wanted so hard to believe his words, though I knew neither who this Mary was nor what he meant by ‘Christian.’ His words nonetheless reassured me that he knew my enemies, and that I was safe from them here.

“Thank you, thank you!” I said.

“Don’t worry about a thing, boyo. You’re safe here and you can stay for as long as you wish,” he added, and I smiled. Feeling less anxious, I let go of his arm.

“You just rest now while I go outside to chop some wood,” he said, and I nodded and laid my head down, doing as instructed. I remember the sound of his axe striking logs outside, and then as sleep approached, the sound faded. There was a moment where I didn’t hear, feel, or think anything — a moment of utter blackness. Then the visions came, a vast discord of images and sounds; fire, screams, violence, pain, and the scent of scorched

flesh and spilled blood. I strained with all my might to open my eyes, and flee this place which I knew by name now. 'Hell,' Raymond called it, and the name fit perfectly.

My eyes shot open and I bounced from my bed, shaking uncontrollably, soaked in cold sweat. It was the middle of the night now — I judged by the darkness outside and the sound of the Raymond's snoring. I lay back in bed as soon as my surroundings became familiar again, not wishing to disturb my host's rest. Mutely, I stared at the ceiling until the light of day came, my mind deep in conflicting thoughts. A part of me wanted to remember who I was and what had brought me to this place. Another part wanted to forget, to start afresh — as far as I could go from the Hell I had been trapped in before I met my present host.

"Raymond," I began, come morning.

"Aye, boyo," he answered as he cooked us breakfast.

"If you were given a choice as to whether or not to have memories, though you know deep inside that most of them are unpleasant, or to start afresh as a different person, which would you choose?" I asked, as clearly as I could pose this question that was troubling me so much.

"Well ... that's quite a deep philosophical question, coming from someone so young. I don't think I can give you a simple answer," he replied. I lowered my eyes and clenched my teeth in disappointment.

"Will you give me a complicated answer, then?" I asked, cheering up a bit and allowing myself to be bold.

"Ye sure seem passionate about an answer," he replied in a pseudo-casual manner.

"Yes, I am," I replied, hoping to press him further for an answer.

"Well, to be a new man, to start over, sure has its charm. I

mean, life's painful enough, and surely there are memories I can live without. But on the other hand, my life, with all its blissful events and its suffering, has made me who I am today. So my answer is, that I'd rather be the man I am today than live a life of blissful ignorance," he answered. I stared at him quietly, somewhat disappointed.

"I'm sorry, boyo, I didn't mean to make you sad. I'm sure your memories will come back eventually." He misinterpreted my sadness.

"I don't know if I want them to," I replied, frustrated with myself.

"How so?" He asked as he served us breakfast, keeping his composed manner.

"Because I have this feeling deep inside my heart that my life has been quite hard, and every time I close my eyes, I see this place — 'hell' as you called it. So maybe I don't want my memories back," I answered.

"What about fond memories. Don't you think you had any of those? Family? Friends? Maybe a special lady-friend for a young man like you? Don't you think you had any of those?"

I tried to think hard, to see if any bells started to ring in my mind. Family: not even an echo there; complete nothing — couldn't remember any family. Friends: even more dark — the feeling was like the absence of anything, so I knew for a fact that I had no friends. When I tried to think back to see if there was any special girl in my life, I did recall a face. It appeared as a blurred white visage, surrounded by the dark of nothingness, her blond hair shining like the sun. But I couldn't see her facial features; couldn't make out her eyes.

"There was a special girl in my life, I fink," I said after a long pause, spent in contemplation.

“So ye have your answer then!” He said cheerfully.

“I don’t follow,” I replied, growing confused.

“Starting fresh has a price; you pay it by leaving behind those that love you and those whom you love,” he said. There was something in his voice. A quality I cannot explain. It touched something, inside of me.

“What if she’s dead?” I asked.

“What if she’s waiting for you at home?” He retorted quickly, not letting me think too long these sad thoughts.

“Then I have to find her, of course,” I replied, and moved subconsciously to start running.

“Hold on there! Do you remember her name? Or where she’s from? Do you have any idea how to find her?” He asked.

“Not really,” I replied, frustrated again by how stupid and rash I was.

“Well, there aren’t that many settlements nearby, so you’ll probably find her, or at least someplace that’ll jog your memory if you take your quest seriously and travel around,” He said, not losing patience with me.

“You’re right. Tank you,” I replied, and started thinking of the track ahead, and who she may be. But then a suspicious thought entered my mind. This man who saved me from Hell, who sprang out of nowhere, took me to his home and cared for me as if I were his lost son ... I wondered, why all the kindness? Who was he, really? I knew it was improper of me to think ill of my host, but I couldn’t help it.

“I’ll leave you to your thoughts, then,” he said.

“No, wait!” I replied hastily, extending my arm towards him.

“What’s wrong?” He asked and remained sitting.

“Well,” I began, retracting my hand, “I don’t mean to be rude or burden you in any way, but may I stay here a while longer?”

I asked.

“Of course, boyo ...” he said, a smile slowly spreading across his face, “... stay for as long as you wish. I’m a lonely old man and could use the company,” he said. And thus I stayed with him a very long while, enjoying a life of blissful ignorance. Raymond never requested or demanded anything of me, and I was always grateful and full of admiration for a man who seemed so perfect; such a shining example of what men ought to be. His smile was contagious. The bright way in which he conducted even the slightest aspects of his life could cheer even a wounded soul such as mine.

‘I never want to leave,’ I told myself.



Present day...

“So, as a supernatural creature, how do you feel about humanity?” Daina asked.

“That’s a deep and complicated question Daina,” Jaunee began. “I’d like to start by correcting your statement. Nothing is above the natural order of things. There is simply no such thing as the supernatural. You perceive some things as the supernatural because you cannot explain them, that does not imply they cannot be explained.”

“But you’re immortal.” Daina protested.

“Virtually immortal; I don’t age but I can be killed,” Jaunee corrected.

“And you’re capable of extraordinary feats.”

“Yes, I am physically superior to a human being. I'm smarter, faster, stronger etcetera ... However, these traits do not make me a magical creature.”

“Come on! They say you can bend metal bars with your mind, ignite fire and cast spells!” Daina protested.

“Yeah, I'm secretly a Jedi.” Jaunee laughed, “You caught me. I'm the incestuous daughter of Luke and Leia.”

“Are you?” Daina replied, and Jaunee could not read if she was being serious.

“Non!” Jaunee began. “However, you are correct that I am capable of performing magic,” She admitted.

“See!” Daina replied.

“Magic, as you refer to it is nothing more than a form of energy one can learn to harness with practice and effort. There is nothing supernatural or magical about it. All energies obey the laws of physics. However, your human understanding of physics still has not reached its full maturity ... A few decades ago flying to the moon was considered science fiction. Just imagine what you could accomplish a century from now, assuming a nuclear war doesn't extinguish human life. You could be immortal, all of you.” Jaunee said, hopefully.

“Do you really believe it's possible?” Daina asked, now keenly interested. She thought back to her life, to her every-morning ritual of looking in the mirror — looking for graying hairs. What a dream it would be to be forever young.

“Oui ... I believe that it is. But for this dream to become real ...” Jaunee mistakenly replied to Daina's thoughts. “... The light will have to finally overcome the darkness.”

“What is the light then, and what is the darkness?” Daina asked, forgetting her role as interviewer.

“Oh it's nothing magical...to put plainly. The darkness is a

part of human nature, the vices of the world. People need to realize money is just paper, faith is not a justification for hatred or murder. Nothing which exists is neither inherently evil nor good. These are just man-made concepts. The advancement of science allows mankind to cure the ills of the world, or to destroy on a global scale...in the end, we all pay for what we've done. You have to mature as a species, to take responsibility or find yourselves destroyed. This is my wakeup call to you, the world is escalating to a very dark era but it's not fate, nor divine will. This is cause and effect, science." Jaunee explained, and it seemed that she wanted to elaborate further, to give a full speech but decided not to.

"I get it, science makes us powerful now, so you've chosen to make your presence known before we find out on our own." Daina said.

"True, but I'm not talking only about the dynamics between us and you but the dynamics between man and man, the dynamics between man and nature. You're in control, for good or ill." Jaunee replied.

"Anything else?" asked Daina.

"Yeah, something about racism always bothered me. It's like that scene in planet of the apes where the astronaut saw the apes arguing which is better, a gorilla, orangutan or chimpanzee is superior and he was telling them 'But you're all apes!' So yeah, it's kind of like that. You're all human for us." Jaunee added excitedly.

"We're all apes?" Daina repeated.

"You're all human." Jaunee repeated. Daina seemed to be day-dreaming, or very focused. Jaunee didn't hear the static interference whispering instructions.

"Let's do a short break," She said and got up. "I'm going to

make me some coffee. Do you want some?" She asked, and signaled the cameraman to stop recording. Jaunee nodded her approval with a smile.

"Black, one sugar," She replied. And as she said these words, a third group of soldier opened the glass doors into the building.

"Gamma team is in position," was heard over the radio. When Jaunee would attempt to leave, Strike Teams would surround her on all fronts.



## CHAPTER VIII

# THE LIFE OF RAYMOND BROOKS

Raymond and I lived in Northwood Forest; a vast woods ranging from the Channel near Drentwych to the old western borders of Wessex; to the north it expanded and separated us from the Scots. The trees closer to our settlements were rather small, for the local population often harvested timber as close as possible to home. Wood-theft was also a widespread crime amongst the various lumberjacks. This is why Raymond had chosen to travel deeper into the forest to harvest one of the larger, older trees. Raymond's cabin was quite large relative to the neighboring homes; it equaled the size of three hovels merged together into one. When I inquired as to why his cabin was so big, he said that he liked his space. But there was more to it than that, I reasoned. My guess was that he had a large family once upon a time and that they all had left, each in his turn, leaving him alone in his venerable age. He was a very fatherly figure, and I could well imagine him with scores of

children running about.

One normal, autumn day Raymond and I labored at chopping such a tree as he preferred to harvest. This tree was tougher to chop down than it had appeared to be at first, and both Raymond and I grew tired before it fell. Other trees loomed high above us, some of their peaks painted white with snow. Though no snow or rain was falling at that moment, it was quite chilly. I liked this weather. It made the world seem beautiful and calm — kind of like how I felt. The sounds of small animals and birds kept us company, though, and I felt safe sitting by Raymond's side. I watched him light a bonfire and blew air upon the embers when instructed.

"Master Raymond, may I ask a question?" I said, after we settled for supper, our dishes spread before us.

"Of course," he replied, and I hesitated a few moments, trying to think of how to pose my query.

"What drives you to act so kindly?" I finally asked.

"What do you mean?" He replied, puzzled by question.

"Well, you took me in when you had nothing to gain from it. I, a wounded soldier with people probably out to kill me. The way I see it, you had everything to lose and nothing to gain, so I don't understand why? Please tell me," I said.

"Not everything is about gaining or losing," he replied in calm tones. "And it's not true that I had nothing to gain. I saved a life, and I think yours is a life worth saving," he said, yet his expression told me there's more beneath the surface.

"Why me? You don't even know me," I protested.

"I don't need your life's story to know your heart, and it doesn't matter. I'm not your judge. For me you're a soul in need, and as such it's my duty to give assistance," he said calmly.

"Duty? Assigned by whom?" I asked, pressing him further. I

wanted the god-awful truth.

“Self-assigned, by my heart as a Christian. It’s my duty to help those in need,” he replied quickly. I knew there was more to it than that, but I changed my mind and decided that I should not delve into matters which he wished to keep to himself. My mind was not satisfied. I wanted to know, damn it. But I’d be a dick if I repaid my savior with interrogations. The turmoil was probably evident on my face.

“Why, you don’t think your life is worth saving?” He asked, after an awkward silence of studying me.

“Yes! I guess ... I don’t know. I don’t know for sure, maybe I’m a villain and I don’t even know,” I replied honestly.

‘If he won’t come forward, at least I will,’ I thought.

“What crime could a boy your age do to damn you so completely?” He asked.

“I don’t know! I can’t remember, but there’s guilt. I know there’s guilt in my heart, and I can’t remember why. I don’t know my crime, but it’s there, running like a bleeding wound across the very foundations of my soul,” I replied. And there it was, as honestly and boldly as I could put it. It wasn’t him I wanted to interrogate, it was me. I rubbed my eyes, I wanted to go away, I wanted to stay and open Pandora’s Box.

“So take this opportunity to ask forgiveness of the Lord, and mend whatever it is you feel needs mending,” he replied, still amazingly well-composed.

“But what if my crime is not against God, what if it’s against my fellow man?” I asked, as I felt the Box’s lid start to open.

“Then ask forgiveness of that man once you see him,” he replied.

“Not all crimes can be forgiven,” I replied, feeling a hole in my soul, my heart burning, and growing frustrated with these feelings for which my mind recoiled at the recollection.

“Forgive yourself then, or find a way to make amends, lest guilt consume you.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Go on, eat your food.” I did absent-mindedly.

“I killed,” I said after finishing my food, having no better way to restart the conversation so I just opened the Box and dared reveal what was inside.

“That’s a soldier’s job, Jesus knows ...” he said, and I stopped him.

“Not as I did,” I replied, tears in my eyes.

“I don’t understand,” he said, becoming very attentive.

“My brother, I fink I killed my brother, and it’s haunting me forever,” I said, staring at the ground.

“You remember this or you just think it?” He asked, caring perhaps more than he should.

“It’s a feeling I can’t describe, but I know it’s real and it won’t leave me be,” I said, looking away from him.

“Did you mean to do it?” He asked calmly.

“No! I don’t think so, maybe ... no,” I said. “I don’t know!”

“So for all you know, it could have been an accident,” he replied.

‘It could have ... yes!’ I thought. I hung on his explanation as if my life depended on it.

“Yes, it must have been an accident, though I feel responsible,” I said.

“If it was an accident, your guilt can only hurt you, unless you find a way to make peace with it and move on,” he said simply.

“How can you make peace with something like that?” I asked, clenching and unclenching my fists.

"You must, for life goes on no matter what. Either you go on with it or you wither and die. There's plenty of guilt in my life too, but I don't let it rule over me," he said.

"You make it sound so easy," I replied.

"Never said it was, you just don't have any other choice," he replied, and I stared at the fire silently, trying to sort out a lot of blackness and some scrambled images running across my mind.

"It's rather simple, boyo. You're handed out what you're handed out. We're not all born equal, so there's no use resenting fate," he said.

"But it's not fair!" I protested, feeling an old anger stir to life, and an image of blond hair blowing in the spring wind.

"No, it's not, but you have a choice, and it's a simple one, really. You do what you want to do, go your own way, carve your own fate," he said.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"I'll explain, then," he said, grabbing a twig and drawing in the sand.

"There are three kinds of fates," he explained. "The first is the fate of being born," he said as he drew the word 'vitae', which is Latin for life. He was highly educated for a wood-chopping-hermit-in-the-woods.

"You can't change the circumstances of your birth, can't choose your folks, can't choose your gender, can't choose your race. Do you know what I'm saying?" He asked, hinting at a deeper meaning I could not yet see.

"Yes," I replied, as so far it was clear as I took his words literally for what they were.

"On the other side we have death," he said, and drew the word 'Morte', the Latin word for death. "You can sometimes choose the way you die, but you can't stop death. That's the

second God-ordained fate,” he explained.

“I understand,” I said.

“Now, in between, you’ve got the last kind of fate called ‘experience,’” he said and drew the word ‘experience’ in the sand. “This is where your freedom of choice comes in. You can do whatever you want between those two fates, birth and death, and this is the fate that matters, since it is the one that is yours to shape as you see fit. And you shape it by making choices. For this fate, God gave us a guidebook, to tell us how to experience a good life. But he doesn’t force us to travel his way, you can experience life in any way you want,” he explained at length.

“I understand,” I replied, thinking this over. His words were clear, but I wanted to protest.

“I’m happy boyo,” He replied awkwardly. He wasn’t happy at all.

“You say we have no control over birth and death, but have control over our life,” I said.

“Yes ...” He agreed preparing for my challenge.

“But I say in life, we have little to no control at all. For you see, we’ve got rules, and people telling us what to do and what’s right and wrong, even what’s proper to fink.”

“Of-course, freedom is a valuable thing, and one must always be mindful and protect one’s freedom,” he replied. It was a statement which seemed filled with flaws, although sounding pleasing to the ear.

“I fink freedom is an idea, but it doesn’t exist in real life. Suppose society crumbled and there were no nobles, no soldiers, no rules ... each person would have to fight for everything, to protect his family, to gather food. A world without rules will be a dark world indeed,” I said, and I had more to say, but I wanted

to hear his reply.

“Of-course, the rules of society are there for a reason, to preserve your wellbeing, but one can choose to live outside of society, as I have,” he replied, keeping his adamant composure, even when challenged rhetorically by an adolescent.

“So I say there is no freedom. You can choose to live confined by society, or to live as an outlaw. You can sometimes choose your craft, and sometimes even your wife. But I say choices are limited, and therefore even between birth and death, a person is limited.” I felt my argument was sound, and that made me a bit sad: I didn’t want to bring him down.

“That is where you’re wrong,” He replied without missing a beat. “You think freedom is divinity. I’ll explain what real freedom is. Freedom is the choice you make to do the right thing or the selfish thing. You can’t always choose your wife, but you can choose how you treat her. You can’t always choose your profession, but you can choose to dedicate yourself to it and excel or to slack at it. Even when a soldier’s life is imposed on you, you make a choice on what kind of soldier you are. And you always have a choice of what kind of person you can be. That is true freedom, and no-one can take it away from you because it was given to you by God — the freedom to choose,” he replied, and I was humbled.

“I understand,” I said, and this time I meant it. I felt better now, and in a way after releasing all my troubles, I found hope. I can be a good person; a better person. I have a choice, and I choose to be noble, like Raymond o’ the Brooks.

“Will you tell me your story, how you grew so wise?” I asked, hoping for a change of subject.

“There’s nothing in my story that would cheer you up. Perhaps

it's best to let the past die out," he replied thoughtfully.

"I'd like to hear it nonetheless, if you're willing," I replied, now eager and intrigued.

"Well, boyo, there's seem no stopping you ... very well then ... I originally came from a land further to the north ..." he began, and I listened carefully, making myself as comfortable as I could.

"People were different there, taller and stronger than any here. We were a warrior nation, though few of us remain today. I wasn't much of a warrior compared to my brethren. It wasn't that I lacked skill, but I lacked interest. My concerns lay elsewhere, in things far more tender and pleasurable," he said, and winked at me. I didn't get whatever he was hinting at and my face remained blank.

"I mean to say, Boyo, is that I was far more interested in women than I was in wars. I courted a young lady by the name of Lianna, and she indeed was fair. Raven-haired, clever green eyes, and a sharp mind. We spend many an evening — after doing our chores, debating and arguing all the facts of life, and every time, boyo, every time she left me confused, discouraged, miserable, and longing for more. She had something to say about everything, and most often it was radical, revolutionary, bittersweet, and demanded rumination. I fell in love with her, and though she would have said my affection was towards her flesh and not her spirit, this was not the case, no!" He said, and his eyes took a nostalgic gleam.

"As fate would have it, I was called to war before I had the chance to propose marriage. I had saved a fortune to pay her father for the privilege of her hand, and he, a sharp, shrewd, and greedy man, knew of my affections, and would demand no less than everything I owned. I had managed to raise enough gold and jewels to purchase her, yet as the fates would have it, I

was called to war and her wedding ring remained in my purse,” he said, his eyes glazed and haunted.

“So I went to war and I fought. I didn’t care who the enemy was or why I was fighting. I fought only to return to Lianna, and propose to her. Five years of soldiering changed me, Boyo — changed me to the very core of my soul. I forgot myself, who I was before the war. I lived in the forest for five years, fighting again and again, I can’t even remember against who — I don’t care to remember. But I was strong, and I survived,” he said, taking a sip of water from his water-skin to calm himself. I sat beside him stunned, wanting to say something, but I didn’t know what. I was eager, yet at the same time frightened to hear what happened to his love.

Somewhere deep inside of me I wondered, am I too in exile from my lover ...?

“In the end I found my way back home, a shadow of the man I used to be. My face was heavily bearded and crusted with dirt. My clothes were not my own, but belonged to a dead man who had worn them before me. My hands, my fingers, were blackened by ashes, sand, and blood. In other words, I looked as if I had gone to Hell and back. I could not have Lianna see me like that. So back I went to the forest, and bathed myself in the river, washing clean my body but not my soul. There was still blood on my hands, a stain that can never go away,” he reflected.

“Raymond, may I ask a question?” I ventured.

“Yes, by all means boyo,” he answered, his face relaxing and his tone lighter.

“Why five years at war, why were you the only one to come back?” I asked. He paused for a few moments, trying to make a decision, and then he spoke.

“I have died, Boyo,” he began darkly. “I died and came back to life. There’s no doubt about it. A blade pierced my flesh and as sure as heaven, I remember myself lying in a pool of blood. Then ...” he paused.

“Then what?” I asked, looking to the ground, unable to bear the intensity of his gaze as he spoke those words. “Then an old man appeared out of nowhere, he just materialized behind my killer. I listened, trembling in awe and fear as the old man struck my killer with thunder and lightning, destroying his body completely. I can see his face even now in my mind, smell the brimstone and witness the smoke. I thought him a demon and called out to God with my final ounce of strength. But he healed my wounds, Boyo — healed them,” Raymond repeated.

“Did he say anything?” I asked, in awe of his story.

“Aye, Boyo. He said unto me the wisest of words,” Raymond answered and breathed deeply. “He said that angels hide as common men, watching us, serving justice or mercy as God sees fit. ‘Why me?’ I asked, and what he told me I cannot repeat Boyo, though I can admit our meeting was not by chance but of fate.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, fervently.

“I cannot say,” he replied.

“Well, go on with your story then!” I pleaded. “Please,” I added.

“On that day I swore my life to Christ, and this is why I was the only one to return, Boyo,” he said with a far-away look.

“Where was I?” Raymond suddenly asked, as if waking from a sleep.

“You had bathed in the river,” I said.

“Yes, yes. I had bathed myself then returned home the second time, seeking my Lianna,” he said and grew silent, his

face turning grim.

“And what happened?” I asked after a few moments, unable to bear the uncomfortable silence that settled between us.

“And, her father had wed her to another man while I was gone, that’s what happened,” he said, and was silent again.

“What! That’s not fair, why did he do that?” I asked, protesting what I thought to be a horrible ending to this tale.

“He said that all thought me dead, and that he had only his daughter’s best interest in mind. Though I believe he had his own best interest in mind, for he was paid a handsome fee. He requested then that I refrain from seeing her, and I silently turned my back to him and left,” Raymond said.

“Where did you go?” I asked, still immersed deeply in his story.

“I went to Lianna, of course. Her husband blocked the door, yelling at her to remain silent. I chopped the door down with my axe, struck his face with the hilt, and proceeded to take her with me,” Raymond said, and his eyes shone in remembrance of a rage he had not forgotten.

“What happened then?” I asked as he once more became silent.

“Then we made love under the stars and together we built this cabin where I still live,” he said, tears in his eyes.

“Why so sad then? Where is she now?” I said, and then caught myself, for his silence told it all. His eyes gleamed and stared into mine, as if digging into my soul.

“... She was still the wife of another man. Justified or not, our love was a sin against God and he punished us, for I had coveted and taken the wife of another man,” he replied with tears in his eyes, and I for once remained silent.

“And I have bettered my ways since then. I had come to fear

the Lord and keep his commandments ... And I pray, every day that he would forgive me, and deliver me to where our love would be possible. Any place where we are together will be an Eden to me," he said, and stared at me silently.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Don't be; you gave me your confession and I gave you mine," he responded.

"I wish I knew what to say," I replied.

"Don't be sad for me, Boyo. I did find another love eventually, got married, had children," he said.

"Still, it seems unfair and sad," I replied, still engrossed in his story.

"Come on, Boyo. The autumn winds blow chilly come darkness," he said, and we made way back home. My mind was now filled with more questions and fewer answers than it had ever been.



## CHAPTER IX

# THE CASUALTY OF MURDER

Only a single week had passed since our conversation — too soon it faded away, and I continued to live in ignorant bliss, full of youthful questions and an innocent longing for life. Raymond was a virtuous man in every measure; a shining example of the nobility of the human heart. I envied his peaceful demeanor and his wisdom, which shone in every word he said. He made me feel like a child again, but in a positive way. I felt sheltered. We never mentioned our talk in the woods. I dropped a couple of hints that I wished to know more, but whenever I did, his eyes took on a sorrowful gleam and I knew better than to strike at the dent in his armor.

I remember it was a Sunday. Raymond had sent me to the brook to draw our supply of water for the day while he prepared fish for lunch. Perhaps I was too slow in getting the buckets of water, for the scent of cooking fish attracted not only beasts of the animal sort, but human as well.

I felt a chill when I came within viewing distance of his cabin, as if someone had passed over my grave, though as yet I saw nothing out of the ordinary. For a moment my mind recalled an image of a lord in dirty armor, his skin sickly, and then the vision ended. A keenly dire feeling filled my heart with mortal dread, but I dismissed my fears because I saw no evidence to validate them. The smoking chimney gave a pleasant smell, and I approached rapidly, bearing a log over my shoulders from which two water buckets hung. I carefully kicked the door open, and then stared, mouth agape, at the sight which confirmed all my fears.

Two armed men sat at his table. I remember their faces as if they were carved on my soul in blood. As they ate the fish which Raymond had cooked, a spear rested, leaning on the table within reach of the man sitting opposite to me. His hair was black and his face dirty, his palms covered in some fabric: I don't know if they were bandaged or gloved. I can't forget his face or the chestnut brown mass of hair which belonged to his friend. He sat with his back to me, his club of carved wood lying on the table right next to his right hand. A third bandit minded the cooking pot; he was dark-haired as well, perhaps a brother to the first man. But what struck me the most was not the sight of the bandits, but Raymond's dead body laying at the cook's feet. His head was cleaved — probably by his own axe, and his insides littered the floor. None of the bandits seemed to care; they had been eating as if nothing extraordinary had happened until I came.

"Hey, you!" The black-haired one roared, and grabbed hold of his spear as he stood up abruptly. I dropped the log with the buckets to the floor, stunned. The chestnut brown-haired man turned and grabbed his club. I managed to see his face for only a

brief moment before I took a long step backwards and slammed the door shut with all my might. I heard the spear-head strike the door and didn't wait for what was to come next, but ran with all my might away from the cabin, into the woods. The three gave chase like hounds, obviously in better shape than I. Yet I was running for my life and so did not tire or slow for all the world.

I ran straight for the brook, trying to zigzag my way between trees to make chasing me as difficult as possible. I looked to the ground only for brief glances. My feet moved so fast that I could scarcely see them at all, only feel the earth beneath me. As soon as I reached the brook I bounced across the bank to the other side, hid behind a tree, and prayed that the bandits would think I had continued on, swimming.

The sound of the running water masked the sound of my labored breath, or perhaps the bandits were dimwits. Regardless of the cause, they strayed in their chase and sought me elsewhere.

I waited until it grew dark, standing motionless with my back to a tree. My thoughts at first were too frightened to be coherent, but they became clearer as I calmed down. I thought of the bandits' faces, memorizing their every feature. I would not forget those faces, I swore to myself, so help me God.

As I carved their images into my memory, I imagined what sweet vengeance would be like, fantasizing unlikely situations in which I would kill them all after making them suffer first. At last I forced my mind to stop its idle fantasies and focus, knowing I would make sure that those who had killed Raymond would pay, pay dearly with their lives.

Raymond had been a saint; a true saint — one who was kind and good-hearted. When he had helped me, it wasn't because

of a selfish desire that I would pay him back for his kindness. He hadn't even expected God to repay him his kindness. Raymond's sole motivation for his actions had been the nobility of his soul. I wasn't so noble, however, and my fist clenched; I wanted his killers' blood splattered — I wanted them to suffer horribly and die in agony.

It was then that I prayed, under the moonlight, in the dark of night, for God to grant me justice, to grant me vengeance. I didn't know how to pray anymore — I couldn't remember, so I spoke from my heart, baring my soul to He who remained silent.

"God...God ..." I called out in pain, as silently as I could "Grant me vengeance, please, oh Almighty God of the Heavens Above, He who hears the voices of his people," I continued after taking a deep breath. "Hear me!" I exclaimed.

"A great wrong — a great wrong, has been done. A righteous man has been slain, murdered!" I cried in pleading tones.

"Raymond o' the Brooks; he was murdered by three bandits. Murderers!" I called.

"Oh please, Lord of Hosts, grant me this prayer; help me strike them down," I pleaded.

"I'll not rest until justice has come to pass ... this I swear! This I swear!" I called more softly in agony. It was only after many minutes had passed that I collected myself and found the strength to rise. A raging spirit was alive in me now as never before. It brought me strength and comfort, where before had been weakness and fear. It caused me to spring to life with determined motion, where before I had been numb and insecure. This vow was my passion, my only passion.

So it was that my memories returned, one after another racing backwards through time. I whimpered in fear as I now

remembered the fire-trap and the flash of light. Ivar's monstrous glare as he roared at me to leave filled me with a mournful anger. Then my memories brought me forward to the fight against the rebels, and again there was nothing but sadness there. I was angry at myself, and disappointed. There was so much I could have done differently, so many possible outcomes and I brought down the worst upon myself. My rage raced on, unstoppable as a tornado, tearing across my heart and soul. I remembered the fights then, and clenched and unclenched my fists in recollected anger. Then Ivar once more: a vision of an honorable man. Though he had cast me away, oh how I wronged him. My thoughts next lingered on the bittersweet memory of Ingrid. I even whispered her name to the wind. I had so much in the life I left behind. Why did I leave it all behind?

Next I remembered my parents, and the ship which had brought us from Jerusalem to Drentwyck on the coast of Britain. My memories ended with a vision of my older brother moving to the rhythm of the wind, hanging from his neck, his head in an awkward position. I shunned away from that memory, for it was too much for me to bear, and the guilt which accompanied it threatened to shatter my resolve. Why all my memories were tainted by hatred, malcontent, and rage, I know not. But whatever sadness, longing, or even joy I dared remember was overshadowed by this great hate that now engulfed my life. I fed the infernos and was nourished by them. Hatred gave me the strength and resolve I needed for the grim task I had set before me. My path was laid bare before me, paved in violence every step of the way. This is who I am.

I reached the military camp in Over Hampton at the break of dawn. I smiled, pleased to see that the fighting had subsided and was forgotten. I asked a soldier where the clerk who enlists men

into service resided and made my way in grim determination to his barrack. He sat in a room very close to the cells where the surviving rebels now resided. I took satisfaction in hearing the moans of those rebels who had been captured by the army. I could not forgive nor forget how they had nearly ended my life, and I was not enlightened enough to consider them more than enemies now. They were the same brand of scum as the soldiers surrounding me. They were human. I had only to pick sides. I knocked on the door and entered quickly.

The room had been dark when I crossed the threshold — only a lonely light shone from a single candle. A clerk in gray robes sat upon a heavy oak chair, an open book before him, still writing with the feather in his hand as I entered the room. For a moment I envisioned him as a demon, writing down the names of the souls he would take with him to the underworld. Only his blue eyes shone in the light of the flame.

“So you want to sign in for service,” he asked in a rasping voice, and coughed, raising his shiny eyes from his book to look into mine.

“Aye, I’d like to be a soldier,” I answered nervously. There was a nearly invisible shift in his expression, a tiny smile that was nearly obfuscated. In my paranoia I almost imagined he had been waiting there for me. I banished that thought, however, since it was impossible.

“Sign here, then,” he said, turning his book over to me and showing me with his finger where to place my mark with the writing-feather. I tried to banish the impression in my head that I was surrendering my soul. I nervously moved a shaking hand to scribble my name when his cold fingers closed around my hand, preventing me from signing.

“If you’re not sure, don’t sign,” he said in a voice that sent

shivers down my spine.

"I'm sure," I replied, my face growing harder.

"If you say so, young man," he replied.

"You don't seem convinced," I told him.

"You're not the type to join the army," he said dismissively.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because the army has only bloodshed to offer you. I am giving you a chance to choose a different fate," he answered.

"Be that as it may, I still wish to sign," I replied.

"Why?" He asked bluntly.

"Because in Drentwych, I had been nothing; a boy relying on the kindness of others. I spent my days living either on the bitter grace shown to me by those who did not care for me, or outside in dark places where the scum of the earth roam," I said, trying to convince myself as well as him.

"And you think a soldier's life will elevate you?" He asked, smiling a crooked smile as if challenging my resolve.

"Yes, it will give me the chance to be my own man, to carve out my own fate. It will give me a sense of purpose and something useful to do with my time rather than waste it dreaming," I said.

"Dreaming, young man?" He was growing interested in my odd confession.

"Yes, dreaming. I hate dreaming. I dreamt of a better life for myself, but I can't have what I wished for. I wanted a good wife and perhaps to raise my own family someday, but she'll never be mine and the only thing I'm good for now is fighting," I said.

"I'm afraid I don't follow," he replied.

"I just want a second chance, so let me sign and halt the questions," I growled.

"I'll halt my questions when you cease lying. Why are you really ready to sign your life away?" He asked, and I wondered

if this demon could truly gaze into my soul.

“Vengeance, alright! I want to take bloody vengeance against bandits who murdered my father. I want to kill them and the rest of their kind! I want to make the world a better place by disposing of the scum in it,” I said angrily, certain that I now would be sent away or tossed in the dungeons.

“Very good, the army always needs good men!” He replied and clapped his hands together as he spoke. “Sign here,” he continued, and pointed to the place I was to put my mark. It was only when that the feather was touching the parchment that I recalled that I did not know how to write in his language.

“I can’t write more than a few letters,” I said in shame, and handed him back the pen. I had no idea that in Barbaria, very few people could spell even a single letter.

“Why didn’t you say so, then,” he said, and took the feather from me. “What’s your name?” He asked.

“Raymond of Drentwych,” I replied, and he signed the name which I took for my own from that day forward, in homage.

“Transporto lemma ut Abyssus, son,” he said as he dismissed me.

“What?”

“Send ‘em to Hell!”

I left his room with the dire feeling that someone had just stepped on my grave. In an odd way, though this man sent shivers down my spine, I felt I’d found in him a kindred spirit. There was a dark passion about him, full of malcontent and hatred of his life. One lost soul can always spot another of the same nature.

Just before I was sent off to the fortress of Wist Hill to be trained I heard the most alarming news. They found the enlister’s body — with his throat slit, stuffed in a closet. Luckily

I wasn't a suspect. I mourned for him, though. Enlisters usually get paid for every head they enlist, and it was mighty kind and thoughtful of him to try to turn me away. I was young, after all, and eager and strong. Exactly the kind of man the army wanted.

I arrived at the fortress of Wist Hill once again and there I was trained. Luckily for me, most of the trainers were different men than those who had been there my previous sojourn, and the one trainer who recognized me couldn't remember my name. I was eager to get back into fighting shape so that I could take revenge. Perhaps it was my grim determination or perhaps the shortage of soldiers after the rebellion that prompted the army to provide better training now. This time I was trained properly in the use of both sword and spear. Three months passed, as if they were a single day. I asked to be stationed at Over Hampton and was granted my request. Thus I became a soldier there once more, this time under a different name and with true purpose.



Present day...

Just before the dawn, Jaunee took the elevator with Daina. As they descended, Daina thought to herself just how small Jaunee was; like a miniature woman. Hard to believe this petite little person was a thousand-year-old witch — the smartest person on earth. Daina walked first, bent and turned the key to open the glass doors. Jaunee was preoccupied with examining

Daina's bum to notice any snipers outside. They descended the stairs together, shaking hands as they parted. Daina went back inside, and took the elevator to the basement floor where her car waited. Meanwhile Jaunee turned left, to go to her bike where someone was waiting. Taking three steps she noticed too late that something was wrong with the road blockade. A hail of bullets was fired at her all at once from Anti-Material rifles and machine guns. She was literally flung against a wall on her left by the powerful kinetic impact of these high-powered rounds. No person could survive being shot by an armor-piercing. 50 cal BMG round, and Jaunee was shot by a few dozens. Yet they did not tear her apart as they would a human being.

A towering figure, two meters tall, brown-haired and wearing a Biker's leather jacket ran towards Jaunee, oblivious to the danger.

"Mother!" He cried in a heavy voice devoid of human emotion. The Strike Teams were loading magazines as they watched this towering giant flailing his arms about, running towards his mother, who lay in a pool of her own blood. The sickening sound of a human skull exploding attracted the attention of a Sniper, who turned to see his friend drop dead, his brain splattered all over the roof. The Giant was shooting silently from the wrist. The sniper screamed at the radio, and the shooting began again.

"Mother!" The figure cried again, as he lay on top of her shallow-breathing form, shielding her with his body. The bullets tore his clothes and flesh apart, to reveal a metallic form beneath. Achilles retaliated, firing from an internal mechanism. Two more deaths convinced the soldiers to drop down and take cover.

"Achilles, run!" Jaunee said feebly, as her flesh begun turning to stone. And Achilles ran as fast as he could, carrying his

mother; he knew this story was over for him but he had to get mother to safety.

"She's got a fucking Terminator!" The Snipers screamed over the radio.

"No way, man! It was probably just some armor!" replied the Commander.

"Are you fucking kidding me! I shot him in the head like three times, and I'm telling you, this ain't human," replied the Sniper.

"You fucking moron, of-course he's not human; his mother is a monster and so is he. Now pack your gear, we're leaving!" He said.

"Delta team in position," was heard over another radio. Sparks were flying from Achilles' internal mechanism, and he received damage reports from every part of his body; both his biotic and synthetic parts were all ruptured and bleeding. He was heating up inside; his micro power-plant's cooling system was damaged. How did they pierce his graphene subdermal armor? Achilles didn't know. It was only a matter of time now before he ceased to be. Achilles broke the door of the Azrieli Towers, and hid Jaunee where he could. If protection of mother was not his primary goal, he would have killed all of them and more much sooner. Jaunee built Achilles to survive. She could not bear children, so she built one. Her perfect son, a machine.

Ten minutes later large army forces surrounded Achilles as he left the towers. They opened fire on what they thought was a terrorist and he exploded. The media reported a suicide bomber was intercepted by Israeli soldiers and his belt detonated. Luckily no-one was hurt.

"For mother." Were the last words he said as he combusted from the inside while being shot with a hail of bullets. And he wondered: do machines have souls...something that has

never before crossed his mind. An hour later life resumed their normal course. The bus stations were packed with people going to work, and traffic was a mess as it always is at these hours. The news repeated a story about a terrorist bomber, but the Israelis were used to these kind of stories, and everyone signed a sign of relief hearing no citizen or young soldier was hurt.

A floweriest discovered an ivory statue of an angel with her wings folded cloaking herself. She took the statue and used it as a mannequin to display her bouquets.



## CHAPTER X

### **JAUNEE**

Dear Journal,

I am skipping forward in my tale to allow my daughter Jaunee to add her story to my book.

But first some background ...

It has been a long time since last I wrote, for reasons I cannot elaborate at this time. Tonight, however, I should like to tell you of current events instead of the age-old tales of my youth. My beloved daughter Jaunee came to see me yesterday. We had parted ways about half a century ago over a trifling argument. I was surprised and overjoyed to see her again, to say the least, though her visit worried me beyond words, and I shall explain why. Like me, she is immortal yet unlike me, she was never really human. Jaunee is an astonishingly beautiful lady, her eternal youthful appearance enables her to easily pass for a teenager. Much like a teenager, she enjoys parties, dancing, and drinking and life as wild as it can be. Throughout the ages

she has retained her youthful, unchanging looks and lifestyle, regardless of how many centuries have passed. Until now. That is, when I saw her yesterday. Her hair had whitened completely. This brought me to two dire realizations: one, something is terribly wrong with her, and two, she hasn't dyed her hair — so she wants me to know. I was certainly worried, but uncertain on how to approach the matter.

“So what ...” I began, looking at her hair after I had served her a dish of spaghetti and red wine.

“No,” she replied dismissively. “Not now, I'm not ready yet,” she added in more pleasant tones. I did not want to put pressure on my little girl, so I questioned her no further. Like a worried father, though, I searched the refrigerator for a treat more suitable to her palate. I knew she loved cheese, wine, and sweets. I, however, lived a more modest lifestyle when she wasn't around, and therefore kept few of those things. After an extensive search I managed to locate some salty cheese of a local brand that I consider to be quite good and some bonbons I keep in case guests arrive. She smiled as I placed these things on the table, and her smile warmed my heart as it always does. We then debated the quality of Israeli cheese, being the local brand in this case, while we ate.

When the ice had finally melted and the Israeli cheese had been properly debated she spoke more warmly.

“This is nice, this place,” she began after a few moments of awkward silence, smiling.

“Thanks, I like it too,” I replied casually.

“So of all the places in the world, why pick Palestine, and a small secluded village at that?” She asked.

“Israel,” I corrected.

“Israel,” she repeated, wishing to avoid a debate.

“Well, I like the fresh air,” I said, trying to hide an awful truth.

“So, are you in some sort of trouble?” She boldly asked, catching on far too quickly for this young-old man.

“What makes you ask that?” I replied, exploiting my people’s age-old custom of answering a question with a question.

“You, living in a secluded location pretty far from any settlement — as far as I recall you’re usually a city-dweller,” she said.

“Maybe I’m favoring country life for a little while,” I offered.

“And I suppose the armed guards are here to keep you company?” She added in the same tones I had used.

“Maybe I prefer to keep human company for a while, and providing them with a useful occupation is an added bonus,” I jested.

“And you like people around you carrying guns, cuz you like guns so much you think no person is complete without one, like Prada for the masses.” She said with a winning smile. Damn her, I couldn’t think of an answer she wouldn’t twist around to reveal how pitiful my attempts at deceit were.

“I’m not naïve, Ray. Since when do you need someone to guard you?” She asked, slightly worried.

“I decided I want a change of pace,” I lied. “I’m actually working on a book, and the quiet pastoral environment helps my muse,” I added.

“Really?” She asked with a raised brow. “What about?” She added.

“Well...” I began nervously, “My life, actually,” I explained.

“You’ve gotta be joking!” Jaunee said. “Haven’t you always been shy of the public? Warning me repeatedly what would happen if we are discovered,” she asked. I tried to come up with a clever retort, but couldn’t find a winning argument. She was

right.

“Yeah, well, being the old man that I am, I thought it’d be good to actually write my story. Besides, even if I am ever published — and I doubt that I will be, nobody’s going to believe this is a real story,” I said.

“You don’t grow old,” she stated, and I frowned. “And are you actually considering getting yourself published?” She queried.

“Well, no. I mean, I’m not sure,” I replied.

“Very well. I want to help!” She exclaimed in lighter tones, catching on that I really do want to keep my secrets as much as she wants to keep hers. She’s obviously in trouble now, and there is no need to put my troubles on her shoulders as well.

“So you really want to help?” I asked carefully.

“Sure!” She replied, “Where are you at, exactly?” She queried.

“Well, I just finished writing about my battle with the demon in Drentwych,” I explained.

“Just before you found me!” She replied. “Yes, I remember,” she said, and I blushed. “How about I’ll write you my side of the story and we can compare versions later, wouldn’t that be fun?” She asked.

“Sure,” I replied. She bounced from her chair and gave me a kiss.

“So, where do I stay?” She asked with a winning smile. I showed her to a lavish bedroom with a king-size medieval hand-carved bed, a large armoire, and all the latest electric appliances one could wish for.

“This is the guest bedroom,” I lied, showing her the room I had furnished for her and her alone. I had kept the room clear and in pristine condition with the hope that someday she will return to me.

“Ray-mond,” she began with a wide smile. “Mon Dieu, I didn’t

know you had it in you!”

“Thanks,” I replied.

“This is a room befitting a king ...” she said “... or a queen,” she added.

“And it’s yours,” I replied, and left her to explore it on her own. I would have told her that I designed the room and carved the bed thinking of her — hoping a day such as this would come and that she would fly back home to me, but I wish it had been sooner and under different circumstances.



Dear Reader,

I am going to call this Jaunee's Diary, and write my story from time to time. I will use a different pen, and of course my writing style is different so you should be able to recognize my pages. Later we will organize it in the correct order ...

As promised, here’s my part of the tale. I guess I should start with an introduction for you, dear audience. So, my name is Jaunee, and I’ve been immortal for close to a thousand years now. Unlike my stepfather Raymond, I was never an ordinary mortal. I was born odd-looking and I have always had this touch of magic which set me apart from the rest of humanity.

I’m a tad less than a meter and a half tall, though by no means a dwarf. I’m a perfectly proportioned miniature woman and it’s a perfectly natural height for my race in the era in which I was born. My hair is naturally tomato-red and wavy. I have

crystal, ice-blue eyes and a heart-shaped face. With my pale complexion I'm not too comfortable in direct sunlight. I wasn't a pretty child but nowadays, but matured nicely. Raymond is the only person in the world for whom I am neither a trophy nor a monster. For him, I am and always will be his little girl.

I was born in a small village near Paris — in my estimate around 1010 or 1011. My father was a local nobleman of minor title and no lands, having lost them in this or that venture. He was not a tall man. Probably of mixed Celtic and Normand blood, he had blond hair and blue eyes you could die for. I mean, I always loved his eyes, but that's about all I loved about him. He was drunk most of the time — rude, and cruel.

My mother often said that it was my birth that broke him, but I heard from more reliable sources that he had already been like that before she met him. My mom was a French prostitute, by the way, and a famous one at that. She had ginger hair and a natural talent for, well ... she was a famous and much sought after prostitute.

Together the charming couple took over the brothel she worked in, after she got pregnant with me. The establishment later served as our home. It wasn't all that bad, though. I was actually quite fond of the place, if it hadn't been for the presence of my father.

Really, brothels in France are the best places in the world. In the old days it was where men and sometimes women came to unwind after a hard day's work. We had good food, good drinks, and fabulous music and dances—it was like a party that never ended with interesting guests showing up every evening, each carrying with him a story to be told. I learned to sing right after I learned to talk, and to dance right after I learned to walk. My passion, ever since I can remember, has been for song and

dance and life as it should be lived, abundantly.

However, my personal life wasn't one big party. My parents weren't too fond of me, you see, given that I had been born unnatural. And it showed. I was odd looking, I saw things nobody else could see, and I was far too smart for my own good. Since predestination was a dogma, it was obviously my fault for being born as I was, just like it was my mother's fault for giving birth to a girl, instead of a boy. The priest, and even the midwife, thought it best to drown me right after birth; that's what my mother told me when we were on better terms. However, on that day my father would hear nothing of it. Perhaps only because he was drunk, he insisted that I be allowed to live. Maybe his evil heart had a drop of tenderness in it, which he utterly spent on the day of my birth.

So I was allowed to live, but I was not loved. And I think the most tragic and sad part of it all is that they blamed me, and I blamed myself. So I've always tried to impress my parents, showing off the new songs and dances I learned. My father was usually drunk and impatient — he wanted me away from him, and my mother; she didn't care about anything. She was absorbed in herself. When my talents failed to attract attention from my parents, I showed off my skills to the rest of the patrons. Everyone thought it's amazing that a girl so small spoke fluently, and sang like an angel. On stage I was admired and cheered. I shone, and I felt that this is where I belong.

The awful truth was that my life was terrible during my tender years. I tried to hide behind stories I heard, and the songs I sang. I tried to win admiration when I failed to receive affection. But in the end, my fantasies always shattered when confronted with the truth of reality. They both hated each other, locked in a marriage because of my birth. One day I just couldn't take it

anymore. I wanted to live like in the songs and ballads. I wanted to see the world and go on adventures. I wanted to dance with the faerie maidens of the woods, and to dine at the tables of kings, and to meet heroes like mighty Hercules and Beowulf. I wanted to see the round table of Camelot, and to ask Morgain, "Who am I."

And so it was that a seven-year-old girl took to the hard road. I managed by stowing away on carriages and ships, by stealing, and sometimes by singing or playing music for food. I can say fairly that I lived day to day, not knowing where the next meal would come from, but I had fun — I really did. I loved traveling and seeing new places. Everything seemed so big and wonderful to my eyes. Some people along the way were cruel to me but most took pity and offered me shelter and food — at least for as long as I kept my hair covered and hidden from view.

That's how I got to Drentwych — by accident, really. I had been on a ship moored at the docks, and decided, on a whim, to disembark there. In a way that's where my life's story began; in that fateful town which changed all our lives.

I disembarked quietly before anyone noticed I stowed away. I then sought the town square so that I could play the flute or maybe even sing for food. I dreamt of playing my flute, and to see all the townsfolk gather in admiration. Surely I'd find a warm meal before continuing on my journey to see the whole wide world. But it was a cold day — too cold for singing and playing, and it turned into an even colder evening. In the end I earned a scrap of bread and caught a chill that penetrated my bones.

I was in tears then — the bread was my only solace, and yet that too was taken from me before I had a chance to take a good nibble. A boy much larger than I with a filth-crusted face

and a red aura mirroring his violent intentions, grabbed my bread, took a handsome bite out of it, and laughed as I shrieked and tried to take it back. I tried pleading with him, but whatever reply he gave was in a language I could not understand. As I despaired of attempts at diplomacy and tried once more to grab the bread by force, he shoved my face into the filthy, slushy ground and sniggered.

I remember feeling despair, as only someone defenseless can feel. Unable to contain the stream of tears that came rushing forth, I saw the villain speeding off with his loot. Then another boy tackled him and they fought. This one was a smaller boy with brown hair. They appeared as venomous monsters to my eyes, with a red light of violence emanating from them both. A part of me was content, though, seeing my villain on the losing side. Then it was over as quickly as it had started. The thief, now beaten out of his trophy, escaped, and his vanquisher made his way towards me. I tried to brush off my tears and thought perhaps to thank him, if his intention was to return my food, or to defend myself should I be attacked again. Humans were always needlessly violent. Internally I tugged upon my magic. To my utter surprise and gratitude, he chose the first of the two options. I released the tug before it hurt me.

He handed me the bread, which I took gladly, but with a trembling hand as he smiled victoriously. He also said something in the same crude language his adversary had used. I expressed my gratitude in French, which he probably understood, for his aura changed to a more passionate color. I broke the bread in half and offered him the bigger half. He took it graciously, for he was hungry too: I could tell. Then he sat beside me and we dined on the two scraps.

He then pointed to his chest and said, "John," to which I

nodded and pointed to my chest and said my own name. He fumbled as he attempted to repeat it in the same accent I had used, and then called me, “Jane,” instead.

I hugged him, which took him by surprise though he did not push me away. I was very cold and trembling. The boy spoke and took me by the hand when I failed to reply, guiding me to a place I assumed to be his home.

It was a large abandoned house with five or six children like me — well ... not exactly like me. They had an old, greedy man for a Papa. I assumed it was the local orphanage.

John led me straight to the Papa. His aura at closer inspection made me disdain him even more. It was sickly and colored by greed. I often gazed at that particular shade when workers in my mother’s establishment were given jewels, or when my father counted coins at the end of a successful night. Never had I seen this aura shade coloring a person when he gazed at me. I lowered my eyes in fear of him. This unsavory man was to be the judge of whether or not I’d be allowed to stay, and spending the night in the cold is not a thing I was sure I could survive. I needed his approval for just one night I decided, ‘for tomorrow I’ll go someplace else, hopefully warmer.’

They spoke; John and the Papa. John’s tone was somewhat urgent and pleading, while the Papa’s tone was mainly flat and uncaring. I was amazed and frightened to see the bully who had beaten me earlier enter the house and go straight to the Papa. The darkness in my heart sent vile images to my mind of what I can do to him, what I should do to him. But I didn’t want to listen, I didn’t want to be the demon-child my parents said I am. I forgive; that’s what good girls do.

The three of them argued, and at the end of their fight Papa slapped John, felling him, as he barked an order at him. John

got up and fled the room as fast as he could. My eyes followed John as I stood still, very intimidated by the large old man.

His bony finger touched my chin and forced me to look at him, right into his eyes. He studied my face and then said a few words in the same crude language he had used earlier, switching to French when he realized that I could not understand a word he said.

“What’s your name?” He asked impatiently.

“J-Jaunee.” I replied.

“Indeed she is,” he replied, addressing everyone, turning his head around to make sure they all heard him, his aura taking more iron tones.

“What?” I asked, completely puzzled by his remark. I was only seven at the time, though I was a smart and clever child.

“God is Gracious’, that’s the meaning of your name,” he replied.

‘He isn’t so gracious to me,’ I thought. ‘Not with how he made me, not with the parents he gave me. And I wouldn’t be standing here, a beggar, if God was indeed gracious to me.’

“All right,” I replied, after a pause in which his aura once again shifted — I tried to understand why.

“Where are your parents?” He asked, and once more his tone and aura took on iron quality.

“Dead,” I replied and lowered my eyes to hide my lies. He misread me and thought I was sad, as well I should have been had I had any feelings for them besides utter contempt.

“I’m sorry,” he answered, but didn’t mean a word of it; his tone revealed that he was pleased somehow by my loss. I couldn’t for the life of me figure out why that would make him happy.

‘He didn’t know them, or how vile they were. Why would he be pleased by their demise?’ I wondered.

“Have you any guardian, someone who takes care of you?” He asked.

“No,” I replied, my mind still occupied with trying to understand him.

“So where do you sleep?” He asked, leaning forward a bit, like a predator catching the scent of blood. To that I had no reply. I was now more than ever completely intimidated by this ugly old man who smelled so badly. I sought with my eyes an escape route.

“You can sleep here if you like,” he said in lighter tones, and still I did not reply, for I was puzzled, and scared by his conduct, which frightened me more than his words.

“What do you say?” He asked, hanging on his own words.

“Thank you?” I replied, but as I spoke in French he may have mistaken my tones for actual gratitude.

“You’re welcome,” he replied. “I’m sure we can be great friends,” he added as he patted my hair. I loathed his touch, I wanted to bite his fingers. A part of me wanted to run away now, another part wanted to remain and lash out, or at least to protect myself, by calling upon my demonic gifts.

“You’re cold,” he said. He then turned from me and barked orders to his orphans, who obediently cleared a bed for me and guided me towards it. I wasn’t so sure at this point if I was going to run away or not, but the warm comfy bed put its spell on me, so I stayed the night.

Come morning the Papa cooked us all breakfast and then sped all the other children off to whatever it was that children did in Drentwych. My first thought was that they were sent to help adult workers as cheap labor and as a way to learn a profession, but my naïve notions were quickly dispelled when I was left alone with the old man.

“Do you like games?” He asked as I eyed him fearfully.

“Yes,” I lied. I preferred music and dance to pretending, but I didn’t want to disappoint him.

“How about we play a game? I know quite a few,” he said. He tried to sound harmless, but his aura revealed his inner thoughts.

“All right,” I replied after a pause. I knew that if I wanted food and a roof over my head I’d better play nice and play along. To my surprise he showed me a game where he adorned a scarecrow with small bells, and my job was to pick off the bells as fast as I could without them ringing. I liked the game, though it was quite difficult to get a hold of more than a couple of bells at a time.

He seemed quite pleased, and urged me with pleasant tones to try again. When I grew frustrated, then bored with this game, he showed me another. In this one, I had to carry the bells on me yet not make a sound while I walked. I grew bored with that too after a while, though in this game I fared better. I wasn’t so unfamiliar with sneaking or stealing and these games demanded similar skills.

“You’re quite good at it,” he complimented me.

“Thank you,” I replied politely with the winning smile my mother used to put on when she wanted to win men over. He smiled back, pleased with himself.

She always said that. “If you let a man know my heart, he will own you. So you must mask your feelings with a smile. As long as you smile they’ll never be the wiser.”

“Do you know why I taught you these games?” He asked. I honestly did not so I shook my head.

“This is what all the other children are playing outside,” he replied.

“You’re strange,” I replied.

“Why?” He asked.

“These are strange games. Why play them?” I wondered.

“Because we’re a family,” he replied.

“I don’t understand,” I said. I knew what a family was well enough, but I’d never seen these games before.

“I take care of my family, and I teach them these games so they can bring me gifts to show me they care,” he said.

“All right,” I replied. I understood that he was asking me to steal, but I wasn’t going to do that. I offered him my flute instead — my one possession. That will win him over, I thought, and I could always steal it later, from him.

“A gift,” I said as I presented him the flute, wearing my mother’s smile. He shook his head and did not take my gift.

“Can you play the flute?” He asked suddenly.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Show me,” he urged, and I pressed the flute to my lips. I fumbled at first with my notes, but after a few tries music flowed from my flute. I played the tunes of my home and a few songs I had learned on the road. He seemed transfixed by my music, and it pleased me greatly.

“You’re very talented,” he said at last, and I smiled broadly.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Why don’t you play in the town’s square for everybody, and come back with a gift,” he said.

“All right,” I replied and hurried to get to the town square. When I arrived there I played my flute as I’d done the day before. This was a better day; somehow cozier. The people of Drentwych seemed to be deeply

Influenced by the weather, for as the weather brightened so too did their generosity.

At noon all the people of Drentwych came to dine together for a big meal. There was a cook who made the food for all of them, and a line in which everybody stood and waited eagerly to get their share. The guards kept the peace, taking a double share of food as wages for their hard work. They all smiled and pointed at me, seeming pleased with my music. Though it wasn't a stage, I was the center of attention, and as they all stopped to listen, I felt at home. I played travel songs, allowing my inner self to shine through the music.

A strong old man came as I paused to rest, smiling, and gave me a bowl of food. He said something in that same crude language that I could not comprehend, and I bowed my head and thanked him in my native tongue.

I didn't eat just yet, for I thought it best to play for my crowd while they ate, and eat when they finished. That way I'd have the most chance of winning alms. It was as I played that I noticed the rest of Papa's children. At first it seemed that they were staying in line, though making a bit of a noise while they were at it. Upon closer examination, though, I discovered their clever ploy. While some children made a commotion — playing, yelling at each other and running, others used the distraction to steal from the unsuspecting townspeople.

I thought it best to mind my own business and play my music as Papa had instructed me, lest I be tossed back to the street. I wasn't sure why it became important for me to stay with Papa at this point, but it was. As I played my music the townsfolk listened and made no sound. That was the biggest compliment an artist of my small stature could receive. Even Papa's children all remained as silent as death, listening to my music. Of course, being silent was of paramount importance in the art of stealing, which they continued to practice with ease now that I was

providing them with a good cover.

When the eating was over I stopped playing and joined the rest of the kids on their way back to Papa's house. John took me by the hand, which both surprised me and sent butterflies flying through my belly. I cared for him; there was something about his honest, chivalric manners that moved my heart. His friends — even the brute from the day before, all seemed impressed with me and envious of John. I adored the feeling it gave me, and craved more of it.

John tried talking to me, but I couldn't as yet understand his speech. I assumed, though, by the tone of his voice, his body language, and the color of his aura, that his words were compliments. Yet I couldn't be sure, so I refrained from responding lest I make a mockery of myself. Still, I kept on smiling at him lest he interpret my silence as rejection, occasionally nodding to show I was listening.

Back at the orphanage Papa waited eagerly for our return. Some children advanced ahead and gave him gifts as well as explanations or boasts of their deeds — I couldn't be sure, but their tones suggested as much. Then some others advanced with nothing in their hands, John amongst them. They all talked, seemingly at once. I stayed where I stood, not so sure what I was supposed to do. To my surprise, they all pointed at me and spoke hurriedly, their auras signifying nervousness and excitement. As the papa approached me, I took a few steps back. I didn't like the shade of his aura, or the look in his eyes.

"Jaunee, my pretty," he began in French. "My children tell me you played very well," he continued; at this point I stopped walking backwards. "Because of you they were able to bring me gifts, so I am very pleased," he said.

"I'm glad I have been of service," I replied nervously, not

sure what I was supposed to say. He spread his hands as he advanced. The movement frightened me beyond words, though I presume he meant well. Still, there was something about his gestures which terrified me. My eyes darted about, seeking an avenue for escape. Like a coiled snake or a threatened cat, I bared my teeth and hissed at him. I surprised both myself and him, but at my sudden weird, threatening movement he stopped in mid-step and did not advance any further. In my mind I saw myself leap over him, biting his neck. There was a strange warmth flowing through my body, and a craving for his blood. I suppressed my demonic urges. I will not hurt him unless he leaves me no choice.

“Didn’t mean to scare you there,” he said apologetically.

“Pardon,” I replied as the darker side of me slept again.

“I just meant to thank you,” he added, still defensive.

“Pardon,” I repeated. I was appalled with myself and the wickedness with which I wanted to tear him apart. In my mind, he was my father, a rude, crude drunk. But he was not a monster like me. I just couldn’t let him touch me ever again.

I fled and hid in an alley behind some trash and broken barrels. I must have hidden there for hours, though I don’t even know why. Luckily, I was found when the night grew dim. John had been searching for me throughout the day, but I had remained hidden, not replying when he called my name. He nevertheless did a wonderful job and found me in the alley. I was fortunate, you see, for in my fear I’d lost track of the fact that I was frozen to the core.

He extended his hand to me, saying my name quietly. He waited until I was ready to come out on my own and let him take me by the hand. As he touched me he said something worriedly, then rubbed my palms until they were warmer.

I slept a haunted sleep that night, feeling the room grow alternatively too cold or too warm. Feverish, I dreamt of my father and suffered the worst of nightmares, sleeping and waking in spurts. Sometimes when I awoke John was there at my side, petting my hair or offering me food. Other times when I awoke, I burst out in fits of weeping, especially if he wasn't there. He really did try to take care of me, though, even if he didn't know how. Days passed, I think, and my sickness only worsened. At the height of my fever, I could not tell if I was asleep or awake, for both worlds seemed to defy reason, and both were coated with a thick layer of misery.

Several days later, come morning I could not rise from bed even to relieve myself. John was not there when I awoke and Papa came instead and touched my head. He said something, then he picked me up and carried me somewhere. I was half asleep or delusional, but I remember the rush of wind and the change of temperature. I remember the bitter-ice kiss he gave me, like the mark of Caine on my forehead, and then he laid me in the freezing snow.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't have you infecting the other children." Then he left me for dead in an unknown alley in Drentwych.

This is the end of my entry for now so it's back to Ray's story.



## CHAPTER XI

### **SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND**

I reported to the barracks as soon as I arrived at Over Hampton, eager to be sent to my station. They told me I was to be a footman, and my job would be to patrol the streets, keep the peace, and report any signs of insurrection. I was taught that rebellion is a form of a social disease that spreads rapidly, and corrupts the hearts of innocent men and women. A traitor betrays both God and his fellow man for he causes the fabric of society to grow weaker, and thus gives the barbarian horde an advantage when they try to conquer us. I can't say I find the argument convincing now, but at the time of my training, after all I've seen, it made perfect sense. Not that I had any illusions that we were the good guys and they were the bad. We were the bad guys fighting against other bad guys, and the good guys were somewhere in the middle of the battlefield getting hurt; innocents who pay the price for their leaders' decisions.

They sent another soldier with me to teach me the patrol

routes. He introduced himself as Edrid. He was a man whom I recognized from the tavern, since we had brawled once over one offense or another, but he didn't seem to recognize me so I acted as if it were the first time we'd met.

During my shift I acted the ideal soldier, which means I kept my mouth shut, my eyes open, and my ears peeled for any sign of insurrection. People were mostly terrified of us soldiers. Some, however, were too broken-spirited to care, and behaved like horses who accepted the yoke of their master. Edrid, meanwhile, took it upon himself to be my senior officer and mentor, and taught me his version of all I needed to know about being a soldier.

"Being a soldier, is the best damn position one can hold," he said, and I nodded. "You get to carry a weapon, and the maidens just love a man brandishing a big weapon, if you know what I mean," he said and elbowed me playfully. "Now, the thing is with the maidens, you have to be clever, or else you're in a big mess, if you know what I mean," he repeated, again elbowing me, and starting to get on my nerves. "See, the thing is, we're the law around here — the utmost authority, the supreme leaders, if you know what I mean," he said, and I dodged his elbow. "I do," I replied, prolonging the 'o' sound.

"See, that's better. I knew you'd see things my way," he said, cheering up, though I don't know why. "So, as I was saying ..." he said after I neglected to comment, "... you can have any maiden you like, you just have to make sure nobody's looking. Know what I mean?" He asked — but I didn't know.

"If you approach them in a crowd or when they're close to home, they'll scream," he said, and I stopped walking. "Then you have to threaten the father, accuse him of mutiny to scare him off and have your way with some tender flesh, if you know

what I mean,” he said, smiling broadly.

“So your idea of wooing maidens is threatening their family and raping them?” I said, trying as hard as I could to hide the fury in my voice.

“No! You’re not paying attention,” he said, and I relaxed, hoping it was a language misunderstanding.

“I never said anything about wooing ... Who needs to woo women when you can just take them? I mean, we’re the law, right? So we take what we want, divine privilege and all,” he said, and I remained silent. I imagined myself grabbing his throat with my right hand and tearing his ‘big sword’ from its scabbard with my left, imagining his screaming face brought a smile to mine. He saw me smiling and smiled back. Most likely the villain thought I was seduced. If he could only catch a glimpse of my dark thoughts, he’d never smile again, for in him I saw the same wicked evil that has claimed Raymond’s life.

“See, I knew you were a sport,” he said, and continued on merrily. I stopped paying attention to his words, though he kept on babbling throughout the shift. I couldn’t afford to listen to him, for it would have cost him his life and me my job, and I needed my job if I was to take my revenge.

When our shift was blissfully over I went on a second patrol, still wearing the uniform and helmet of a guard. This patrol took me to other areas: taverns, alleyways, and other gathering places for those of a dangerous sort. I sought out the cutthroats who had murdered Raymond, and hoped they wouldn’t recognize me with the uniform and helmet on. Besides, even if they did, I doubted they’d try to attack a soldier when there were so many of us, all blood-thirsty and within calling distance. My preparations proved to be in vain, however, for they were nowhere to be found.

My time in Over Hampton was most frustrating. I spent countless days in idle search, finding nothing. I left no stone unturned and no alley unvisited. I tolerated Edrid day after day, trying to turn a deaf ear to endless accounts of his diabolical activities. Every word he said, every description of the deeds he'd done, left a bitter taste in my mouth, and day after day I planned the day of reckoning, when I would dispense justice to him as well. Truly readers, if ever there was a devil masquerading as a human being, this would be him.

There was no sign of my chief adversaries in Over Hampton, however, no matter where I looked. Malcontent filled my heart until I could no longer eat. Nightmares of Raymond butchered like an animal haunted me, reminding me that the scum of the earth still roams free. All too soon maidens pleading for mercy, along with their screams and Edrid's laughter, joined the disharmony of my dreams. I could take no more. I awoke one morning, and it was a different day, a new day, a beginning and an end.

A single blow to the back of the head killed him, a move that is commonly known as a Blackjack. I buried him in an alley beneath a heap of trash and human waste, a suitable grave for the man, if such a monster may be called a man. I laughed inside at how easy it is to kill a man, to snuff out a life. I had hoped to feel regret, to feel anything. But there was only content. A dark beast long growing in the fertile soil of malcontent, watered day and night by rage, had finally been sated.

When they finally came around to question me, I told my superior officer and his comrades that he had not seemed himself, looking over his shoulder as we patrolled. After a lot of fuss, I got out of the incident with a reprimand. As I expected, they preferred one soldier working rather than one gone and

one in prison, especially since they had no evidence of foul play. I must admit, though, that murdering him was a spur of the moment thing, an uncalculated risk which jeopardized my long term goals.

However, I did sleep soundly that night. No nightmares haunted me. The commoners sighed in relief when word of his absence became the talk of town. It's so easy to get away with murder, it seems; so easy that I wanted to protest. How many more murderers like me got away without as much as a proper inquiry, I wondered. I requested a transfer from Over Hampton a few days later, telling them that Edrid's disappearance had touched me deeply and I sought a change of scenery. I thus returned to Drentwych with mixed feelings but with hope for a fresh beginning.

Drentwych had remained just as I remembered it, fortified by a wall with familiar cobblestone roads. When last I had come here I was a boy, recently orphaned and mesmerized by the beauty and the ugliness of this town. Now I was a man and not so easily charmed. I reported to the barracks and was assigned a fellow soldier by the name of Barnabas, though his close friends sometimes called him Barney. He was much shorter than I, with short curly hair that thinned dramatically around the front of his head. He was also much fatter than I was, though not so fat as to resemble a barrel.

"So you're the new guy from Over Hampton," he said, moving his head back and raising his eyes in a very peculiar gesture.

"Aye, th-" I began, but he interrupted.

"Splendid! My name's Barnabas," he said. "But if we get on well, you can call me Barney."

"Raymond," I replied simply.

"And this is my partner, Crushy," he continued, as if I hadn't

spoken, showing me his iron club—a heavy, dented weapon, dirtied by crusted blood.

“Crushy?” I inquired, with the most puzzled look. Perhaps it was a stunned look, I’m not certain.

“My partner ...” he said, presenting it again. “Do you know why I called her Crushy?” He asked, in what I didn’t realize at first was a rhetoric question.

“Why?” I asked, meaning, “Why the bloody hell, under God have you named your club at all? And how in bloody hell is a spiky, dirty instrument of death at all female?”

“Because she and I crush things, that’s why!” He elaborated.

“Of course, that makes perfect sense,” I said, nodding my head. Are all soldiers violently crazy? I wondered.

The odd introductions done, we went on patrol together. Barny was crazier than my last partner — obviously missing a few marbles in his head, but on the bright side he wasn’t into rape and pillage. He much preferred to be lazy, at least from what I gathered patrolling with him. ‘So I guess he should live,’ I told myself and smiled.

There were two main topics which seemed to occupy his monologues. I’ll summarize them for the sake of not delving into his madness any further. His favorite hobby was gaming and wagering. He spoke constantly of various games, stakes, and odds, along with his victories and losses. I had a very hard time keeping up with his prattle so I just nodded my understanding upon occasion to keep him from asking me anything. His second-best favorite subject was vengeance. He kept a list in his head of everybody who had ever wronged him and described to me in detail what he had done or intended to do to said party. On the bright side, he wasn’t as bad as Edrid, who I tried to forget. He spoke so much of wagering that he got me thrilled

at the prospect of joining him and his friends for a game in the Tavern. This is where we went together after our shift.

We headed for The Black Sheep Tavern at the docks, the same place where I had once fought, drunk, and wagered, myself. The outskirts of the tavern smelled worse than I remembered. Puddles of piss and vomit ‘welcomed’ any patron who sought entry to the establishment, along with the *crème-de-la-crème* of Drentwych: drunks, cutthroats, thieves, eccentrics, and salesman of dubious reputation and merchandise. I shoved the drunks aside when they bumped into me, broke the fingers of a man who tried to pick my pocket, and told the salesmen to shove off or be damned. Barny seemed impressed with my show of violence, and commented:

“Wow, you don’t talk much, but you sure do handle crooks right!”

“I just don’t like ‘em shoving their fingers down my pockets or trying to sell me fenced goods, as if I’m some easy mark,” I said.

“You’re even savvy to the street lingo, and you’ve only just arrived. I’m impressed,” he said.

“Yeah, I learn fast, but only because you’re such a great teacher,” I said, and opened the door. The sarcasm was lost on him though. He just smiled at the compliment.

Inside the place seemed to have remained as I remembered it, though now I noticed every bloodstain, every spot of filth and, more importantly, I saw the hidden weapons of many dangerous-looking patrons. I wondered to myself for only a moment; how could I have brawled with these people, so carelessly wagering my life? Then I spotted the three murderers, as all the patrons paused in their doings to stare at me. The murderers appeared cleaner now than I remember them in Raymond’s cabin, and their table sported a fair number of drinks

as well as that same tired-looking hooker whom I recognized as having belonged to one of my friends from my previous identity. Obviously they had acquired a certain amount of gold to afford this relatively lavish lifestyle.

“Splendid, Adam,” I told myself. Finding them had proved to be fairly easy, and I hadn’t counted on that. “Now what?” I asked myself. My first instinct was to charge them head-on, spear in hand, ready to extract justice and bloody vengeance. However, I wasn’t stupid — at least not to that degree. Having been in the army and learning a few moves with a spear hardly qualify a person to take on three experienced adversaries all at once. So I stood there, watching them silently, uncertain of myself and my next course of action.

“What can I do for you soldiers?” The tavern owner, failed to recognize me in uniform and helmet. If anyone else did recognize me, they wisely kept it to themselves. I turned around and left without a word being spoken. I had nothing better to do at this stage anyway. The patrons resumed their doings as if I had never come. Barny didn’t seem to care that I’d left; he walked inside and indulged in whatever game of chance he was accustomed to playing.

Now I had to carefully devise a plan. Killing three armed men is not a child’s game, and I could easily be killed. The image of Raymond the Forester with his head cleaved in two, lying in a pool of his own blood, came to mind, reminding me again how fragile life is. Calling more soldiers to take them in might have been a good idea, but then I’d have to spill the beans on how I came to know they murdered Raymond the Forester in the woods. The last thing I needed was for the army to know that I had defected and then enlisted again under a different name. For all I knew, this could mean a death sentence for me rather

than them. No, I had to do this on my own; no witnesses.

Who was I kidding? I'm no assassin, nor a great strategic mastermind. I had no idea how to accomplish my goal. I did know for certain, though, that I needed a better weapon than an army-issue spear. I needed a sword, some better training, and probably someone older and wiser to give me council.

'There is only one such person I know who can do all of this,' I thought, 'And he won't be too thrilled to see me. In fact, he may slay me himself for dishonoring both himself and his daughter. It may be too risky turning to him.'

Besides, I was more than half afraid of confronting him, even without regard to the messy business at hand. But there was no one else. Decisions, decisions ... I procrastinated again.

'Just act, Adam! Just act!' I told myself.

Reluctantly, I found my way to Ivar's Smithy, the place where I had once lived and fallen in love. As I walked there, I gathered strength and hastened my pace. I tried to banish all thoughts of Ingrid, and forget her father's face when he had sent me away. I tried to focus on the business at hand instead. I was able to put aside my disagreements with Ivar, but Ingrid ... I missed her.

The smithy was closed at this time of the evening. Snow fell about me and obscured the cobblestone road which led to the door. The windows were closed, but a light from the inside penetrated through the cracks in the shutters, making the scene around me seem a bit surreal as all was dark, save for starlight and the glow coming from the house. Smoke coming from the chimney and the scent it brought of cooked, cheered me up and told me that the occupants weren't sleeping. It also reminded me of how hungry I was ... I day-dreamed of having supper with Ingrid and Ivar, as we used to do when life was simpler.

As I stood by the door, all my turbulent thoughts assailed me, and I was lost as if in a dark storm that drowned my senses and clouded my judgment. I must have stood there motionless at the door for minutes, unable to find the strength to knock. He may have spoken prior to opening the door, for I remember the sound of his voice, but not what he said.

Ivar's beard was grayer than I had remembered, and signs of aging were on his face. We stared into each other's eyes for a few long moments, neither of us speaking. His face actually brightened up when he recognized me, at least for a moment — before the pleasure was replaced by a frown. I smiled faintly and lowered my eyes. They stung, as if wishing to shed tears, but they wouldn't do what my heart wanted them to. I could only speak the words which came from my heart.

"Adam, what are you ..." he started to say, but I interrupted.

"Master, I'm sorry, for everything. I was a fool," I said, not daring to look into his face. He paused for a moment in mid-speech, considered his words, and then spoke:

"I told you to go and never come back," he replied somberly.

"Father, who is it?" Ingrid asked from behind him. I heard the sounds of a chair shuffling and her rising up.

"This doesn't concern you," he replied, his head turning left to face her as he spoke.

"I know you did, Master, but I dishonored you and bore the shame of it for a long time. I came to apologize for my wrongdoings and thank you for the hospitality and grace which you've shown me," I said. He considered in silence before speaking.

"Well-spoken. Obviously you had time to prepare a speech," he replied.

"I mean it, every word of it. I've changed. I know better now,"

I replied.

"I can't take you back," he declared.

"I'm not asking you to," I answered.

"So you really came here just to apologize?" He queried, and I was trapped. If I told him 'yes', then asked him for aid, I'd be a liar, and a poor one at that. If I told him 'no' and ask for something more, my apology would be seen as a means of obtaining his aid. So I decided not to answer at all.

"I came to apologize, and also to tell you I understand your decision and agree with it. I'm not of noble blood or spirit and I'm unworthy of the likes of Ingrid. You were right to turn me down; a good father must protect his daughter from those beneath her status," I said.

"It's not that I don't love you," he answered.

"I know you care for me, Master, but you have a duty to your daughter and that comes before all else. I'd have done the same if I were in your shoes."

"You really have changed," he remarked.

"Yes, I have, and I've learned something. I've learned that even if I'm not of noble bearing, it doesn't mean I can't act nobly and be a better man for it," I said, and inhaled the cold air. "Offering a much deserved apology is my second step in being dignified."

"What's the first?" He inquired.

"Recognizing my errors and taking responsibility for my actions," I said.

"May the Gods bless you!" He answered.

"May I ask a small favor?" I asked.

"What is it?" He replied, losing his mirth at my request.

"I'd like to be given the chance to tell you what happened to me after I was banished, and how I came to this epiphany," I said.

“Well, of course! If that’s your only desire, I apologize for mistrusting you. Won’t you come in for supper?” He asked, and I entered, smiling...



## CHAPTER XII

### SCUM OF THE EARTH

I was beaming with happiness as I sat at Ivar's table for supper. It had been a long time since I'd been this happy, and only now did I realize how much I had missed them both. Ingrid kept silent most of the evening, though her constant smile told me without words all the secrets of her heart, and I too smiled, and found a measure of joy dining on a simple meal, with simple people who were family to me. "So I see you're a soldier now," Ivar remarked, only after we had finished our meal. Ingrid then eyed my uniform and rank carefully, as if she hadn't understood their meaning until then.

"Yes, I've enlisted," I replied proudly.

"Are you high-ranked?" Ingrid asked innocently.

"How can he hold a high rank if he only recently enlisted?" Ivar responded, in a manner that somewhat belittled his daughter.

"No, I'm only a footman now, but I'll be promoted if I work hard enough," I said. Both Ivar and Ingrid nodded in

understanding, though their conflicting expressions told me that each understood me in different ways: Ingrid seemed impressed, Ivar not so. I heard the sound of Ivar tapping his leg impatiently under the table, and decided that this was the best and probably only opportunity I had to tell him what had happened — in hope he'd want to help. And so I started ...

"That Raymond sounds familiar from somewhere," Ivar said, and I leaned closer to hear what he'd say next.

"Can't remember from where though. You're saying three bandits killed him and they're in town now ... sounds like risky business if you're after them," he remarked.

"Honor demands that I pursue them; I would do the same for you or Ingrid if something were to happen to either of you." I replied.

"I respect that," Ivar answered, thinking a few moments. "Tell you what ... I'll give you a sword and tutor you in its proper use. You can return here each evening after your shift and we'll train together. I've been meaning to practice my fencing at any rate, but haven't found the time. Now'd be as good an opportunity as ever," he concluded.

"Thank you! Thank you Master Smith! I shan't forget this favor, I shan't!" I cried, taking his hand and kissing it. "Don't thank me yet boy, I may be sending you off to your death. You need to take your training very seriously now and be persistent," he replied after he released his hand. Ingrid's face turned pale.

"I'm not going to die, God is with me," I replied, to reassure both myself and Ingrid.

"The gods favor the bold, but they'll not stay the hand of death even for the mightiest of warriors. Now wait here," Ivar said, and went to one of the walls, where he removed a log to reveal a secret compartment. Both Ingrid and I stared at him,

and he smiled as he took out a bundle covered in brown cloth. He returned to the table, I rose as he approached, and Ingrid did as well. He presented the bundle to me with both hands. I took it and removed the cloth to reveal a finely-crafted sword.

“Take it, it’s yours,” he said, and I did. I lifted the sword by the hilt and studied it. It was long, though unlike a generic long sword, this one featured a two-handed grip for easier wielding and a slightly curved blade-point. The sword was quite sharp and lighter than it appeared to be, so most likely it was made of some kind of iron with which I was unfamiliar. I took a step backwards and tried holding it with two hands, then shifted my grip to one hand and smiled, anticipating revenge. I discovered that I wasn’t strong enough to use it properly with one hand despite the fact that it was lighter than a common sword, however, so I was glad for the prolonged hilt. I just wasn’t built as strongly as those of northern lineage and Ivar knew it.

“It’s called Troublemaker,” Ivar said proudly.

“The name fits,” I replied.

“Of course it does, for I was thinking of you when I named it,” he said, chuckling.

“It’s a masterpiece,” I added.

“Well, I made it for you a long time ago, but then other things came up ... I don’t know why I haven’t sold it since,” he said, embarrassed. I smiled broadly then, as the implications of what he had just said became clear to me.

“Want to go outside to test it?” He asked.

“If it’s not a bother, of course,” I answered and turned to exit his home. He placed his hand on my shoulder then. I could tell by his expression that there was much he wanted to say — hell, there was much I wanted to say to him. But he was Ivar. Ivar rarely displayed emotion, and I ... I was as stubborn as he.

“Adam, it’s best if your old name is forgotten. I know the army better than you think, and it’ll be the death of you should they discover you once defected,” he said. I knew his words to be true and had previously come to the same conclusion of my own accord. I acquiesced silently, and then thanked him for the advice.

“My name is Raymond of the Brooks,” I replied, and he nodded.

“It’s an honorable name,” he replied, and we went outside to train.

We stood outside facing each other, Ivar and me. Snow fell about us, and Ingrid held a torch illuminating our training ground. Ivar padded our weapons, then started the lesson with a free-form light fencing exercise — meaning that he let me fight as my spirit guided me without correcting my pose or movements. He frowned and batted my weapon aside when he saw I was very dominantly left-handed, as he believed this was a great flaw for a swordsman. When Ivar had trained me in the past, he had instructed me to use only my right hand. Since then, I’ve only wielded pole-arms which require the use of both hands. Now as I switched back to a single-handed weapon again, I found that I still favored the left despite his constant tutorage.

“Ada- ... er, Raymond,” he said, getting used to my new name. “Your left hand rules you and your right is practically useless, I don’t know if you’ll ever be able to fence properly.” I frowned, assaulting him with greater force. He easily side-stepped my wild attacks, stabbing me with the tip of his padded blade. It hurt and I was humiliated, but I didn’t let that slow me down. I just tried again and again, shifting and experimenting with my as-yet-nonexistent technique.

“Alright, alright! You have a fighting spirit; I’ll grant you that. Maybe I’ll make a warrior out of you after all,” Ivar said after intercepting a hail of blows he realized would never end. I panted heavily. My head felt too light, and the world spun about me, but by an act of sheer will I kept standing. Unlike me, he hardly moved or exerted energy. This drove me mad. I had above average speed, stamina and average strength, yet for this old man, I was nothing.

“Maybe we can turn your disability ...” he said, referring to my left-handed grip, “... into an advantage,” Ivar added. He taught me the proper leg and hand positioning for executing a reverse grip of the two-handed pommel. I placed my left foot a bit forward, but not so far forward as to reveal my reversed grip and stance. He showed me how to hold my weapon as if I were right-handed, and then shift my grip as soon as the first swing came, in order to deceive my opponent until it was too late for him to adapt his tactic to respond to my blows. The move is usually referred to as “the fool’s guard” though there are several variations.

“Most battles are decided by a couple of sword-swings,” he said, “despite various legends which tell of prolonged matches.”

“Yes, Master,” I replied, taking his word for it.

“Stand properly, breathe in rhythm, study your opponent, search for his weakness, then strike, deceive, and go for the kill,” he told me, summarizing his fencing philosophy.

I did as instructed, failing miserably time after time, until I almost despaired. But I would not quit — I could not. My pride kept me from it, and the sense of my utter worthlessness whenever I had thoughts of quitting; that kept me from backing down. We battled for perhaps an hour, until soldiers heard the sound of our swords clashing despite their being muffled.

“Halt!” A senior officer called to Ivar when he saw us fighting. Another soldier stood beside him, more nervous than the first. I lowered my blade before Ivar did and spoke.

“Thank you, Master Smith, for the sword and the lesson. Your generosity will be made known to the Lords of Wist Hill,” I said.

“Aye! This is my personal gift to you, Master Soldier,” he replied and bowed low, catching on. Both soldiers visibly relaxed, and I turned to them.

“Master Ivar the Smith, has given me a sword and a lesson on its use,” I explained.

“Carry on, then,” the senior soldier said, losing interest and leaving, together with his companion. I turned back to Ivar, but he had left silently with his daughter as soon as the soldiers had focused their attention only on me. I did not understand his fear of the soldiers, but I guessed that his reasons must be sound enough. I left the merchants’ quarter and walked back to the barracks, where I spent the remainder of the night alone. I watched my unsheathed blade reflect the light of the single candle which shone near my bed, casting the only light in the room. My mind raced with thoughts of everything which had brought me this far, and of what lay ahead. I wondered if these were the last days of my life. I fell asleep.

I was walking in a field of wheat, the sun shining above me and white sheep-shaped clouds moving in the sky. The climate, for once, was just right. The sun above was not too hot, as it normally was where I come from ... neither was it too cold, like where I am now.

Everything was just perfect. I walked in the field, not knowing where I was going, or how I got there. So many questions unanswered, some answers I would never know. But my body moved with its own inertia — it seemed to know where my

strides were taking me, though I didn't. Suddenly, my brother stood before me, just as I remember him before he was lost to me. He stood, leaning on a scarecrow, much smaller than I now was. How odd it is, I thought to myself, to have my older brother be smaller than me.

"Where are you going?" He asked me, in an ancient language that I had almost forgotten.

"I don't know," I answered honestly in the odd, mixed language.

"Where have you come from?" I asked him after a pause, when he had said nothing more. But he was already gone; the scarecrow remained, surrounded by golden wheat.

Looking around, I murmured, "Where have you gone?" Now in my native tongue. It seemed the field was spinning as I turned. No matter which direction I looked, the scarecrow always faced me. I felt trapped, like in a rat's maze, my path set before me by hands not my own. The world seemed to close in around me, and feelings of claustrophobia urged my feet forwards. It seemed I had no choice ... a sword! A sword just lay there in the field. How odd to see a sword just lying there, its surface gleaming, reflecting the light of the sun. My left hand moved of its own accord and grabbed hold of it. Was that the right thing to do? I asked myself as I inspected the blade. Then there was something on my palm; my eyes lost focus and the golden field blurred. I was bleeding! It was blood on my hands! I look about. It was night-time. Someone was chasing me; I could feel the predatory eyes on my back. I turned and turned but the world kept on spinning. It was right behind me; I could feel it! I swung my sword widely, cutting through the air and wheat all about me. Nothing was there though. A raven flew and my eyes followed its flight. The world spun as I turned. The raven

finally rested on the right shoulder of the scarecrow. It wasn't the same scarecrow as before, for this one seemed sabotaged. Its right hand appeared to be missing, as if someone had torn it out, and its face was scarred where there should have been an eye. The raven cawed once and I became aware of my hand again ... it was still clutching the sword. That hand seemed distorted, however, as if someone had poured hot red wax on it. The sword fell from my palm as I clutched my wounded hand, and its blade dug into the ground. I stood before a cross with the raven behind it, and then I turned my back and fled, as fast as my feet could carry me. Wheat everywhere, breaking when I trampled on it. I didn't know the way ahead so I looked back as I ran forwards, leaving havoc in my wake. Everything I touch dies, I thought. I can't escape ... Bells rang, high above in the sky.

I woke to the sound of church bells; it was now morning. I sat in a cold sweat for several minutes, frightened like a little boy, though I didn't know what had scared me. I got up and washed my face, ready for another day of duty. Barny seemed affable enough, having forgotten the night before as if it had never happened. Perhaps he respected my privacy and knew not to ask questions.



## CHAPTER XIII

### **MAN ON A MISSION**

My shifts passed quickly in succession, one after another, like night-time intervals between my evenings with Ivar and Ingrid. All I cared about was justice and my friends. In an attempt to better myself, I acted with respect towards Ivar and heeded his wishes. I had to stay away from Ingrid, though I still cared for her. I reasoned that I would have plenty of time for that when we'd be married, after Ivar had passed away, or mellowed enough to allow us our dream. Not that I wished him dead — on the contrary, I wished him a long life. But I couldn't forget and I couldn't forgive the way he had cast me away. I realize it makes me seem ungrateful, but I was only a kid then, more concerned with what I did not get than with what I did.

As a soldier in Drentwych, my duty was to keep the peace and deal with anyone who posed a threat to the Prince and his Lords. I decided that bandits, since they rob people and thus prevent them from paying their taxes, are a threat to the

Prince. I decided that rapists, since they disturb the peaceful lives of commoners, are also a threat and must be dealt with. Barny didn't seem to care one way or the other. He was as fond of idleness as he was of violence. He was a true friend in that he always covered my back and let me do whatever I wanted to do without judgment or complaint. I was no fool, however. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Prince only cared about his taxes and Barny about his pleasures. But I decided that my duties extended beyond that, so I worked within the system which empowered me, that allowed me to carry a weapon and do what I thought was right. Perhaps I was just searching for an outlet to satisfy a dark need for violence. The ruling power did not condemn my prey, their deeds were tolerated, at least to some degree. To me, however, that power would not have shown such clemency.

The world, I discovered, does not revolve around me; earthly matters do not wait until I'm finished with my business. It must have been two fortnights along into my training with Ivar when my Commander summoned me to his office.

His office was a modest enough place; a small room in the upper floor of the barracks. A heavy oak table occupied most of the room, and on it were various scrolls laying about in no particular order. My Commander was an aging man, both a religious man and a soldier. He wore a brown wool shirt adorned with small spikes that acted as light armor, and thinner trousers of a softer fabric. Around his neck he wore a silver cross, large enough to be seen but not large enough to pose a hindrance. His face was hidden beneath a thick white mustache that partially concealed thin lips, and his dark graying hair was trimmed short. Overall, to me he resembled a raccoon, though I never mentioned this to anyone. When I crossed the threshold,

I saw another man present whom I did not recognize.

The stranger appeared thinner than both the Commander and I; a head taller than the Commander but half a head shorter than me. He wore fancy brownish-red, clothes topped with a dapper green hat. His clothing and shaven face marked him clearly as nobility, probably of small stature, for he wore few jewels on his person. Buckled on his belt I saw a fancy-looking, short, thin sword, probably best used for stabbing. My own longer sword was strapped to my back.

“Come in, Raymond,” the Commander said, and I did.

“Lord Durrant, this is Footman Raymond, whom I told you about,” the Commander said, motioning to me. I immediately straitened my pose, swallowed and stood erect, increasingly nervous as the implications of the title ‘Lord’ ran through my mind.

I thought, ‘He works for the Prince and is licensed to kill.’

Lord Durrant studied me, while I remained motionless.

“Footman, Lord Durrant is on an official errand on behalf of His Majesty the Prince,” he said, addressing me. “It has come to the Prince’s attention that a fair number of commoners have vanished without a trace here in Drentwyck,” Lord Durrant said, and I immediately disliked the annoying sound and arrogant tone of his voice. “The Prince wishes these commoners found and those responsible for their disappearance brought to justice,” he continued.

“Raymond, you are to accompany Lord Durrant and serve him in any capacity he sees fit, laying down your life if need be,” the Commander ordered.

“Yes, Commander,” I responded immediately, hoping the latter part of his command would not come to pass.

“The Prince thanks you, Commander Faolan,” Lord Durrant

said, and then turned to me without waiting for a reply.

“Come, Footman,” he ordered me, and left, turning his back to Commander Faolan, whose name I had only just learned. Peculiar, isn’t it? I was so absorbed in everything that’s been going on in my life that I neglected to know my own commander by name. I who always fancied myself a man of astute perception failed to discover something as plain as my own commander’s name. I who remember the names of every single town-person and soldier and where they live ... I’m losing it, I’m falling apart again, and I can’t afford it.

“Yes, my Lord,” I replied hastily and followed. I forced myself to focus on events at hand, and ignore these things that are beyond my power to change. Death is final. I cannot bring back the dead. I cannot take his place.

“I’m going to list the missing commoners and what we know of them. Stop me any time you know something that I haven’t mentioned,” he commanded as I followed him down the corridor. Soldiers made way for us as we walked; I rather liked others clearing the path before me.

“Richben Son of Egbert,” he stated. “A merchant of some reputation who traded in fine silver, gone missing about two months ago, last seen at The Black Sheep Tavern.”

“The Black Sheep Tavern is a dangerous place, usually the home of ruffians,” I commented.

“Are you implying that the respected Richben consorted with criminals?” He asked the question casually, but there was a sting in his voice.

“No, my Lord, I would never dream of it,” I said, trying to wiggle out of his trap. “I was suggesting that he could have walked in the vicinity of the Tavern, which after all is located at the rim of the merchant’s quarter, and been surprised by bandits who

sought his purse.” Lord Durrant pursed his lips in a smile.

“Very well, let us continue,” he said.

“Yes, my Lord,” I replied.

“Thomas the Potter,” he said. “A local potter of no known reputation, last seen in his house.” I remained silent. I had known his son Charles Potter back when I was a child living with Ivar, and I felt pity for Charles, who must, like me, be an adolescent now.

“Anything you’d like to share, Footman?” Lord Durrant asked, seeing my change of expression.

“I am familiar with his son Charles; his father Thomas was an honest man to the best of my knowledge,” I said.

“Very well,” he replied.

“Owen. I don’t know his father’s name,” Lord Durrant said. “Young pickpocket, disappeared a month ago, last seen leaving jail after being released from incarceration,” he finished. The name meant nothing to me, not that I gave too much thought to thieves gone missing.

“Jaunee,” he said. “Street musician — a child. Reported missing two weeks ago,” he finished. I was unfamiliar with her. She must have come when I was in Over Hampton and vanished before I returned, or else she had been there the entire long and I just hadn’t noticed. I tried harder to recollect if I had known any children who worked as street-performers, for it saddened me greatly to think of a child gone missing. I tried to dispel thoughts of the unfortunate circumstances that turned a child into a street-performer.

“Adam, Son of Ivar the Smith,” he said, and I strained with all my might to keep a straight face and betray nothing. “Reported missing by his father almost a year ago,” he said. My heart was overjoyed at the implication of what he had said. Ivar named

me his son, and had gone searching for me after he banished me. I was happy beyond words to know that I was loved after all. It was then that I forgave Ivar with all my heart and soul and felt deeply ashamed for mistreating him.

“What are you smiling about?” Lord Durrant asked, irritated.

“I find the name funny,” I quickly replied, using the first excuse that came to mind.

“Thomas and Archibald, Sons of Bowie the Butcher,” Lord Durrant said. “Failed to return home for supper, disappeared three weeks ago,” he finished. At first I hadn’t recognized the names, but the mention of the Butcher sparked my memory. Archie and Timmy, I had brawled with them when I was a child.

“I’ve heard of them. They’re no weaklings, and always go together everywhere,” I said.

“I see,” Lord Durrant responded. We were outside the barracks by the time he spoke; I only then noticed that we had walked that far.

“Have you ever conducted an investigation?” Lord Durrant asked, turning to me — yet before I had a chance to reply, he answered himself.

“Of course not, silly me, why you’re nothing but a common footman,” he remarked. My face flushed red, though I said nothing. Lord Durrant disregarded my expression; obviously he didn’t care.

“Well, the first thing you do in an investigation is try to find a link between all the missing people. Since you’re better acquainted with the local populace, can you think of one?” He asked.

“Seem to be unrelated incidents,” I said.

“You soldiers are always trying to dismiss anything that causes you to work,” he said, irritated by my answer. “There’s always a

link!" He continued. "You just have to find it."

"My Lord, may I speak freely?" I asked. He took a few moments, and then finally, impatiently, he replied.

"Very well, but let's restrict ourselves to the investigation at hand, shall we?" He said. "The sooner we finish, the sooner I leave this godforsaken town."

"What I meant to say, my Lord, is that I don't think this Richmond is related to any of the rest," I ventured.

"Richben," he corrected me.

"Richben, my Lord. He was a merchant, probably with some coin or other valuables on his person, and he vanished in a dangerous neighborhood," I said.

"So?" He asked.

"So I don't think the same person or persons who took Richben would also have taken a penniless child who's a street performer, or a pair of brothers who knew how to defend themselves," I said.

"Hmmm," he said, rubbing his chin. "You have a talent for the fine art of investigation, it seems. Good. Yes, the offending party should have motive and we've failed to establish a motive so far," he continued after a moment.

"So Richben was probably taken for his money," I speculated.

"What about the potter?" He queried.

"Perhaps ransom ... Perhaps some unsatisfied customer had it in for him," I offered.

"And the child, Jaanee?" He asked. I couldn't for the life of me imagine why anybody would want to kidnap a child.

"Ransom again?" I offered.

"No. Ransom could be a motive for a merchant and maybe the potter, perhaps the smith's son or even the butcher's sons, but Jaanee was an orphan, and of no value to anyone," he said.

“So who reported her missing?” I asked.

“Good question. I don’t know,” he said, and smiled, pleased with my contributions to the investigation.

“Alright, I have a task for you,” he said, apparently having arrived at a resolution. “I want you to go around the town, find a trustworthy criminal, and enlist him in our service,” he said.

‘Good thing he doesn’t ask me to summon the dead or turn night into day,’ I thought.

“A trustworthy criminal, my Lord?” I asked, putting on my most puzzled expression.

“Yes, dimwit. Find a criminal who knows things, arrest him, interrogate him, bribe him, I don’t care. Just get him to cooperate,” he said. “Oh and when you go about the investigation I want you to concentrate on finding Richben, if he’s still alive. The rest are unimportant to the crown.”

“Yes, my Lord,” I replied, and went off in all haste. The last thing I wanted was to stay around that pompous ass a moment longer. Though I must admit, I was more than curious about the investigation business. I can’t put to words what sparked this passion in me. Maybe it was the thrill of testing my mental abilities against those of a skilled adversary; maybe I was like a child being presented with an interesting puzzle; maybe I cared about the victims; and maybe some combination of these answers was correct. Whatever it was, it excited me. I went out to look for a ‘trustworthy criminal’, and not only in order to be rid of the Investigator’s presence.



## CHAPTER XIV

### **SIMON THE THIEF**

Finding a criminal proved harder than it had first appeared. I strolled about town in expectation of crossing paths with the 'right' kind of person. As fate would have it, all criminals seemed to have taken the night off. The drunks dozed off in alleyways; I tried waking a few, but most of them were too far gone in delirium to make any sense, let alone be of use to me. The common cutthroats were as trustworthy as their name suggests, and they too seemed to have retired for the night. The same went for pickpockets, though I searched them out in preference to violent criminals. My next bright idea took me to the local prison; I figured that an incarcerated criminal would be more cooperative than ones with nothing to gain. Heck, I could offer them food in exchange for aid. It's not like anybody bothered to feed the prisoners except family members, if they had any.

Drentwych had a prison too large for a medium-sized town,

but with the amount of immigrant traffic it made sense, in a sad kind of way. As I walked the corridor of the prison I was filled with a sense of dread and compassion for the human suffering around me. The moans, gentle sobs, and sometimes hushed prayers touched and softened my heart. I couldn't even bring myself to imagine the kind of lives these people lived, probably not so very different from my own. I imagined that most were incarcerated for crimes lesser than my own. I was, after all, a murderer, a traitor, and a liar. Confronting the inmates' misery afforded me a rare glimpse behind the mask labeled 'convict'. At this point I stopped seeing them as criminals; they became just men. True, there was a rough face peering at me from behind bars here and there, but the vast majority of prisoners seemed to be only feeble and suffering. My heart filled with prayers for the ill-accused and all those in distress; may God grant them mercy, for no man would.

It was when these thoughts were occupying my mind that I found my candidate. Green eyes gazed silently at my walking form. I paused and turn to him, only half-conscious of what I was doing. I started to smile but then stopped, unsure if smiling was the proper gesture. His hair was blond, though unkempt and dirtied by crusted sand. He was shorter than me — even shorter than the average man of my time. Consequently, I took him for a half-breed, the result of an unfortunate union between a Scots warrior and a Briton woman. The vast majority of these half-breeds are the result of rape, though most often the women are killed after the men have had their fun. Some women are spared, or manage to escape, though their offspring are cast away by both the Scots races and the Welsh.

“Come to gloat, soldier?” He asked, interrupting my thoughts and catching me off balance.

“No, why?” I asked innocently, before my conscious mind focused.

“You’ve been staring at me as if I have the plague,” he said.

“My apologies; that wasn’t my intent,” I replied.

“You’re apologizing? That’s a novelty. Are you sure you’re a soldier?” He asked mockingly.

“Yes, I am. My name is Raymond of Dren-” I began, when he interrupted.

“You daft or something? I don’t bloody need an introduction. Just be about your business and gloat; leave me the hell alone, or even better, get me out of here,” he said.

“I’m not daft Or weak in the head,” I said angrily, “Speak to me like I’m your wench and you can be as certain as hell that I’ll leave you here to rot,” I said. He just glared at me and said nothing — probably too proud for an apology or too dumb to flatter me. Good, I preferred working with someone honest.

“I can set you free,” I offered.

“Then why don’t you?” He asked.

“Because I want something from you first,” I retorted.

“And how can I be of service?” He asked, smiling casually and leaning closer, with tensed muscles. He was intrigued, but trying to hide it.

“You can start by giving me your name and why you’re here,” I answered.

“And once we’re done with our formal introductions?” He asked on edge.

“And once you answer my questions without backtalk, I’ll tell you,” I replied.

“Fine then. My name is Simon of the Roads,” he said. “And I’m here ...” he began, and I interrupted.

“Wait! What does it mean; ‘of the Roads’?” I asked.

“Means I’m a vagabond, you know? A drifter without home,” he explained.

“Fine. Why are you here?” I asked, a bit irritated by his manners.

“Because I was starving and stole some bread,” he responded after pausing and taking a deep breath, obviously not keen to confess as much.

“And?” I asked.

“And what?” He replied.

“That’s it?” I asked.

“That’s it,” he responded.

“How long have you been here?” I asked.

“Two days. I’ll probably be dead in a day or two,” he replied. “Unless you get me out of here.”

“Let me get this straight. You were caught stealing bread when you were starving, so they put you here for two days without food,” I said.

“A week actually, I was sentenced to a week,” he corrected me.

“If what you’re saying is true, I’ll try to get you out,” I replied and turned to leave.

“What do you mean, ‘If’?” he asked urgently. “I may be a thief, but I’m no liar,” he said.

“My apologies. I’ll try to get you out,” I replied. At the time being a liar was only a short step from being a traitor, and both were worse than being a thief as far as offenses goes. Unless you stole a horse, in which case, you were dead by torture. You might as well have killed people, rather than steal horses; it would get you a lesser penalty.

I checked with the warden and he told me that Simon was a common pickpocket, and that he had indeed been caught

stealing bread. The warden made it sound as if Simon was a dangerous criminal, emphasizing the word 'pickpocket.' I told the warden that I'd been assigned to a Lord's retinue, and that he wished this criminal to be set free. The warden wanted to resist, but I told him that he could speak to my commander if he'd like. Without further trouble he released the unlucky thief.

"Thanks ... sir!" Simon said when I sprang him free, and hastily moved to get away from me as soon as we left the barracks.

"Hold on there," I called back to him, my hand moving to grapple him of its own accord. I stopped its movement as soon as I noticed it and tried to depend upon my words instead of force. Simon slowed but did not stop, turning his head wearily towards me.

"I pulled in a favor back there, and I'll be in a whole lot of trouble if you flee on me," I said.

"I'm sure you'll manage," he replied after a moment of silent consideration, and turned again to get away.

"I probably won't," I said.

"Life's tough and to each his own," he retorted lightly, taking pleasure in my seeming disadvantage.

"Will you hold on a minute? I'm not giving chase. Hear me out and then leave when I have finished, if you're not inclined to help me," I said, angry at myself for this show of weakness — angrier still that I had let the situation get out of hand. I told myself it wouldn't happen again.

"Fine, I'm listening," he said.

"Thank you," I replied. I took a couple of deep breaths to recollect my thoughts and then spoke. "I'm trying to find a few people who've gone missing in town and I need your help," I said.

"I'm no investigator. Maybe you should try to find a lord or

something,” he said, interrupting my speech.

“Let me finish, please,” I replied, somewhat angrily. “I’m no investigator either, and there is a lord investigating. But the lord’s mainly concerned with some rich merchant gone missing, while I’m trying to find them all,” I said.

“Why?” He asked.

“What do you mean, ‘Why’?” I asked.

“Don’t play innocent with me, I know soldiers of the guard variety well enough,” he said, and I clenched my teeth yet, remained silent. “What’s in it for you? Why do you care?” He asked.

“Nothing’s in it for me,” I replied angrily.

“Liar!” He replied.

“Bloody hell!” I spat angrily.

“Liar!” He repeated.

“Fine! Fine!” I protested, surrendering. “I hate the bloody lord!” I said.

“And ...” Simon said.

“And I bloody want to shove this investigation in his face. Pompous bastard, I want to find ‘em all myself, claim the glory, and watch him stroll back to his ivory tower knowing full well that he was outwitted by a simple soldier,” I lied.

“That’s much better,” Simon said, satisfied. “Let’s get one over on the Lord!” He added.

“Fine!” I said.

“Fine!” He agreed. And so I told him of my situation.



## CHAPTER XV

### **JAUNEE'S STORY CONTINUES**

So I was left for dead in an unknown alley in Drentwych by the Papa. The tears froze upon my face as I resigned myself to my fate and waited for death's numb embrace to claim me. I may have passed out, or perhaps I was still awake but too delusional to tell reality and dream apart. My next vivid memory, though, was of a man towering above me. In a desperate desire to stay alive I clung to the waking world of the living just a bit longer and managed to move my lips to form the word 'please'. He was a tall yet skinny man, perhaps twenty-five years of age, with a well-kept shaven face and black hair oiled and brushed backwards. His black robe, adorned by silver was so beautiful ... He had a dark kind of beauty about him. He studied my face intently before he spoke, standing still like a statue. This is what he told me:

“Little girl,” he said in clear French. “Disease overtook you and no healer in this world can heal you with his crafts. You are

going to die.” I closed my eyes and resigned myself once more, losing all hope.

“I am a magician, and it is within my power to save your life, but there is a price ...” he announced. I opened my eyes, desperately wanting to believe there was still hope for me.

“Yes?” I strained my lips to form the word.

“Servitude. You will belong to me,” he said sternly.

“Yes,” I replied as the world spun about and faded into dark.

I woke up in a strange room that at first glance appeared to be a very clean nursery room, but on closer examination turned out to be a prison cell of some sort, with a heavy iron door confining me. Suddenly a sharp pain gripped my stomach — it was like being stabbed over and over again, until a horrible nausea compelled me to vomit the contents of my belly. A hand pressed against my mouth. Surprised, I first tried to fight, but then his voice spoke to me.

“Calm down,” he said. “Don’t fight it. The potion is the only thing that can save you; you must not spit it out.” I did as instructed, swallowed the vile potion again and watched the man’s swirling aura as he kept his hand on my face; there were magic runes in his aura now. It was the same man I had seen before, so I realized that this wasn’t a dream. I was really alive! Comforted by the knowledge that I was still in this world, I let sleep and oblivion claim me again. His aura, like his robe dark and silver, was so magnificent.

When I woke again I was surprised to find myself standing. I quickly looked around, and to my surprise saw my body lying on the bed with the healer standing over it drawing strange runes upon it. I tensed in fear, realizing that I might be dead; a ghost standing over my own dead body. Something moved behind me and I turned, surprised and fearful. But the movement had

just been mine. I had wings; beautiful angelic rainbow-colored wings. I had died and become an angel. I reconciled to the notion that I wasn't a demon-child after all, but a higher being, beloved by God. All my life I had loathed myself for being a monster, but now I knew that they were wrong, the priests and my father — I was not infernal but angelic instead. How saddened I was to know the truth now, only after having spent the few years living in vain self-loathing. The man's voice broke the train of my thoughts and centered my attention on my body again.

"She's dead," he said in disappointment. As he uttered the words, I felt the gravity of their meaning more fully; it was as if someone had stepped on my grave. Such a terrible feeling of hopelessness and fright gripped me that I tried with all my might to awaken — to live. Despite my curiosity; despite the bittersweet joy I now felt; despite the realization that I was better off dead and divine than living and miserable, I wanted to stay alive. I strained with all my might to enter my body. I called upon my will and unleashed my magic. I wanted to live! At long last, my efforts proved successful.

I woke again with great difficulty, and it was then that the burden of life returned to me threefold. I felt such weakness, misery, and pain that I couldn't even cry.

"You're alive!" He said, overjoyed. "It worked!" Yes, indeed, against all odds I was still alive, or alive once again.

"Yes," I said, as I felt my strength slowly return to me.

"Hush now," he replied and patted my hair. "Save your strength and sleep," he added, and I did as instructed, content and comforted by the fact I was still here on earth, an angel.

It was then that I had the strangest dream. I dreamt that I traveled to a land of ice. It was cold but I didn't mind, for I was

an angel and angels were never cold, sad, or lonely. I found myself walking towards a cave, but I paused for a moment to study my dreamscape. It had always been a natural ability of mine to be able to consciously control my dreams, and even sometimes to see the dreams of others when I strained hard enough.

The ice appeared strange, for beneath its layers I could see an ocean of sea-sand. I looked towards a cave that harbored similar qualities, a world that had once been an ocean of warm sea-sand now turned into a cold desert of ice. I entered the cave, straining to see in the dark. The cave consisted of five walls of ice formed into a geometric shape. Never in my life or even in my dreams had I seen such sheets of clear ice. Then I noticed that there was someone trapped on the other side of one of the walls. It was a woman, naked and beautiful. I moved closer, touching the ice and gazing at her intently.

“My darling,” I heard her voice say in my head. As she began speaking a red liquid began flowing on the cave floor. I touched it, and found that it was blood. I looked at her with a questioning gaze; I did not have the ability to speak to minds, but she did.

“Blood is life,” she said. “Fear it not, for the flowing blood signifies the streams of our lives.”

“Who are you? You are so mysterious,” I thought.

“You,” she replied. “You and I are one, one and the same.” I strained to see her more clearly now, trying to dream-craft the ice to make it more transparent.

“You can’t see in the dark?” She asked.

“No,” my thoughts replied.

“Take my eyes, then,” she offered. “They are a gift,” she added. I touched my eyes, my hands moving of their own accord. I smeared blood on my eyes by accident. My vision

became blurry for a moment, and then it cleared and became much sharper. The dark didn't appear so dark anymore but rather radiated with magnificent pale blue light, resonating off the icy walls.

'Thank you,' I thought.

"You are most welcome," she replied. It was then that I saw and marveled at the cave's true beauty. The ice radiated and reflected the starlight, which sparkled and made everything wondrous. With a smile I gazed at the woman and marveled at her beauty as well.

She had red hair like mine, but it was much prettier, cleaner, and longer, the way I would have liked my hair to be. Her skin was white and perfect without blemish, like an ivory statue of an angelic being animated to life. Her features were likewise perfect — feminine and divine, as I dreamed of being. Not a single flaw marred her beauty. More than anything, I wanted her words to be true; that we were indeed one and the same and that I too would someday be as beautiful and feminine as she.

"You and I are one," she replied to my thoughts. I marveled at her rainbow-colored angelic wings, just like mine only longer and far more striking.

"Why are you here?" I asked her, for I felt that beneath her mask of glamour she was suffering and sad, just like I was.

"I'm trapped here," she replied, her face turning sad, though it hadn't really moved. It was more as if the light somehow reflected differently, coloring the room with her sadness. I couldn't bear seeing her unhappy, and wanted to cry in misery and pain, echoing her sadness.

"How can I help?" I asked in desperation.

"You can free us," she replied.

“How, oh how I beg of you, tell me how!” I cried.

“If you exert your will and power all barriers will shatter before you — all gates will open,” she explained. I didn’t understand her at all, so I tried banging at the wall, hoping to free her by force. But I couldn’t, and since I wasn’t calm anymore, I couldn’t hear her thoughts, which made me panic even more. I then wished for fire with all my heart; burning fire; enchanted flames that would mirror the warmth of a distant summer; fire everywhere to melt the ice, boil the blood, and free the other half of me from the cage.

I woke up frightened, and screamed, vividly aware that I had failed to free the woman in my dream. The room had become warmer. Or perhaps there was heat rising from me again. The candles and torches burst into flames, and fire licked the walls; it was me, I now knew. I could feel it. It was like a wave of lava that flowed in my bloodstream, with my heart pumping it. Then suddenly there was sweet release as a volcano of power and flames erupted from me, lighting fires all around.

Before long I was trapped in this inferno of my own making, yet I had power still — I felt it flowing in my blood, raising my hair on edge. I waved my hand towards the living flames and concentrated, mentally commanding them to die out and sleep. I felt my heart beating ever so fast, until a few pulses of power bent the fire to my bidding, and it slept. Wind flew through my hair. The feeling was intoxicating and wonderful.

The door opened. My captor and savior entered the room. With a wave of his hand the smoke cleared and vanished. He eyed me then, most pleased with himself.

‘He is a real magician ...’ I thought, ‘... and a powerful one, as proven by the ease with which he cleared the smoke.’

“Excellent! You are by far the most successful experiment as

of yet," he boasted.

"What?" I asked him feebly, exhausted now that the haze of power had lifted.

"So many times I've tried! So many specimens wasted! Strong young men. Powerful witches. All failed. I almost gave up hope, only to succeed with a frail, dying, odd-looking little girl!" He said triumphantly, his voice growing in volume as he spoke.

"I don't understand," I ventured, but there was no stopping him.

"I've only administered the potion yesterday, and already you can light and extinguish fires with your mind!" He gloated.

"I'm an angelic demon-child," I replied softly.

"What?" He demanded abruptly, as if this was the first time he'd heard my voice.

"I am an angelic demon-child, I have always been able to light fires," I explained, telling a partial lie. It is true that I've had some control over fire all my life, but it was more in the realm of lighting a candle when I concentrated with all my might.

"Really?" He asked, quite surprised. "How did you come to be such a being?" He asked soothingly. I liked his pleasant tones so much better than his angry ones that I would have told him almost anything he wanted to know, if only he wouldn't be angry with me anymore.

He listened carefully, and I began. "When I was a little girl, a man used to come to our home. Mama and papa didn't like him, and were both angry and sad every time he came. Mama told me she was sad because she had to give him coins, so one night when he came I told him to leave. He was a bald wrinkly man, and when he smiled or frowned, he wrinkled even more," I explained.

"What happened after you told him to leave?" The magician

asked.

“He yelled at me, so I yelled back. I was so angry. The wrinkly man slapped me and I fell down. So I bared my teeth at him and he laughed. Papa came running when he heard noise,” I said, getting angry just remembering it.

“What happened then?” The magician asked.

“Then the man grabbed his eyes and screamed. He couldn’t see anymore because I had burned his eyes with my power,” I said.

“And then?” The magician asked.

“Then everybody screamed ‘Demon, demon!’ At me,” I said and hid my face from him.

“You did well,” he said.

“Papa and his friends didn’t think so. They all shouted at me and then papa hit me. I tried to protect myself from him, but he hit me again,” I told my captor. He tried speaking softly to me and even patted my hair. When I closed my eyes and went to sleep he was relieved, and asked me no further questions.

Back to Ray’s story...



## CHAPTER XVI

### A FINAL RESOLUTION

"Sounds like a tough case you've got there," Simon concluded after I told him my assignment. "So what do you need me for?" He asked, after taking a few moments for consideration.

"If you have any ideas who ..." I began.

"I don't," he stated instantly, then added, "but I'd like to help nonetheless."

"Then maybe you can ask around — fellow thief buddies or something," I said. He frowned, and then smiled.

"Sure, I will," he said, still smiling. Then he turned around and started to walk. I did likewise.

"Why don't you ask around your soldier buddies or something? Maybe one of them helped these people disappear."

"Maybe they did," I replied. Simon snorted and went about his business. Meanwhile, I went to Ivar to seek his council.

"This sounds like a dangerous quest. I'm afraid I haven't a clue who kidnaps commoners. Except perhaps the Lords themselves,

but then they wouldn't send a representative to investigate," he said.

"Do you think perhaps one of the Lords did the kidnapping while the others remained oblivious?" I asked.

"Possible, but unlikely. You haven't answered a simpler question yet," he said.

"Which is?" I asked.

"Why should a Lord bother to kidnap commoners when he can simply take them, out in the open?" He said.

"I can't think of any reason," I admitted.

"And why do you, and probably this representative Lord, refer to these people as 'kidnapped' when as far as anybody knows, there was no demand for ransom? This is an immigrant community, they could have simply left," Ivar said.

"What could that mean?" I asked, now even less sure of where this was going in light of Ivar's perceptive observations. I had trouble enough understanding his elaborate use of the tongue.

"It means that something fishy is going on," Ivar replied. "If the people were kidnapped, then you'd know they were kidnapped on account of a ransom demand. If the people just vanished, however, then there is no reason to believe that any of them are alive at all," he explained.

"And what does that mean?" I asked, humbled by my apparent lack of basic investigative logic.

"It means that the Lords are unlikely candidates, and that they know something they're not telling you," Ivar said.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"They know the people were kidnapped, and now they want to find them — at least they want to find the merchant." He said.

"Any more insights?" I asked.

"I fear I'm ill-equipped for such investigations," he said, and resumed his work. He lied of-course, I could tell he's conducted investigations before, and I was sure as hell he was a Lord himself, though he did his best to hide it.

'I'll let him have his privacy,' I decided.

"You've done great so far. I hadn't even considered the things you pointed out so quickly and clearly," I replied.

"And what does that tell you?" He asked, testing me.

'That you're a lord obviously,' I thought, but I drew an alternative conclusion as well.

"That you'd rather not get involved," I replied, catching on to his way of thinking. "Well, thank you nonetheless," I said, and moved to leave.

"A piece of advice, if I may offer one, young man," Ivar ventured after a few moments of hesitation.

"Of course," I replied, ready to listen.

"It's a feeling in my gut: something about this whole business reeks of danger, so do be careful, this may prove more risky than your common brawl," he warned.

"Thank you, I will," I replied and left. I waited in the barracks for Simon's return.

"No luck," Simon said when he finally returned. Reluctantly, I reported my failure to Lord Durrant. He didn't seem surprised.

"Alright, soldier," he said. "Return to your usual post. I'll have you summoned should I have use for you in the future," he said in dismissal. I returned to my post still thinking over the mysterious events that had just come to my attention. I kicked a pebble as I walked, following the route of my patrol. I heard the sound of Barny behind me.

"Hey, Raymond!" He said. I tried to get away, and just kept on walking. I didn't want to lose my train of thought and had

no desire to entertain him now. I heard his short legs flapping, chasing after me. He passed me and turned, puffing as if he had just run a marathon. I gave him an irritated, impatient look.

“If I didn’t know you better I’d say you were trying to shake me off,” he said and laughed. I gave him a half-smile.

“Shake you off? I wouldn’t dream of it,” I replied cynically. He smiled broadly between huffs and puffs. “But really Barny, I need to do something now, so ...” I continued and he interrupted.

“Listen, I heard about this investigation of yours, and you want to know what I think?” He offered.

“What?” I asked, trying to be patient yet having little success.

“I think you shouldn’t let it get you down. I mean, people vanish all the time, and most of the time nobody finds them ever again. You should just pray that they had a quick death and didn’t suffer too much,” he began, and I interrupted.

“Is there a point to this tale?” I asked, growing more and more impatient.

“Yeah. People vanish all the time, it’s a fact of life like eating or sleeping, so don’t let yourself get down on account of it,” he repeated.

“People do not vanish as casually as they eat or sleep.” I replied, not very cheered up.

“Yes, but people also shit,” He replied, as if that’s some sort of revelation.

“So?” I asked, not knowing if I should laugh or cry about this turn of conversation.

“So it’s like; shitting, people shit all the time but nobody discusses the fruit of their bowels.” He said, and I frowned. “So it’s like that, people vanish all the time; everybody knows, but nobody talks about it.” He carefully explained.

“Fine!” I said, not feeling cheered up at all.

“Like there’s this story about a soldier in Over Hampton. One day he vanished without a trace, and nobody was able to find him.” He continued his monologue as if I hadn’t spoken. I felt my face turn red as I recognized the story of a soldier who vanished without a trace.

“And?” I asked, now faking anger to mask my blushing face.

“And they found him a week later, half-eaten by rodents and in several pieces,” he said.

“Wonderful. Did they found out who did it?” I asked, leaning closer to hear his answer, which now truly did interest me.

“I don’t think so. Rumor has it he was done in by some crooks he owed money to,” he said.

“Great! That sure cheered me up,” I remarked wryly, and started walking again. Barny wouldn’t give up and walked on beside me.

“Oh, come on,” he said and slapped my shoulder fondly. “I know what would cheer you up! Me and some friends are gathering tonight ... you know, to drink some; loosen up. Maybe play rocks; wager a bit. You know, you can win lots of money from friends,” he said, laughing.

“I don’t think so, Barny. I don’t have much for you to win from me,” I said with a half-smile.

“I’m kidding! I’m kidding!” He protested. “Come on, come on! It’s going to be fun!”

“No,” I flatly refused.

“I insist! If you won’t come of your own accord, I’ll be forced to take you there by extreme force! You know Crushy, she’s very emotional — you can never tell what she’s gonna do!” He jested.

“Fine, I’ll come,” I conceded, hoping it would get him off my back already.

Though I came reluctantly at first to Barny's gambling get-togethers, once I learned how to wager I loved it. To be honest, more than playing, I loved winning; the game was only fun for me for as long as I won. Call it beginner's luck if you will, but once I started gambling I was an instant success. I won a day's pay on the first evening I played. I waited eagerly for my day-shift to be over so that I could wager again in the evening. I even skipped my evening training session with Ivar, telling myself the old man could use a day off. I don't know what made me slack off; perhaps it was the strain of constant failure, and perhaps it was fear of what was to come, of what I had set out to do. I doubled my weekly wages on the second evening, and tripled them on the third, becoming quite the celebrity around The Black Sheep Tavern. Then a bright idea struck me: it was as if the devil had whispered a devious idea in my ear, I could even imagine the smoke.

'I'm going to get them all, and they won't see it coming.' I thought.

I played the game, played at being a dumb and obnoxious soldier. Suddenly, I had an abundance of friends, and even women started paying attention to me. Word spread around town that I was rich, and I did nothing to counteract that rumor. Word also spread around town that I was a ladies' man, and I did nothing to negate that gossip either. In truth, I wasn't half as rich as they made me out to be, and I was all talk and no action with the women. Actually, they did the talking and I did the smiling. But regardless of my involvement with the ladies or lack thereof, my new-found fame killed whatever relationship I had with Ingrid. Nothing comes without a price in life, and I was ready to pay a personal price for the sake of justice.

"Sad I am to find you here," Ivar remonstrated upon entering

The Black Sheep Tavern on the fourth night of my winnings. I was surrounded by numerous sordid friends who eyed him threateningly.

“Why sad, Master Smith?” I asked, offering him a pint of ale. “Perhaps some ale will cheer you up,” I added.

“I’ll have none of that drunks’ piss,” he said forbiddingly. I ignored his glare.

“Suit yourself,” I said lightly. Apologizing in my soul for what I was about to do.

“You’re drunk! What’s become of you, boy?” He said angrily.

“I’m a man, not a boy, old man, and I’ll drink when I see fit, and wager when it pleases me,” I replied casually but with venom behind my words. He glared at me and took a deep breath. Holding the chair and leaning forward, his clenched fingers turned white.

“Fair enough. What about your training sessions?” He asked, exercising a measure of self-control that amazed me.

“Figured you could use a few days off,” I replied lightly.

“How thoughtful of you,” he said sarcastically.

“Take it easy, I’m just having a bit of fun. Even God rested one day of the week,” I said.

“I’m greatly disappointed in you,” he replied sternly.

“Why the bloody hell do you keep judging me all the time, eh? What’d I ever do to you?” I asked, as pure pain rushed from my heart to my mouth with the sort of honesty that I had not seen forthcoming.

“Why? You want to know why?” He asked, his voice growing in volume and anger as he spoke. “Because you asked me to, that’s why!”

“Me? When’d I ask you to condemn me?” I asked painfully.

“When you asked me to make a warrior out of you. What, do

you think being a warrior is just about knowing a few moves with a sword?" He asked.

"Yeah ..." I replied slowly, and several of the patrons nodded their agreement.

"Well, you're wrong. Anybody can swing a sword. Being a warrior is a matter of discipline and honor, and both are equally important. A warrior trains hard, every single day, honing his body and mind. A warrior without discipline is just a rash youth, and they don't live very long. A warrior without honor is nothing more than a murderer," he proclaimed.

"Well, I'm a murderer then!" I confessed, though he had no idea.

"And obviously a rash, sentimental youth as well," he concluded.

"Anything else? Let's list all my defects," I responded.

"Only the Gods can tell you those, I have not enough longevity to list them all," he replied. At that remark the whole tavern started laughing, and I was filled with pure rage. I don't remember what happened next. What I do shamefully recall, however, is waking up in the morning on the tavern floor covered in bruises. Barny was waiting for me to awake, come morning. What began as a clever ploy had now backfired into a whole mess.

"Bloody hell," I protested as a wave of nausea and aching head suddenly attacked me.

"You're alive!" Barny cried out merrily.

"Not so loud, in the name of God!" I moaned, grabbing hold of my head and moving into a sitting position.

"Glad to see you're alright," he replied.

"If you say so," I groaned.

"Saved your coins for you," Barny offered.

"First good news I've heard recently," I said.

"What about being alive?" He suggested brightly.

"Don't depress me further," I answered. At this point he started laughing.

"So what happened?" I asked.

"You don't remember?" He questioned.

"Obviously not. What happened?" I repeated.

"You attacked the smith," he stated, as if that explained everything. I waited a few moments for him to continue, but no further elaboration was forthcoming.

"And?" I asked impatiently.

"And truly he beat your hide. Boy, I've never seen a person paved to the floor like he paved you," he said.

"Thanks," I answered dryly.

"Oh, don't worry, I got him for you, so you're welcome," he said, and my eyes darted on their own accord to his weapon.

"What do you mean?" I asked, suddenly fearful beyond expression. His eyes followed my gaze.

"What? You think, I'd club him? No, saved you the honor. Meanwhile I had him arrested," he said.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"In jail, of course, waiting for the magistrate," he said. "Why, what's wrong? I thought you'd be pleased. You can nail him now," he offered.

"I've gotta get there," I said and rushed to get up — obviously a painful mistake. I vomited the content of my stomach on the floor, partially wiped my face on my sleeve, and ran to the jail as fast as I could in my condition.

"Open the gate!" I called to the jailer as soon as I reached Ivar's cell. Ivar stood there watching the sun outside and didn't turn towards me.

The jailer arrived promptly to hear what the fuss was all about and protested. "He hasn't seen the Magistrate yet."

"He doesn't need to see the Magistrate," I replied. At this point Ivar turned to face me and I lowered my eyes, unable to meet his gaze.

"He beat up a soldier yesterday," the jailer began.

"Yeah, me!" I interrupted.

"So what's the problem?" He asked.

"It was my fault. I was drunk," I said.

"So?" He asked, unimpressed.

"When I repeatedly made rude remarks against his person and that of his daughter, he kept his peace," I lied.

"As he very well should," the jailer added.

"Yeah, but then I attacked him," I said, killing my career.

"So? He probably deserved it," the jailer said.

"No! It was totally uncalled for. I take full blame," I replied.

"The magistrate will have your head if he hears," the jailer warned.

"So ... what if he doesn't hear?" I propositioned.

"Suppose he doesn't ..." the jailer offered.

"Then I'd owe you a favor," I tried.

"Deal," the jailer said and unlocked the door. I opened it, and Ivar paced outside in no great hurry, as silent as death.

With a cloudy sky above our heads and the barracks at our backs, Ivar finally turned to face me after having stayed silent for the entire walk from prison to the Smithy. I gazed at the ground, unable to meet his eyes.

"Took a lot of courage to do what you just did," he said.

"I couldn't let you die for my shameful conduct," I said.

"The Magistrate wouldn't have done anything; we've been friends for a while now," he said.

"Oh, I see," I replied, flushing red.

"But you didn't know that," he offered. "And you risked your career, perhaps even your life, on my behalf," he added.

"I did what I thought was right, and I'm sorry, but it was all part of a -" I said and Ivar interrupted.

"So what's wrong with you, boy? Why do you act so nobly sometimes, and at other times like such a damned lowlife?" He asked. I felt so ashamed of myself that no words came and my eyes burned. Even if I excuse this one time, in the broader sense he was completely right, and I had nothing to say in my defense.

"I don't mean to judge you; I honestly want to know what's wrong, like a father worrying about his son," he said earnestly.

"I don't know. I'm messed up," I said honestly.

"You make it very hard for people to get close to you," he replied.

"I know," I admitted.

"So get a grip, Raymond, be a man! Stop turning into a mindless thug, irresponsible and thoughtless, whenever things don't go your way," he said.

"What?" I asked, surprised and shocked by his words.

"You don't know what's wrong with you ... well, I do. You want something and you work to get it, but when your achievements don't meet your expectations, you change into a downright lowlife," he explained.

"I'm sorry," I replied, blushing and fully realizing the truth of his words.

"Don't apologize," Ivar replied. "Change instead! Apologies don't mean anything unless you do something to better yourself," he finished.

"You're right," I replied.

“I know I’m right. I know you. Now, if you don’t mind I’ve got a daughter at home waiting for me,” he said and turned to leave.

“Thank you,” I replied. I wanted to say something meaningful to him; something to express my gratitude and shame; something that’d make him see that I can be better than all of this. But real life isn’t full of pretty speeches, and all I could say was, ‘Thank you,’ and have my unspoken words singe my soul.

My life resumed its course as if nothing had happened. It seems that I had not gained any wisdom or enlightenment from my experience. My thoughts sometimes wandered of their own accord and lingered on all the things I had left behind — all the things that mattered to me. I wondered why I distanced myself from those whom I love and those who love me. Why did I postpone all the goals so dear to my heart? What is it that tore me apart? I didn’t know, and don’t know even now. I took comfort in the sordid companionship of strangers, and the kind of peace only alcohol can bestow. In a word, I was a mess. What I began as a ploy to win the attention of my adversaries in a way that would leave them off-guard, now backfired. I succumbed to despair, very low. I kept on winning at games of chance most of the time, but not even that elevated my spirits; nothing did. I felt a sense of helplessness, accompanied by bitterness and a silent rage for things beyond my control. I felt I had strayed from the path I should have taken in life, but I didn’t know how to find my way back.

It was on a Tuesday just as I ended my shift behind the barracks that Simon found me and reminded me of the world outside myself.

“Ray, I think we have a problem,” he began quietly, his eyes darting everywhere.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, matching his volume.

"I overheard some of the guys talking about you," he said.

"And?" I asked.

"And they think you're rich," he continued.

"And?" I asked again. He spoke in stops and starts as if he had hard time talking.

"And I think they're gonna do you in; they want your money," he said.

"Who?" I asked a bit too harshly, as my heart sped faster and faster.

"I can't tell you that! They'll kill me. They're dangerous, Ray ... You should clear out of town," he warned.

"What do they look like?" I asked. He pursed his lips.

"I can't tell you that, but I can tell you it won't be their first time. They're a dangerous bunch. You should disappear," he repeated. I described to him the three who had killed Raymond of the Brooks, without telling him what they'd done. He nodded his head, his face turning paler.

'My ploy a success, finally! Now let us hope it won't be the death of me as well.' I thought.

"So you know them," he said, his eyes darting everywhere.

"Yes," I replied.

"I've got to disappear myself ... It's not safe. If they even dream I said anything, I'm worse than dead," he muttered apprehensively, shaking all over.

"Hold on. I need you to do a favor for me," I said, as a devious plan began to take form.

"Well?" He asked, nervously, obviously holding himself back from fleeing.

"Talk to them. Tell them I'm richer than they think. Ask for a small share of the loot in exchange for my whereabouts," I said.

"Are you crazy?" He asked incredulously.

“Yes. Tell them I somehow think someone intends to rob me, and I’m hiding out in some cabin I found in the woods, by the brooks.”

“You really are crazy!” He replied “But you’re planning something, aren’t you?” He asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Alright. I’ll do it, but I want you to know I’m really sticking my neck out for you, so if I do this, we’re even. You got me out of jail, I’ll help you out here, and the score is settled,” he said.

“I’ll owe you,” I proposed.

“You just remember that,” he replied.

“Remember; in a cabin by the brooks!” I reminded him. He turned, nodded his head, and left without another word. There it was; my salvation. All the stray thoughts, gone. The causeless depression, gone. The Fates had intervened. As I had strayed and procrastinated, the Fates had sent my enemies to within my reach. Like Hector and Achilles, our paths were destined to collide in a fatal way. All the things that had been taking me away from everything I held dear; gone, as if they’d never existed. And all it took was a reminder that death waits for no man. Death does not wait for a convenient time. Death may strike anyone and at any time, reminding us to cherish our lives. My mind was sharp again; it was as if just yesterday I’d trained with Ivar, and just last week Raymond of the Brooks had been murdered. Whole and in control, I focused on the dire task ahead. I knew that I was living on borrowed time, so I moved as fast as I could, formulating my plan as I went along. They will die where they killed Raymond Brooks, I vowed. I purchased a few boards from the carpenter and black cloth from the seamstress. I then went to Ivar, finding the courage to see him again only because of my mission.

“Why the nails, Raymond?” He asked, somewhat disappointed that this wasn’t a social call.

“If I come back, I’ll have earned the name Raymond,” I replied, and he smiled and asked nothing more.

“May the gods be with you,” he said, kissing my forehead and giving me all the nails I’d asked for and more, and even a hammer to go with them.

I went to Ingrid next; she looked lovelier than I had remembered. Time has been kind to her. She had filled out in all the right places, making her a very alluring shape. Or maybe it was the thought that I might die that elevated her beauty in my eyes. Without a doubt though, I wanted to forget my past mistakes and kiss her one last time. I wanted to tell her there are things bigger than the both of us, and that love matters and nothing else. Damn, just before my very likely demise I turn up a philosopher.

“I know you don’t want to talk to me,” I began. She ignored me.

“I’m sorry,” I said simply. She continued to ignore me, though she stopped moving, perhaps sensing that something had changed.

“I’m going away now; when I come back, I hope I’ll be a better man,” I said. She paid me no heed, yet her pose relaxed and she seemed worried. I took her apparent anxiety as a sign that she still cared. I turned and left with that — her last expression, cherished in my heart.

“I love you Ingrid, daughter of Ivar,” I said under my breath as I left, hoping that God above felt my love, and would somehow send an Angel to deliver my love to Ingrid when I was gone.

I purchased a potion of Greek-fire, a magic concoction that, once opened, ignites almost instantaneously — a few bottles

of oil and a chain. With my supplies carefully assembled in my pack, and this hidden under my bed, I moved on to the next stage.

Using a bit of charcoal to darken my skin directly below the eye, and an herb to paint my face — making it seem a bit yellowish, I was excused from service on account of being very sick, and went off into the forest, to where Raymond had once lived and died. I don't know if my disguise worked, or my Commander deemed it reasonable that I take a day off. The latter is probably correct.

As I opened the door to Raymond's hut I hesitated a moment. I more than half-expected to see his carcass rotting on the kitchen floor, being eaten by insects as I opened the door. I dreaded the sight, but forced myself to stop my rapid breathing, take a deep breath, and enter the cabin. I was surprised to see that his body wasn't there. I half-smiled in relief and walked inside. Only after taking a couple of steps did I realize that if the body wasn't where it should have been, and the house not crawling with insects, then someone must have been, or be there still! My eyes darted everywhere in alarm; my hand drew my sword of its own accord. I searched around the house, found nothing, then searched outside and found no one.

I found a tombstone outside, near the woodpile behind the hut. The tombstone marked the grave of a man who had once lived there. I was surprised; the body missing and now buried; the house cleaned. But what made my jaw fall, agape was the writing. Someone had written on the stone — not in the curved script of the local dialect, but in Ancient Hebraic letters. I read the text carefully, going over every single letter and every mark:

Raymond Brooks  
 May God Avenge his Blood  
 May His Memory be Blessed



To the right of the writing a cross was also imprinted on the stone. He was given a Christian burial, after all. I bent closer and touched the letters, read and re-read them, trying to grasp this enigma. Who in this land knew ancient Hebrew well enough to write this inscription? Who would have had the motive to find Raymond, bury him, and write such an inscription? How would they accomplish all this? The letters appeared to be burned into the stone, but I knew of no technique capable of accomplishing that feat. A crow passed above my head, an omen to remind me that I had little time to prepare for my mission. I decided to leave the current enigmas for later and focus on the task at hand.

I first pounded the nails into the boards; all the way through so that they protruded from the other side. I then placed the boards below the windows, upstairs and down, with the nails pointing upwards. I then camouflaged the traps with some black cloth. This done, I cleaned the fireplace of leftover wood. I then climbed up on the roof and poured oil down the chimney, soaking all the walls inside the chimney. Going back inside the

hut again I nailed the black cloth into the walls of the fireplace, spread across the opening shaft of the chimney. This made the chimney appear completely dark to a person looking down the smokestack from the roof, should someone contemplate scaling down it. Fireplaces were usually built slightly lower than the rest of the floor so that the ashes would settle there, rather than spread throughout the house. I filled the cavity with oil, creating a small pool. I then carefully tied a short rope around the potion, making triply sure it held before attaching it to the cloth now hanging above. I could not afford to die before my bloody vengeance was complete.

The trap set, I proceeded to the next stage. I crawled under the staircase, filing a few of the steps leading upstairs; I made them too thin to support weight. I then laid out all my tools below the steps, along with every other sharp object I found in the house. Finally, I prayed to God to grant me vengeance and waited impatiently for evening to fall. As soon as the sun set, I poured water on the steps behind the house, hoping that it would freeze quickly in the winter air. Then I hid in the closet, hoping that the bastards would take the bait and come tonight, otherwise... I didn't want to think of 'otherwise'. Luckily for me, and quite unluckily for them, they took the bait and came. "Let's dance with death." I told myself.

I had no guarantees, of course, that the returning bandits wouldn't just barge in through the front door, weapons in hand, and ready for slaughter. However, I knew from Simon that they were experienced killers, and thus careful ones. I reasoned that if they were careful and they had reason to guess that I knew of their whereabouts, they'd also assume that I would have prepared something for their most obvious choice of action and location, and that I'd do something clever. I hoped... I really did.

In the worst case scenario, if they did storm in through the front door I'd just hop over my own trap and flee out the window. By exploring the house, they'd be at the very least wounded.

'And I know these woods better than they do. I'm bigger now, and I can risk a skirmish in the woods and by the brooks.' I thought.

It was a windy, starless night with no clouds in the sky. As silent as the night had been until now, it proved to be only the silence before the storm. I was tense, soaking in cold sweat. I held my sword in both hands, hugging it close to me. A part of me was scared, but another part was thrilled. I held my breath, still hidden in the closet, when I heard the first suspicious sounds. There was a shuffling of feet; someone was scaling the outside wall in the vicinity of the bedroom, where a nail trap waited for him — and me. There was a pause and utter silence as the room grew a bit darker.

'He's at the window,' I reasoned.

I grew dizzy, which made me realize that I was still holding my breath. I forced myself to inhale and exhale, softly, slowly, so that he wouldn't hear. There were sounds of movement, feet touching wood. Suddenly, a terrible scream of agony and surprise shattered the silence. I peered through a crack in the closet, and caught a glimpse of moonlight reflected on the bloody nails and of an intruder. Another person stood behind the first.

"Shut up, you fool!" He said in hushed, strained tones. The first turned his head and looked at the second, then moved his eyes to gaze stupefied at the trap, and his feet soaking in a pool of blood, nailed to the board I'd prepared. The eyes of the second followed, and grew wide as he too realized the deadly trap into which they'd fallen. With a quick gesture the second

thug sliced the first's throat wide open and he fell to the floor. My eyes widened at witnessing such a casual act of murder, and I again forgot to breathe. The remaining intruder bounced inside the room clear of the trap, taking a step towards the closet with his bloody dagger in hand.

There was a shuffling of feet followed by a small, pitiful sound, then three thuds on the ground, one after another, and a groan. Someone fell off the slippery back steps, possibly breaking his neck by the sound of it.

"Haa, Eafriid! It's a trap, Eafriid! A trap!" The victim screamed from outside. Eafriid's grip on his dagger tightened and he turned his head towards the window, hesitating. I knew then that this was my chance to open the closet, sword in hand, and storm him but I was too scared. I hesitated, and, having missed the moment, retreated deeper inside the closet.

A sound came from the chimney, too fast to be that of one scaling the interior, which meant that someone must have been falling. A loud thud resonated through the hut, followed by a terrible scream of agony. A man was burning, caught in my fire trap. I wanted to laugh, which reminded me to start breathing again. By the sound of it, the burning man was now running away. Eafriid's eyes grew wide and filled with a look of pure fear. This had turned out vastly beyond my wildest expectations. I had expected them to choose a path of entry, and fall into one or two traps. Not choose every single path of entry, falling into every single trap. I'd have asked 'what the hell is going on!' But I didn't want to push my stellar luck. Perhaps God had made them dimwits, thus aiding me in extracting vengeance for the murder of a truly righteous man.

"What the hell's going on?" The Bandit muttered, seeming surprised that he spoke out loud. He turned towards the

window, took a couple of steps and paused, mindful of the trap. I knocked softly on the wooden wall of the closet a couple of times to catch his attention. He turned and walked towards the closet as silent as death, his hand shaking.

Another sound came from outside, a cracking of wood, something falling, and then the loud sound of heavy, sharp tools being trampled underfoot. These were accompanied by the screams of a man who had just found out the steps he was attempting to mount couldn't support his weight, and fallen on top of the sharp snare I had carefully prepared.

'Great, that truly makes it divine providence' I told myself as I braced for combat.

"Eafrid! Eafrid! Help! My legs, my legs!" He cried. Eafrid moved closer to the closet, taking one slow, careful step after another. He tilted his ear to the wooden wall and I swiftly stabbed through a crack with my dagger, trying to impale his head but narrowly missing the mark. The dagger flashed before his face and he fell back, surprised and momentarily off-guard.

I took a quick breath, braced myself, and stormed out of the closet, knocking its door of its hinges. I slammed into Eafrid and we both fell on the floor. I dropped my sword as I fell on top of him, but it was at any rate too long for close combat. I caught the fast movement of his dagger going for my neck and grabbed his wrist with both my hands, wrestling for my life. With his left hand he pounded the side of my head. Seeing through a haze of red, I heard no more sounds, just the beating of my heart. I may have screamed as I kneed his groin with all the strength I could master, simultaneously pinning his right hand to the floor. He may have hit my head a few more times, but the blows lacked the strength of his first assault. I continued to knee his groin as hard as I could, assaulting him like a rabid beast. Finally, he

ceased fighting.

“Please,” he began between moans. I paused as bile poured from my mouth onto his face. I recognized the face: this was the ax-bearing murderer who had killed Raymond. God had delivered onto my hands the one responsible. My hands! Not a trap; not second-hand vengeance. I have him now!

“I surrender!” He continued. I roared like a maddened beast, striking his face left and right over and over again — until he grew silent, and then some more.

Fire now surrounded me as the room. The entire house was fully engulfed in flames. It was only when the fire caught the rim of my trousers that I was released from my frenzy. Eafrid’s face had lost any resemblance to a human form. Blood was everywhere and bits of flesh hung from my gloved fists. His brains were showing through the cracks in his skull, and an eye socket was visible amidst the wreckage. He was most surely dead. I stood up, dazed; shaking uncontrollably, smoke finally penetrating my eyes, slightly blinding me. I looked out of the room, trying to shield my eyes with my right hand. Flames were everywhere. There was a tremor and a burning beam fell; the house was falling apart, and I hadn’t much time to escape. I turned to the window. It wasn’t burning yet, but there was no way for me to avoid the trap I’d set and bounce out of it. I wasn’t agile enough, and even if I had been, I’d have landed face first on the ground. In my inexperience I thought it best to take another path. I grabbed my sword instinctively, turned towards the searing inferno, and ran into the flames.

I jumped downstairs and fell into the fire, screaming as I burned. The agony was unimaginable. With my lungs on fire and my eyes blinded. I moved out of instinct, conscious thought being now impossible. My last conscious thought was that I’ve

made a fatal error in judgment; I should have gone for the window escape. I ran straight ahead, into the flames or not, — I didn't know, didn't care. Smashing the door off its hinges as burning timber flew about, I kept on running. My clothes were now on fire and smoke was in my eyes as I exited the building. The house collapsed behind me and I dropped to the ground and rolled, trying to extinguish myself. Someone called my name and poured water over me. Oblivion overcame me, though demons still kept burning my flesh in hell as I slept.

I screamed in my sleep and screamed when I awoke. My eyes shot open. I felt so cold and wet; the agony was terrible as rain washed over me. Partly hidden by a tree, I heard the flow of water to my left, and turned my head. I was by the brooks.

"You're still alive!" I heard Simon's voice say.

"No," I replied. Simon's smile faded, and he actually sought the movement of my chest to make sure I wasn't among the undead. His smile doubled when he realized I was joking.

"Yeah you are!" He said.

"Kill me," I replied.

"Do you mean that?" He asked, deeply troubled.

"No, bloody no!" I said. "But I need a healer," I continued.

"Yeah, you sure do," he agreed.

"Would you mind?" I asked politely.

"What?" He asked.

"Taking me to a bloody healer, that's what!" I protested.

"Can't ... I already tried carrying you. I managed to drag you this far to safety," he said, obviously in distress over it.

"I see," I said. "Help me up, then," I asked.

"You're kidding," he said.

"No, I'm not. I need a healer; you can't take me to one so I gotta walk," I said. He apologized under his breath, and helped

me to my feet. The pain was excruciating. I slowly walked back to town in the pouring rain, Simon helping me as much as he could. For once I felt good, at least at heart.

I finally reached Drentwych when the dawn came. Rain still poured over my head and my clothes hung in wet tatters about me. As I watched the sun rise, the world spun about me and I fell. I kept on staring at the sun as I lay on the ground. Simon's head blocked my view as he spoke to me, but I couldn't hear his words. He just wasn't loud enough or I'd lost my hearing, I didn't much care which. The sun was shining again, and I was glad. Simon now came back — oh pesky him; I'd hardly noticed his departure. He brought more people, some of whom I knew. Now they all blocked my view, and then they lifted me up, torturing me beyond words I could tell. Somehow in the heat of torment, I grew numb and silent, as if watching from a distance. I didn't want to be lifted so high — didn't want to be carried away from the light, so I closed my eyes and the light kept on shining.

Next I knew I was walking in a field of wheat. I was so glad to be out in the sun again, for I had felt so cold before. I didn't know where I was going, but that was alright. All roads led to heaven, or hell. I didn't care as long as it is warm there.

I opened my eyes; an old wrinkly face replaced my beautiful sun.

"You have a fever," the Healer said.

"Oh?" I replied.

"Do you understand me?" She asked.

"Sure. I'm dying," I said lightly. "But why'd you take away my sun?" I asked.

"I don't understand," she replied.

"Truth is never honest," I replied.

“Demons have taken hold of his mind,” she said, turning her head as she spoke, obviously addressing someone else.

“I’m going to try to lower his fever,” she suggested. “Though they don’t like the cold,” she explained.

“Very well,” a familiar voice replied.

“I have some herbs to take care of his burned skin,” she added. I moved my face in the direction of her gaze. She was speaking to Simon.

‘Isn’t he the dearest of friends,’ I thought.

I closed my eyes, not interesting anymore, and gave in to my fatigue.

I returned once more to the field of wheat, but something told me this was going to be the last time. The sun shone above my head and I wasn’t cold anymore. This time, I recognized the way. I had walked here before, though it seemed so long ago. I started walking once more, a smile across my face.

Raymond of the Brooks stood there where the scarecrow used to be. I was overjoyed to see him again, and yet so tired. It was only now that I saw him — a ghost at peace, that I realized how lonely I had been; how I’m trapped in this mess that has no resolution.

“It is done,” I said simply.

“It is, Boyo, indeed it is,” he replied gently. Why is he so damn calm! He died for a bowl of soup, and his murderers are for the carrion, only because I could find no peace. How can he be ever gentle and wise!

“I killed them — butchered them, like the vermin that they are.” I spat angrily. “And I avenged your death,” I added more calmly.

“I know Boyo, I know,” he said calmly, as if soothing a child. I am not a child! And my rage will find no tranquility.

“So?” I asked, feeling myself growing warmer, practically fuming.

“So, I thank you; I’m grateful. They were deserving of death, I think. And you’ve done right by me, Adam.” He said, and smiled. I was so torn inside — angry, sad ... and lonely. I wanted to weep like a child on the cold ground; I wanted to swing sword and piece flesh, to tear them apart again, limb by limb and bathe in their blood. I wanted to scream. I wanted to be at peace, like him.

“What now?” I dared ask, as he watched me silently, knowing my heart. He did not recoil, and I was grateful for it.

“Now it is time for me to go,” He replied as a faint ghostly image appeared behind him in the distance, beyond the field of wheat, and nearly obscured from my view. She was a woman, and though I could not see her full form, her smile, was like his and she was at peace.

“No! Don’t go” I yelled.

‘I know he was at peace, and that he was wrong about God, for there it was: his Lianna, waiting for him, his and no others.’ I thought. ‘I know I should let him go, but I can’t! I can’t do what’s right! I’m not like him.’

“It’s my time, Adam.” He replied “I have to go,” He added sadly as a crow landed on a branch next to him, observing us. Was it the same crow I encountered before, when I set to the task of bloody vengeance?

“So take me with you!” I replied. “I’ve drank enough of the bitter cup of life. There’s nothing left for me here; only bitterness, wrath and disappointment.” I said bitterly. “Won’t you please take me with you?” I asked more softly, the walls of wrath inside my heart shattering. I was so very sad and lonely and desperate.

"It's not your time," He replied "And it won't be for a very long time." He added.

"Please! I have nothing to live for here," I begged. "Please take me with you, I won't come between you and Lianna. You'll hardly know I'm around." I cried, tears upon my cheeks. There was a sorrow in me so great hiding behind the walls of rage, I wanted to drown into oblivion, to feel nothing at all now that my true self had been exposed. Meanwhile Lianna came closer, and held his hand. She was fair, and her eyes shone in the light of the stars, and I knew what envy was. He was about to turn to leave, but paused. He will not go, not until our matters are resolved.

"What about Ingrid?" He asked empathically.

"Ingrid?" I asked, memories of her flashing before my eyes. I was overcome. "Ingrid! Oh God, what have I done? How could I forget! How could I fail her so?" I asked him and myself. He watched me silently, they both did.

"She needs you," Raymond said "And Ivar too" He added.

"I'm undone Master Raymond, I'm undone!" I said. "I cannot come with you! I cannot fail them so!" I said and tried to find the strength to get back on my feet, but my body felt so heavy, and the weight of the world pressed to hard against me. He grabbed my hand and helped me to my feet. The weight of the world didn't seem so heavy anymore.

"You have much to live for Adam, for Ivar and Ingrid await you, and you will love and be loved by many others in the ages to come. And as the music of the spheres plays along, stories such as my own shall repeat themselves in variations. And you shall be called to raise sword again, for justice or vengeance." He said as his voice took on a different tone, like someone else was speaking from his mouth, someone greater than all of us.

I listened very carefully then to the words which came out of Raymond's mouth.

"I cannot promise you a life of pure love and bliss, for not all stories get a happy ending. But I can promise you a life of meaning, should you choose to accept it, and walk a path few dared walk before you."

"I accept!" I replied without thinking twice for I understood, I really did.

"Remember what I've taught you," Raymond added, now in his own calm voice again, "Though some things are of fate and beyond your power to change, there is always a choice to be made. You, and no other decide the man you're going to be," He said.

"I understand," I replied simply, for I was at peace.

"Fare thee well, Adam, Man of Swords," Raymond said.

"Fare thee well, Raymond and Lianna of the Brooks, People of Wisdom." I replied, and they were gone with calm smiles, walking to where I cannot go yet.

I woke up, feeling my body so cold and heavy, I had to strain to open my eyes and as I did, the dream became obscure, and I could no longer remember the details of it for a long time. I was however at a measure of peace.

"Hello," I greeted the Healer, who apparently treated my wounds as my soul travelled through the realm of dreams, conversing with the ghosts of the past.

"Feeling better?" She inquired.

"Yeah, much," I replied.

"Good," she replied and got up.

"How am I doing?" I asked her, my mind growing clearer with every passing moment.

"Pretty good, all things considered," she said.

"Please explain," I replied.

"You came in with a mild fever and fresh burn marks," she said.

"And?" I asked.

"I brought your fever down, and gave you a remedy for the burns. They weren't so bad, you'll be good to go in a couple of days, though there may be scarring," she concluded after pondering for a few moments.

"Good," I said, drinking some water and laying my head back, allowing the world to fade away once more. Ivar was the first to visit me, accompanied by Ingrid.

"How are you feeling, lad?" Ivar asked warmly. Ingrid opened her mouth to say something, but then thought better of it and just stood behind her father.

"The fever's down and the Healer said the burns will heal quickly," I said.

"Good. Did ya get 'em?" He asked, proudly.

"Every last one of them," I announced.

"I'm proud of you boy, you've done well," he said.

"I'm a man, not a boy," I corrected him.

"That you are now. That you truly are," he said.

"How do you feel, Ingrid?" I asked, turning towards her.

"Oh, I'm alright," she said, surprised that I'd spoken to her. I caught Ivar's forbidding gaze.

"I was so worried about you. I'm so glad you're alright!" She said, and moved to hug me. Ivar stopped her.

"Why?" I asked him.

"Not now," he replied.

"When?" I asked.

"What's wrong?" Ingrid asked.

"Not ever," he finished, and that was the end of it.

“You are what’s wrong,” I told Ingrid harshly. Though I spoke to Ingrid my gaze never left Ivar’s eyes, locked in a message of hatred, rage, and felt betrayal. I’d willingly tear my heart out of my chest to have this pain gone from me.

“I’m sorry,” she said in surprise, her fingers moving across her chest.

“Why’d you come here anyway?” I asked her, still eyeing Ivar.

“To see you. I was so worried,” she explained, her honesty breaking my heart into such small pieces that I nearly lost my bitter resolve.

“Well, you’ve seen me, now go home and worry about something else,” I said harshly, stabbing both our hearts, and hoping that Ivar saw the pain and comforted himself, with the knowledge that he’d betrayed us both.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to ...” she began. I couldn’t take it anymore.

“That’s fine. Go away now,” I said. Ivar smiled. I loathed his smile and focused on it, letting my hatred fuel my rage, letting it soar and drown away my pain.

“Why are you so mean to me?” She asked.

“Because I don’t like you,” I lied from the bottom of my heart.

“Why don’t you even look at me?” She asked, heartbroken. My eyes found her tear-stricken eyes and the pain was too much for me to bear. I so wanted to take back the bitter words I’d said; they were addressed to another, not her. But I didn’t, and for that I am sorry to this day.

“I don’t like you,” I repeated flatly, in a voice devoid of outside emotion.

“I hate you!” She yelled pitifully. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” She screamed, turned around, and ran outside, crying miserably.

“Thank you,” Ivar said, lowering his eyes and nodding his head. He then turned around and left, and I wished with all my heart and soul that this would be the last time I ever traded words with him. I laid my head back, letting the rage and hatred fuel my will to live and drown my pain.

My Commander was the next to visit. I told him exactly what had happened, adding just one lie. I told him Raymond had been my father, and that I was named after him. My Commander appeared surprised at first, but his look gradually changing into one of admiration.

“Well, I didn’t know,” he began. I nodded my head.

“That changes things ...” he said, thinking deeply. “Raymond, you’ve done well,” he said.

“Thank you, Commander,” I answered.

“You took on a band of murderous bandits all by yourself,” he said.

“Yes,” I lied, leaving out Simon’s involvement.

“I’m going to recommend to the Lord that you receive the Medal of Honor for your actions,” he said.

“Thank you, Commander,” I replied, full of pride. Two days later I was up on my feet. At the meal gathering at noon I was awarded the Medal of Honor in front of the citizens of Drentwych.

“Let it be known that Raymond Brooks is a shining example of an ideal soldier,” Lord Durrant announced. I recalled Edrid when he said it, laughing inside at the irony.

“Sergeant Raymond,” Lord Durrant said, spontaneously promoting me by a couple of ranks, to my utter surprise. “I hereby grant you the Medal of Honor,” he said as he pinned the medal to my new uniform. The people cheered and I smiled, my eyes scanning the crowd. Simon appeared just as proud, as did

Ivar. I turned my gaze away from the latter.

The following day I resumed my duty tours with Barny as my companion. Now I was his superior, but I didn't make an issue of it, for we were friends.

I could tell you how vain vengeance is; how it leaves you in a cold and empty shell once you're done with it, and have to deal with life all over again. True, vengeance provides a powerful point of focus, keeping you occupied, and channels all your negative emotions into a single-minded and driving force. On the other hand, when you have to deal with life, vengeance can't help you, for it tends to consume your very spirit. I don't recommend taking on vengeance as sport, for it causes the worst kind of self-destruction. Then again, no pearls of wisdom can replace the sense of deep satisfaction that well-delivered vengeance brings.

Raymond of Drentwych.



## CHAPTER XVII

### **SELF LOATHING**

After that incident my life took a turn for the better. I was perceived as a local hero by both commoners and soldiers and took pride in my new reputation. I patrolled both in, and outside the town, and kept in shape when my shifts were over. I still drank and wagered upon occasion, but not with the same driven, self-destructive force as before. It should come as no surprise, then, that on one typical night of small wagering and mild drinking, I allowed things to get out of hand. Maybe I drank on an empty stomach — I don't remember. What's important though is that in the thrill of the moment I made a ... large wager and lost all I'd gained — my wages, my winnings, and everything else, short of my clothes and my sword. Dumb as I was, I never bet on Ivar's masterpiece sword.

It was then that I discovered two worldly truths. The first is that false friends are like the tides; they come when you're high and drift away when you're low. Simon, my only real friend,

had advised me time and again to cease my bad habits. Simon stayed by my side, proving that he was of the second brand of friends, those that lend a hand when you need them. The second worldly truth I learned is that God seems to love fools, so very much so that he made so many of them and lavished opportunities on their heads — or at least he did on mine.

The next day around noontime a man came by and stood in front of me as I sat on a barrel after my shift was over. I pretty much ignored him, hoping he'd go away, since I was too focused on my current predicament to want any sort of conversation. He didn't go away, though. He was shorter than I, which wasn't unusual, as most people with blood of the northern and eastern tribes didn't approach my height. He had short black hair and a shaven face, in the style of the Romans. His chest and arms were very muscular, even more muscular than Ivar's. He wore scale-armor and a golden cross hung from his neck. He was probably a Lord, or at least a true warrior, unlike us ragtag soldiers. In any case, he was someone to watch out for. I should have, but I just didn't care.

"Are ye all right, soldier?" He asked, recognizing my position even though I wore casual clothes, and nothing in my attire signified my occupation or rank. I continued to ignore him, hoping he'd go away. But he just stood there, motionless, waiting patiently for my reply.

"No, I'm not all right, since you're so determined to know," I said rudely.

"What ails you, my son?" He asked gently, taking no offense.

"I'm no son of yours," I responded insolently.

"Still, my question stands," he replied calmly.

"I'm but a lonely, poor, and wretched soul," I said miserably.

"I've got no coin for you. Leave me in peace, if you please."

"Whatever coin you possess I suggest you keep in your purse, young man," he said gently.

"So what do you want, then?" I asked impatiently.

"To help you, if I can," he replied.

"Why would you do that?" I demanded, suspicious.

"Because I can," he said frankly "Now, will you tell me what troubles you? Or if I am truly the sum of your troubles, ask me to leave again and I shall not return," he said. I paused to consider this, opened my mouth to tell him to go, but then thought better of it.

"No, stay," I said. "I'm sorry, Master," I began.

"Call me Richard," he replied.

"Master Richard," I corrected myself.

"Just Richard will suffice," he replied. "I need no titles."

"Very well, Richard ..." I said carefully.

"What's wrong?" He asked again, and took a seat beside me on a lower level.

"To be honest, I don't know. I was rich and now I'm poor, but that's not really my trouble. I mean it is, but it's not," I said confusedly, perplexed now as I thought over his question.

"Perhaps I can ..." he began, reaching for his purse.

"No," I protested, grabbing his hand to stop him from offering me alms. I let go of him as soon as I realized what I'd just done. "I don't want your charity. I may be many things, but a beggar is not one of them," I said in my defense.

"Both wretched and proud; a very bad combination," he mused. "I wasn't about to offer you charity," he added.

"What, then?" I asked.

"A bargain," he replied.

"I won't convert, not for all the riches in the world," I said.

"I hadn't realized that you were pagan," he remarked calmly.

“Regardless, I’d like to purchase your story,” he continued.

“Why?” I asked.

“My reasons are my own and my terms are simple. Your story for whatever debts you owe,” he said calmly, yet firmly. It made me wonder the extent of what he knew about me, if he already knew that I owed money without me telling him. I had not admitted to a single soul in Drentwych that I was in deep debt.

“Very well,” I replied.

“You mentioned that you’re of a different faith. I’d like to know where you come from and the tenets of your faith,” he began.

“Very ...” I began.

“I’m not finished,” he said. “You also mentioned that you’re wretched, and I’d like to know what happened that felled you,” he said.

“Very well,” I replied ... and began my story from the beginning...



## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE STORY OF A MAN

"I was born in the year two and one thousand, as you Christians count," I said. "I was born under a different name, in the outskirts of Jerusalem."

"I see," he replied.

"My mother Sarah was a healer, my father a carpenter. I had one older brother whose name I care not to mention," I said.

"Very well," he replied.

"Me and my brother; we used to get into a lot of trouble with the Muslim kids. We were always at odds," I continued.

"Why?" He asked.

"I don't know, really. Like all enduring historical arguments, I think, nobody really knows who started it or when it's going to end," I said.

"I see," he replied.

"But we got along with the Christian community well enough. I mean, we weren't friends or anything like that — none of our

fathers allowed it, on either side. But we were bound together in hatred," I said.

"Explain," he said, with a puzzled expression.

"We were both oppressed by the Muslims," I stated.

"I've heard otherwise," he said somberly. "My father went to Jerusalem twenty years ago on a pilgrimage, and he told me that the Muslims were fair to both Christians and Jews." I stared at him for a couple of moments, dumb-struck by his odd comment, and then burst out laughing when I couldn't contain myself any longer.

"I told no joke; what amuses you?" He asked.

"I guess your father never heard of Hakim," I said.

"No, he never mentioned him. Who's Hakim?" He asked.

"Abu 'Ali Mansur Tariqu Al-Hakim" I said, pronouncing his name as a native Arabic speaker would. "Known here as Hakim the Mad, supreme ruler of Jerusalem," I added.

"This is most disturbing," he said seriously. "What's his story?" He asked.

"I honestly don't know. He has ruled Jerusalem for as long as I can remember ... maybe even since before I was born. He was always issuing weird decrees, acting like a different person every day, or so I was told," I replied.

"I understand; continue," he said.

"He was mostly occupied in making Jews' and Christians' lives a living hell," I said.

"In what way?" He asked.

"Well ... at one time he decided that we should all worship his God. When that didn't happen, he forced all the Jews to carry big logs of wood every time they went outside, and Christians had to carry big, heavy crosses around," I replied.

"You must be joking," he replied.

"Afraid not, unless the joke's on me," I replied.

"All right. Go on, then," he said.

"I was just getting started," I replied. "Did I mention that he burned all the temples and churches to the ground?" I asked.

"No," he said. His eyes grew red, causing me to lose my mirth, though it was my only shield against the madness that had been my childhood.

"I'm sorry, but that is truly what he did," I said softly, finding my heart again.

"Continue," he replied, his face deeply troubled, mirroring his inner thoughts.

"At some point he decided that he was the new incarnation of the Prophet Mohammad, and then he re-wrote the Koran — their holy book, substituting himself for Mohammad," I said.

"Truly a madman," Richard said.

"Yes. Well, I don't know if it was ever resolved, for we escaped his persecution. Perhaps he still rules," I said.

"When did you leave?" He asked.

"After my brother died," I began.

"I'm sorry," he said. I nodded and continued.

"After he died, I fled with my parents. We took the route the Christian pilgrims travel, to take us to Europe," I said.

"Good," Richard replied.

"That was the first time I killed," I revealed. Richard's eyes opened wide, but he said nothing.

"Before we reached Jaffa, we were ambushed by robbers along the way," I explained.

"What happened?" He asked.

"I'm not sure. I had gone to relieve myself behind a tree, and when I returned I saw two Arab boys — older than myself, but not old enough to be men. One waved a wooden club around

and the other held a Jabaria — a curved dagger. They demanded everything we had, and one of them moved to cut my mother. I ran towards them, thinking with my fear instead of my mind. I struck the first on the head with my walking cane as hard as I could. He turned around, stunned, blood dripping from his head. I struck him again even harder, and he dropped to the ground without making a sound. His friend dropped the dagger, his eyes wide as he watched his friend fall. I don't know what came over me, but I ran after him as he tried to get away, and struck him across the face with my cane. He fell to the ground, crying and screaming. I proceeded to strike him until he didn't move at all anymore. There was blood all over me, and I was crying," I said, my face harsh, and my body shaking with the memory.

"I'm sorry," he began.

"Don't be; I did what I had to do," I replied.

"I'm not only sorry for you, but for them as well," he replied.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the Muslims I know are honorable people, and from what you say, it sounds like these were just two poor boys," he said.

"Nobody told them to rob, or to wave deadly weapons about at innocent travelers," I replied harshly.

"Maybe they had no choice," he argued.

"Waving a deadly weapon about, is always a choice!" I protested.

"They could have been set by an elder to the task." Richard tried.

"I guess we'll never know," I replied angrily.

"True. Continue, please," he replied calmly again. I glared at him for a few moments, then let my anger subside and resumed

my tale.

“Well, after I killed the two, my mother and father hugged me. They took me by the hand away from there. They washed my face and hands of the blood. I pretended it was only dirt and that nothing had happened, they pretended that their son wasn’t a killer, and we never mentioned it again. It was like one of those road stories you hear often; just a story.” I said, and he nodded.

“At night, when I pretended to sleep I could hear my parents talking while my mother wept. They spoke about me, my brother and the people I killed ... I’d rather not delve into terrible words said long ago by now deceased parents.” I said.

“Very well,” He replied, and did not press me on the matter.

“Anyhow, we reached Jaffa soon thereafter,” I replied.

“I see. And then what happened?” He asked.

“We got on a ship, but my parents became ill during the journey and died as we reached the shore,” I said.

“So what made you change your name; the thing that connects you to your lost family?” He asked.

“I don’t know; wanted to start afresh; got tired of racial wars; told myself that a name means nothing on the outside, and that inside I’m just the same,” I said.

I proceeded to tell him the rest of my story, as I have written it here in this journal. By the time the telling was done, the sun had sunk, and I was hungry.

“Raymond,” he began, “I certainly got more than I bargained for by hearing your story.” He then handed me a sack filled with gold coins, more than enough to clear my debts and more than enough to live as a nobleman for years. “Yet a deal is a deal, so this is yours,” he explained as I gazed wide-eyed at the coins.

“No, I can’t accept this. It’s too much,” I replied and tried to

return the sack.

"I insist!" He said. "It's yours now, do with it what you will."

"But why do you give me this much?" I asked.

"An old man donated it to my church," Richard began.

"So?" I asked.

"Let me finish. I too have a story worth telling, albeit a shorter one," he said. I shut my mouth and listened as patiently as I could, considering my excitement.

"He came by the church a couple of months ago, dressed in an odd fashion. His manner of speaking was as odd as his clothes, and he reeked of some incense I was unfamiliar with," he said.

"And?" I asked.

"And he donated this gold and more, and then asked that a quest be embarked upon on his behalf," Richard said.

"I don't understand," I responded.

"Neither do I. Let me finish, for it gets stranger still," he said, and I once more stood silently. "The bishop himself came to accept the donation after priest saw the sum. The priest bade the bishop to summon me, mentioning my name specifically," he said.

"What's so odd about that?" I asked.

"I have never seen the man. I'm one of the defenders of the church, but I'm not famous in any fashion. How did he know to call me by name?" Richard asked.

"Perhaps he overheard it from others," I suggested.

"No, it isn't possible. But when I spoke to him, he was so self-assured, speaking as if he had all knowledge at his fingertips. His accent, his manners, I don't know — alien is the best way to describe them, and I thought perhaps he was one of the apostles, for it would have explained his accented Latin," he said.

"I see," I replied.

"No, you don't. When I asked him if he was an angel he burst laughing, then coughed. He couldn't speak again until we gave him some water. This meant, of course, that he was a mortal man," Richard said.

"He swore me to secrecy before sending me out on his quest," Richard said. "I took the vows he dictated, and then he told me he was dying. His sole wish, as odd as it may seem, was that I and I alone seek out the town of Drentwych, in the Kingdom of Wist Hill," Richard said.

"And?" I asked.

"I'm not sure of the date my friend will be there," he said, but you are to travel the town and seek out young beggars and purchase their stories with some of the gold," Richard told me, eyeing my expression carefully.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"That's unfortunate, I was hoping that you would," he said. "You should get yourself something to eat," he added, and moved to depart.

"No, wait! Tell me the rest of the tale first," I begged.

"Very well. The man told me that I would find 'one' — a youth in Drentwych, who will tell me that he came from Jerusalem, that his mother's name is Sarah," Richard said, studying my expression.

"What! Now you must be joking!" I proclaimed.

"Afraid not. The old man requested that I give the sum of his fortunes to this 'one' — to you," Richard said.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"Neither do I," Richard agreed. "At first I thought his quest to be a fool's errand; the talk of the old and the mad. But he gave me the funds, and I saw no ill intent in his desire," Richard said.

“But who can it be? Who would give me so much without knowing me?” I asked.

“He said he was your father,” Richard finally admitted.

“That can’t be. My father died along with my mother, and he wasn’t old, anyway,” I protested.

“I don’t know the truth; only what he told me. I’m sorry,” Richard said.

“Why did you tell me all of this then?” I asked.

“Because that was one of his requests, that I discuss it with you and no other,” Richard replied.

“I don’t understand,” I replied, staring at the gold.

“Get yourself something to eat,” Richard repeated, “and farewell.”

“Wait! Do you remember anything else, anything at all?” I asked. He turned his head to face me again, and paused, deep in concentration.

“No, I don’t ...” he began. “Hold on, yes, there was something else that was odd. The Old Man had some strange letters tattooed on his wrist,” Richard said.

“Do you remember the letters? Can you scribe them down?” I asked, excited at this new piece of the puzzle, though it seemed to signify absolutely nothing. Richard picked up a stick and roughly carved a few letters on the ground. I studied the letters very hard, as did he.

“Some of them remind me of Arabic numerals. The rest I don’t recognize,” I said.

“What does that tell you?” He asked.

“Nothing,” I professed. “Or maybe that the Old Man had visited the east,” I offered, after careful thought.

“I can’t make sense of it, so I’ll leave it with Christ,” he stated. “What about you?” He then asked.

"I can't," I replied.

"Why can't you see the love of Christ? Surely it is he who sent this messenger who called you his son."

"No," I replied.

"Don't you understand, after all that you've told me, that you're cursed, and that there's only one way to lift the curse, which is to accept Christ and mend your ways? Surely even Raymond, after whom you've named yourself, would have endorsed my advice." He said.

"I'm not Christian," I replied.

"I know that," Richard replied. "I was wondering as to why. You see, this is a first for me, talking openly to a Jew, and I'm trying to understand your rejection of Christ as the son of God."

"He's not my God," I repeated.

"Very well; I won't force you to explain," he replied.

"Why is it so important for you to know my people?" I asked.

"Jesus was of your people, and you've rejected him though he performed many miracles," he said.

"I'm afraid I don't have an answer for you. I wasn't taught much of Jesus," I replied sadly.

"And now that you know?" He asked.

"I cling to my old faith still," I replied.

"Why?" He protested, and I could not understand why which God I bowed down to meant so much to him.

"Because ... I began angrily, not yet having formulated a coherent argument. "Because ... look, I'm not a great theologian; I don't pretend to know the mysteries of the divine. But I can tell you this: I have lost everything already; I have drifted so far apart from everything I once knew. My faith, as fragile and lacking as it is, is the last thing that remains truly mine," I said.

"But what if it's wrong?" He asked.

“Then it’s wrong,” I replied.

“What of your soul?” He asked, genuinely worried.

“Not mine to begin with,” I replied

“You dress like a Christian, walk like a Christian, and talk like a Christian. Few can tell what your real faith is,” he said.

“Exactly. The faith in my heart is all I have left,” I said.

“But you’re a good man, you can be saved,” Richard tried again.

“So if I’m a good man, I deserve to be saved,” I offered.

“Yes, but you have to accept God first,” Richard said.

“Your God,” I corrected.

“He is the Father; the same God you worship. You have to accept the Son as well,” Richard urged.

“But therein lays the difference. Your God will damn me if I do not worship him, mine will forgive me if my faith is in error. He will accept me, for as you just said, I am a good man, deserving to be saved,” I said, surprised at myself for this improvised defense. Richard wanted to protest. He probably had a few points he’d not yet made, but he thought better of it and just said:

“You should get something to eat. Farewell,” he added as he turned to go.

“Thank you,” I replied, meaning it in more ways than one.

“Farewell,” I responded. And so we parted ways, and I was left staring at a large sack of gold.



Richard was a fine man. To this day, when I recall his name I smile. I often have wondered what drives a man to do good. Usually I think the reasons are selfish. We do good because we're lonely and want the company. We do good because we want others to think highly of us. We do good because we expect reward from high above; from someone else. It's always a sort of a bargain done in good faith. But there is another kind of kindness; the selfless kind. A mother's love for her child. A man placing himself in harm's way to save his wife. There is no gain there, and one needs great internal strength to overcome survival instincts and perform selfless kindnesses. Blessed be all the loving mothers, blessed be all the brave husbands, blessed be those who struggle to make the world a better place. This is my blessing to you, Amen.

Raymond of Drentwych



## CHAPTER XIX

# THE VALUE OF GOLD

I ate until I was full, feeling much refreshed. A smile now stayed perpetually on my face, making it hurt just a tiny bit, since I was unaccustomed to smiling. I repaid my debts as soon as I'd done eating. I made sure my gold sack was hidden, to avoid giving ideas to the patrons of The Black Sheep Tavern.

"You robbed somebody?" Barny asked, as he sat by the table, playing rocks, surrounded by my sordid friends.

"You shouldn't ask that sort of question," I replied, and eyed him dangerously, to give him and the others the impression that I've gotten the money by dubious means and they'd better not inquire further.

"Right," Barny began, tilting his head back in a defensive position. "Sorry I asked," he added.

"Forgiven," I replied and took a couple of steps back.

"Wait! You don't want to play?" Barny asked. I wanted to very much, but I'll not walk that devil's road again after having been

given yet another chance.

“No,” I replied with finality. “Farewell, see you in the morning,” I said as I turned and went away.

“What came over him?” One of the gamblers asked under his breath.

“He’s always moody, mostly on the bad side,” replied Barny. That was it; really, I wanted to walk away from playing games of chance. I wanted to live my life as cleanly and virtuously as I could, as Raymond the forester would have done had he been in my shoes. Before every important action I took from then on, I asked myself what he would have done had he been in my shoes. Meanwhile the investigation stood still until 31st October of that year.

It was during the new-year celebrations in England — the holy day known as Samhain. I knew little about it at the time and paid it as much heed as I did any other foreign holy day — I respected the participants while ignoring the details of the festival completely. Samhain for the pagans marked a shift in the underworld which allowed the ghosts of the once-living to return to visit their loved ones in the world of the living.

Christians had an opposite view of the meaning of the underworld and talking to the dead, and therefore found their own non-violent way of protesting the pagan customs. They created a mock holy day, commonly known as Halloween, in which they dressed up like ghosts and all manner of apparitions from hell and made it all into a big joke.

Regardless of how a person viewed this holy day, it was an important event in Drentwych. More importantly for me was the fact that another person was taken on that day near the infamous The Black Sheep Tavern.

I had offered a reward to any patron who knew something

about the kidnappings. I know Lord Durrant should have offered the reward, not I, but I wanted to make good use of my gold. I thus discovered a property of gold seldom explored by modern science. It seems that gold is a remedy for silent tongues and sudden loss of memory. Some say it's also a very powerful aphrodisiac, but that I never cared to discover. Not that I held humanity to any especially high standards, but even as low as my opinions were, I was amazed to discover how quickly people turn on one another for just a few coins. Three men wearing priestly robes had been seen in the vicinity of the kidnapping. I quickly delivered my findings to Simon and Lord Durrant, and that very night we sat in council.

"So gentlemen, we have three people dressed as priests seen in the vicinity of the area. What does that tell you?" Lord Durrant asked.

"That the priests could have done it," Simon replied.

"Don't be preposterous! The Church does not go about kidnapping people in the dark of night. That's what criminals do," Lord Durrant replied.

"Of course, what was I thinking?" Simon replied. Lord Durrant nodded his head and smiled, oblivious to the blatant nuances of skepticism and cynicism.

"Maybe criminals donned priestly robes to avoid suspicion," I said, feeling as if I was talking to little children rather than adults.

"Splendid! Raymond, take Samyon ..." Lord Durrant began.

"Simon," Simon quickly corrected him. Lord Durrant glared at him and continued.

"Take Samyon with you to the church, question the priests, and find out if perhaps someone stole some of their robes," Lord Durrant said.

“Yes, milord,” I replied.

“What are you waiting for, off you go then!” He replied, and shooed us away like small children.

I started walking with Simon by my side. “Oh, and Raymond?” Lord Durrant said when I was already several paces away from him.

“Yes, milord?” I turned and asked.

“Do keep your thief on a shorter leash. If his tongue slips again I’ll cut it off,” he said.

“Yes, milord,” I said and left with Simon. I didn’t have to tell Simon anything; for he had heard the Lord’s threat as well as I.

Drentwych’s church was a stone masonry building two floors high. Obviously, it wasn’t as large and magnificent as Abbot Suger’s later Gothic churches, but compared to the humble hovels and huts everyone in Drentwych lived in, it was impressive, to say the least. A cross carved from black stone hung above the threshold, greeting the comers and goers. My eyes were fixed on the crucified Christian God, portrayed in his moment of supreme suffering. I focused on his closed eyes, as if they may open at any moment. I often wondered at the time why the Christian God hung on the cross, an instrument of torture, but I feared embarking on that sort of conversation with a Christian more than I was curious about it. When my brother died I didn’t much think about what happens to a person when he died. Perhaps I was too young, or perhaps I couldn’t begin to deal with his demise. For me, it was like he went on a journey, never to come home. When my parents died however the question took root in my heart. Why did this happen? Where are they going? I have made many questions in my heart. Yet I knew there were no certain answers, and so I grew frustrated. But it was only when Raymond of the

Brooks died, that I truly wanted to know the truth. Now faced with his God upon the cross, my heart burned with questions unanswered. Yet I knew the common man had no answers for me, and a Priest ... I feared the church more than anything. It was commonly believed that Jews had horns and were allied with the devil. More than anything, I feared being discovered for what I was, and worse, finding evidence that's it was true. There was enough darkness in my soul to prove just that. So I just stared at the cross, silently begging for an answer.

"Ray! Quit day dreaming!" Simon said, shaking my shoulder.

"Ah, eh, sorry about that," I replied.

"So are you going to open it?" He asked. I moved my hand to do so, but I suddenly grew fearful of the notion, so I stopped and just stood there motionless.

"You do it," I replied, hesitating.

"What's wrong with you?" He asked.

"Nothing," I replied impatiently. "Open the door," I instructed him.

"No, you do it," he rejoined. I pursed my lips and exhaled through my nose. At that moment the door was flung open by a priest. I should like to point out that Drentwych housed several priests, as this was an immigrant's town, and thus important to the holy throne.

"What's all the ruckus about this late at night; even if this be Halloween, the house of God is not a place to go wandering about?" An irate figure demanded. We turned to him and I studied his features in the torchlight.

"Good priest," I began. "Er ..." I stammered.

"Out with it," the priest replied impatiently.

"Do you happen to know if any of your priestly robes are missing?" I asked bluntly.

“Stolen,” Simon corrected me.

“What?” The priest asked.

“Do you know of anyone who may have stolen ...” I asked again.

“I heard you the first time!” He said angrily. “And the answer is no, no one steals priestly robes.”

“Perhaps you can ask the other ...” I began.

“No, I’ll not bother more priests this late at night with idle questions,” he said angrily. “Have you two been drinking?” He added and eyed us carefully.

“In that case, we’d like to check the church,” I replied, losing my patience at his rudeness.

“You may not!” He retorted in a raised voice. “This is a house of God, and you may not ...” he continued, when I interrupted.

“I have the permission of Lord Durrant; take it up with him, priest,” I replied angrily.

“I forbid it!” He began.

“Step aside,” I commanded, and shoved him out of the way as I stepped inside a church for the first time in my life. I was shaking all over, my heart beating like a drum. I more than half expected lightning to strike me, or to die suddenly for barging into the house of a god.

“Stop!” He called, raising himself up from the floor. I must have shoved him a bit too hard. More priests came to answer his call.

“By order of Lord Durrant, I will inspect this church,” I announced to the priests. “You will let me pass where I will, and you will answer my questions truthfully,” I continued. “Or you will spend this night in jail and tomorrow morning stand before a judge, priest or no.” I tried to sound as threatening as I could. I didn’t know if I was really in the position to make those sort

of threats or to follow them through. At the very least it could cost me my job, at worst, my head. But the truth is, I had let my anger rule me, so I hadn't really considered the consequences.

It appeared to be that the priests believed me, or they realized I was a deranged lunatic capable of many things, for they hurried to get out of the way, eying me warily, those who bothered to look at me at all.

"Ray, what are you doing?" Simon asked nervously.

"Shut up, shut up," I replied as quietly and harshly as I could. We then questioned the priests. They were cooperative but were not very informative, meaning that they tried to avoid us wherever we went. It was as if we were playing catch but without actually running about. Even when we "caught" a priest, he had little or nothing to say. I grew impatient, which seemed to have become a trend. Simon, on the other hand, took it differently.

"Ray, you know who talks like they do?" He asked me.

"Priests?" I answered, stating the obvious.

"No, crooks," he replied. I listened very carefully then. "When you're hiding something, you answer as briefly as you can hoping whoever is asking the questions wouldn't think of the right ones to ask," he said.

"I don't follow," I said, trying unsuccessfully to understand his theory.

"People usually act differently when they're lying than when they're telling the truth. Most liars would rather avoid actually making up stories as much as possible, therefore they give short answers," Simon speculated.

"Makes sense," I replied. I then addressed the priests: "If you tell me what you're hiding, I'll go away." I received several comments, which it would be disrespectful to the priestly order

to repeat.

“Very well, then,” I replied, taking offense but not showing it. “In that case, I’m going to look around EVERYWHERE,” I said, pausing for them to take it all in, UNTIL I find something.” I resumed my search with Simon and it didn’t take long for us to find a hidden passageway.

“Where does this lead?” I asked a priest.

“To the catacombs, the burial caves built at the time of the Romans,” he replied.

“I see,” I responded, getting a bit agitated at the thought of visiting a place full of decomposing bodies.

“You have nothing to look for down there,” the priest added. There was something in his eyes, however, some hint of secret knowledge; a worry. Like a wolf smelling blood, his fear fueled my resolve. I decided we should look there anyway, so I motioned for Simon to take a fresh torch and follow. He did, reluctantly.

Down the spiral descending stairs, we went. Rats scattered about us and the scent of dust hung heavy in the air. Even the most minor of sounds, like our breathing and the sound of scuffling feet carefully making their way resonated off the walls, sounding too loud for my ears. Even the rapid beating of my heart felt too loud. We were frightened to be sure. I imagined unlikely encounters and what I should do when faced with these unknown dangers. Everything from decomposing bodies, animated by some dark magic, to a coven of deadly assassins, or restless ghosts crossed my mind. Sadly, most of my planned reactions included either stabbing it with a sword or running for our lives - this being Samhain eve, had not made the circumstances any easier to bear.

I bent to fit under a Roman archway; Simon had no trouble

passing, as he was shorter than I. I paused, looked at a human skull lying about the tombs. A rat fled from beneath it, frightened by the light. I bounced backwards, almost bumping into Simon. He was saved, however, because he bounced even further back, both of us shrieking like little girls. We then paused and stared at each other for a moment, and then simultaneously burst out laughing.

“Who be there?” Asked a strange voice from further away, stopping us in mid-laughter. Simon drew two daggers, slowly and silently I followed his example and drew my sword as quietly as I could.

“Who be there?” Insisted the voice again, louder and obviously angry.

“It is I, brother Kleptophile,” Simon called loudly.

“And I, brother Be-a-veneus,” I said, fumbling with making up a Greco-Roman sounding name.

“Come here,” the voice called. We hid our weapons behind our backs and approached.

The voice belonged to a hunched abomination; that’s the only way I could describe the twisted, deformed, ugly, and smelly creature which seemed a macabre shadow of a human being. The light obviously hurt his eyes, so Simon held the torch in front of us, so that he wouldn’t see clearly.

“Password?” He asked, shielding his eyes from the light. Both Simon and I strained our muscles, ready for confrontation. My heart beat faster, and I felt alive.

“Password?” I began, not sure what to say.

“Why do you question us again?” Simon asked him pseudo-angrily.

“What?” He asked, taken aback by Simon’s tone.

“What do you mean, ‘what’?” he began. “Don’t play dumb

with me. We were just here with a friend of ours, remember?" Simon said as he reminded the creature of something which had never happened. "We gave you the package," he added more softly. "You know, the human package," he finished.

"Deliver package to Necromancer; Master, don't need more for ritual," the Abomination said. I fought very hard to hide my stunned expression.

"No, the Master told us to bring the package here," Simon argued.

"No," the Abomination began. "Deal not like that," he said.

"Remind me of the deal then, for I remember differently," Simon argued.

"Package to Necromancer. In return Necromancer gives boon to Master," he said.

"You forgot one thing," Simon stated.

"I not forget anything," the creature corrected.

"Yeah, you did. What do we get out of it?" Simon said, emphasizing the 'we'.

"You wait your reward like I wait. Master said reward is power and eternal life, but only if I wait and work hard," the Abomination said.

"When?" Simon asked. "We are growing impatient," he added.

"Tonight Master make ritual. Reward comes after," the Abomination said, growing very impatient. For my part, I was ready for a fight, silently thanking God that we'd fallen on a dumb, talkative minion rather than a smart one. If only he hadn't been so big, I'd have been even more grateful.

"Where?" Simon asked, still on a roll, but going too far this time, it appeared.

"You not priests!" The Abomination roared, standing straight

and flexing his muscles. He clearly stood two head taller than me; four times as strong. Simon bounced back. I sprang back and to the side, as Ivar had trained me.

The Abomination lunged at Simon, hands at his sides, muscles flexing, wicked claws protruding where nails should have been. Simon moved as fast and frightened as a cat. I held my sword in a two-handed grip, swinging from right to left with all my strength, moving my left foot forward and turning my abdomen, spinning to the left. The blow hit him across the mid-back. It felt like hitting strong bones, as if his whole body was as hard as stone. There was blood on my sword, however, so I figured if I can make him bleed, I can kill him.

I didn't even cause it to budge, however; he just stopped his chase instantly, turning his abdomen and then his feet as well in my direction. His hands were extended to their full length, and he nearly ripped my head apart. I dodged his swing, bringing my weapon closer to my body. I held my sword tightly at my left side and went for a blow with all my strength. When I stabbed him on the right side below the ribs he screamed. I relaxed for a split second, thinking that the blow should have killed him — but it didn't.

He struck me with his left palm. Luckily for me, he was too close to make use of his claws. Nevertheless, he was inhumanly strong and the blow sent me flying. My back hit the wall with tremendous force. The world spun, and my vision grew dizzy and unfocused. The ringing in my ears killed all other sounds as my sword fell at my side.

Meanwhile, Simon stabbed him with both daggers, drawn from scabbards on his back. The Abomination spun to the right and the left, yet failed to loosen Simon's grip. He then smashed his back against the stone wall, slamming poor Simon between

the bone of his back and stone. As Simon fell, the Abomination spun about once more, stepping on a burning torch by accident. He screamed in great agony.

I had now had sufficient time to recover. I got to my feet, lifted my sword, and charged him once more. He turned as I roared, ready to meet my charge. At the last moment, not slowing down, I bounced to the left. I struck him with my most powerful swing, loosening my grip after the hit so that the momentum wouldn't slow me down. It was sort of like stopping a mounted charge, only without the mount. He screamed and missed his next swing. Badly injured and bleeding, he nonetheless remained on his feet.

Simon grabbed the torch from behind him. "Hey!" He called out. As the monster turned, Simon stuffed the torch right in his face. Burned, he screamed, and Simon hurried out of harm's way.

I swung again, feeling my heart nearly burst. I decapitated his head and it fell with a thud to the floor. Both Simon and I gazed at the felled, twisted head. Only then did we realize that the dismembered body was still standing, still trying to swing widely. We both jumped back.

Simon burned it with his torch while I hacked at it. Two more swings and it, whatever 'it' was, lay down, burning, and died. This had been my first conscious encounter with the supernatural, though I was too stunned at the time to take it all in.

"Ready?" I asked Simon, preparing to charge the door.

"Yeah," he replied, holding a dagger in one hand and a torch in the other. I hacked at the door and kicked it until it fell down, then bounced to the side, hiding behind the wall.

"Good minions are so hard to come by nowadays," a voice called from inside. It sounded like an educated nobleman rather

than the sinister tone we were expecting. Damn it, the voice sounded familiar. I took a peek. He was a pale man, taller than Simon but shorter than I. He wore richly woven black garments. Various silver runes adorned his clothes, but I didn't have much time to study them. Then it struck me; this was the dark warrior who constantly watched Ivar's smithy when I was a kid. Now I remember quite vividly his words, and the dire intent behind them.

'Why couldn't I think of it before? Why couldn't I remember?' I wondered.

"Surrender, 'Master'!" I called after a moment's hesitation, belittling the title 'master' with my derisive tone.

"Oh, but I am not the Master," the voice said, mocking us.

"That's right," Simon sneered.

"The Master is currently at the cemetery; you should go there before it's too late if you intend to stop him," the voice said. I looked at Simon, who looked at me, neither of us sure what to do.

"By all means go, I won't try to stop you," he added.

"We'd rather take you out first," I announced.

"My revenge is best saved for those who wronged me," he said. I knew he didn't recognize me. I wanted to question him about Ivar, and the nature of strife between them. Then again, I was more eager to kill him and keep Ingrid and Ivar safe, than I was interested in solving this enigma.

"Enough talk. To battle!" I roared.

"Very well, but it's your funeral," the voice said. I readied myself to storm in, visualizing the room from the glimpse I had of it when we toppled the door. I made plans to feint a charge and then drop and roll to the side, clear of any hurled attacks.

"Do answer one question before you foolishly charge, brave

warrior," the voice said, stopping me abruptly.

"Ask," I said.

"Why do you seek to stop us when you can gain so much by helping us?" He asked.

"Because I want nothing you have to offer!" I replied.

"But you haven't heard my offer yet," he protested. "I can grant you eternal life," he said.

"No, thanks, my life's hell enough without you extending it indefinitely," I replied. He chuckled.

"You seek justice? It is I who was wronged! I am in the right! God brought me back to life, God empowers my vengeance. Stand with me and you stand with God!" He said.

"Don't care. Not interested." I replied dryly.

"I can offer you power beyond the dreams of mortal men," he proposed.

"Not interested," I lied flatly. The fact is, I was more than intrigued, but Raymond the forester would have said 'no' so that was the right thing to do. "I am only interested in the ending, with your death lord." I added.

"Then you are a fool! I cannot be felled by any mortal man." He spat.

"That kind of power? Why didn't you say so in the first place?" I asked, pretending I was either intimidated or intrigued. "What kind of powers exactly are we talking about here?" I asked.

"More than enough to make you lord over all mankind," he said.

"Be more specific. Big words with little meaning do not impress me," I replied.

"Supernatural strength, speed, and endurance," he began.

"You yourself possess so much of these traits," I mocked.

"I'm not finished," he continued; my cynicism was clearly

not working very well. "Magic healing, everlasting youth," he promised.

"Sounds wonderful," I said.

"Oh, it is," he said, pleased with himself.

"But how can you just 'grant' these powers? Don't I have to study for centuries or something of the sort?" I asked.

"Oh, no, my powers are in my blood. If I share my magic blood with you, I share my powers, no dull studies to be had." He said.

"And what exactly do I have to do to ensure my share?" I asked.

"Ray, you're not seriously thinking ..." Simon began. I motioned him to be silent.

"I'm glad you're final- "he began. He had to stop in mid-sentence, I'm afraid. I charged him while he was busy explaining to me the magnificence of his powers. He responded, but not fast enough to avoid my assault.

I tried the 'charge and bounce to the left' move that I'd used on his minion, but barely hit him. It felt as if I was striking some sort of liquid instead of flesh. Only then did I notice how the shadows were moving about my opponent as all color drained from the room.

He just stood there motionless, while shadows moved about him as if he was himself hidden inside a reflection. Shadow-tentacles attacked me, and I dodged first one, then two. The third grabbed my feet and lifted me off the ground as if I were a freshly-caught fish.

Seeing this blatant display of magic, I lost all my confidence. Simon threw the torch at our adversary, thus saving my life, since he abruptly burst into flames as if a potion of Greek-fire had hit him. I dropped head-first on the stone floor, losing my sword in the process. He moved with impossible speed,

extinguishing himself with his hands.

I recovered quickly and got up from the floor, grabbing my sword. He clawed me with his hands, the movement too fast for me to register or respond to in any way. I tried blocking the blows with my sword, but it was too late, I was already bleeding from a dozen wounds, my clothes ripped to shreds. Simon threw a dagger at him, but he caught hold of it easily.

At this point I saw red and lunged at him like a maddened beast, flailing with my fists. We wrestled, which was a bad course of action, for I quickly discovered that he wasn't lying about his superhuman strength. We bumped into a wall, then fell over each other. As he lay on top of me, he tried to choke me, digging his prolonged nails into my neck. I flailed my fists at his face desperately, tightening the muscles around my neck to enable me to keep on breathing.

Simon jumped on his back, stabbing repeatedly with his dagger. I was half-crazy by then. I felt his blood dripping on me, stinging against my open wounds. Then, in a fury of stabs and blows, he died — or at least I thought he did. It seemed as if a fire engulfed and consumed him in just a few moments, leaving only small puddles of blood, some of which continued burning. I reasoned that perhaps he had failed to put out the fire the first time or else some divine hand had saved us. Simon stood over me and inspected my wounds.

"You're not hurt too badly," he said. "Can you get up?"

"Maybe," I answered, as giddy as one would expect after receiving a dozen 'light' wounds. I got up with little difficulty in spite of my dizziness. I inspected my wounds; mere red marks remained where only moments before had been gashing cuts. Only then did I realize that he had probably been telling the truth about the endurance part as well—what an idiot I was.

"I'm all right, Simon," I said.

"There's some blood left on the floor," Simon remarked.

"We shouldn't touch it. It's probably tainted by the devil or something," I replied.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he replied, and eyed the pool with disappointment.

We inspected the room. A ledger lay open upon a writing desk. A few tomes of knowledge sat on a bookshelf attached to the wall. A coffin lay on the other side of the room, where a bed should have been. We both tried to read the ledger, but neither of us was adept at reading or writing, at-least in whatever language was written there, so we picked up the books and moved to leave the room. I let Simon carry the books while I pried the coffin open. It was empty; no dead body lay inside. Simon started going upstairs, only too happy to leave this dreadful place. As soon as he exited the doorway, I bent down and collected the monster's blood which had spilled on the floor. I used cloth to soak it up, and then squeezed the cloth into my water-skin, repeating the action until I collected it all.

I knew beyond any doubt that what I was doing was wrong, but I was seduced by the promise of supernatural powers. This was a monster and his blood, an unholy thing, offered abilities I could only dream of. I wanted as much as I could get and more. I told myself that this is what Raymond would have done if faced with diabolical magic, but it wasn't true, and deep down inside I knew my reasoning was false. Something was now nabbing my insides, as if screaming to be heard — warning me to get away. I didn't listen, though, as the sum of my desires lay there, so close, in the pool of blood. Besides, even as I wrestled with listening to common sense that told me to leave this place, another pressing thought found its way to my head. If I am to

face this creature's 'Master' and have any chance of winning out against him, I had better exploit every advantage at my disposal. Would not God approve that I used the power of the dark to fight for the side of the light? Yeah, I was only doing what I must, I reasoned. Now that was all right, I rationalized. It didn't even feel wrong anymore.

"Ray, where are you?" Simon called.

"Coming!" I replied and hurried to join him.

We ascended the stairs and arrived at the church again. Lord Durrant waited for us there, tapping his foot impatiently against the stone floor. Priests gathered behind him, waiting for us, eyeing us as if we were condemned men.

"Raymond, Samyon, how good of you to join us," Lord Durrant began.

"Milord!" I began.

"There's no excuse," Lord Durrant said loudly.

"But Milord!" I protested.

"You barged into the church!" Lord Durrant said angrily.

"Yes, but ..." I began.

"You threatened the priests in my name!" He shouted.

"Yes, but ..." Simon said.

"You treated them as if they were common criminals!" Lord Durrant said furiously, eyeing me dangerously.

"But wait!" I pleaded desperately.

"I should have your heads," he said irately. "Maybe I will."

"We have proof!" I shouted. Lord Durrant became mute and so did all the priests.

"We have just fought two monsters. Not people; monsters. There's a dead monster and a pile of dust downstairs to show for it, as well as the lovely state of my clothes which I offer as proof!" I shouted. If I was about to die, I reasoned, I would go

down fighting. The priests were stunned; they made the sign of the cross and said nothing.

“We took their books — here, see for yourself,” Simon added. Lord Durrant turned his head left and right in disagreement.

“The monster knew where the missing people are!” I added. Lord Durrant ceased moving.

“Show me the ...” he began.

“The devil speaks from their mouths!” The head priest shouted. Both Simon and I glared at him. “No unclean thing may enter here!” He pronounced.

“We have evidence in our hands proving otherwise!” Simon called. “Or do you suppose that your priests read these forbidden tomes?” He added. I had no idea if the tomes contained forbidden knowledge of any kind or not; it made sense, but we had no evidence.

“Let me see the volumes,” Lord Durrant said. The head priest began to protest. “Be silent, priest,” Lord Durrant spat, and inspected our books. As he scanned the pages his attitude changed.

“It seems you are in the right,” Lord Durrant stated, his gaze growing softer as he looked at us. “The ledger contains the names of the missing people — more names than I knew of, and a list of dates,” he said.

“The twisted monster at the door; it told us that the priests delivered the missing people to some Necromancer,” Simon said.

“Lies!” The head priest called. “A pox on your head for accusing the Church!” He told Simon.

“It’s true,” I replied.

“You will burn forever in Hell!” The priest called out.

“I guess we’ll never know, as the thing is dead, is that not so?”

Lord Durrant asked us, interrupting the exchange and drawing surprised looks from everyone about.

“He’s dead,” I confirmed.

“Very well. Now let us leave the unsolved matter of the priests, and focus on the trouble at hand, shall we?” Lord Durrant said, and motioned for us to follow him.

“Good night, good men,” Lord Durrant called to the priests when we were at the door. “I’m afraid my men are drunk. I’ll discipline them for their ravings,” he said with a smile. Only the head priest smiled back, however; the rest appeared mighty fearful.

“Pray the Church won’t come after you, fool!” Lord Durrant said as we hurried away from the church.

“What can the priests do?” I asked, in challenge.

“The Pope can crown and topple kings great and small,” Lord Durrant said.

“So?” Simon asked.

“So if the Church decides to hunt you down for Devil-worship or whatever other reason, no lord, prince, or king will stand in their way.”

“I see,” I replied.

“If it’s any consolation to you, according to this ledger none of us will live through the night anyway,” Lord Durrant said. Simon paled, and I clenched my teeth.



## CHAPTER XX

### **WHEN ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE**

"Tonight is the night of the dead; do you know what that means?" Lord Durrant asked.

"That we're in trouble," I answered.

"That our loved ones return to visit us, not harm us," Simon corrected.

"True, Samyon, however it is a night of great significance, and a Necromancer or a Witch whose soul clearly belongs to Satan may use their power to exploit the event for evil sorcery," he explained. On any other day I would have laughed at the utter stupidity of his claim, but on this night, after the fight with the monster and the magic pertaining to the blood that I had witnessed, I was inclined to believe any tale of sorcery and wonder.

"I have battled quite a few witches in mortal combat, staving off their diabolical sorcery with the purity of my faith," Lord Durrant said, and I repressed the scorn I felt for him. I sincerely

hoped that he'd cease his efforts to impress us with vainglorious tales, and stick to the matters at hand.

"Now, if only we had a better idea of who our enemy is and exactly what he intends to do," he added. This last statement brought me back to the present.

"Wait! The monster said something about the master conducting the ritual at the cemetery!" I called out.

"Be silent! We don't want to panic the town," Lord Durrant warned.

"Shite!" Simon cursed. I clenched my teeth as the air grew chilly. It was our enemy, silently reminding us that he was on the move.

"Come on, let's hunt down a 'Master' tonight!" Lord Durrant said and led us to the cemetery.

Drentwych's cemetery lay next to the western wall — a dreadful place to visit, especially at night. South of it lay Drentwych's swamps — an equally ghastly place to sojourn in at any time, day or night. Drentwych's graveyard was full of rotten wooden crosses and unmarked graves. A frightening chill pervaded at night, felt more keenly in the bones than the flesh. It was as if the chill emanated from somewhere at the core of one's soul rather than being an effect of the weather. The three of us — Lord Durrant, Simon and I, bent low and inspected what soon would become a battleground.

A lone figure stood at the center of the graveyard wearing simple gray robes, its eyes hidden from view as it bent over an open tome held in its left hand. Blood, probably human in origin, had been used as paint in forming a five-point star on the ground, a lighted torch marking each point. Beneath each torch, at the top angles of the pentagram, an artifact lay. At the base of one of the triangles lay a large onyx stone that glowed with

a metallic hue. At another triangle was a bowl of dark liquid. At the third triangle there burned a large black candle whose flame strangely did not sway with the wind. At the fourth point, incense coated in honey burned. At the fifth was a blue urn of magnificent beauty adorned with silver and gold carvings. Though none of us knew anything of magic, it was quite clear to all that a ritual was being performed, and that whoever the caster, he was quite adept at the task at hand.

“Get ye ready,” Lord Durrant commanded, drawing his splendid long sword. The lone figure before us ceased its chanting and eyed him. I could almost swear I saw it smile.

“By the Power of the Dark Hand, I command ye to approach me!” The figure ordered. Both Simon and I buried our faces in the ground hoping it would not see us. Lord Durrant, however, stood upright, his eyes unblinking, and gazed at the robed figure. He started walking, his feet following the path as if he were a puppet on strings.

“Just as the Dark Hand predicted,” the figure said with a smile. “You’re just in time, warrior, to act as my sacrifice.” Lord Durrant kept walking towards it. Both Simon and I hoped beyond all hope that the Lord was faking it, and that he would stab this Master to death as soon as he got close enough. After all, he did claim to be a veteran of sorcerers’ battles.

“Drop your blade, warrior!” The Master commanded. Lord Durrant complied silently. We then lost hope. This was no clever ploy of his to confront the mysterious figure. I shook uncontrollably, for nothing I had ever learned or done had prepared me for this show of force. I clenched my teeth and flexed my muscles as I banished any thoughts of weakness. Raymond the forester would have done the same. By God, I understand now my life's purpose. I am rough, and rugged and

unpleasant. All my bitterness and disappointment, and all my failings have forged a wrath, a burning hatred inside my still beating heart. I am only suited for violence; I thrive in it. Be it by blade or fist, I shall tear my enemies asunder, I shall break them. I have no choice in this, I was not destined for love or be loved. I was destined to inflict pain, and to kill. I have been given a choice though, on who my victims shall be. I shall be the monster onto the monsters, and I shall be the shield of the defenseless.

“I’m disappointed,” the Master began, “for ye, who was prophesied as the Sword of God, are a weakling; the old man overrated you.” Lord Durrant stared at him mutely.

“Kneel!” The Master commanded, and Lord Durrant obeyed.

“Ray, what do we do?” Simon whispered desperately. I studied his face for a moment, seeing the utter fear in his eyes. I did not share his fear. Meanwhile the Master drew a ceremonial dagger and read passages from his tome, holding the dagger to Lord Durrant’s throat.

“Run away,” I instructed Simon. “Warn the town; get everybody away from here as fast as they can go!” I instructed.

“What are you going to do?” Simon asked fearfully.

“I’ll hold him off; now go!” I said. The Master then slit Lord Durrant’s throat; his blood flowed into a pool at his feet, until he finally dropped to the floor, dead. I prayed to God under my breath, and then drank of the evil potion; the magic blood I had stolen.

My vision turned red, and time began to slow inexorably. I heard Simon’s footsteps as he ran. My body grew alive as it had never been before, and my senses sharpened. My eyes took in the figure’s every detail, even in the dark of night. My ears heard Simon’s frantic strides and his shrieks of alarm, even

though he was already far away. My muscles tensed, and I took a deep breath. I bounced to my feet, filled with overwhelming rage that drowned out my fears, drowned out my thoughts, and drowned out my very humanity. I accepted what I am, and I was ready to die. Was he?

"Another one," the Master mused. That's all he managed to say, however. I ran towards him, gaining impossible speed. I couldn't see my feet as they moved, couldn't even feel them, but just felt the ground flying beneath me. I smashed into the smaller figure, shoulder-butting him. The force of the blow sent him literally flying away. He hit tombstones of stone and wood, breaking them, though they hardly slowed his trajectory. He then hit a tree, shattering it to pieces. A few trees later an old willow had finally stopped his flight with a terrible crushing sound. My shoulder hurt and I breathed heavily. This burning wrath brought me comfort, it brought me strength. I wanted to eviscerate him. I felt alive now for the first time in my life. No fears, sure of purpose I held my sword with both hands. Walking hastily towards the fallen form of the Master, I was stunned to see him rising from the ground. He smiled and then began to shift his shape. Doubt crept into my heart. Who am I, a pitiful mortal to challenge this infernal monster? A voice screamed inside my head: "No! Do not falter now, not now you baby! Tear him limb from limb!"

I stood motionless, my mind filling with indescribable fear. This fear...he was doing this, I realized. My mind reeled and recoiled, trying to assume control again. Before me now stood a towering demon, his flesh a reddish-gray, on his face a dog's mouth filled with fangs. In one powerfully clawed hand larger than my entire body he held a flail made of living snakes. For all intents and purposes, I believed I faced the Devil himself and I

was petrified with fear. Kill him! My mind roared.

He swung his coiling snake-flail at me. With no time to think, I dodged and rolled to the side, letting instinct guide me. I arose and swung wildly with my sword. He moved away from my wild swing, kicking me. He missed, however, for I spun to the side and moved closer to him, stabbing at his extended foot. Blood! He could bleed, but his blood was a fiery acid that burned my sword. He then struck me with his other hand, but I didn't even register where the blow came from as I was sent sprawling to the ground. My left hip was torn, and blood came gushing from cut muscles. Blood, sweat, fear and rage; they were my guiding lights as I let the feral beast which lurks in every man's heart take hold.

Madness overtook me; I rose up, supporting my weight mostly on my right leg. He laughed a hollow laughter that filled me with dread, which was soon mixed with uncontrollable rage. He swung his snakes at me and I sliced them with two sure swings, waiting for him to advance. Full of rage, he did so, attacking with his claws. I anticipated the move, dodged to the right beyond his reach and then chopped his hand cleanly off. The blow nearly pried loose my grip on the sword as I broke a couple of fingers.

I would have continued fighting, but my sword shattered as I landed another blow. I stared for just an instant at the hilt and the broken-off blade. Ivar's 'troublemaker', destroyed. An instant later the Demon attacked, clawing at my chest and inflicting five gashing wounds down my torso, which felled me. My flesh was torn and my ribs broken; blood was everywhere. I would be dead in only a matter of moments. The whole world was spinning. I had been gazing at the spinning stars as I hit the ground. As I closed my eyes in the silent acceptance of my

demise, I wondered if I would be buried next to my parents, buried nearby, or, more likely, have my remains eaten by the demon. He loomed above me, laughing, and extending a hand to grab me. The world faded away and I may have been lifted off the ground, for I felt as light as air, with chilly winds surrounding me. I lost all sensation of pain followed by the sensation of flesh, and then the sensation of time and place. I saw my life flashing by, and what an empty life it seemed to have been. I've done few deeds to be proud of; all my life I had spent in idle activities which amounted to nothing at all. Drentwych, the Demon, and even Simon, became fleeting images in my mind, part of a long-lost memory. I saw my mother hugging my father closely, extending an ivory hand towards me, shining in the pale light of the moon.

I tried so hard to fly into their embrace, seeking the solace that a child can find only in a mother's warm arms. I was a little boy again who had gotten lost in a dark and foreign land. How glad was I to have fled horrid reality and to have found my parents again; how thankful to have come home at last. "Not yet, Son. You must go back," my father suddenly commanded me. I felt my soul being sucked back into my broken flesh as if the hand of a Titan was whipping me back to life. I didn't want to return. I wanted to stay with my parents, even if only a moment longer, but this was not to be.

My flesh felt alien to me, torn, cold, and bleeding as I opened my eyes to see the Demon ready to step over my face and finish the job he had begun. I stared at his foot, the instrument of my destruction. I could feel my broken flesh knitting together as the dark potion repaired the damage he had done. Then Simon jumped on the Demon's back with nothing more than a dagger; my dear friend Simon, risking his life and soul when he could

have fled and saved himself. Simon was charging the Demon despite his fear and in defiance of reason, in an effort to give me enough time to recuperate.

My rage returned tenfold as life re-entered my flesh. Simon left the dagger lodged in the Demon's back and ran like the wind away from him. The Demon, leaving me for a more challenging target, turned and gave chase. Simon screamed in fear and I jumped to my feet as unspeakable anger filled every corner of my body. So terrible was my wrath that there was nothing beside it. All the world was consumed in my fury; I knew only the rage that would not let go.

I ran bare-handed after the Demon; I didn't care about my odds, or formulating a tactic. I heard Simon scream in pain as the Demon struck his leg, and my rage grew immensely. I screamed as only monsters can, and the Demon turned; in a split second I was upon him. As he saw my hand, rushing to his face, clawing at his eyes, surprise gripped him and he momentarily failed to respond. My fingers tore into his face, plucking out his eyes, tearing into his skull. I then heaved with all my strength, kicking his form with my foot. I tore his head from his body, creating a sickening sound. Before the body fell to the ground, I smashed the skull and proceeded to tear the Demon limb from limb. I was completely consumed in my thirst for blood; I tore at him like a maddened instrument of death. His flesh emitted acid and I burned, but I didn't care, and I tore at him until there was nothing left but a pool of blood and gore. I screamed in anguish and rage as his acidic blood burned my hand like a thousand fires boiling my blood. I roared to the heavens, heaving my bloody arms to the sky to show God my bloody work, screaming in rage like a beast.

"Ray! Help me, Ray!" Simon called. I noticed his existence only

then, as the bloody haze slowly lifted. He was crying, bleeding from his feet.

“Ray, I can’t feel my legs, help me, Ray!” He cried. I bent to lift him up. He was as light as a feather. I turned to go to the Healer, when I saw the townspeople standing all around us, at a safe distance, of course. Like rodents, they sensed the danger was over, the enemy vanquished, and moved to celebrate this victory, as if they all had a hand in it. They cheered, screamed, whistled, whispered, and blessed us — yet none of them approached to offer aid.

“Someone help us!” I called. “Someone help!” I repeated. Then the world spun about me. I saw the stars, and the ghosts of dead people. Horrid apparitions — ghostly images of rotted corpses, sent shivers down my spine. My eyes darted everywhere as I held my head with my good hand while a piercing pain shot through it. Simon’s pleads for aid echoed in my ears. Through half-closed eyes, I saw my parents. They held a lantern, then a moment later they were gone. The piercing pain throbbed, and I may have screamed, or perhaps it was someone else. The world was spinning, and then I saw the stars as I fell to the ground — the stars were the last thing I remember before unconsciousness claimed me.



## CHAPTER XXI

### **AFTERMATH**

I woke up on a bed, and sprang up screaming. I had dreamed that my battle with the Demon still raged on, and I the loser at every turn — torn and dismembered repeatedly. As I sprang from the bed, the pains of my nightmares echoed in the pains of my mortal injuries, so that I thought I was still fighting him. Hands grabbed me, soothing voices spoke to me, but I roared and jostled them all aside; to me they were minions holding me in place, while he, the Demon, my tormentor, held a curved sacrificial blade to my chest. I roared like a cornered beast and flung them across the room with tremendous force.

“Raymond! Calm down! You’re safe!” Barny yelled at me from across the room. Apparently he wasn’t hurt, and I found it odd that I had managed to fling the chubby man across the room.

“We’re not safe,” I called out urgently. “We have to get away!” I added as I inspected my surroundings. Apparently I was in the barracks, surrounded by soldiers, healers, and some of the

townsfolk.

“We’re all safe,” Barny repeated.

“Ray?” Simon asked weakly from his bed at my side.

“The Demon! Simon, we have to get away!” I shouted.

“The Demon’s dead, Raymond, he’s dead, you got him,” Barny told me. I stared at him in disbelief.

“Dead?” I asked.

“Dead,” Barny repeated.

“Be sure,” I replied.

“Ray, you tore him limb from limb, then stepped on the remains. Invisible fire then took him to Hell, and there ain’t nothing but scorch marks where once he stood.” Barny explained.

“Ya sure got him!” Another soldier called.

“All hail Raymond!” Yet another applauded, rising his hand in salute. “Slayer of Demons,” he added.

“Cease your vain boasts, you fools!” I roared at them. The room grew silent. “Can’t you see; the darkness isn’t gone! Tis’ merely a recess, and I a broken vessel!” I roared. I heard laughter in my ears; in truth, it resembled the sound of a man gagging, but definitely was an attempt at mirth. I sought out the source of the laughter, my good hand searching for my broken sword.

“Calm down, my hero,” Ingrid said softly. “The darkness surely is gone. Lo and behold, the dawn is here.” She added. My eyes darted to her, still half-deranged, and as they focused on her angelic image, my resolve broke and I could not contain my tears. She held my hand and brought me comfort. My love for her burned still, in agony. Her gaze transformed into one of suffering, and she tried to release her hand from my grasp. I let go instantly, for apparently I had squeezed too hard.

“You’re safe, dearest hero,” she said, hiding her hurt fingers behind her back so that I wouldn’t see. “And we are all in your

in your debt," she continued as she bowed to me.

"Alas, my dear, do not bow," I replied. "Please, I shall utter no more dark words," I added. She bent to my cheek and planted a kiss, her lips chilly and soft against my feverish skin. Then she rose up and stood behind her father, who showed only worry for me.

"Lord Durrant?" I asked. The soldiers lowered their heads and said nothing.

"Help me up," I commanded the nearest person, and he complied. I sat down and inspected my injuries silently. My left arm from elbow to the tips of my fingers lay in heavy bandages, feeling as if it burned still. My torso and hip were likewise bandaged, and hurt just as much.

"They say a miracle saved you," Ivar said as I contemplated my injuries. I gazed at Ingrid as if from a great distance.

"What does he mean?" I asked, addressing another.

"They say your wounds healed on their own," Ingrid offered.

"Who are they?" I asked.

"The soldiers that carried you here," she said.

"And I, too, observed the miracle with my very eyes. Where once organs lay exposed, your flesh knitted together and reformed," Ivar added.

"We saw you wrestle and slay a dire monster with your bare hands," called one of the soldiers.

"Aye, we all saw your glory!" Added another as they cheered and nodded their approval.

"What, again, about my injuries?" I asked.

"The healers said you were only lightly wounded, considering what you've been through," Ivar said.

"I see," I said.

"You'll probably live. However, there will be scars," a healer

said.

“I understand,” I replied.

“You’re the town’s hero,” another exclaimed.

“I don’t care,” I replied.

“What?” A soldier responded, astonished.

“I don’t care about that,” I replied.

“What about us?” Ingrid quietly asked, and suddenly she seemed to me as fragile as a flower.

“I’m in terrible pain,” I replied. “Now is not a good time ...” I said dismissively. I remembered her father’s words, and determined not to put him to shame yet again.

“Yes, dear, of course!” She said, flushing red. “I’m so sorry,” she added, and fled awkwardly. As if she had increased my suffering with her words. How much I cared for her. How she has changed from the young brat that she was to a compassionate woman. How I have changed from a young brat, to a bitter young-old man.

“Simon, we have to go, our work isn’t over,” I stated as soon as she had left.

“I can’t walk, Ray,” Simon replied.

“What need ye done?” My Commander asked.

“Arrest all the priests. They are involved in this dark deed,” I answered.

“I can’t arrest all the priests! The Bishop will have our heads — surely men of God are not responsible for this,” he protested.

I got up, seeking my broken sword. I found it next to the bed, grabbed it with my right hand, and started walking. Ivar and some of the soldiers followed close behind me. I first visited the battlefield, dearly hoping to see a slain demon there to dispel the horror of my dreams. Sad I was to see that no demon lay there, only a patch of blackened ground and some crusted

human blood. The instruments of magic were all gone.

“Where have the tools gone?” I demanded of the soldiers behind me.

“I know nothing! I saw nothing!” Called out one, defensively. My anger burned inside of me, magnified by pain and fueled by despair; I felt cheated. Had I won a fight only to lose the war? I asked myself. Someone had to have taken the artifacts. I knew that the priests were involved and that we still didn’t know the true identity of this Necromancer. Meanwhile, Lord Durrant lay dead and I chase after ghosts.

“I’m gonna get me some answers,” I said through clenched teeth. “Follow or disperse as you see fit,” I told the others and walked round to the church. At least the soldiers all followed.

I procrastinated before entering the church. My sword was shattered; all that was left was a quarter of a blade and a nice-looking hilt. My left hand was encased in heavy bandages, as were my torso and foot. In short, I looked as bad as I felt; my personal odds in combat were slim, and I counted on no one else — except perhaps Ivar. Abruptly, I had enough of thinking, and I pushed the doors open and stepped inside.

Priests rushed to me, blessed me, and cheered me on. The head priest, however, saw my bloodshot eyes and my menacing gaze. He hurried to get away, crossing himself as if I were the Devil himself.

“Halt!” I called out to him and pointed the remnants of my blade at him. He paused in mid-stride and dared not take another step. The room grew silent as penitents and priests alike watched me in a blend of fear and admiration.

“Confess!” I ordered.

“I’ve committed no sin and shall not be judged by the likes of you,” he replied. He tried to sound self-assured but his voice

was shaking. I smelled his fear and loved the scent of it.

“The Lord of Hosts guided my hand and delivered me from the inferno,” I began.

“Amen!” The priests and soldiers called.

“Confess!” I called.

“Begone you fool!” He replied

“I know of the Dark Hand, and I know of your sins,” I bluffed. The head priest inhaled and held his breath, his eyes growing wide.

“Invoking God’s grace, I offer you this single chance to confess and repent your sins ...” I said “... or to side with the Devil still and pray that his hand stays mine ...” I added with a smile. “... Or to lie, if you think the Devil can protect you from me.” He took the bait, and began sweating like a hog. His eyes darted about, taking in the accusing stares of his parishioners and priests.

“I’ll confess! I’ll confess!” He relented.

“A wise choice,” I replied sternly, smiling internally with a big, wide, and evil grin.

“May I ask for the privacy of the confessional booth?” He requested politely, sweat dripping from his face.

“Of course,” I replied and followed him. He was babbling something to himself, but I failed to focus on his whispers for I was more preoccupied with seeing the inside of a confessional booth for the first time. He began with a short Latin prayer while I waited for him to confess. There was something very wrong with the way he prayed. Though I didn’t know the words, I had heard the prayer before, and his was odd in a way that made me shift uncomfortably in my seat.

“Wh-where do I start?” He asked.

“Start with why you did it,” I instructed cryptically. I feared he’d catch on that I knew no details, so I remained as enigmatic

as I could and let him do the talking.

“It’s those damned pagans with their witchcraft!” He exploded, as if that excused everything.

“Explain,” I instructed.

“The commoners; they’re so ignorant of the ways of the devil. They’re ruled by witches and warlocks, who govern them with magic. They seek healing from blasphemers and devil-worshipping hags. We ... I tried to save their souls,” he said as he attempted to justify his actions.

“How?” I asked.

“I thought you already knew,” he replied.

“I do, but I want you to tell it to me from your point of view,” I countered, once more saving myself.

“I thought it a lesser evil. As Christ suffered for the sins of others, I, too, was ready to give my soul and suffer, so that theirs would eventually be saved,” he elaborated.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I tried to purchase a miracle,” he said flatly.

“Go on,” I instructed.

“A man approached me, Sebastian of Spain. He offered me a bargain; a few wretched lives in exchange for the power to perform miracles,” he said.

“And you just accepted — a man of your stature and in your state of grace?” I asked, by no means intending to be cynical.

“He showed me how he heals; he even raised the dead before these very eyes, like Christ did for Lazarus, whom he favored,” he said.

“So you tried to be Christ?” I asked.

“Isn’t it what we all want; to be like him, clean of sin and full of grace?” He asked.

“So you kidnapped people and delivered them to him?” I

asked.

“I only took the damned, wretched criminals, villains, and witches. They were all lost to God anyway,” he said.

“Only those that deserved to be damned?” I questioned.

“Yes! Only those who were damned anyway,” he said.

“What about Charles Potter?” I asked.

“Ogler.” He replied.

“He stared at women?” I inquired, not exactly sure if he did anything further than stare.

“Yes,” The Priest replied firmly.

“Richben?” I asked.

“You don’t want to know the weight of this man’s sins.” The Priest replied proudly, as if one heavy sinner from a bunch of minor ones justifies his own sins.

“Alright,” I began with a challenge “What about the children? Jaunee, the street musician. Bowie’s kids, and Adam, son of Ivar the smith.” I asked, saying my own name without flinching.

“Her hair was red — she had no soul to begin with,” he said venomously. Taking a deep breath, he continued his turret of accusations. “Bowie’s children are illegitimate. He was never properly married. His children are bastards, cursed by God,” he said.

“And Adam?” I dared inquire, to see if he was just giving excuses — covering up for someone behind the scenes, or if he had actual knowledge of each of the victims.

“We took no person by that name, though I have heard Adam was a bully and a brat. He will not be missed,” he said, and I wanted to punch his teeth in.

“What if you’re wrong?” I asked “What if you’ve condemned innocent people — even children, to terrible fates, just because you believe they did something wrong, or they shouldn’t exist?”

I challenged him.

“Nobody is innocent,” He replied angrily.

“That’s right,” I agreed, and he seemed stunned by my shift of argument. “Not even you,” I added. He was about to protest, but I wouldn’t let him. “You kidnapped people and sold them to slavery, for crimes which were confessed to you in hopes of pardon and guidance,” I said, then raised my voice. “You were supposed to be their shepherd, helping them, but instead you were their wolf, devouring them. Now tell me — you who fancy judgments so well, what should be the penalty for one who consorts with sorcerers and sells innocents to slavery?” I asked, and he could not answer. His face was red, and his eyes appeared as if they’d pop out of their sockets at any time. He just stared mutely at me. I took a deep breath, and continued the interrogation.

“How do the monsters in the catacombs fit into the picture?” I asked, as if nothing had happened.

“This was when the ordeal got out of hand,” he began, taking a deep breath. “After I closed the deal with Sebastian, his consort approached me; a man by the name of Azimar. He threatened to expose me,” he said.

“Go on,” I commanded. He answered a different question than I asked, but I did not reprimand him for I wanted to hear everything he had to say.

“If I had been exposed, I would have been excommunicated, my soul damned and lost before I had accomplished my goal,” he explained.

“So, what did he want?” I asked.

“Mainly to blackmail me for favors,” he replied.

“And the men in the catacombs?” I asked.

“You would not believe me if I told you.” He said, and his eyes

took on a maddened stare. I decided not to press the subject, else he'd go insane before completing his confession.

"So, what of the Dark Hand?" I asked.

"Elder of the Old Ones," he stated, as if the statement clarified everything.

"Explain," I ordered.

"I thought you knew," he replied.

"I'd like to hear your version," I retorted.

"Long ago, before the age of man, demons roamed the earth. We call them the Old Ones. The one you refer to is an Elder of the Old, which makes him a creature of immense power," he said. His words amounted to a load of nonsense; the same maddened arguments I heard again, many times in the future when interrogating Heretics.

"Where are the people you kidnapped?" I asked sternly.

"With the Necromancer," he replied.

"Where?" I pressed.

"He has a mansion outside the town," he said.

"Where, outside?" I asked.

"It's hidden by magic; you can't see it," he said.

"All doors shall open before me," I stated. "How do you find it?" I asked.

"They're all dead anyway. I'm sure of it," he cried desperately.

"I have to get there regardless," I replied.

"The Necromancer; he's powerful beyond your wildest dreams. He commands the Hordes of Hell as if they were pawns," he explained.

"Nevertheless, I need to know how to get to him," I persisted sternly, while shaking inside with dread.

"You have to drink the magic potion, and then say the incantation," he explained.

“Give me the potion and teach me the incantation,” I commanded.

“Yes, of course,” he replied, and proceeded to do just that.

“You do understand I meant no harm. I meant no harm,” he repeated desperately.

“I don’t care about your intentions; I am not your judge,” I replied.

“But you’ve smitten the demon with your bare hands, surely Christ guides you! You must judge me!” He said in despair.

“Why do you want me to judge you?” I asked.

“Because I need to know,” he replied.

“Need to know what?” I asked.

“Need to know that I served God; need to know that He, at least, understands,” he pleaded.

“I do not presume to know the mind of God or his will,” I stated flatly.

“But you’ve been blessed,” he persisted.

“And still I know nothing,” I maintained. His eyes became more desperate as I rose to leave.

“Wait! Please! A moment longer, please,” he begged. “Very well, if I can’t have God’s judgment I’ll settle for yours,” he begged. Rage burned in my mind. I wanted to shove my hands through the wood and tear his heart out for what he did — for what he was asking for, over and over again. Why couldn’t he understand that I was trying to save him from my own wrath?

“Very well, I shall give you your heart’s desire and may you burn with it,” I said. “You tried to play God, sacrificed innocent men to an agent of the Devil in exchange for unearthly powers,” I said.

“Yes, yes,” he agreed, weeping.

“So be your own judge; what would you have said to one

guilty of those crimes?" I asked.

"I ... please ..." he sobbed uncontrollably.

"May you die a horrible death!" I said venomously. "May your Satan claim and torment your worthless soul! And may you thrice be damned for forcing me to be your judge," I concluded. His weeping took him to realms of madness as I rose from my seat and left. The confession door opened behind me.

"Kill me," the desperate voice of the head priest cried.

"May you live long and suffer," I replied without turning to face him. Thus I left the church, contemplating my next adversary, the Necromancer, and his consort Azimar...

I was no fool. I knew beyond a doubt that I was probably incapable of vanquishing true Evil just because I had survived a gruesome ordeal. Whoever these sorcerers were, I was certain they knew their minion failed and that their plans had been made known. I had to devise a tactic, if I were to vanquish them. From all the evidence I had gathered, they were magicians, not men of the sword. I had already defeated their Demon and a few of their minions. It was safe to assume they'd be trying to cover their tracks. A bold, aggressive move on my part would send them into hiding.

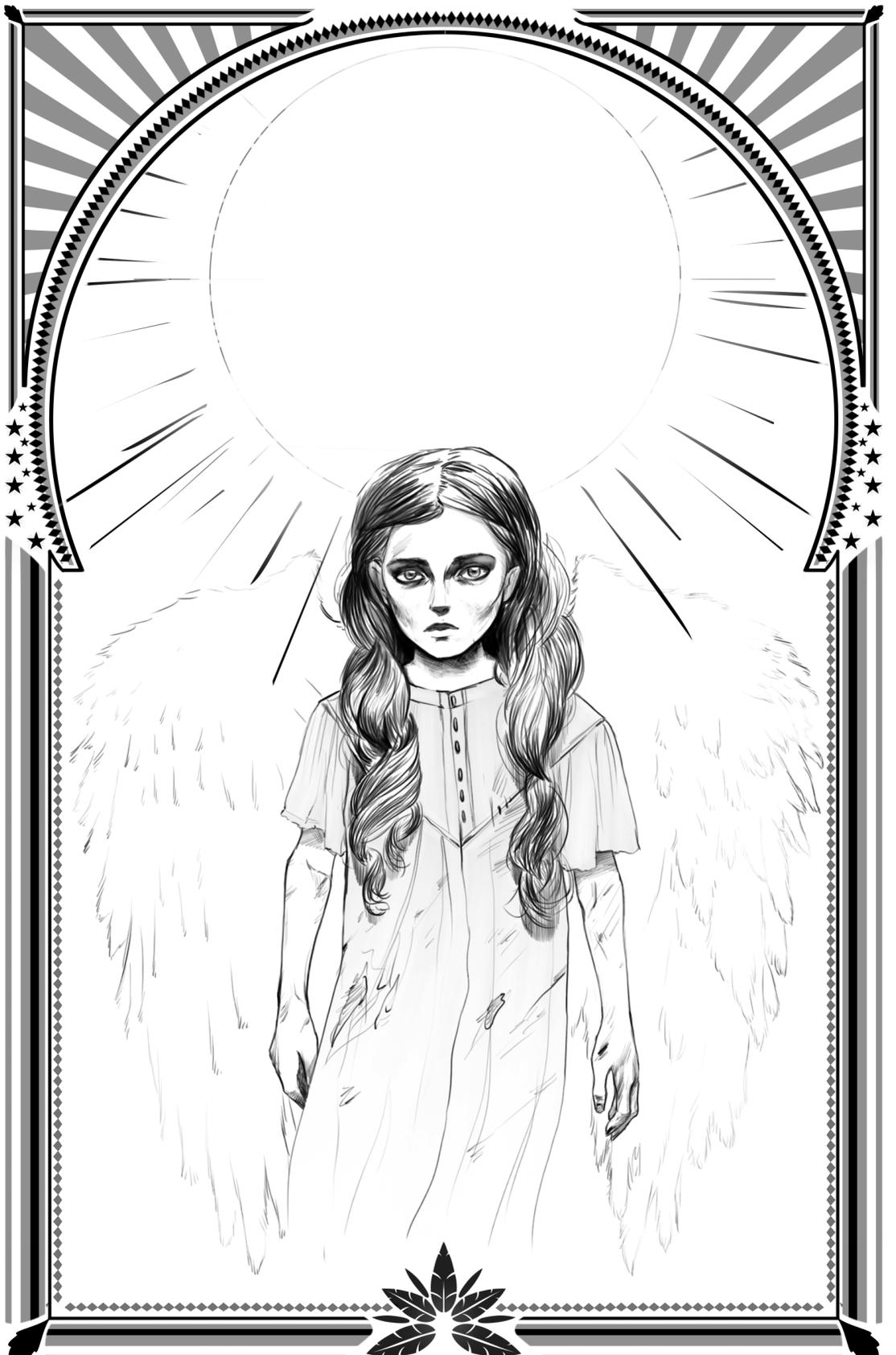
'As long as they're on the run ...' I thought, '... whatever plans they had for Drentwych would have to end. That is my true goal.'

Killing the demon had given my confidence in myself. That's what I'd been missing all my life; confidence and a sense of purpose.

This was the first day of my life. This was the day I had earned the right to bear a hero's name. Not because I Succeeded in doing something grand, but because I dared to, and that made all the difference.

Thus I became known as Raymond Demon-Slayer, Hero of Drentwych. I cannot say that the title changed anything inside. I was not magically re-forged into a new person, or even a better one. I cannot say everything in life worked out for me as I would have hoped. Circumstance, tragedy and a few bad choices on my part had their role to play in the forging of my fate. I don't complain though. I got what I wanted, if not everything that I longed for. I did learn something about heroes though. Heroes are ordinary people, who endure through dire circumstances, and perform acts which make us question human nature in a positive way. A Hero is not without fear; he acts despite fear. A Hero is not without vice; he channels it for positive outcome, as a warrior who rides a ferocious beast. We all have the power to be heroes. All it takes is a spark of hope and tenacity of spirit, to take that first step, beyond words commonly expressed by the vast majority of men. We know in our hearts as we witness with our eyes the wrongs of the world: A Hero is a person who rises above his earthly vices and does something about it. It doesn't have to be a grand gesture. Feeding a stray cat, or standing up to a bully are both heroic actions, one of generosity the other of justice. As for you my readers, I want to inspire you to be heroes yourselves. Rise above your fears; conquer the obstacles that stand in your path. You are heroes when you dare to follow your dreams, when you dare and try to make this world a better place. Never give up, for the path to success is never a straight arrow up, it is a long and winding road, full of obstacles, challenges and failure.

Raymond of Drentwych



## CHAPTER XXII

### **JAUNEE'S STORY: THE MAGICIAN**

The following day the magician came into my cell and gave me food. It was a rich meal of cheese, wine, and some meat stew. On the road I'd gotten used to eating little, and such a large and varied meal was like a trip to heaven for me. Yes, I had actually been a chubby child once upon a time — before I left home.

“My name is Sebastian Del Toro, Master Magician of the second degree.” He said softly after I thanked him for the meal.

“Jaunee,” I replied with a smile. I was glad to be alive and, all things considered, I was better off with a crazy magician who actually fed me well and took care of me than I was with the Papa in the city.

“No, no, no,” he announced. “In here you are special. Everybody's got names, but you also get a number. Only special people like you get numbers,” he explained.

“All right,” I replied, not really sure I understood.

“You are Number Three, and it would please me if you answer

to your number,” he continued.

“I still don’t understand,” I replied.

“Your name is Number Three now,” he repeated sternly.

“No! My name is Jaunee!” I insisted.

“We made a deal. I gave you life and you belong to me now,” he pronounced angrily.

“All right,” I surrendered, now very afraid.

“You will never repeat your old name, ever,” he instructed.

“I shall refer to you as Number Three, and you shall answer to that name.”

“All right,” I repeated, but then could contain my tears no further. He left me there with the food I no longer desired. I wasn’t sure what was worse, being in servitude or being robbed of my very name — my identity as a living creature. I was left alone throughout the day, without a flute to pass the time or even a window from which to gaze at the world. I spent the time sleeping or thinking of what it means to be a slave and to have no name.

Slavery, though not widespread where I come from, did nonetheless exist. There was a custom amongst the nobles; they would sometimes travel to villages like the one I grew up in, seek out pretty women — mostly very young, and buy them from their fathers for large sums with the understanding that they would become servants for life. That was the common, dignified way to establish slavery. I knew this because those same esteemed noblemen would often visit brothels such as the one I grew up in to ‘try out,’ ‘train,’ or ‘break in’ their new purchases. I wasn’t too sure exactly what it was they were doing with those young women, or why they needed to buy them in the first place, but the names they used to refer to these women, and the way those women cried or screamed at

night painted quite a vivid picture of their ordeal.

So to be a slave, I knew, was to be treated as an object, not a person. To add to that, the denial of my name made me think my situation was even worse. Even a cat or a dog, once owned by a master, has the privilege of a name. Not I, though, and I couldn't understand why. There was one thing I had learned from the slave-girls back home, though. Those who were obedient and pleased their masters suffered less. Yet for the life of me I couldn't find the strength to smile and act perky, when deep inside, I just wanted to die. It was perhaps fortunate that at that day which he left me by myself, for I had such fits of weeping that I could do nothing else.

On the third day of my captivity I had put on my mask. I greeted my master Sebastian Del Toro with a wide frozen smile upon my face, as I had seen my mother do countless times when patrons visited the brothel that was my home.

"Master, good morning," I said.

"G-good morning, Number Three," he replied, taken back by my odd manners. "Have you slept well?" He asked, trying to be social — obviously something which he wasn't accustomed to.

"No," I replied casually. He fumbled with his words after my unexpected retort.

"I wanted to thank you, Master," I began, with a winning smile plastered on my face.

"What for?" He asked, puzzled.

"For saving my life ..." I answered, "... and for this comfy bed, and fabulous food," I added.

"You are most welcome," he replied. "Now why don't you return the favor and answer my questions?" He added in stern tones. I looked at him mutely and nodded my consent. I had decided to throw him a bone so that he'd leave me alone.

“What can you do?” He asked simply.

“I’m hungry,” I replied.

“Very well,” he said impatiently. “I’ll give you breakfast, but only if you answer my questions afterwards.”

“I will,” I said with a smile, which I meant this time. It seemed that I could pull his strings to some extent after all. He left then, and returned with breakfast an hour later. The meal was wonderful, though I have no idea what exactly it was that I ate.

“So tell me,” he said as soon as I’d done eating. I took my time with my meal, by the way, as I sensed his eagerness. I really was a demon-child, far too clever — like the snake that ate the fruit of knowledge, and as sharp of the tongue as the Devil himself, or so I was told.

“I can light fires,” I began.

“What else?” He asked mighty pleased with himself now that I’d started talking.

“I see things,” I said.

“What kinds of things?” He asked.

“Lights around people, which change color sometimes,” I said.

“Auras,” he said under his breath, and then I knew what they were called. I never had the privilege before to talk to a magician. I had to make up names for what I could do.

“What else?” He asked.

“Faeries, too, if one is around,” I said.

“Faeries. That’s odd,” he said.

“And dead people too,” I added casually.

“You see ghosts?” He asked, now very alarmed.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Can you talk to them?” He asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“What do they tell you?” He asked.

"They usually ask me to do little things for them, or ask me what's going on when they're confused and don't know where they are," I said.

"You speak quite well for one so young," he observed.

"Thank you. I was told that all demon-children are too smart, and that it's the mark of the Devil," I said, shifting the conversation in a different direction since I didn't want to discuss my powers.

"Who told you that?" He asked.

"Priests, and my father," I said innocently.

"Your father told you that? What else did he say?" He asked.

"Papa said that red haired girls who are too smart are the devil's children and that I belong in Hell," I said.

"That's terrible!" He said, his aura shifting, perhaps to one of sympathy.

'Had he suffered a similar childhood?' I wondered.

"He also said that making fire is the devil's power," I added.

"You're not a demon's child," he stated.

"No?" I asked, sincerely hoping the magician had a better explanation of my odd qualities.

"You're gifted," he explained. "Your powers are gifts, which are given to a chosen few."

"Why?" I asked.

"Many reasons," he replied.

"I don't understand," I said.

"You should rest up a bit. I'll come back later, and I'd like for us to experiment with your gifts," he said.

"What's 'experiment'?" I asked.

"We're going to play with your gifts ... to see what you can do," he explained.

He returned later that day and we started playing with my

gifts. He let me try to light fires; first on candles and then on bigger things. I was quite surprised that I was even able to light a torch. He kept asking me how I did it and what I felt; I tried to answer as best I could. We had to stop many times, though, for using my magic hurt me a lot. First I got headaches, then I bled from the nose, and finally I fainted, and had to rest. He tried giving me all sorts of remedies, but nothing worked. Making magic made me sick, and that was a fact. And so time passed — time that I could not measure. We experimented and then he made efforts to make me well. He did not try to advance my magic or to teach me anything new. On the contrary, he hid as much as he could from me and focused the whole of his efforts into working out how I practice my magic without any formal teaching.

Speaking to ghosts proved easier than lighting fires. He took me outside by the hand, and we sought out a ghost. I was glad to be outside, and I knew better than to try to run. At this point, as ashamed as I am to admit it, I was quite fond of him. He treated me well, compared to the way I'd been treated thus far by others.

As soon as we found a ghost, he watched intently as I sparked a conversation with it. Ghosts are always eager to talk with the living world; it is a relief from the state of confusion they usually suffer. I stay away from the malicious ones; those I can usually tell apart from the others because ghosts emanate their feelings. Thus, a ghost who emanates red rage and appears as a bloody man with sword wounds, is usually a ghost out for vengeance. I did notice Sebastian could tell when a ghost was nearby before I did, for his grip tensed and his aura shifted to eagerness, which I now could identify in him with ease.

We spent many days like this, exploring what I could and could

not do. Yet he changed — and I don't know what caused the change in him, but after some time things turned for the worse between us. He came only to feed me, and spoke to me briskly. Even when he did chatter, he always seemed preoccupied. He once commented that I was flawed, and that the headaches and fainting may never pass. Today I know that he didn't act out of cruelty or boredom, but rather frustration. He spent much of his time seeking a cure for me but neglected to care for me as a human being. I write this now so that you'll know exactly what kind of man he was. He was a criminal to be sure, but not wholly evil.

Being left alone for so long made me long for the outside world, like a caged bird. My only pastimes were singing or playing music by myself. So I made up both sad and happy songs about adventures and the outside world. I sang of handsome princes and fair maidens locked in towers. I dreamt of spreading my wings and flying far away to a place where I would be really loved. What else can a caged bird do but sing of freedom and the sights and sounds denied it?

After a while I discovered that there was a moment between waking and falling asleep where it was easiest to imagine and travel with my mind. So I used this moment to dream of passing through the walls and flying high and far away. Unfortunately, during those kind of dreams I only saw shades of grey and I heard no sound. I saw then mute tales of human life: romances and tragedies of simple folk, the joyous birth of children, and the bitter mourning of demise. I dreamt of lovers kissing and children playing in the fields, and in a forlorn way, it made me happy — I was comforted by the fact that at least some children are loved. In my games of make-believe, they were my friends so I gave them names and composed songs for them.

Then 'she' came into my life; the monster.

Sebastian opened the door one day, and I greeted him as I always did, with a false smile plastered on my face. Unlike all his previous visits, though, this time someone tailed after him.

"I brought you a friend," he said as took her by the hand and presented her to me. She was slightly taller than I, with mangled red hair and a pale complexion. That is where our similarities ended. She had a stocky build, somewhat like a barrel, with too many bulging muscles to be feminine. Her too-large monkey-hands ended with long fingers and sharp, eagle-like silver nails which frightened me. Her mouth sported four fangs amidst other sharp teeth. By all accounts she was a monster, and there was something about her playful smile and shiny red aura that frightened me to the core of my being.

"Number Three," he began. "I'd like to introduce you to Number Four."

"A pleasure to meet you," Number Four said in awkward French.

"I made her just for you," my captor said.

"I don't understand," I replied.

"She may not be as pretty as you, but I'm sure you'll be great friends," he said.

"You think I'm pretty?" I asked.

"Let's play!" She interrupted before he could fumble with a reply.

"I'll leave you two alone," Sebastian said as he departed, locking the door.

"You're such a little thing, a pretty thing," Number Four said, and I took a step backwards, feeling like a cornered animal facing my predator.

"Come and be my pet and maybe I'll be good to you," she said

as she advanced. My eyes filled with the blood-tears that I had cried ever since I drank his potion.

“Come closer. Don’t be scared, little bird,” she said, and advanced, while I sought ways to keep us apart.

“All right, let’s play cut and chase,” she said, and advanced towards me quickly, cutting my hand with her sharp nails as I tried to dodge out of harm’s way. I cried as I bled, and she laughed giddily. My only consolation was that she sought to cause me pain and misery, not death. For as I cried, bled, and suffered she seemed pleased, but made no more advances to injure me further. I’ll spare you the exact grim details of our ‘game’; just try to imagine a cat playing with his prey.

At the end of our play session, which seemed to last forever, she left me on the floor crying in a panic, with blood all over the room — I had never known that I had so much blood inside of me.

When Sebastian finally came back, he struck Number Four’s face hard, and she in turn hissed at him, baring her fangs, then smiled as her lips bled. He seemed enraged — more enraged than I had ever seen him. In my heart I prayed for her death. He lifted his hand and seemed to strain — and as he did so she rose in the air, as if an invisible hand had grabbed and choked her.

“You shall never hiss or challenge me, Number Four, lest I show you the horrors of my wrath,” he said, and flung her across the room, causing the wall to shake as she hit it, and my bed to break as she crashed into it. He then advanced towards me, and I hugged his leg in fear, horror, and relief, weeping uncontrollably. With a touch he healed my wounds and sent me to sleep.

When I awoke I was in a different room, one with a hole in the wall through which I could view the corridor. I was fed large

meals and allowed plenty of time to rest here. All the while, however, I dreaded the return of my new 'friend', something which eventually came to pass. Her games now were slightly less cruel, for it seems she had learned her lesson. Every time she came to play with me from then on, she knew better than to leave any marks of her abuse.

As my life turned to hell, I spent more and more time far away in the Grey world of dreams. I began learning the language of that world by reading the creatures' lips. I was also constantly on the alert and eavesdropped on every conversation I heard through the hole in the wall, until I managed to figure out more and more of my captors' language.

I discovered many things this way, including that Sebastian had perhaps an associate, perhaps a brother. I never saw the one who often referred to Sebastian as 'brother', though I noticed that Sebastian never called him that in return. He referred to him instead as 'Azimar.' The name sounded alien and odd to me. I distinctively remember a conversation which took place near the corridor one day, and which relates to your story, Raymond. In this conversation, there were two more individuals whom I'd never heard or met before. One was a very loud and sinister-sounding individual, the other very self-confident one with a rasping voice.

"I'm telling you, according to the prophecy the Sword of God is here, in this town," said the rasping-voiced man.

"What does it mean for us?" Asked Sebastian.

"Only that you all need to be especially careful in order to succeed at what you intend to do," the rasping man replied.

"Why are you helping us?" Asked Azimar.

"Because I know full well that I'll be rewarded for my help when the time comes," the man replied.

"I don't believe you!" Roared the loud voice. "No mortal man can defeat me!" He added.

"That is the prophecy," replied the rasping-voiced man, in simple yet firm tones.

"Prophecies are for fools," the loud voice replied.

"True, yet precaution is never foolish," replied the rasping-voice man. I marveled at the control this man asserted over the conversation.

"I agree," replied Sebastian.

"As do I," replied Azimar. "It is never foolish to be careful," he added.

"Very well," said the loud voice. "Who is this Sword of God?" He asked.

I could almost hear the rasping-voiced man smile. "This is where my price comes in," he said.

"Talk or die!" The loud voice said.

"Kill me and you'll never know," replied the rasping-voiced man, as calmly as ever.

"There is no need for squabbling and violence," said Sebastian.

"Name your price," offered Azimar.

"Three things," the rasping-voiced man began. "First, you are to transfer all your experiments to the south quarters," he said.

"Why?" Asked Sebastian. The rasping-voiced man ignored him.

"Second, once my prophecy comes true and your Demon lose to the Sword of God, none of you shall attempt to harm the Sword in any manner, ever," the rasping man said.

"I WILL NOT BE VANQUISHED BY ANY MORTAL MAN," the loud voice roared.

"Then my second request shall be voided, since there will be no Sword of God," the rasping man mused.

“Who is this man?” Demanded the loud voice.

“Third, once I reveal his identity none of you are to harm me in any way, directly or indirectly, unless I attack you first.”

“I am losing patience,” replied the loud voice.

“First, you must all promise what I have instructed, and then do as you promise,” he replied.

“I promise,” said Sebastian.

“I promise,” joined Azimar.

“Very well, then, if your prophecy holds true and the Sword of God slays my host body, I shall not engage him in any sort of further combat,” the loud voice said.

“Promise?” Asked the rasping-voiced man.

“I promise, mortal! Now tell me who the prophesied Sword of God is!” The loud voice roared.

“His name is Lord Durrant. He is a master swordsman currently here in town,” the rasping-voiced man said.

“He is here?” Demanded the loud voice.

“Indeed, and investigating your experiments, no less,” answered the rasping-voiced man.

“Interesting,” replied Azimar.

“I can tell you how to kill him,” said the rasping-voiced man.

“I need no aid in killing a mortal man,” replied the loud voice.

“He’s not an ordinary man, but you’re right, I shan’t argue for your benefit. After all, I will get what I desire either way,” the rasping-voiced man said.

“It wouldn’t hurt to hear him out,” reasoned Sebastian.

“Fine,” the loud voice relented.

“Just wait for him to find you; he shall approach you on the night of the dead. Use whatever powers you possess without engaging in physical combat and you will prevail over him,” the rasping-voiced man instructed.

“How do you know all of this?” Asked Azimar.

“I’m a prophet?” Answered the rasping-voiced man, his voice dripping with smugness.

“So prove your powers — tell me my future,” Azimar said.

“How did a man as smart as you ever come to possess real power?” The rasping-voiced man asked.

“What?” Azimar asked.

“He means that he can just tell you a good fabrication of your “future” — for telling fortunes is no sign of true power,” Sebastian explained.

“Very true,” the rasping voiced man said, quite amused.

“So you want to know how I came by my powers?” Azimar asked angrily. “I discovered the secret names and words of power, and I was brave enough to use them, and strong-willed enough to get my way,” he explained.

“Very well—” the rasping-voiced man began.

“I may not be as sharp as you or Sebastian, but don’t presume that I’m weak, and don’t take me for a fool. I could ruin you with a word,” Azimar warned.

“Tell me of my experiment, then,” said Sebastian, changing the subject.

“Number Three is your winner. Some day she will take upon herself the role you have assigned her and make the world a better place; she shall be known as the as the Red Witch.” The rasping-voiced man said, a reply which stunned me, and I guess Sebastian and Azimar as well.

“And what is the purpose of my experiments?” Sebastian asked, reassuring self-control.

“You explore the innate magic as exhibited by a select few people.” The rasping-voiced man replied.

“To what purpose?” Sebastian asked further.

“To make a god.” The rasping-voiced man replied.

“You are no prophet,” Sebastian remarked casually.

“What makes you say that?” Asked the rasping-voiced man.

“You obviously know a few scattered details, yet you are so misled on your assessment.” Sebastian replied dryly.

“Enlighten me then,” replied the rasping-voiced man with a smirk.

“First, the purpose of my experiments is not to make any sort of god. Number three is no winner, and she means nothing more to me than a test-subject.” Sebastian lied. I knew him well enough by now, and I could hear the rise in his vocal pitch when he was lying.

“I don’t follow,” Replied the rasping-voiced man.

“Foolish man!” Answered Sebastian, losing patience. “If you had any measure of true understanding of the occult, you would have known that magic is no gift. It is a craft — an art. A deal must be struck with an outside force, later it must be studied and practiced to perfection. And yet, some people are born with some minor innate magic ability. Meaning, they can use minor magic without any sort of studies, practice and deal-making.” Sebastian explained.

“And Number Three?” The rasping-voiced man asked.

“She’s only unique in the sense that she has more than one such innate ability and therefore she makes a better test-subject,” Sebastian explained.

“So what’s the final goal?” Asked the rasping-voiced man.

“To study these innate abilities. Once I understand them fully, I should be able to alchemically purify these abilities. Then I should be able to control who gets born with innate powers, and what kind of powers they shall have. In the long run this research may circumvent the need to strike bargains with

outside forces, and may even benefit humanity in a number of ways.” Sebastian explained. The rasping-voiced man laughed.

“I just told you everything, haven’t I?” Sebastian asked. The rasping-voiced man kept laughing. “Well played!” Sebastian replied, obviously amused.

“So how do you know anything about my experiments?” Demanded Sebastian, after being sufficiently insulted by the rasping-voiced man’s laughter.

“Aren’t you supposed to be a genius?” The rasping-voiced man asked, provoking him further.

“I can’t believe you’re buying into this!” Demanded the loud voice. “Surely this man is a trickster. I sense no touch of the divine about him — he doesn’t even have a soul,” he added.

“So your damaged sight makes my words false?” Asked the rasping-voiced man.

“Do not tempt my patience,” replied the loud voice.

“May I remind you that you promised,” replied the rasping-voiced man. I heard the sound of loud breathing, which I assumed belonged to the loud voice, because he spoke no more.

“Answer my question!” Sebastian demanded. The rasping-voiced man began talking when Azimar interrupted.

“You think you’re so smart, coming in here and playing the wise prophet, calling us stupid and imaging that you have the upper hand,” Azimar said.

“Perhaps,” the rasping-voiced man replied.

“I can play this game as well. I know more about you than you think!” Azimar said.

“Oh yeah, like what?” The rasping voice challenged.

“I know that those are Arabic numerals on your wrist, which means you’ve been to Arabia or Spain and studied the secrets

of algebra," Azimar said.

"Maybe," retorted the rasping voice.

"And I know from your odd Latin vernacular and from your blond Northman looks that you're probably a Northern scholar who traveled as far as Arabia," Azimar added.

"Let's say you're right; now what?" He asked.

"Don't take me for a fool," Azimar warned.

"I never said you were a fool," the rasping-voiced man replied.

"I may not know why you're here or why you pretend to help us, but I do know this. If ever I so much as suspect that you're working against us, I will rain hellfire on you," Azimar warned.

"Of course, and I shall cower in fear." The rasping-voiced man said.

"I will make you suffer torment you have never even dreamed of, and I'll keep you alive until I'm bored with you," Azimar added.

"Of cou—" the rasping-voiced man began.

"And I will help him, free of charge," added the loud voice.

"Are we done threatening me?" Asked the rasping-voiced man. Receiving no reply, he continued, "My word shall hold true. You just keep your end of the deal and I'll keep mine," he said in softer tones.

"We will," replied Sebastian calmly. "You may leave," he added.

"Goodbye," said the rasping-voiced man and left.

"Goodbye?" Azimar repeated after the rasping-voiced man had left, puzzled.

"Gods be with you," explained Sebastian.

"What an odd man," replied Azimar.

"I know this man, or a man like him," replied Sebastian. We all listened carefully.

“A long ago when I was seeking treasures in Arabia, I met a young man who spoke just like him,” Sebastian said.

“And?” Azimar asked.

“And he destroyed something precious to me,” Sebastian replied.

“So we kill him?” Asked Azimar.

“Yes, we kill him,” replied Sebastian. “But first I’ll go move my experiments, he just might be right.” The loud voice started laughing.

“What about our promise?” The loud voice asked after calming down.

“Just make sure you slay this Sword quickly and seemingly effortless, confirming he is a simple mortal man.” Sebastian said.

“If our esteemed prophet is wrong, we owe him nothing,” Azimar added.



## CHAPTER XXIII

# **JAUNEE'S & RAY'S STORY COMES TOGETHER**

First, Jaunee:

It seems I owe my life to the rasping-voiced man, for an earthquake struck our home and my room was one of the few which survived relatively intact — relatively here means that my room was not completely destroyed. It took me a few moments to realize what was happening, but by then it was too late to seek shelter. I remember how hopeless I felt as the mansion collapsed and I was trapped under the debris.

I fainted as pebbles hit my head when they bounced from the walls. As I woke up, I began banging repeatedly on a stone wall, hoping beyond hope that somehow I would be found. I was hurt, maybe bleeding, I couldn't tell. I didn't care as long as I survive. The dread I felt being entombed live is a feeling I cannot describe. The horror of these moments gave strength to my limbs. I couldn't die, not like this. I had to fight, had to stay

alive. I know it doesn't make sense, my life being the horrid little story that it was, but I had, let's call it faith, that a handsome prince would come, like in all the fairytales.

I don't know how much time passed in this manner; you can't really judge time when you're buried alive. I remember that at the point I was half dreaming, and half awake. My fantasy of a prince to come overshadowing the bleak reality. My prince would come, I told myself, over and over again. I just need to stay alive.

It was you Raymond, that had rescued me of-course. When I first felt the rocks move and heard faint sounds, I was uncertain if this was a dream or reality. But for the life of me I banged harder than ever, and it hurt so much. I kept telling myself over and over again, my handsome prince had come, he's here. I won't die alone, I would live, happily ever after.

"I'm here! I'm here! Alive! Alive! Here!" I screamed in French as I heard the footsteps draw near. I had breathed in too much dust and began gagging on it. Then rocks moved and dust flew across the room as a man heaved the debris away with the strength of Hercules.

You were a giant of a man, yet somewhat thin. Your left hand and waist were bandaged, but that did not slow you one bit. The dust made my eyes water, but I could still make out your dark image, illuminated by torch-light shining behind you. My handsome prince had come, I thought. It was you, Ray, it was always you. I remember how you threw the rocks away like they were nothing. Then carried me to safety saying, "everything's gonna be all right. Just stay down, yur safe now, I won't let anything bad happen to you," You said, in your somewhat broken speech. I found the way you fumbled with the words charming in a goofy kind of way, making you seem ever more

perfect because you were human. I slept safely in your arms

— My Handsome Prince had come. Oh, my love, my champion.

I vowed in my heart then that I would love you forever.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### **RAY'S STORY CONTINUES**

Dear Diary, this is Raymond.

Jaunee contributed a few entries to my journal, though, honoring her request, I have not read them as of yet. It's been a week since she came to live with me. Unfortunately, as fate would have it, during this time I was away on business. For the first time in a long while, though, I was eager to come home. There is a certain undeniable joy in knowing someone out there is waiting for you when you come home. I have been lonely without her, I can admit as much. If anything is ever to happen to her, I don't know what I'll do with myself.

Yesterday as she sat near the computer typing, I strolled round and round the house, as I often do when I'm deep in thought. Everywhere I walked I found evidence of her presence. It was like the changing of the seasons from winter to spring; everything seemed a tad brighter and full of life. I was passing my time in contemplation, as I often do, when a young, French-

accented, “All done!” Woke me from my thoughts.

“Evening, Jaunee,” I told her as if I was Sherlock and had just discovered a new clue.

“Evening, Ray,” she said cheerfully, and smiled graciously, a smile that only hinted more surely at her guilt.

“I see you’ve had a lot of spare time,” I said in an amused tone.

“Some, why?” She replied in an innocent tone.

“Well, apparently you’ve managed in only a week to gain the attention of each and every one of my security personnel. They just greeted me with a ‘Lucky dog!’ When I asked them what was new. Not only are they all in love with you, but it seems that they’ve gotten used to your cooking and are reluctant to cook for themselves anymore ...” I mock-complained. Jaunee giggled.

“Well, what can I say — I’m irresistible to men in uniform and I like to cook,” she offered.

“And somehow you’ve convinced them all to clean each and every spot of the house because dust makes you sneeze,” I continued, exposing her crimes.

“And what’s wrong with having a clean house?” She replied, and then smiled innocently.

“I clean every week,” I replied defensively.

“If it’s dusty, it’s not clean,” she replied.

“So you’ve rearranged all the furniture?” I tried once more.

“Yes, maximizing work space, efficiency, and stuff like that,” she offered, using terms I would use when rearranging furniture.

“Besides, it looks much better now,” she added with a winning, million-dollar smile. I would have said something sooner, but frankly I love a woman’s touch around my house and I had no intention of discouraging her efforts. But she likes it when I’m

a bit goofy.

“Well, eh, ok then,” I said as I lowered my gaze with a defeated smile, playing the game we had so often played. She bounced from her chair and kissed my cheek, making mock house-peace.

“The way I see it, you should be thanking me for cooking and cleaning for you,” she said.

“Thank you, dearest,” I said in defeated tones.

“So, you want a read-marathon or what?” She asked cheerfully.

“Sure,” I replied.

“Wait, where did you stop your writing?” She asked.

“Right after the Demon fight,” I replied.

“Well, I stopped after you were shot by that bolt,” she replied.

“Right,” I replied, remembering fully well that dreadful day.

“I want you to get to the same point before we switch,” she asked.

“Very well,” I replied, and got to writing.

The time is nearly a thousand years ago, right after I found the missing people on Lord Durrant’s list. The place is Drentwych. For about a month or so none of us left our beds, recovering from our injuries. I wasn’t doing so well, for you see, I may have defeated the Demon on the physical level, but in my mind he lingered still. Whenever I closed my eyes and sought a restful state, the nightmares began, always accompanied by a dreadful chill that seemed to emanate from my bones.

In each nightmare I was once again on the terrible battlefield in Drentwych’s cemetery. I felt the sand as I laid on the ground, and the coldness which penetrated to the bone. I felt the night air chill my face. I even remember the expression etched on Simon’s face as he lay next to me. Yet the events in my dreams always unfolded in a different manner; an even more horrific alternative to the already dreadful combat.

In one version it was I who was compelled by the Demon's power and sacrificed by his blade. The feeling was so terrible and real that upon awaking, screaming, I grabbed on to my slit throat trying to stop the gushing blood, only to realize that it had been but a nightmare. In another version I had lost the confrontation with the Demon, who proceeded to tear me limb from limb. I didn't die instantly, and the feeling was more real than reality itself. Once again I woke screaming in agony, only after final death should have occurred. In yet another version I had won the fight, only to be eaten alive by the acid which was the Demon's blood. This was the most terrible version of the nightmare, not because of the agonizing pain I felt at this slow, torturous death, but because in this version, I actually thought I had won, only to be robbed of my victory by this slow death.

So real were these nightmares that after a while I dreaded falling asleep and would stay awake for days until fatigue finally overcame me. It wasn't long until madness claimed me, and I could no longer tell dreaming and waking hours apart. It was like living the nightmare, only to awake and discover in horror that I was still dreaming.

The healers feared that we would both die — Simon and I, a fact that had not hindered the town's celebration of our triumph over the demon. I am ashamed to admit that I would have taken my own life if it were not for the vigilant care of my healers. For I was broken and sought means to escape the nightmare, even at the cost of my immortal soul.

I do not remember clearly, but I do believe I was told that Richard — the Chevalier with the gold cross who had bought my story, had come to see me one day, and that both I and Simon recovered miraculously in the days that followed. Regardless of the cause, I was grateful for the reprieve from the nightmares.

As soon as I had regained a semblance of sanity and began to walk outside, I was greeted fondly by the townsfolk. Simon could not yet walk more than a few steps and relied heavily on his cane. We were suddenly so well-loved by the people of Drentwych that they held a second celebration in honor of our recovery. Both Simon and I were reluctant to attend the celebration at first, but eventually agreed to come.

During the height of the event, the Mayor very enthusiastically announced, "Listen! In the year of our Lord one thousand and eighteen, the Lords of the Land call upon the heroes of Drentwych, Master Raymond Brooks and Master Simon Roads, to grant them their due honor in the Fortress of Wist Hill."

The crowd cheered, and even I couldn't help but smile. Being called to Wist Hill under these circumstances meant more than just being honored. It meant recognition by Prince Adwen and his lords. I dared even hope they'd make me a lord, and thus I would be a commoner no longer. I could do so much as a lord. I could hunt the scum of the earth freely, and make Drentwych a better place. I could easily then afford my own hovel, perhaps even a larger house. I would have these things: honor, recognition, wealth and power. Surely then Ivar would be glad to marry off his daughter to one as dignified as I. Once she was mine, I'd make sure she'd lack for nothing in life; Ivar, too, would live his remaining years in luxury.

A hollow laughter in my head reminded me that life wasn't so easy; the Demon was here to stay. Their claps and cheers took on a darker hue in my eyes. How could they rejoice, I wondered, when the shadow of death so clearly walked amongst them? Only a month ago, a demon cast his infernal magic, right here in town, an event which could have turned into a much greater tragedy. No one is safe, I realized. Not I, not my friends and

loved ones; not anybody. We are all doomed, victims of this invisible enemy. I can't say anything to them, it would only spread panic. The Demon, though, is still alive inside my head, and he never rests. I fled in the middle of the celebration just as the Mayor asked me to give a speech.

"Leave me be!" Was all I said, as some men chased after me to find out what caused my flight. The Mayor quickly recovered, and to assure the murmuring peasants he made up this or that explanation for my absence. I hid in an alley for a few minutes until I recollected my thoughts well enough to block out the sound of the Demon's horrible laughter. The messenger was quick to find me as soon as I left the alley. He eyed me as if I was deranged, and perhaps he was right.

"Are you all right?" He asked, a certain pity in his voice.

"Aye," I said and breathed deeply. "It has been a hard recovery since my fight ..." I began.

"Certainly, there's no need to explain," he answered.

"And I'm afraid I'm still not at peak health," I added.

"Of course, of course," he replied.

"Yes, thank you," I said and took a deep breath.

"Please tell whoever sent you," I said and he frowned. I must have violated some rule of etiquette. I smiled in embarrassment.

"Please tell his Esteemed Majesty the Prince," I corrected myself. "That I am honored to be invited to the Fortress of Wist Hill," I added.

"Of course!" He replied with a smile.

"How fares your arm, by the way?" He asked, glancing at my left arm which was still wrapped in bandages.

"It's much better now. The wounds have closed, only scars remain, though sometimes I feel pain," I replied honestly.

"Very well, a carriage shall await both you and Master Simon

tomorrow morning,” he replied.

“Farewell,” he added, and then bowed low and left.

Before my departure numerous townsfolk came to visit me. Many of them gave me gifts, and all spoke warm words. Simon seemed a bit envious, for the love of the people seemed to be focused on me. I was their grand hero, the slayer of a demon, while he was an ex-thief — a sidekick. I felt it wasn’t fair; Simon had risked his life just as much as I had, and he’d got the short end of the stick, almost none of the glory, and had suffered greater injuries than I. I may have become scarred and ugly but he was that, and handicapped to boot. Whenever I said a word on behalf of Simon, people just regarded me it as my modesty, which was annoying, but it made me realize a simple truth about people. People want to see things a certain way; greater-than-life-heroes; the world painted in black and white, and they won’t let a simple thing like truth get in their way. Nobody really wants to know me or hear what I had to say. They wanted their own shiny Hero, towering above them, shielding them from the horrors beyond — and that’s why they gave me gifts and spoke highly of me. They made up a false me, and worshiped him, trying desperately to make me fit my small feet into his huge shoes.

The gypsies gave me a green sapphire necklace which they said was magical and would protect me from the restless dead. Some townsfolk gave me chickens, clothes, and other such mundane things. Ivar came with Ingrid, carrying fancy armor called *Lorica Segmentata*; Roman Legionnaire’s armor. It featured silver and gold engravings of a dragon and a lion. It was magnificent, and Ivar smiled broadly as he presented this armor to me. It was priceless; a perfectly made artifact.

“I’ve worked on this ever since the Great Battle, son,” he said.

"It's magnificent, surely your finest work!" I replied.

"It's yours, Ad- ... er, Raymond," he replied.

"It's too much, surely it's armor worthy of a king," I replied.

"Indeed it is, and you deserve it," he said and scratched his beard. "What you did ... rivals the glory of Beowulf," he said. Beowulf was the greatest hero of his people, and this compliment meant a great deal coming from him, for this was not something which is said lightly or at all by his people.

"Surely I ..." I began.

"I saw it," Ivar replied "I will hear no denial of your glory, Odin blessed your hands and you tore the demon apart," he added. I bowed my head and offered no further argument.

"You may now marry my daughter with my blessing," he said suddenly after an odd pause. For a moment I was thrilled, for now all my dreams seemed to have come true. I envisioned our wedding, and how beautiful she'd look dressed as a bride. Yet something was terribly wrong with my imagined picture. Instead of a rabbi or a priest, stood the Demon — Grey robed, reading from his infernal tome, asking me:

"Do you, Adam the wretched, take Ingrid the miserable to be your bride? To love her as you two grow sick, wither, and die?" He asked and laughed that terrible laughter of his.

"No!" I replied

"What?" Ivar protested in disbelief.

"Raymond?" Ingrid asked.

"I cannot marry your daughter," I told Ivar.

"I'm sorry, Ingrid," I told Ingrid empathetically as I felt my eyes turn red.

"You sought her hand for so long and now she's not good enough?" Ivar yelled.

"No! You don't understand!" I protested.

“There is no end to your dishonor — villain,” he said darkly.

“Let me explain!” I protested raising my voice. “Damn you, old man, let me speak!”

“Speak,” he said as Ingrid wept. He held her fiercely by the hand and would not let her flee. I felt so sorry for her — and for myself. She had suffered so much degradation for loving me and I, in the end could not reward her love.

“I am not well,” I began. “I am injured. Some wounds are of the flesh, but others are of the mind, and may never heal,” I explained.

“You see the battle in your head, don’t you?” Ivar asked, in more empathic tones.

“And hear it, and feel it. Every time I close my eyes,” I said. “It haunts me,” I added and could contain the tears no longer.

“My poor boy,” he said softly. “I have seen this in many warriors whose minds lay broken after a battle,” he explained. I wept softly.

“I will not have Ingrid, my love, suffer the remainder of her years next to a crippled, ugly husband who cannot sleep at night without waking up screaming,” I said. The Demon laughed triumphantly in my head.

“I will gladly do so,” Ingrid replied.

“But I will not have it!” I answered more harshly. “It is my wish that you find a decent husband from your people who will be good to you and make your father proud,” I said.

“You are a hero amongst heroes,” Ivar said. “And there is no man worthier of my armor,” he added.

“I love you, Raymond,” Ingrid said and kissed my cheek.

“Please go, I cannot bear to be around you,” I replied. Ivar took Ingrid by the hand and turned to leave. He had this look in his eyes, this proud look I never thought I’d see directed at me. She

however was in great turmoil, and the distress was very evident in her expression. Her eyes were haunting, mirroring my own suffering. As they crossed the threshold of the door Ingrid said to Ivar “May I? Father,” and he nodded slightly, approving. Ivar kept on walking, and the sound of his steps were as the drums of war for Ingrid’s approach. She was a fighter, just like her father, and she had no intention of giving up without a fight. I wanted to lose so badly in this fight, but the Demon’s breath in my ear reminded me that the price of love is terrible tragedy.

“Ingrid I ...” I began, and Ingrid uncharacteristically interrupted as a warrior raising a sword for a wild swing.

“No!” She began “I know about the bargain you made with my father. I know he forced your hand.” She said and stood above my bed, scratching her fingers in distress, though she tried to appear composed and resolved. She took a deep breath, her eyes darting everywhere as her mind composed the words that hurt me so in the hearing of them.

“Don’t bother denying it, I know. I’ve always known,” She began again as I inhaled, wanting to say something myself. “And I understand. That’s what I’m trying to tell you; I understand. I always have. You feel ashamed because he denied you your genuine affection towards me for so long, only to change his mind when you proved your worth, as I knew you would — always.” She said, and choked the sobs that sought release. She forced herself to be the strong girl — the Saxon-born.

“Ingrid, I ...” I tried to begin again; to explain; to confess, to tell the truth. But she shushed me with a gesture.

“Let me finish what I started,” She begged kindly, and I nodded my consent ever so slightly, closing my mouth. “That’s why I never held it against you, I knew it was him. But I want you to look past that, swallow your wounded pride and look to

the future — our future.” She said, and the Demon laughed in my head. I saw in my mind us getting married, and the Demon instead of a Priest joining us in terrible matrimony, the vows all wrong. I blocked out the sight and forced myself to pay attention to her.

“... Healthy, and would bare you many good and strong children,” She said. “I come from noble blood, and we don’t have to live in poverty in the smithy,” she said, listing her perks as if my rejection of her has anything to do with greed or desire for offspring.

“Enough,” I said, as I could hear it no longer.

“I will be a good and obedient wife to you,” she added, her tone becoming desperate as she sensed rejection coming again.

“Enough!” I cried.

“I will be loyal!” She raised her voice desperately.

“No more!” I wept.

“But Adam, I love you! I always have.” She added, sobbing terribly.

“As I love you, my dear Ingrid, and always will.” I said, and she moved to embrace me, by my fault mistaking my words for acceptance. Oh, how the Demon laughed and enjoyed the unfolding of our tragedy. I ignored him; there would be time to dedicate myself to his destruction later. I tried to push her from me ever so gently, but she would not let go.

“No! No! No! No!” She repeated, crying in panic. “Do not discard me,” she begged. I surrendered for I had no more strength in me to fight, to hurt my loved ones, though I knew I must. She cuddled like a child in my embrace, and I combed her hair as I spoke.

“Ingrid, listen to me. I have to tell you. I have to tell somebody. I need you to listen,” I asked her, sorrow choking me as my mind

formulated the words that might condemn me.

“The Demon which I fought is still alive,” I said. Her eyes widened in alarm at hearing these words. “It’s inside my head taunting me, and I’ve come to suspect I’m not its first victim,” I confessed.

“I’ll stand by you!” She said, after a small struggle with herself “We’ll fight it together, and die for one another if need be,” she offered. “I promise! I won’t falter. Though I’m a woman, I’m also Saxon. I won’t fail you,” she added.

“You can’t fight it, my love,” I said, and she kissed my lips to the sound of “my love” expressed. Her kiss was soft, yet bitter from our tears, much like our love. It was a rare comfort in an ocean of misery.

“It’s inside my head, and I have to figure out a way to banish it to hell, else I suspect I’ll end up like the mad priest,” I said, and it had now just occurred to me. It was so very likely the mad priest was his previous victim, how didn’t I see it before!

“Alright, I understand,” Ingrid said and she kissed my cheek. “You have to go to war, and I will wait for you,” she added.

“Yes!” I agreed with all my heart and soul. “When he’s vanquished, I shall return, we shall wed, and I promise you; I shall be a good husband to you. I will always protect you, and respect you. I’ll work hard, and you’ll have no want in life. I promise!” I offered. We kissed, exchanging our vows and for a few moments I knew pure bliss. I fell asleep cuddling her. With first light she left, as silent as spring wind, taking with her whatever measure of joy I dared feel in her presence. One thing remained though. I had hope. I had hope for a better tomorrow. I had something to fight for, something greater than my own life.

“We’re gonna be all right, aren’t we?” Simon asked when he

woke up. I had practically ignored his presence up till now. I felt so ashamed that he had to see me in my moment of weakness, and was grateful that he pretended to be asleep when tender words were expressed.

“Yeah, we’ll be fine, Simon,” I said.

“So, the Smith’s daughter, eh?” He asked boldly.

“I don’t want to discuss it,” I replied flatly.

“We’re friends, aren’t we? Saved each other’s lives and all?” He said.

“Be that as it may, I do not wish to discuss it, nor anything else that was said in confidence” I said in firm tones.

“So today’s the big day, isn’t it?” He asked in light tones, suddenly changing the topic. I understood well enough that he wanted to talk, but not why. I just wanted to be left alone to my misery, to plan a war I could not win, against an adversary who played by no rules. Simon however, when feeling miserable, sought the company of friends, even one as lousy as I.

“Yeah,” I replied.

An hour later the sun shone brighter, and the children played merrily outside. Like a world after a great storm, all seemed to bloom with new life. The armed chevaliers saluted me and Simon as we mounted the carriage that would take us to the Fortress of Wist Hill.

People hurried to get out of our way; else they’d be tramped or shoved aside by our escort. All work ceased as the townsfolk formed two lines cheering us on. Even in my dreams, I had never imagined that people would cheer as I came and went. Simon appeared to be daydreaming — there was something both sad and happy in his eyes. His hand then moved to caress his injured knee. Instinctively, my right hand moved to stroke my left. I understood now that glory had its price. Before long

we stood before the gates of the Fortress of Wist Hill, and they opened before us to a fanfare of trumpets.

"Always thought I'd have to impersonate a monarch to be invited to a place like this," Simon joked.

"Or kill a monarch and be invited here in chains," I joked back.

"Oh, shut up," he replied. I laughed, and then quickly adjusted my new armor and my broken sword. Luckily for me no one could see that my blade was broken, for enough of it had remained intact in order for it to fit its sheaf and appear whole.

"Think they'll let you be a lord for killing me?" The Demon asked in my head. I ignored him. "You know you're just a fraud, a little boy with a broken tool," he tried again. I ignored him still.

"No title's going to save you from me, I'm here to stay, 'Boyo'," he taunted. My anger grew, and I hastened my steps towards the Throne Chamber, accompanied by the armed guards.

"Who do you think sent the villains to get him, Boyo? It was I, because I knew you loved him," he jeered, reminding me of The Forester's murder scene.

"Shut up," I replied.

"Didn't say nothing," Simon replied defensively.

"Sorry, thought I heard another crack at me," I lied as the demon laughed in my ears.

"Don't worry, they'll all know what a lunatic you are soon enough," the demon said and laughed harder still.

"Stay behind, his majesty Prince Adwen wishes to see Master Raymond first," the soldiers who accompanied us commanded Simon.

"All right," he replied. "Holler if you need me, Ray."

"Sure," I replied, and pushed open the heavy wooden doors impulsively. Etiquette demanded that I wait for the trumpets and have the doors opened for me, but I was in a semi-fit of

rage, fighting my own internal battle, too preoccupied to keep these things in mind. The doors were heavy, perhaps too heavy for a single person to open them. It was then that I realized I wasn't supposed to have attempted to do so as casually as I had. Worse still, I succeeded, demonstrating supernatural strength both to myself and my hosts.

The throne room was fairly large, fitted with burning torches. By their light I saw the Lords sitting at heavy tables, fully armored; above them stood the throne of Prince Adwen. He was a pale, black-haired man and fairly strong, his clothes fresh. His face was clean-shaven, in the Roman style. He wore ornate plate armor like mine, only with different engravings, and a fancy shirt depicting his family crest. The Lords rose from their seats, though they appeared angry with me for my breach of protocol.

"I applaud a man who's brave enough to do away with set codes of protocol, a man who is sharp and straight to the point," the Prince said, while still sitting.

"Thank you, Milord," I replied.

"And he does not bow either," the Prince added. "Perhaps he feels so elevated that he needs not pay homage to his Prince and lords?"

"I mean no disrespect, Milord," I apologized, feeling my face turn red and hearing the demon's laughter in my ears. I bowed awkwardly; this was my first time. The Prince seemed displeased still, and grunted as I bowed.

"Tell me your story, Raymond of Drentwych," he commanded.

"Yes, Milord," I replied. "I am a soldier in your service. I was stationed in Drentwych," I began.

"Yes, yes, that we know. Get to the part we don't know," the Prince replied impatiently.

"Simon and I worked for Lord Durrant. We sought the missing people," I said.

"You mean you sought the missing merchant," the Prince interrupted.

"Yes, we ..." I began.

"And you failed to locate him," he added.

"Yes," I said.

"Go on with your story, then," the Prince commanded.

"The clues led us to the church, which in turn led us to the Demon," I said.

"The priests were involved?" The Prince asked, leaning forward in his seat. I got the distinct impression that he had murder on his mind. The Lords murmured.

"One, Milord," I replied.

"Who?" The Prince asked.

"He was taken care of," I said.

"Good. Now go on," the Prince responded, satisfied.

"Lord Durrant engaged him first in combat," I elaborated.

"And you two did not fight at his side?" The Prince asked, and I once again felt that he had murder on his mind and this time I was the intended target. I grew a bit fearful.

"No, for Lord Durrant commanded us to stay put while he engaged the demon in combat," I replied.

"He did such a thing?" The Prince asked.

"Aye, he was a man most noble and brave, and he fought staunchly against the Demon," I lied.

"And then when he died?" The Prince asked.

"Both Simon and I engaged him," I said.

"Violating the Lord's orders," the Prince said.

"Yes. We wanted to save the town or die trying," I replied.

"Good," the Prince responded.

"The Demon was substantially weakened by Lord Durrant's mighty blows, so we managed to finally defeat it," I lied.

"And that's how you both were so injured ...?" the Prince queried, "... and were in need of a month's recovery?"

"Yes," I answered. The Prince stared at me, thinking.

"You are a man of honor, Raymond of Drentwyck," he stated.

"Thank y—" I began.

"I'm not finished!" The Prince spat out angrily. "But you speak falsely, and badly so," he added more softly. I clenched my fists in a mixture of stress, shame, and anger. The Prince smiled at my display of emotion.

"It is admirable how you tried to honor Lord Durrant at the expense of your own glory. But I know the truth. I know that it was you who found all the clues and I know that it was you who engaged the Demon in battle after Lord Durrant most foolishly died without so much as an attempted blow," he said. "I know that it was you who tore the mighty Demon apart, limb from limb, until he laid on the ground a broken mass of gore and blood," the Prince added darkly. I stared at him mutely.

"Well! Confess your glory or remain silent," the Prince commanded. I remained silent. "Never have I seen a man who does not boast of his glory. Why, most men when slaying a rooster would turn it in tale to a fearsome dragon, but not you. Why?" He asked.

"Because I remember no glory," I said.

"Explain," The Prince commanded.

"I remember many details in my ... in our struggle with the Demon, and there was no glory there. There was bloodshed to be sure, and sweat and tears. Some people perished, others survived with injuries, but glory? No, I found no evidence of it," I said.

“Well said,” he commended me. “Bravo,” he added as he clapped. “This is why I like you, Raymond. You are a pious man of true honor,” he said. I stared at him darkly; I felt he was trying to flatter me and I didn’t like it.

“I am satisfied, you may proceed,” he instructed the Lords, and then he rose from his chair and left through a side door.

The Lords then presented me with a gift: A Helmet forged of pure silver in the shape of an eagle. It was a masterpiece, and I stared at it in wonder. With gleeful faces and merry smiles, they bade me try it on, clapping as I did so and they saw that it fit. I felt almost like a child impressing his parents. Then ever so kindly they asked me of my lineage and hinted that I’d be made a lord.

I told them the truth: that I was a wayward Jew orphaned and lost when I came to Drentwych. Ever so kindly they asked, “Won’t you convert?”

“No,” I replied. Smiles turned to frowns, merriment turned to rage.

“This is sacrilege!” One of the Lords warned.

“Accept the true God,” another tried more softly. “Surely after all that you’ve seen, you know he watches over you,” he added. “Will you turn your back on He who guides your hand against the agents of the Devil?” The Demon laughed ever so loud in my ears.

“Lords, I am weak of faith,” I admitted. “Yet my weak faith is all that remains of the legacy my dearly departed parents left me. Surely I must honor it for their sake,” I added.

“I can understand that,” a soft-spoken lord commented. I smiled shyly, hoping that perhaps this meeting would not end in complete disaster.

“Oh yes, it will!” Taunted the Demon in my head, and he then

assaulted me, causing my head to throb in pain. I grabbed hold of it, trying to ease the pain and calm the ringing in my ears.

“Are you all right?” Asked one of the lords.

“Yes,” I lied.

“I am sorry, Master Raymond,” said one of the lords. “But we cannot appoint you a lord.”

“Very well,” I said, deeply disappointed, fighting to ease the throbbing in my head.

“We can, however, promote you to the rank of First Sergeant,” another lord offered.

“Thank you,” I heard myself say, overcome with a feeling of bitter disappointment.

I turned around in yet another breach of etiquette and walked up to the door; a quadruplet of soldiers opened it for me. Hesitantly, I gave one the silver helmet and exited the room. Simon was there, waiting for me. He read my sad expression.

“What’s the matter, Raymond?” He asked, worry and fear evident in his voice.

“Nothing,” I replied.

“What the bloody hell happened in there?” He asked. “I thought you’d be made a lord or something,” he added.

“I’m not good enough, it seems,” I replied, matching my speed to his as we walked away.

“You’re really not good enough. Surely they’re better off without your bitching and whining,” said the demon. “You shut yer mouth!” I yelled at him.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it,” Simon replied, thinking I had spoken to him.

“I’m sorry, Simon, didn’t mean to lash out at you,” I apologized. He nodded his head, offended, yet he let the matter pass. We made our way outside of Wist Hill, and proceeded towards

Drentwych on foot.

The night air proved mighty chilly as we made our way to Drentwych. Anger and bitterness kept me warm, however, and I didn't pause even once along the way. It was a tiresome and long journey nonetheless, more so for Simon, who had not yet fully recovered and had to lean on his cane for support. Come morning we arrived at Drentwych.

In Drentwych they had no knowledge of what has transpired in Wist Hill, and they celebrated our return as heroes. The soldiers escorted us in and all the townspeople left their work and homes to cheer us as we entered town. I loathed it, and loathed them for being so cheerful in the face of so many wrongs. I paused in the center of town, determined to end this constant celebration of my every step. As I began to speak they all silenced each other "Hush up, he's trying to say something!" One proclaimed. I waited, gathering the strength to say what I had to say.

"What are yah all celebrating, yah pack of Pan-crazed Satyrs," I pronounced they were drunk, bewitched by Satyrs or both. "Not long ago a demon tried to destroy this town with everyone it, yet you rejoice!" I yelled. "You think we have won, but this was only a single battle. The war wages on while you dance and sing my praises," I said. "I weep for us, and you rejoice!" They looked at me blankly. "I curse your ignorance," I finally said. They were stunned; speechless. I know now that I was wrong to judge them so harshly, to rob them of their little joys when they had so few of those. But disappointment had made me bitter, and in my resentment, I lashed out against the world. Without another word I returned to the hospital and lay in my bed. Simon seemed offended by my speech, for he was quite happy with the way things were — being admired and all.

The next day the Mayor came to my home, and all the townsfolk walked behind him at a distance.

“Listen here, eh, Master Raymond. The town elders and I have met last evening, and we’ve talked ...” he said and I just stared at him, still unjustifiably resentful. “And we have decided that you are correct in your assessment of our situation.”

“All right,” I acknowledged.

“And we also decided that we need someone young, someone who has what it takes to clean up this town of filth and return us to God’s grace,” he said, searching my eyes for approval.

“Good luck then, Mayor. I hope that you’ll find such a person,” I replied.

“We were thinking of you, Raymond. Would you be willing to be our protector?” He asked

“No,” I answered flatly.

“You’ll receive generous wages and a free hand to do as you choose,” he offered.

“You already have a protector, and he’s a good protector who performs his duties well — and he has a wife and three children,” I said. “What would become of them? Would you leave him without work, and his woman and children to starve?” I asked. The Mayor hesitated before replying.

“I’ll not have their fates on my heart, and I do not think I can do better work than he,” I said finally.

“You have the heart of a saint, Master Raymond,” the Mayor answered, trying to flatter me.

“Hardly,” I replied dryly and turned around, looking at my bed with longing.

“You can have any position you desire,” he called after me in a hurry. I turned around and faced him again, looking intently into his eyes.

“Any?” I asked.

“Any,” he replied, swallowing. I guess that he thought that I was aiming for his job.

“If that is the case, I want to resume my position as a simple soldier,” I said as he visibly relaxed. I then raised my voice to be heard across the crowd.

“You look at me to be your savior, yet I am a simple man, lost and alien in a foreign land. If you truly love me, let no man place me on a pedestal or build a statue in my honor. The Devil is real. We have seen it and felt its work in the world,” I said as I clenched and un-clenched my bandaged left fist. “Evil works best when the heart grows indifferent and cruel, and if you want to oppose it, oppose it by good works. I would not be here if not for three kindly men that guided me on my path. The first is the smith Ivar, who took pity of me and raised me as his own. Next is Raymond the Forester of the Brooks, who sheltered and gave me guidance. The last is the priest Richard, who was charitable to me when I fell — we can all follow their example,” I said. I do not know what muse sparked this speech in me, but I dared hope Raymond the Forester would have been proud. I also pretty much admitted I was Adam, Ivar’s supposed child, not that any would dare to arrest me now. I grew sick soon after speaking and spent the rest of the day in feverish sleeping.

As I slept I felt as if I had plunged into an abyss. I was upside down, falling into a vortex of swirling fire. The Demon’s laughter accompanied me all the way down, until I found myself standing before it again. It stood towering over me, menacing, and I, I stood there feeling puny. Its every movement threatened to engulf me but I was defiant — frightened, but defiant nonetheless.

“They will never listen to you,” it said, fire coming out with its

every breath.

“Shut up and fight!” I said.

“They will take every word you say and twist it beyond recognition,” it continued.

“Shut yer mouth! I killed ye once and I’ll kill yah a thousand times over!” I screamed at it. It laughed and continued as if I was not to be taken seriously.

“And when they’re done with your words, they’ll strip you of your very humanity: they’ll find names and titles for you. I can hear it even now, being passed on from father to son — the story of mighty Raymond, a God amongst men,” it jeered, laughing, mocking me. I was filled with rage.

“Wouaaaa!!! Haaaaa!” I screamed. “I’ll tear yah apart piece by piece! Do you hear me?” I yelled amidst its laughter.

“Do you think that I lie, little mortal? You’d like to believe that, wouldn’t you?” It asked.

“Away with you!” I yelled.

“Do you have any idea how many before you have tried to change the nature of man and failed?” It asked.

“You’re nothing more than a shadow, you’re nothing!” I called back.

“Learn from the past, or better yet, watch the future unfold. And then when your false beliefs, false hopes die out and leave you with the ugly face of truth, you will come to me and bow down before my throne. You will beg me to teach you the truth and take your life as a penance for your mistakes, but I won’t. I’ll just sit and laugh at your foolishness,” it said.

“You lie! Everything you say is a lie! You are a pitiful creature born to a tortured existence who takes pleasure in watching the pain of others,” I said. It stopped laughing and I knew I had struck a soft spot.

“Your power, your immorality means nothing, for you do nothing of value with what was given to you,” I said, and it lost its mirth as well.

“You are a prisoner in your own self-made jail; a sorry excuse for a life gone terribly wrong. Are these all your hopes and dreams, to watch me fall to my knees and beg you for mercy? If that is so, better prepare for a long wait, for I shall never come to you with anything but a sword in hand, ready for battle,” I said.

“You dare!” It yelled, angered.

“I dare, and I shall take your head and make it my trophy for the world to see and scorn your sorry existence!” I yelled. “You are the worm beneath my heel, and though you may best me in battle, I shall never be defeated by a nothing like you!” Finally, it roared in wrath.

“Enough talk. Take up arms!” I said, our weapons collided again and we fought. It wasn’t so strong this time, and we struggled for a long while. I realized that I was feeding it constantly with idle negative thoughts, and when these feelings subsided, he really was nothing. I fought on as hard as I could; armed with the knowledge that victory is never beyond my grasp. Eventually, though, it murdered me again, and I awoke on another plane of existence, in another world, screaming. Dazed, I saw people approaching me; healers and nurses. Simon was there too, and even Barny.

“His wounds have opened up; he’s bleeding,” I heard a healer say. I tried to get away, to get up and away from them.

“Raymond, don’t move. You’re injured,” Barny said.

“Get yer hands off of me!” I yelled as I shoved them back. I sat up and examined the black scars the Demon had given me in our terrible fight. One of the wounds opened slightly and

released puss. I cleaned the wound myself and bandaged my arm.

“Leave me be,” I told my friends harshly and returned to sleep. The following days I remember only faintly, for I was given a strange medication that made recalling memories quite difficult.

The next time I awoke I felt a lot better. My wounds were completely healed now and only ugly black scars remained to commemorate them. I had no idea how long I slept, and I didn’t care. I felt that there was something I had to do, now that I felt better.

I went to the barracks, to where the evil books and the rest of the magician’s artifacts were kept. I gathered them all in a cloth bag, closely followed by my friends. From the barracks I went to Ivar’s home and asked to use his smithy. He allowed it, of course, asking no questions.

They all watched as I lit the fires in the smithy and took out the shards of my Troublemaker, the sword Ivar gave me which had been destroyed in the fight. I melted the sword and its shards, adding new metal and using the evil books and artifacts as fuel. The flames changed colors and burned brightly, and my friends gasped but watched me still.

Hammer to anvil, I struck the heated metal and forged my blade anew. Mesmerized by my own work, all the fury rushed to the surface once more. In a fit of anger, I struck again and again. Seeing in my mind’s eye the Demon, I struck its face with my hammer and struck its flesh — struck and struck again. I saw a vision of the evil, undead menace and struck him as well — he with his magic blood which coursed through my veins still, polluting my blood. Sparks were flying everywhere as I struck the Lords of Wist Hill, and struck Prince Adwen, and struck the

murderers of Raymond the forester Finally, I struck my own image as I killed my brother. Like a man possessed I struck again and again. The men from the barracks had already gone, and left me to myself.

When I finished the blade days later my work was fearsome to behold. The metal for some reason had taken on a reddish hue. Looking at the blade, at its razor-sharp curved shape, stretched out with a wide elongated sharp tip. It appeared strange and terrifying to behold, like a blade forged from the substance of nightmares. Finally held the finished sword in my injured hand and it was a perfect fit; it belonged there, in my hand.

"Rage, I name you, for you are the fruit of my rage and suffering", I pronounced, and so it was done.

My rage was poured into the blade and none of left in me. I lifted up the barrel of water in which I'd cooled my sword and poured it over my head, washing my body clean for the first time in a long while. And I felt clean, calm, and at peace, like a child who has cried all night long and finally in the morning falls into a peaceful sleep. I placed my sword in its scabbard and walked outside. The sun's rays greeted me kindly and my body felt chilled and alive when the wind and sun touched my wet, exhausted skin. As soon as I left the smithy, all eyes turned to me and I greeted the townspeople warmly, for there was no further anger in me.

"Good day to you all!" I proclaimed.

"Good morning", my friends replied, except for Ivar, who wasn't there.

I took a long bath at the nursery, shaved, and ate a large meal. As I slept, no nightmares came, and I woke much refreshed. I put my uniform on, and then my armor, planning to return to the barracks and report for duty.



## CHAPTER XXV

# THE EARTHQUAKES

I was on route to Simon's house prior to the noon meal. I wanted to be with him and maybe take the chance to apologize for being an oaf recently in my self-absorbed melancholy. Disaster, however, rarely waits for a convenient time to strike. I was within view of his door when it hit; an earthquake so great and terrible that it sent me off my feet, and destroyed nearly all the dwellings in Drentwych. Gaps opened in the ground, swallowing trees, rubble, and sometimes people. Not even the town walls were spared the destruction; I saw them crumble to dust as I lay on the ground with my hands folded above my head to protect it from harm. The quakes seemed to last an eternity. My mind was roiling with the possibilities of what was to come. Just as suddenly as they started, the quakes ceased, and I gazed around at the destruction — only the church remained standing. Amidst the screams of the townsfolk I heard a god-awful sound, and then saw in the distance the Fortress of Wist Hill crumbling

down. The cloud of dust almost reached Drentwych, and it would have, had it not been for the tidal wave. The water washed away what remained of the town, taking many people with it. It receded many moments later, as abruptly as it came. I held on to a piece of log, to keep myself in place. As soon as it was gone however, I moved into action.

Without thinking twice, I got up, balanced myself on the shaking ground of the aftershock, and ran to aid the first voice I heard. I was surprised and somewhat relieved to discover that the supernatural strength I had acquired during that terrible fight with the Demon lingered still. It proved mighty useful here, as I tossed timber and stones about to free trapped townspeople. The rest of the soldiers joined the rescue operation as soon as they'd come to their senses, and many of the townspeople also participated. Some sat stunned, however, and did nothing, even though they were themselves not seriously injured.

Many of the soldiers and townspeople came to me for guidance and I sent them here and there to clear debris, carry the injured to the church, and help each other as I saw fit. Together we rescued the injured and turned the church into a makeshift hospital.

I worked tirelessly, for whenever I thought of resting a moment a sound caught my attention or someone needed my assistance, so I just worked on and on, forgetting my own fatigue. In clearing a collapsed hovel of debris, I located an underground passage of some sort. I strained to see inside, but all I saw was pitch black darkness. I tried to listen, but I heard nothing but dripping water. Then suddenly as I was about to get up I heard the faint sound of knocking. I called out to whoever was inside.

"I hear you! I hear you!" I called. "I'm coming! Don't move!"

I added.

“I’ve found someone trapped under the ground!” I called to the townsfolk outside. Barny and my Commander came and lent me a rope so I could climb down.

As I went down the hatch, I saw a corridor built with Roman arches for support. ‘This must have been the old Roman outpost’, I thought to myself. I called for a torch and was tossed one before I made my way on the trail. Sometimes the ceiling cracked and a bit of sunlight penetrated the dark passage. Whoever was trapped knocked harder and I hastened my steps, trying to follow in the right direction. Finally, I found the exact point, I believed.

“Everything is going to be all right; stay down and back away from the wall. I’m coming for you, don’t worry!” I said and began clearing debris. Then I saw it, a small figure trapped among the rubble. It did not seem injured at first glance, though I could not be sure. Its eyes shone blue, so I wasn’t sure if it was a cat or other animal, but then it made the most pitiful sound and I knew it was a human child — I saw the tips of its fingers.

I entered the small passage, leaning my back against the ceiling to postpone its collapse. I hugged the small child to me like a baby and carried it outside, shielding it from harm as the room collapsed behind us.

“You’re safe now, don’t worry, I’ve got you and I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” I told it. It clung to me in a firm grip and held tight. I gave the child to my Commander to hold as I climbed up the rope. Simon stood behind him and Barny as well, his jaw clenched and his face flashing red. I took the child again and examined it. My mother had been a nurse, and I was familiar with the basic teachings of medicine, at least enough to recognize injuries, clean wounds, and apply bandages.

Apparently, being often bruised as a child had its merits now.

It was a little girl, I discovered; perhaps five to seven years of age. She did not appear injured, though she strained to breathe. Her skin was a ghostly shade of white underneath the layers of muck, and her eyes were an icy shade of blue which seemed to glow a bit like cats' eyes. At first I thought she had suffered a head injury and that her hair was smeared in blood, but no, her hair was apparently naturally the shade of blood.

"I saw you outside the window — when the ground shook you left me in a house that was collapsing, knowing that I am crippled!" Simon said angrily.

"It wasn't my intention to abandon you, friend. I did not think, but rushed to the first call for help I heard," I replied honestly.

"What do you mean, rushed to them first — you rushed only to them, I never saw you turn my way," he said.

"Simon, I—" I began.

"Yet despite your will to be rid of me, I managed to survive without your aid," he said, venomously.

"To be rid of you? What the bloody hell are you saying? Why should I plot to be rid of you, you're my friend, are you not?" I asked, stunned by all this anger.

"I don't know, Raymond, am I?" He asked.

"Well, of course you are, have you gone all crazy? What madness is this?" I said, raising my voice in astonishment at his wild accusations.

"Stop playing the innocent, Raymond, you hardly fit the part," Simon said.

"I do not—" I began.

"I was there for you, whenever you needed me, and you, you left me for dead when the opportunity presented itself," he said.

"I'm sorry," I tried.

"And it didn't start here, no. This began a long time ago. You just don't like to share the glory, do you?" He asked sarcastically.

"I never plotted to be rid of you," I replied sternly.

"Never plotted, perhaps, but you'd find it mighty convenient if I just happen to drop dead. You could then maybe give a pretty speech to the townsfolk and play the hero, pissing on my grave when nobody's looking," he said.

"That's not true" I protested.

"Of course not, you're a regular saint, hero of the people and all that rubbish!" He said.

"Simon, I'm — "I tried saying.

"Shut your mouth and let me finish. You won't even let me finish a couple of sentences without barging in, taking over the conversation," he said. I shut my mouth and let him rant on, for the last thing I wanted was to prove him right; though he was right.

"You know something, Raymond, you're so self-absorbed. You only see yourself in everything that you do. If only I should be so lucky as to be rewarded by receiving some of your attention," he said. I waited a few moments to make sure he was done and only then spoke.

"What can I say Simon? I'm not perfect and I never was. I make mistakes, true, but this is hardly the time or the place for this argument. Surely when Drentwych is crumbling all around us we have better things to worry about than our silly disagreements," I said, hoping to put the matter to rest for now.

"Is that what you think this is — a silly argument? All right, Ray, don't take me seriously, but don't expect me take you seriously either," he said. I was amazed by how easily he twisted

the intent my words.

“Simon, I’m not taking you lightly, but like I said, this is neither the time nor the place,” I repeated as the child stirred.

“Very well, Raymond, we’ll settle this later, but don’t think I’ll stick around forever,” he said. I nodded and I turned to the child. I had to sort out my business with her, and then move on to other people in need of assistance.

“What’s your name, little girl?” I asked the child, ignoring Simon now. “Are you injured? Can you stand?” I tried when there was no reply to my previous question. She nodded no, then yes. Slowly I put her down, making sure that she indeed could stand on her own. I gave her a water-skin to drink from and we proceeded to the church. It was my intention to deliver her to the church and resume my business.

“What’s your name?” Simon asked her. She just smiled a sad smile at him, offering no reply.

“Can you talk at all?” I asked her gently; still I received no vocal reply. Then suddenly she hugged my leg as if I was her father. I was a bit uncomfortable with being touched, especially after the fight with the demon. I tried to gently detach her from my leg, but seeing that she hugged me only harder, I ceased my attempts. I really hoped she had a mother somewhere at that moment.

“Just leave her be. She’s obviously not wounded save perhaps being mute. She’ll find her mother in no time,” Simon said.

“No, I’m taking her to the church, she may have internal injuries,” I said. She seemed preoccupied with watching the air as I tried telling her my name. I patted her hair gently to attract her attention. Inside I was starting to lose patience, but this task demanded gentleness, and I intended to have children of my own in the future, so this seemed like a good exercise.

"I am Raymond and this is Simon," I said as she finally looked at me. She seemed to try and speak then and we all paused, waiting excitedly to hear what she had to say.

"Je t'aime Ray-mend," she said, finally. Simon visibly frowned, but I smiled at the compliment. Then she kissed my hand.

"Didn't you say we have more pressing business? We've wasted enough time on this child, have we not?" He said. I ignored him, picked her up in my arms, and took her to the church. Upon approaching the church, she started shaking visibly. I halted my steps and spoke to her.

"What's wrong, little one?" I asked. She just made strange, fearful sounds, like a baby who's frightened. Not understanding what the matter was, I approached the nearest priest and asked him kindly to check the child for injuries.

"Of course, of course, Master Raymond," he said and quickly moved to comply with my request. Moving the blanket that kept her warm, he took one look at her, and then bounced a few steps back in fear. He crossed himself, as if I was holding a contagious disease in my hands.

"I'm sorry, Master Raymond, but I'll not treat this thing," he said in disdainful tones. I was stunned, to say the least.

"What? Why? What's wrong?" I asked.

"That's a fiend whom you now hold in your hands," he replied professionally. Now I was furious — earthquake, flood, a fight with Simon and now condescending shit from a buffoon.

"What the bloody-hell is the matter with ye? Can't ye see that this is a small wounded child and no fiend?" I asked him. I could not tolerate his indifferent treatment of a child. He replied in patronizing tones, as if I was some barbarian in need of slow speech.

"Master Raymond ..." he began, "... this is no child but a spawn

of the Devil! Can you not see its deathly pale skin? Its red hair, the color of blood? Surely you can see that these are the marks of the Devil!" He proclaimed.

"Good priest, she's a She not an It, and she's not a monster but a little girl who's wounded. I don't care what she looks like; she's no fiend," I said, trying to be diplomatic but firm.

"I'll not accept a demon into the house of God, take her elsewhere," he said impatiently. I took a threatening step forward, and he took three backwards; Simon grabbed me, trying to stop me from doing something rash.

"Calm down Ray, it's only an old priest. Hurting him won't do anyone any good," Simon pleaded. I eyed the priest dangerously, but left him otherwise unharmed. I was really fuming seeing those who should care proving indifferent to the suffering of children. The more the world rejected her, the more I felt a growing kinship with her.

We went to where the old orphanage had once stood. I was so caught up with trying to help the little girl, and being angry at Simon, that I overlooked the obvious reaction the children would have to the ghostly visage of the pale little girl. They screamed in terror and cried, "Banshee!" Pointing at her and hiding behind a very worried old man who was their keeper. I hastened to take her away from the other children. Surprisingly, she seemed saddened, but did not weep or cry out. I feared she may be dull in the head, for her reactions were strange, to say the least.

It was obvious to me that the little girl would not fit anywhere. She was deemed a demon by the priests and a ghost by the orphans. She didn't speak for the most part, appeared too frail to work, and she wasn't even pretty enough so that any adult would take pity and adopt her — anyone but me, that is. In a

way, she was as messed up as I was, with bad things hailing down like the flood. When I gazed into her amazing blue eyes, all I saw was innocence there; innocence and an internal spark I envied. Like me, she was an orphan, lost in an alien land. I could tell as much from her looks. Did not Ivar take pity on me? Raymond the Forester as well? Neither of them thought twice before offering me shelter and acceptance. I wasn't much to look at either, an orphan from a faraway land. I should be so lucky, I thought, if ever I could match their honor. As I thought things over, she smiled at me and Simon complained.

"It seems the orphanage doesn't want you," I began. She nodded her agreement, and I could see worry, like a dark shadow, emanate from her eyes. She clung to me a tad more forcefully, and then eased her grip when she realized her grip had tightened.

"If you're willing, little ma'am ..." I said and waited to make sure I got her complete attention. "... I'm willing to adopt you as my own flesh and blood and call you my daughter," I said. Before she had a chance to reply Simon spoke.

"What? Shit on this!" Simon protested, "You're a swine to your friends and now you're all daddy love to a stranger." Simon added.

"Shut yer mouth, what business is it of yours?" I shot back; he was really getting on my nerves —dangerously.

"Let's see now ..." Simon began "... we live dangerous lives," Simon said. "You're going to get her killed but you don't care." He added.

"Again, what business is it of yours?" I asked, glaring.

"Alright, I find it despicable that you don't give a rat's tail about your friends, and you treat her with kindness. The way I see it, it's yet another slap in my face."

“We’ll continue this another time, Simon,” I said through clenched teeth.

“No, let’s settle this once and for all now. Why is it all right for you to postpone arguments when it suits your schedule and wrong for others to settle arguments in their own time?” He asked.

“Look, Simon, I know that I’m not always a nice person, but please ... if not for my sake then for the sake of the child. She shouldn’t hear adults argue like this,” I pleaded.

“Oh no, it’s not about the child, I don’t give a crap about her, so don’t use her as a shield for your faults. You’re being selfish and you’re expecting me to be considerate,” he said.

“What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say? You twist every word of mine and use it to lash out at me. How can I make peace with you when you won’t let me?” I pleaded.

“Lash at you; learned a new word, eh? You’re not trying to make peace; you’re trying to prove that you’re right again, and peace has nothing to do with it. You want me to see your superiority — you want me to see just how kind and understanding you are, but it is all hypocrisy with you. I see through you and I can see through this too,” he said.

“Are you my wife or something? What the hell is wrong with you?” I asked.

“What?” He replied, stunned.

“All right, Simon, you know what? You do what you want and leave me to do what I want. I’ll stay out of your business and you’ll stay out of mine,” I shot back angrily.

“Thank you for permission to go about my business, Great Hero of Drentwyh! Now I can limp about in peace, knowing that mighty Raymond permits me to do so,” he said.

“Bugger off,” I replied and so the argument was done. We

broke off in different directions.

There wasn't much to do around town at this point; everybody who survived was already out of the wreckage. This reminded me that there was one person I had failed to see during the rescue operation.

I hurried to the smithy with the little girl at my side. At first glance most of the house seemed intact. Smithies — like churches, are built out of stone, and I hoped this meant survival for my loved ones.

"Ivar! Ingrid!" I called as I banged on the door. I was answered almost immediately by Ingrid who opened the door. Her eyes were red and her face wet from fits of weeping. Seeing my face, she wept again and hugged me close.

"Ivar?" I dared ask, as I feared her reply. She released the tight embrace for only a moment, holding me still. She looked into my eyes.

"He's dead," she said, and burst out crying again, holding me close once more.

"Show me," I commanded her, I should have been more empathic, I wanted to be but I had other things on my mind. I pushed her to lean on me, as her trembling feet could not carry her. Placing my hand upon her shoulder for support, my thoughts turned to vile and morbid thoughts. My parents dead for they had to flee, because of me. My brother, his blood also upon my hands. I had murdered, more than once. Now Ivar is dead and I failed to save him. I am wretched, and cursed. All that I touch dies...the revenant! When I touched him, he was injured by my hands, as a child.

I inspected the body emotionless, I had to know!

I was right...the subtle markings of hands upon his throat...he was strangled by armored hands.

"I'm so sorry, dear," I said, and fought back tears myself. We stayed like this for many minutes until she gathered enough strength to let go.

"What will I do?" She asked me, her face ghostly.

"You have nothing to worry about," I replied. "I will provide for you. You'll have no worries for as long as you shall live," I said.

"But you will not marry me?" She asked pitifully. Her words broke my heart. I wanted to marry her then and there, damning us both should the Demon prevail over me.

"I cannot yet," I replied. 'First, I intend to avenge Ivar, then slay the demon in my soul.' I thought to myself.

"Why, Raymond? Don't you love me?" She asked.

"I do, I do, but the Demon—" I began.

"I don't care," she replied.

"— Is still alive," I completed my sentence.

"I don't care," she repeated sternly.

"I have to fight him, and I cannot marry you till I win," I explained.

"Let me battle at your side then — the lineage of Warriors runs in my blood!" She demanded.

"No Ingrid, this is not a battle of the flesh, and I must do this on my own. Upon my return I shall marry you," I said. "This I vow!" Ingrid's smile was like the sun, once hidden by the clouds now fully revealed in its glory, warming my sad bones.

"I have found this orphan child in ruins. She has none but me to care for her. Will you Ingrid, daughter of Ivar share this blessed burden with me?" I asked and kissed her hand.

"I will, of course," she replied, taking her by the hand. "I will share all blessed burdens with you, in sickness, and health, till ..." She said and burst weeping again. I comforted her hand and

kissed her forehead. My dear Ingrid, how the fates wronged you.

“Stay with Ingrid, child.” I instructed the little one. “I go on a quest but when I return, we will be a family.” I said. The child remained mute, observing us like an elf.

“Gods be with you!” She said and kissed my lips. Her lips were soft and inviting, yet bitter from her tears. I wanted to wipe her tears away and stay with her forever, abandoning all quests.

The Demon laughed then at my pitiful fantasy, reminding me that the battle was not over yet; it wanted its revenge and it is going to take it, piece by piece, making me miserable. I gave Ingrid all the coin in my purse. With my reward for saving the town it was enough gold to maintain her for years in dignity. I then turned around and left without another word. My Commander found me as I strolled around town, aimlessly, thinking things over.

“Master Raymond,” he began.

“Yes, Commander,” I replied.

“The Mayor seeks hero volunteers for a dire task to save Drentwych,” he said.

“I know. Master Simon already mentioned it, I volunteered.” I replied without thinking twice.

“Good, good, Raymond,” he said and patted my back.

“All the volunteers are to collect coins, jewels, and other things of value. Then you are to take this currency and purchase provisions and hire mercenaries so that the town may rebuild,” he explained.

“I understand,” I replied and went about the task. I passed by every house, taking whatever they could spare. We were set to depart come morning, so I spent the night in Ivar’s smithy — my last night there.

I got a bucket of water, soaked a cloth in it, and used it to wash the child's face while Ingrid cooked us dinner. I repeated the motion several times until I got all the dirt and grime out of her face. I then gave her the cloth, and motioned her to clean herself with it. She responded with a smile, and then undressed herself before my eyes. I turned around, blushing. It may have been the custom wherever she came from to undress before strangers, but here in England — or Jerusalem for that matter, it was highly unacceptable. I so wished Ingrid would take care of her, but she was cooking, and in mourning having lost her father recently, and her mother a few years ago. I would not place an even greater burden upon her shoulders — even the most minor of tasks, unless she volunteered. As for my own grief, I was sorry for so damn many things. For years of taking Ivar for granted, for not showing him the respect I should have. For so many things I cannot take back now, because death is final, the end of all things. I couldn't handle the guilt and the sorrow. My mind recoiled from simple fact that Ivar was gone and I would never be able to make amends. So instead of breaking into pieces, I acted as if nothing had happened; as if he was just gone on one of his journeys out of the realm. I forced myself to focus on the many tasks at hand, and those who were living and depending on me to be strong. I couldn't falter now — like I always do when the pressure rises.

'This time, it will be different, I will be different,' I told myself.

I occupied myself rearranging the house from all the mess while she showered. A giddy sound and a word in French signaled me that she was done. I turned and realized to my dismay, that she was clean, but still nude. I quickly turned from her.

"Dress!" I said in embarrassment. I had never had a sister or a

daughter, so I was highly unaccustomed to taking care of one. I heard her footsteps back away and then she returned a minute after making the same sound she had before. I hesitated to turn around, but then was happy to discover she had dressed herself. Only her hair remained dirty, and this we could not wash in the evening, for it was too cold, and boiling water was out of the question considering the circumstances.

Ingrid placed a bowl of meat soup on the board which we were using as a table. Before the child sat down I took her hands to the water and showed her how to wash them. She nodded, said something in French, and then ate hungrily. Ingrid was mute all the while, watching me handle a child, smiling slightly. I guess she thought I'd make a good father.

I noticed then that her eyes which shone in the dark were not the only thing feline about her. She seemed to lean forward over her bowl and guard her food like a cat does. Prisoners display the same behavior as well. I could not imagine what kind of horrible life she may have had, to have taught the child to guard her food.

As I ate I noticed the strangest thing about her:

Sometimes when she thought I wasn't looking, she'd stare into the wall, mesmerized by the darkness. Other times she seemed to move her head about, as if she was engaged in some sort of mute conversation with the air. Whenever she noticed my stare, she turned to me and smiled.

Finally, fatigue aided by food conquered me and I longed for sleep. Ingrid silently, with her finger, invited me to her bed. I had wanted to share a lover's bed with her for a very long time now so my heart pulsed and I began to perspire. In my mind I imagined lovers entwined the softness of her bosom, and the gentle touch of her caress. Then I imagined her pregnant, and I

failing to return from my quest — misery... such terrible misery.

‘I can’t do this!’ I thought.

“When I return, and we are properly wed,” I told Ingrid, I lowered my eyes and smiled in apology. She seemed glad, and not angry for some reason. I lay down to sleep in the smithy, as I had done many times before, when everything made sense. For some reason the girl stared at me as I lay down to sleep, instead of finding a place to rest. The last thing I noticed before I slept was her eyes, watching me. That child really unnerved me.

Then the nightmare came, as it always does when sleep befalls me, and has ever since that fateful day I fought with the Demon. This time I was trapped in a maze of burning houses. Everywhere I turned burning beams fell my way, and I had to dodge constantly or else be trapped and burned by them. As if the fire was not bad enough, little imps the size of children, with over-sized mouths, sharp teeth, and no face chased after me, trying to impale me on wicked spears. Even cutting them with my sword proved of little use, for their wounds closed and they regenerated in a moment or two.

The nightmare grew more horrid the more I ran, dodged, and fought. I could suddenly hear moaning sounds, like dead souls or people in terrible agony. The moans were like a dreadful music, causing me to shudder in dread.

As the world behind me turned into a blazing inferno, the Demon, now in the form of a wolf, burst out from the flames and chased me. Its eyes were glowing red orbs of infernal fire. Its black coat looked like coal and its mouth was full of shark teeth, with bile spilling out as it hungered for my flesh. I ran with all my might until I reached a place of utter darkness for only a moment. I thought I had lost it. Then it appeared, standing before me in its demon-form, holding a wicked blade in one

hand and a whip made of fire in the other.

I held my sword in both hands, ready to fight for my life once more. Then suddenly a third figure emerged in the dream.

It was the pale, red-haired girl. She wore a dress of bright blue, and at her back there was a golden hue, like sunlight. My first instinct was to place myself between it and her, to guard her with my life against this terrible demon. Then the most dreadful thought entered my mind. The Demon knows of her; it may come after her in the waking world as well, just to torture me. Perhaps in my desire to save her, I've actually damned her. I held my sword tightly in both hands then advanced on him.

It was then that I saw something I'd never seen before in the Demon's eyes. It was terrified, and not of me. Its look of fright quickly turned into that of grim determination, and it advanced towards the little girl.

"No!" I screamed as I stormed it. She held her hand towards it, closed her eyes and seemed to strain. Before I got to it time seemed to freeze. I could not move, and neither could it. There was some sort of golden light emanating from her, slowly growing stronger. The light hurt my eyes.

My tortured eyes watched the little girl grow great colorful wings. Wind blew from her direction towards the Demon and then blew it away as if it were an ant in a storm. The wind then blew the fire out, and everything went dark.

As light slowly returned, emanating from her, I saw her raising her hand upward as if to touch the sky. Her form was like a shadow surrounded by the darkness; only her blue eyes glowed and her colorful wings reflected the light. Then as if the darkness was only a black cloud hiding the sky, the darkness parted, allowing the golden light of the sun to come through.

In the cold and dark I felt the light with every cell of my body

and my eyes watered upon seeing this majestic radiance coming to me, here, in the deepest reaches of my abyss.

She just stood there smiling at me, a little pale girl once more. As my tear fell to the desolate black ground, a thousand drops of rain fell all around me. Something touched my leg and I moved it quickly away, seeing to my surprise that an olive branch, small and green, grew out of the black ground before my stunned eyes, taking the shape of a young sapling.

All around me black turned to green, and to my amazement I saw myself standing in a green garden basking in sunlight where only moments before there had been only desolation and darkness.

The little pale girl was smiling. Then she pointed forward and I quickly turned my head in the direction she indicated. I saw a little fairy, like a woman with dragonfly wings, glowing slightly as she flew towards me. She flew twice around me and then settled on my shoulder. I put my hand there slowly and she climbed on my hand. As I was looking at her, clearly losing any sense of reality, the little fairy said unto me:

“Your soul is a garden and you harvest what you plant, silly human.”

With that the fairy disappeared as well as the girl, and I alone explored the garden of my soul. I swam in the river and laughed at the white clouds, basked in the rays of the kind sun. Somewhere inside I felt her eyes watching me still, but I felt no fear; none at all.

I awoke with first light feeling like a new man. Ingrid was still asleep, I noticed, and luckily so was the girl. I wanted to be up and out, before either of them stirred; before words and deeds drove me from my task. I skipped breakfast and left as quietly as I could.

I was mighty surprised to see Simon there, waiting with a short sword strapped to his hip and a walking cane in his hand.

“Morning, Ray,” he greeted me politely.

“Morning, Simon,” I replied as if we had never argued.

“Morning, Barny,” I greeted my partner.

“Morning, Calin, George, and Archer,” I greeted the three other volunteers who were now my colleagues.

Fate works in mysterious ways, doesn't it? During childhood three of these volunteers had been my bitter enemies, and the last was my friend. Now, they are my allies, and my friend had become my enemy. I was happy they all survived, though I was very displeased with Simon, handicapped as he was, joining us.

“Good morning Master Raymond,” they replied.

We took off on our journey south soon after the pleasantries were over. The road was harsh. We came across many gaps and trees felled by the quakes. That did not stop a crazy faerie child though, she followed us running, falling on occasion and getting back up again. I motioned for us all to halt, then went to take her with me. I expected Simon to say something, but he didn't, something I was grateful for. I didn't have time to return her to Ingrid so I guess she was coming with us.

The girl was most frail; she grew tired and then exhausted after less than an hour. Upon seeing that she slowed her pace Simon frowned, so I frowned back at him in her stead, then picked her up and carried her on my shoulders.

“I need a scout to see what's ahead, and since you, little girl, stand the tallest, you're it,” I said in half-jesting tones. She nodded her happy consent and stared forward into the distance.

The terrain became more difficult as we traveled and soon Simon had difficulty walking as well. I moved to help him, and I thought that now he'd understand the girl's position. But he

just shoved me away.

“I can handle myself just fine,” he said in anger. I moved ahead to take my position first in line, ignoring him — as far as he could tell. As I advanced and passed Calin and Archer, I whispered to them to fall back and help Simon.

When we finally rested after a whole day of travel the little girl approached me.

“Jaunee,” she said in a French accent and pointed to herself. I smiled broadly at the gesture, for it meant she had learned to trust me. Up until now she had not revealed her name or where she hailed from. Her accent gave her away though.

“Raymond,” I said moving to point at myself; she stopped me and with a hug that caught me by surprise.

Later that night after supper, the girl sat down apart from us and seemed to be talking to the wind. While no words came out of her mouth, her gestures were those of talking. I was partly worried that something was wrong with her and partly wondered if she was talking to faeries that we couldn’t see.

“The girl’s deranged,” Simon said, expressing everybody’s thoughts.

“She’s fine,” I replied sternly, everybody except Simon turned their face away, minding their own business.

“She’s not fine and you know it,” he said.

“Not your problem, Simon, leave it be,” I answered.

“We’re in this together for good or ill, so if there’s a problem with one of us, it’s our problem,” he said. He was right, but damn it, he was starting to vex me greatly.

“Jaunee is my problem, not yours. If you don’t like it, Simon, you can just leave,” I said.

“You’ve gotta be joking; what about the mission?” He asked.

“I’ll not leave her out to die even if she is deranged, demented,

or just stupid," I replied, turning my back to him and ignoring his further speech. I watched her strange behavior instead.

She held a beetle in her palm and instead of tossing it aside in fear as other children usually do, she fed it crumbs of bread then placed it gently on a weed. She turned and smiled at me when she noticed my stare. I smiled back and went to sleep, waiting for the watchman to wake me for my turn at guard duty. She slept near me and awoke when I awoke. She even kept me company as I guarded the sleeping men.

Our journey continued for another night and half a day and the nightmares did not come again. I smiled in relief every morning after a night of sound sleep.

Perhaps we were ambushed because I was so happy that I failed to spot the Saxons who hid behind a rock. They shot crossbow bolts in our direction. A few men were hit, I think, and I remember more than one voice calling, "Ambush!" Before falling to the ground.

I brought Jaunee down fast, shielding her with my body as I fell on top of her on the ground. As soon as we were down, I bade her lay flat as I got up to charge my enemies head on. It was a grave error on my part, brought on by my youth and inexperience, and I was shot by a bolt at close range. The missile pierced my belly and came out the other end. At first I just felt the sting and fought on, cleaving a wrist then beheading an adversary.

Then the world around me spun and I fell to the ground off-balance, nausea assaulting me. I managed to crawl under a tree as the battle waged on without me. I was fearful of the pain which spread throughout my frame. It was a fatal wound, I knew. I was about to die, and there was no way for me to extract the missile.

“Go! I’m felled; I’m not going to make it!” I told Simon when the battle was over. He took a deep breath, taking in the news with a mixed look of fear, anger and a bit of pity.

“Go,” I urged him. He grabbed the sack of gold I had carried and turned to leave. At the last moment I grabbed hold of his arm.

“Care for Ingrid, and the girl,” I asked him and then closed my eyes and waited for death to claim me.

“I will, I promise!” He vowed sternly. A true friend when it mattered. We had won the fight and my friends would go on without me, I thought as I closed my eyes.

‘Perhaps the wound will not kill me’, I told myself. ‘Perhaps I have a chance to survive, if only I garner enough strength to make it’.

My eyes shot open; there was the strangest feeling of pleasant warmth spreading throughout my stomach to my torso and feet. I saw the little girl Jaunee bent over me, and pressed her hands against my wound. Then she was snatched away by Simon and I closed my eyes again. My last thoughts were of remorse. I regretted so many thoughts and actions I had carelessly thought and done throughout my life, starting with the guilt I felt over my brother’s death, and then to how I spent the years of my youth idly, too immersed in my own world of rage and guilt to actually make a proper life for myself. More than that, I regretted not treating my loved ones as I should have, for the fact I never got the chance to track down the revenant and avenge Ivar as I have Raymond the Forester. Lastly, I was sorry that I’d never get the chance to make amends. And so my world faded to black.

I woke, surprised and dazed to be alive. I wasn’t actually sure if I was alive or not, but I felt someone touching me. I strained

to open my eyes, which felt heavy and numb. He was a giant of a man with blond hair and blue eyes. He was so massive, in fact, and his frame so muscular that it felt as if his muscles could explode at any moment.

“Greetings, Raymond of Drentwych. I am Lord Tusseldorf Andreus of Sparta,” he said, and I fainted, the strain of staying awake too much for me to bear.



## CHAPTER XXVI

# MODERN DAY, EIGHTEEN MONTHS AGO

It was another conversation in our house — one of those that cement relationships.

“See, you don’t know how to live,” she said.

“Maybe not,” I acknowledged, becoming angry.

“Tomorrow I’m taking you dancing,” she stated.

“Fine! I surrender!” I said.

“Yippie!” She responded, with a huge grin on her face.

“But wait, there was something else I wanted to discuss with you,” I added.

“The old man?” She asked.

“The old man,” I agreed. “How did you know?” I asked.

“I’m psychic!” She replied and I frowned. I don’t like it when she reads minds, especially not mine.

“Didn’t read your mind Ray, and I don’t need psychic abilities

to figure out your thoughts,” she defended herself, obviously reading my mind this time.

“So how did you know then?” I asked.

“He’s the one constant in the ever shifting narrative — a mystery,” she replied. “So it’s only natural he’d be your next topic of conversation,” she explained.

“Right,” I answered.

“All right,” she said. “So what about the old man?”

“When I read your account a thought occurred to me, one that I hadn’t thought of in my youth. An old man apparently sent Richard, and perhaps others my way, to help me,” I said.

“He sent the Demon to you too, if indeed they are the same man,” Jaunee replied.

“Not to me, to Lord Durrant,” I corrected.

“Yes, to Lord Durrant. He specifically mentioned him as the Sword of God,” she said. “A mistake, you think?” She asked.

“Or a deliberate misdirection on his part,” I suggested.

“What about the rasping-voiced old man who enlisted you?” She asked. I hadn’t thought of him.

“You think that was him?” I asked, clenching my jaw. I didn’t like where this was going.

“Well, a recruiter was found dead shortly after you got enlisted, right?” She asked.

“Yes ...” I replied.

“So who’s to say your guy didn’t kill the real recruiter, stuff him in the closet, and I don’t know ... recruit you?” She said.

“Why would he do that?” I asked.

“Who is he?” She replied.

“Let’s see what we know about him...” I said, and began gathering my thoughts.

“We know he’s got a rasping voice,” Jaunee offered.

"We know he's about forty years old," I added.

"We know he's got Arabic numerals tattooed on his arm," she added.

"Arabic numerals? Right! They were quite rare back in those days; who'd tattoo Arabic numerals on his arm?" I asked.

"Holocaust survivor?" She asked.

"What? A thousand years before it took place?" I replied. It fits, but doesn't make sense.

"True, highly unlikely," she agreed "Though you must admit, it fits," she added.

"I can admit that it fits, but not that it's in any way plausible," I replied.

"Very well, let's sort out the 'whats' and 'whys' and leave the 'hows' for later," she replied.

"Very well," I replied. "So why would someone go for all that trouble?" I added.

"What trouble?" She asked.

"Arrange things, people, and situations as he would have them be," I explained.

"Arrange for you to fight the Demon?" She asked.

"And win, by sending the Demon after the wrong man," I corrected.

"All right, let's think back, what else did he do?" Jaunee asked after some pondering.

"Buried Raymond the Forester — even wrote in Hebrew on his tombstone," I offered.

"Saved a young Raymond the Forester, according to his own testimony," Jaunee offered.

"You believe that was him as well?" I asked in astonishment.

"Yes," she replied.

"That would mean the rasping-voiced man was busy arranging

things since my birth, if not prior to that," I said.

"Indeed," Jaunee agreed.

"Alright, what else?" I asked.

"Sent Richard with money," Jaunee offered.

"After Richard made sure he gave it to the proper man," I added.

"But all these things happened at wide intervals, that's why I never thought them linked. You see, if he helped both Raymond and Richard and lived to recruit me and send the Demon after the wrong man ..." I said.

"Then he's over a century old!" We said together.

"It doesn't make sense," I said. "I was an ordinary man and you were just a psychic. What's so special about us that made an immortal of this power intervene every step of the way?" I asked.

"Obviously, he knew something. We're both immortal now, aren't we?" She asked.

"Yes, probably because of his constant intervention." I insisted. "But there is more to it than that. This takes very careful planning and foreknowledge, not just longevity and patience." I explained.

"You're building towers on air," Jaunee said dismissively, just when I felt we're starting to uncover something real.

"Fine, fine. So where does that leave us?" I asked, getting frustrated with this mystery.

"With nothing, really," Jaunee replied.

"Why nothing?" I asked, and I was started to get uneasy. Jaunee is highly intelligent, far more intelligent than I, and her mastery of the occult puts most men to shame. It's unlikely that she knew so little about something which had such impact over our lives. And yet, she's my daughter, and she will never betray

me. I don't believe she would have hidden the truth from me.

"All right, not exactly nothing. We know that there may be a man or a group of people bearing similarities, who may have influenced events during your childhood over a relatively long and unlikely period of time for his or their own reasons, which we don't know," she explained.

"There must be more," I insisted, damn it. Was she reading my mind?

"Why are you so troubled by it?" She asked.

"Because if it's true, it means that someone I don't even know influenced key events in my life that eventually led me to the life I have now," I explained. "And I did not ask for this, any of it. I wanted more than anything, to live a normal life," I added. I know it may sound odd to some, but truly, my life, though long were not a happy life. And I would take a normal, happy yet short life for all the longevity and power in the world.

"Yes," she agreed, a hint of sadness creeping into her blue eyes. "And unless we can travel through time there is no way for us to know what really happened." She said, dismissing it again. The sorrow in her sight lingered still, though she tried to shove whatever saddened her deep inside.

"Damn it, I have to think things over. I'll crack this riddle eventually," I said, and by God, I meant it. If someone messed with my life, I would mess with his, permanently.

"I want to help," she replied, shifting tones.

"Excuse me," I replied as I answered a buzz from the security personnel. "It looks like that won't be necessary," I said as my face flushed red.

"Why?" She asked, insulted.

"Take a look," I said, and pressed a button on the monitor. There was a white man with graying blond hair standing at my

door, wearing a biker's leather jacket and smoking a cigar. It was as if someone had stepped on my grave — I remember this man, or at-least the sound of his voice.

“Tell him it's Uncle Xan,” the rasping-voiced man said as I turned on the sound. He looked directly into the secret security camera now with a smile, as if he knew I was watching on the other side.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### **A FEW DAYS AGO**

It was a few months later when that last conversation occurred. However, there was an unwelcome guest about to visit our house — Benny. I know this because somebody was watching him and gave me this account later...

Benny laid in ambush, as he has been for the last couple of months now, hidden by the bushes and trees of a pastoral settlement in Israel. It was a warm night — too warm, like every night. Yet it was a special night. The monster hiding in the settlement received special company. Benny peered through his scope to get a better look at the small figure making her way to the monster's lair.

She wore long black trousers, and a matching black sweater; her face hidden by a black shawl. At first glance, from her size, Benny judged her to be a seventeen-year-old girl. However, a streak of grey hair told him otherwise. Benny peered closer, steadying his breathing and the scope to get a better look."

Raymond opened the door for her, wearing a white golf shirt, dark blue trousers, and a holstered pistol at his belt. They stared at each other for a few silent moments. Benny's mind raced with the possibilities. Is she a challenger to his dominion over the settlement? Is she a rival? An ally? Why are they staring at each other?

'Raymond,' she said, almost breaking into tears. He embraced her and she leaned on his arms.

'My daughter,' Raymond said. 'You have returned to me.' He said in a voice heavy with emotion.

His spawn! Benny thought, and a puzzled thought entered his mind? Is it possible for a monster to hold human compassion in his heart? Or even love for his offspring? Apparently, the answer is yes.

'I'm so sorry!' They both said.

'I should never have left,' she said. "I should have never let you leave,' he replied emotionally. Benny has been tailing Raymond for a while now, and this was the first display of emotion he had ever seen from him.

"Please come inside," Raymond said as she released him from her grasp. Benny aimed for her head, his finger on the trigger. For whatever strange reason Benny hesitated a moment longer, losing her.

'Damn it!' Benny thought. "His surveillance equipment couldn't capture audio from inside the house and he lost the shot."

Meanwhile, I came in with the meal. It was a three course meal consisting of four dishes. I smiled and then began a prepared speech.

"Goose leg a la Jaunee! First we have an appetizer of shots

of tomato gazpacho to amuse the mouth.” The first course is tartar of red tuna, coated with spices. The main course will be goose leg in cherry liqueur with root vegetable puree — if I can get it right! And for dessert there is chocolate soufflé. In short, it’s a feast suitable for a king!

“I must say, you had quite a childhood, Jaunee,” Raymond began the conversation.

“Yeah, it was fun,” I replied lightly.

“Horrid, you mean,” he replied, surprised by my statement.

“It wasn’t so bad. I mean, comparatively speaking many children had much worse.”

“Just because some kids had it worse, doesn’t mean yours was a walk in the park.”

“No, but I survived, didn’t I? I got to see a lot of the world, and I loved the adventures.”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it,”

“What about you? Yours wasn’t a walk in the park either, as you call it, my American father.”

“I never said mine was easy.”

“But you survived, didn’t you?”

“Yes ...”

“And it was exciting, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And don’t tell me you would have rather lived a simple, boring life, Ray, ‘cause I know you.”

“No ...”

“So there you have it, Ray, you’ve had adventures and you’ve liked them.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“If you wouldn’t mind some positive criticism ...”

“Of course I don’t mind, fire at will.”

“Well, it seems to me — and it comes across your writing, that you’re very focused on negative emotions. Your feelings mostly alternate between anger and sadness...”

“I had an angry childhood!”

“There’s no need to be defensive. I’ll stop if you want me to, white flag and all!”

“No, no, I apologize. I was out of line.”

“Very well then, so as I was saying, you’re constantly angry or sad, and rarely happy,” I said.

“You’re right, I guess,” he admitted.

“Why do you think that is?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Guess I wasn’t too happy then,” he replied.

“And nowadays?” I asked.

“Not too happy now either,” he confessed.

“I think you just don’t know how to enjoy life,” I said.

“I do enjoy life,” he protested.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said.

“All right, when’s the last time you made love to a woman?” I asked.

“What?” He asked, stunned.

“Made love. Come on, we’re all grown people here,” I said.

“Well ...” he began. “It’s been a while,”

“Days?” I pressed.

“No, a while,” he replied.

“Weeks? Months?” I pushed and my face remained blank.

“Years? Decades?” I pressed. I nodded yes somewhere between ‘years’ and ‘decades’. “God, Ray!” I said. “All right, when’s the last time you went on a date, a romantic one?” I asked as soon as I’d recovered from the initial shock.

“A while,” he admitted dryly.

“See, Ray?” I said.

“I don’t think fornication is the measure of fun,” he protested.

“All right, how about bar-hopping? Going dancing? Eating at a fancy restaurant? Even playing a computer game?” I asked.

“I don’t do these things,” he replied. Just then the house alarm sounded. Ray was angry and went to answer the door. I, feeling a strange mix of glee and private indignation, turned the Mozart record up to full volume.

This will irritate Raymond when he's to his soundproof room!

Remember Benny, dear reader...the one I told you about at the beginning of the journals? That was when he struck, and I...I was sick and ill prepared...I’m sorry Raymond, I’m so sorry I couldn’t save you.



Today.

As Benny, the slayer of Raymond Brooks finished reading the whole journal in his house, he cried, like a man whose very life was torn apart.

“What have I done! Oh God, what have I done!” He screamed, pulling at his hair, wiping his face with his hands. If this man had any resemblance to the proud man, the army officer, the police detective who has slain mighty Raymond Brooks, it would have taken a visionary to see it.

Benny had published a small portion of the journals as a work of fiction under a pseudo-name. In a way, he had wanted to fulfill Raymond’s final wish.

As time passed and Benny grew famous as a novelist, his misery only grew. He was stricken with such terrible guilt, that every day he held his gun to his face, wondering what it would be like to pull the trigger.

Benny wasn't a wicked man. In his world view there was good and bad, white and black. There were no shades of Grey. He was the white knight, and these alien monsters; they were evil. But now, with the full realization and acknowledgment that he wasn't a good man at all, his guilt ruined him and drove him to madness. He returned to the house which began this odyssey, the house of Raymond Brooks, seeking closure. He did not bother to watch as the security cameras showed an aging blond man in a business suit approach the house.

As Benny asked yet again "What have I done?" Sitting alone in the abandoned house, a rasping voice finally replied.

"You shot my son," it said. Moments later several shots were fired, but they were not heard by the surrounding community. As mortal men and women went about their lives, the supernatural world was at war; a war ignited by the publication of the journals. For you see dear Reader, secrecy is the keystone — the foundation for any good conspiracy. And as the journals saw the light of publication, names, locations, identities and deeds of many creatures living to this day were exposed. It was only a matter of time before a bored conspiracy fan investigated the evidence spread through the volumes of the Journals, that the truth was revealed. It's ironic, that of all the supernatural creatures in the world, I was the first to be exposed fully to the mundane world, exposed by the very Journals my beloved stepfather wrote.

To be continued ...

