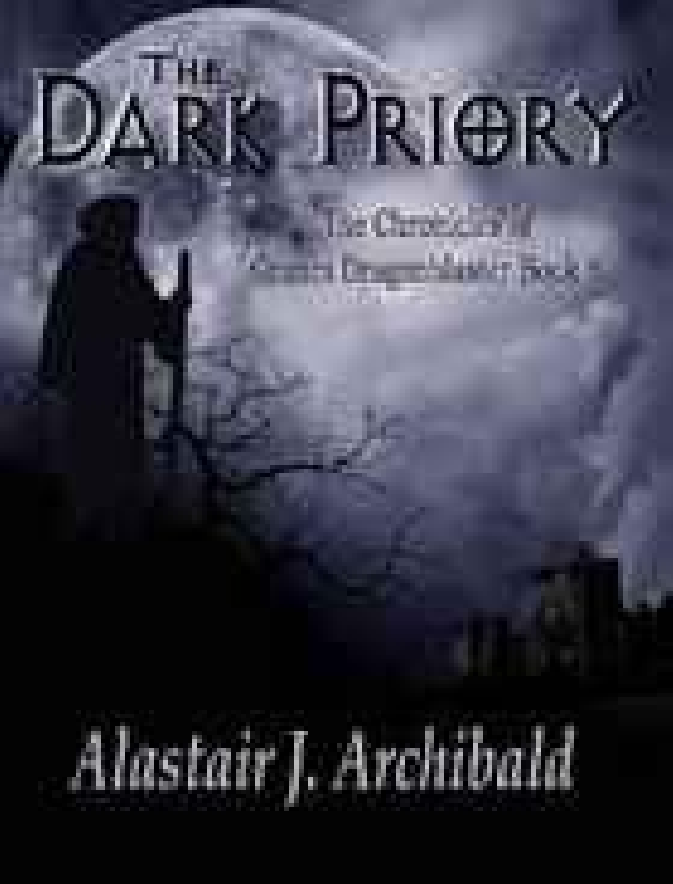




# THE DARK PRIORY

The Chronicles of  
the Ancient Dragonshifter Books

*Alastair J. Archibald*

Whiskey Creek Press  
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THE DARK PRIORY:

Book 6 of The Chronicles of Grimm  
Dragonblaster

by

Alastair J. Archibald





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## Chronicles of Grimm Dragonblaster

After saving Lord Dominie Horin from the attentions of the evil and powerful witch, Prioress Lizaveta, Mage Questor Grimm Afelnor finds himself elevated to the Seventh Rank and the head of a secret Quest to eliminate the influence of her pernicious cult. The mission becomes difficult as Grimm finds his magical aides are a sarcastic dandy (who happens to be Lizaveta's resentful grandson) and a cowardly Necromancer (who would prefer to sing than cast magic). The difficulties compound themselves as Grimm finds himself in an unwitting mental struggle for supremacy with the man he trusts above all others.

After being freed by a mutiny about which he knows nothing, all Grimm has to do is destroy a gladiatorial slavemaster and a ruthless businessman after battling hundreds of mindless fighting drones trained to the peak of physical perfection. And the Quest has only just begun.

## Dragonblaster: Book 5 of The Chronicles of Grimm Dragonblaster

As Mage Questor Grimm Afelnor continues his Quest to destroy the pernicious influence of the witch-nun, Lizaveta, he has no idea that the evil Prioress' inner coterie has abducted his secret lover, Drexelica.



While Drex fights to retain her individuality in the face of relentless, savage torment, Grimm has to face troubles of his own, including the sullen opposition of the unpredictable Questor, Guy Great Flame. When the members of Grimm's party find themselves marked for sacrifice and imprisoned in a fortress immune to even Questor magic, the young mage has to consider highly unorthodox tactics in order to survive.

Meanwhile, Lizaveta is training a new recruit: a human weapon of her own with which to beguile and vanquish the young Weapon of the Guild.

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## **Dedication**

To the one thing as fun as writing that you can do in public: to Mike, Graeme, Colin, Foz, DM, Peter, Donny, Mick, Dave, Richard, Kirk, Spider, Graham, Mark, Kevin, Jo, Bob, Alastair, Guy, Geoff, Sam, Carrick, Steve, Julia, and anyone I've forgotten from a previous band ... and to the late Leo Fender for bringing true beauty to the six-string in the form of the Stratocaster. Music is just like writing: the day after you swear to give it up, you find you can't live without it.

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## **Chapter 1: Betrayal**

Grimm Afelnor, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Dragonblaster, waited in the woods beside Merrydeath Road, deep in worry.

At the tender age of seven, soon after being sent to the forbidding Arnor House to be trained in the ways of magic, Grimm learned that his blacksmith grandfather, Loras, had once been a powerful Mage Questor, too, but he had been stripped of his powers. He was exiled from the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges four decades before, for the attempted murder of the ailing Prelate Geral. He thought he had come to terms with his grandfather's disgrace; however, recent information he

had obtained indicated that Loras had been betrayed by one close to him in the Guild. Grimm now burned with desire to exonerate his grandfather in addition to proving his own worth as a mage. Another worry was his current Quest to destroy the influence of the powerful witch, Prioress Lizaveta. After she had attempted to seduce Dominie Horin, the ruler of the Guild, by her magic, Grimm had felt overjoyed at persuading Horin to give him command of the Quest, instead of to his rival, the overbearing, sarcastic Questor Guy—Lizaveta's embittered grandson. However, the enterprise's beguiling glamour soon faded, after desperate struggles in the town of Yoren and the bizarre dream-

city of Brianston. Victory over Brianston's dragon-god, Gruon, came only at great cost: the swordsman, Harvel, was dead; the half-elven thief, Crest, had quit the party in grief for his fallen friend; and the giant albino, Tordun, had been all but blinded by the dragon's fiery demise.

Before destroying Yoren's Mansion House, Grimm learned that Lizaveta's magic was behind Loras'

sudden downfall, reinforcing his determination. His grandfather was no traitor, and Grimm would do anything to prove that.

His paramount concern was for his

lover, Drexelica. He had already transgressed the Guild's strict rules of celibacy by coupling with her, but he wanted far more than a casual, furtive relationship. However, to declare his love for her might see him stripped of his rank and condemned to menial service in Arnor House for an unspecified period. Added to this, he knew that Drexelica had gone missing, and he believed she was in Lizaveta's clutches; this gave him additional determination to attack as soon as possible.

Although he was a mighty Guild Questor, Grimm was still only an eighteen-year-old youth, and his worries

weighed as heavy on him as it would on any adolescent.

Grimm started from his morose reverie as he heard a faint rustle from the bushes behind him. Straining his ears, he heard the unmistakable crunch of a human footstep on fallen leaves. He jumped to his feet and shouted, "Who goes there? Show yourself!" His two Technology-wielding soldiers, General Quelgrum and Sergeant Erik, ran towards him from the camp-fire, their metal weapons at the ready as a small, dishevelled, dirty figure burst from the undergrowth, straight into the Questor's arms.

"Grimm! It is you!" The shabby creature sobbed into his right shoulder and

Grimm's heart leapt in his chest.

"Drex! Thank the Names! I was so worried about you!"

"I escaped," the girl said, her voice steady. "It was horrible! Prioress Lizaveta's witch-nuns kidnapped me from Crar. They beat me and tormented me, but I wouldn't submit."

"It's good to see you alive, Miss Drexelica," Quelgrum said, "but I'm a little surprised that they were so lax in their attentions they let you escape—"

"Are you implying something, General?" Grimm interrupted, feeling a hot rush of blood flooding into his face.



"Of course not, Lord Baron. I just thought it a little odd." Drex disengaged herself from the mage and confronted the warrior. "I grew up in a tough town, General. I learned to defend myself at a very young age. I tried to fight them, but it got me nowhere. After a while, I pretended they'd broken me. I acted all demure and submissive, the way they wanted, 'til I found a way out. That's all."

Quelgrum's brow furrowed, and Drex's face contorted into an expression of rage. "If you really want to know, I was trained by an utter cow called Sister Melana. She took her eyes off me for a moment while she ate. I punched her in

the back of her neck. She fell to the ground, and I brained her with her plate. She stopped moving. I hope I killed the little slut. I kept to the shadows 'til I found my way down to the coal store. There was nobody there—there almost never is—and I escaped through the delivery chute." The intensity of her scowl stunned Grimm, and he felt his heart swelling with pride at his beloved's fortitude and resourcefulness. "You see, General? There's no conspiracy here. This is Drex, for goodness' sake!"

Guy Great Flame sauntered into view, twirling his Mage Staff in the manor of a bandmaster. "Hullo!" he said, his mouth

crinkling in a half-smile. "What do we have here, a drowned rat? Be careful you don't catch anything off it!"

Grimm felt his dislike of the proud Questor fulminating into sheer, scarlet hatred. "Don't you dare talk about Drex like that!"

He realised his protesting squeak sounded more callow adolescent than Seventh Rank Mage, but he did not care.

Guy raised a sardonic eyebrow. "So, this is your vaunted housekeeper? I must say, Dragonblaster, I insist on a stricter dress code for the hired help in my house."

The younger mage took his own Mage Staff, Redeemer, in a two-handed grip and stepped forward, his face contorted in rage.

"Think you can handle it, youngster? If so, feel free; I'd love you to try." Grimm felt Guy's cool, self-assured manner fanning the fires of wrath within him to such intensity that they threatened to consume him.

I'll kill him! he raged inside his mind. Guy is just a primping peacock and no true mage! I'll squash him once and for all, like the bug he is!

As the older Questor braced himself and lowered his staff, War-maker, still

smirking, Grimm began to gather the golden tendrils of thaumaturgic energy into a tight, ordered knot, ready to unleash them against his hated adversary. He knew Guy must be doing the same, but he felt more than capable of overcoming the foppish mage. In the instant he drew in his breath, ready to let forth a stream of patterned power, Drex stepped between the two would-be combatants.

"What's the matter with you?" she screamed, stamping and raising a small fist to Guy's face. "Fighting like silly schoolboys; you should be ashamed of yourselves!"

Grimm felt his anger dissipate like a puff

of smoke in a strong wind, and he stepped back from Guy, realising how idiotic this confrontation was.

We have a job to do, he thought. We can't afford to have stupid arguments like this; either or both of us could have been injured, incapacitated or killed!

Drexelica withdrew, frowning.

Grimm drew a deep breath. "I apologise humbly for my outburst, Brother Mage," he said at last, extending his right hand. "No, I don't want to fight you."

Guy looked at the proffered member as if he feared it might be diseased. "Thought better of it, eh? I'm not

surprised you backed down."

Grimm felt blood rush anew into his face and fought to suppress his emotions. Don't say anything to inflame the situation further, he thought, his entrails churning and his hands trembling from the effort of his inner battle. Whatever I think of him, we—I—need Guy.

"You're right, Great Flame." The words felt like ashes on his tongue. "I ... I acted rashly when I turned on you, and I've apologised for it. Please take my hand in the spirit of comradeship in which I offer it." Guy snorted. "The spirit of cowardice sounds nearer the mark. Perhaps, instead, I should—" Quelgrum stepped in front of the foppish mage.

"Questor Guy, Lord Grimm was man enough to apologise. Are you? You seem to be going out of your way to provoke him."

"I might have known you'd side with him, Technology-lover!" Guy spat. "Take the hand of that misbegotten waif? I'd rather—"

"Oh, Questor Guy," Drex cried, her eyes moistening. "Can't you make peace with Grimm—please?" Grimm felt entranced by his beloved's blue eyes; they seemed so large and deep that he felt as if he were about to fall into them. How could any man of flesh and blood remain unmoved by such an entreaty?



It seemed that even the sarcastic, acerbic Guy was mortal at heart. He shrugged and took Grimm's hand in his own, pumping it once before releasing it.

"I suppose I was a little hard on you, Dragonblaster," the Great Flame muttered. "Let's just get on with the damn Quest, shall we?"

The older Questor had not even used his favourite perversion of Grimm's title: 'Dragonbluster'. Grimm guessed that was the nearest thing to an apology he was ever likely to hear from Guy.

"Well met, Great Flame," he said, nodding. "There's a difficult task ahead of us, and I'd far rather we were allies

than enemies."

Guy, looking a little dazed, shrugged. "I agree. Let's do it."

Quelgrum nodded. "I'll call the others. We'll be ready to move by morning."

"I don't think we should wait that long, General," Drex said, biting her lower lip. "Nobody knows I'm gone yet, but they will in a short while, when I'm missed at Evening Devotions. There's no telling what that evil bitch, Lizaveta will do then."

"I don't think I could smuggle all of you into the Priory; a small party would be better. I'll go with Grimm—he's a

Questor, after all."

"What's the matter with me?" Guy's voice became a plaintive whine. "I'm the senior Questor here."

"We should stand by, at least, in case of trouble," Quelgrum declared.

"There are witch guards all around, and they know you're coming," Drex said. "Believe me, my way is better. A small group can cling to the shadows more easily than a large one. You and the other warriors should get some rest, so you can be ready in the morning."

She locked those lovely, blue eyes on the soldier's, and Grimm suffered a

momentary pang of jealousy, which he soon quashed.

"Perhaps you're right, lass," the General said at last. "It's a reasonable battle plan." Grimm felt a warm rush of admiration at Drex's calm, intelligent assessment of the situation. After all she's been through, he thought, I wouldn't have blamed her if she'd been a catatonic wreck, but her mind's still clear.

"Well, if that's settled," he said, "I'm going with Drex."

"Me, too," Guy declared. "If you remember, Dragonblaster, I have a score to settle with the old bitch, too. I can

take care of myself."

"I can take care of myself, too, Great Flame," Grimm snapped, determined not to lose any ground to the pompous thaumaturge. He would rather not have Guy around at all, but, in view of his earlier effort at conciliation, he felt he could not easily deny the older mage. "Don't you worry about me; let's go."

\* \* \* \*

"Be careful," Drex muttered, as she and the two mages hugged the lengthening shadows. "Lizaveta's look-outs are all around. They're called the Anointed Score, and they're the most vicious sluts around. It's best to avoid them."

The walls of the Priory loomed overhead, seeming almost to disappear into the inky evening sky. Grimm suppressed a shiver as the distant, eerie bark of a fox slashed through the air.

"Not much further now," Drex whispered, as the trio rounded the north corner of the towering edifice.

"Just keep quiet, and we should be all right."

This Anointed Score can't be that good, Grimm thought. I haven't seen a single one yet. They'd have been better off forming a line in front of the Priory, if they suspected any incursion. This is just too damned—

"Here we are."

Grimm looked down at a dark, unfathomable, rectangular opening, and he felt a frisson of disquiet. Was he expected to plunge into this murky unknown, with no idea what might lie on the other side?

"I'll go first," Drex muttered. "Wait until I give you the all-clear." Before Grimm could protest, his lover flung herself feet-first into the dark chute. Guy stepped forward, but Grimm put an admonitory hand on the older man's chest. "You heard Drex, Guy. We'll wait here." Grimm could almost hear the upsurge of the other Questor's emotions at this affront, but he hardly cared; all he

cared about was that his lover was safe.

"It's all right!"

Hearing Drex's welcome voice from inside the bowels of the Priory, Grimm felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

"There's nobody here, Grimm; come on in. The dirt won't hurt you, Guy, I promise." Even in the dim light, Grimm saw Guy's brows lowering at this slight, and he smiled.

"You aren't scared, are you, Great Flame?"

"Not on your life, Dragonblaster. There's



still time for you to back out, you know."

"Not on your life, Brother Mage. I'm going first."

Grimm squatted and launched himself down the chute, clutching Redeemer to his chest. The darkness and the brief sensation of falling awoke a primordial fear in him, and he felt relieved when he came to a sudden halt. He stood and stepped away from the chute, and his eyes could just discern Drex's shadowy figure, black against deeper black.

A faint bump greeted Guy's arrival, and Grimm, his eyes becoming accustomed to the darkness, ran to his lover, embracing her. Drex seemed a little

awkward in her response to his enthusiastic embrace, but he guessed she was nervous to be back in the Priory so soon after her escape, so he released her.

"Where do we go from here, Drex?" he whispered. "Just point us in the right direction, and we'll take it from there."

"You don't get away from me that easily, Grimm Afelnor," she muttered. "There's a reckoning due, and I wouldn't miss it for the world." There was no mistaking the fervour in her lowered voice. Speaking a little louder, she said, "Follow me."

"Do you really think this is a good idea,

Drex?" Grimm laid a hand on his lover's shoulder. Drexelica stiffened at his touch, but her voice was soft. "Don't worry about me, Grimm." With a determined air, she strode to the inner door and opened it just a crack, allowing yellow light to spill into the dark chamber. Putting her face to the narrow opening, she nodded.

"It's all right. Nobody's there. Let's go."

"You're in charge," Grimm said, and then he frowned.

Drex is no shrinking violet, he thought. I guess that's one of the reasons I fell so in love with her; but she seems so different now, as if she's angry with me.

Oh, well; she has been through a lot...

"Come on, Grimm! Devotions can't be more than ten minutes away now. We've got to move, now!" Grimm stepped through the narrow opening into a small, well-lit vestibule with stairs at either side. Squinting in the bright illumination, he saw Drexelica standing with her arms crossed over her chest, her lips compressed into a tight line.

Why's Drex so uneasy with me? Does she blame me for taking so long to get here?

"We don't have all day, you know, Grimm! Up here."

She started up the left-hand flight of stairs, and the two mages followed her into one narrow corridor after another. Her movements were confident and decisive; Grimm felt glad she was there to lead them through the confusing labyrinth of passageways.

At last, the small party reached a doorway, and Drex stopped. She turned to Grimm, her whole body trembling, and the mage knew she must be fighting powerful, conflicting emotions. His heart went out to her.

Such bravery! Even after all Drex has undergone, her first thought is still for the task ahead of us.

"This is Prioress Lizaveta's private chamber," Drex whispered. "We'll catch her when she returns to put on her devotional robes."

Drex opened the door to reveal an empty room decked with glorious, tasteful brocades and tapestries.

"Come in, boys," she said. "Don't be frightened of an old lady's boudoir." Grimm and Guy did as they were bidden.

Grimm gazed in wonder at the room's splendour; not at all what he had expected of a nun's private apartments.

"I'll wait to the right of the door, Guy,"

he declared. "You take the left." Drex shook her head. "Not a good idea, Grimm; Lizaveta always sends at least two of the Score ahead of her before she enters, and they always check behind the door first. Let's hide in her inner sanctum; nobody dares enter there without her express permission." She indicated the door with a grubby hand.

"In there."

Grimm's hand was on the door handle almost before his rational brain had time to react; something about Drex's tone brooked no argument, and he felt almost helpless to resist her. Grimm's suspicious, well-trained, Questor's mind shot a hot, warning message into his

consciousness: Something's wrong here. I don't like this—

This is Drex! the emotional, uncontrolled portion of his brain snapped back. I'd trust her with my life —

He spun around, startled, as he heard the door close with a bang behind him. In the doorway stood Drex, wearing a cool smile, and flanked by two grey-garbed nuns bearing staves. Behind them stood the unmistakable figure of Prioress Lizaveta, whose expression suggested a cat who had cornered a particularly tasty morsel.

Grimm felt a cold, jagged spear of



horror lance through his body. His mouth moved, but he found himself incapable of speech or movement.

"Welcome to Rendale, gentlemen," the Prioress purred. "Sister Weranda played her part well, did she not?"

Guy raised War-maker and hissed. "I don't care how many ensorcelled sluts you command, old hag. Now, you're going to get what you deserve!"

"Ah, there you are, my dear bastard grandson! You didn't really think I'd let any kin of mine grow up to be a Guild Questor without taking a few precautions, did you?"

"Quondam febrifuge!"

Guy snarled and lowered his brows, but he stopped short of decisive action. His lips moved, but no sound emerged. Guy shut his eyes, baring his clenched teeth, and beads of sweat began to garland his face. After a few further moments, he groaned and sank to the floor, dropping War-maker and clutching his stomach.

"Oh, dear," Lizaveta said, smiling. "Dear Guy's developed a nasty tummy-ache. It's his own fault; he's such a naughty boy for trying to cast horrible spells on his devoted grandmother."

"Your little game's over, Prioress," Grimm growled, regaining his power of

speech. "If we don't return to our camp by dawn, our companions will attack the Priory with all the Technological power at their disposal. It's over: your little family code-phrases won't work on me, I fancy." He began to gather his power, intending to cast a spell of paralysis over the women.

"Ah, you are so right, dear Grimm," Lizaveta replied. "I have no direct hold on you ... yet. However, Sister Weranda, here, does, and she doesn't want you to attack me, do you, my dear?" She's trying to confuse me, Grimm thought, trying to concentrate on his spell. However, no matter how he tried, he could not seem to focus on his magic.

"You wouldn't cast a spell on me, would you, darling?" Drexelica said, and Grimm could not resist the urge to look into those innocent eyes.

"What's the matter with you, Drex?" he gasped, abandoning the struggle to control his wayward powers.

"You're a fighter—so fight her!"

"My name is Weranda, Guild scum," Drex declared. "I really can't tell what I ever saw in you. Mother Lizaveta has shown me how you tried to enslave me. All I feel now for you is utter contempt, you damned rapist!"

She spat at him, and Grimm, feeling

confused and weak, shook his head in disbelief as the spittle ran down his face.

"Oh, and don't hold out too much hope for that bunch of misfits you call friends," she said. "They'll soon have their own problems to deal with. They'll be much too busy to worry about you." Lizaveta said, "Sisters, you may begin." The two nuns stepped forward and acted in unison, slamming their staves into his stomach. As Grimm groaned and collapsed onto his knees, the true beating began, each blow causing pain beyond his imagining. He held on for as long as he could, trying to protect his head, his entrails and his manhood, but the blows

came in quick succession, too quickly for him to react. At last, a solid blow contacted his right temple and he fell into the welcoming arms of Morpheus.

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## **Chapter 2: Despair**

Grimm awoke to the cold shock of a jet of water in his face. He gasped at the icy impact and forced his crusted eyelids open. Drexelica stood before him, holding an empty bucket. In place of her grubby street clothes, she wore a simple, white habit and a wimple.

Prioress Lizaveta stood behind her, and Grimm tried to leap to his feet, but he

could not. Looking down, he saw the strong ropes binding him to a sturdy chair bolted to the stone floor. He tested his bonds and found them quite unyielding. His injuries were painful, but none seemed incapacitating.

"Now, you may imagine that a simple Questor spell will have those ropes off you in a trice," Lizaveta said. "However, while you have been lounging there at your ease, Sister Weranda has used her link with you to impose a few little ground rules for you to follow during your stay here.

"Rule One: you can cast no magic without express permission. Rule Two: you will obey Sister Weranda in all

things, at all times. Rule Three: you cannot cast mind-changing, offensive or incapacitating magic on either of us. This final condition overrides the other two."

Grimm felt an upsurge of hope; his mind seemed unimpaired. He remembered the euphoric sense of intoxication he had felt while under Madeleine's spell at High Lodge, and he felt no such disorientation now.

If Lizaveta felt that confident, he thought, she'd have ordered Drex to make me obey her, instead. Still, I'd better play along with her.

"So what happens now?" he croaked



through dry, cracked lips, putting as much resigned despair as he could into his voice. "Why don't you just kill me?"

"I may do so in time, Questor Grimm, but I have a job for you first. You're going to kill Lord Horin for me." She smiled, revealing a set of small, yellowed teeth.

She's insane, Grimm thought. I know a little of how Geomantic magic works, and I know it can't force someone to do something he hasn't at least half a mind to do. She can't make me kill Horin—she can't!

"He doesn't believe you, Reverend Mother," Drex said. "May I give Grimm

a demonstration?" Lizaveta nodded. "Of course, Sister Weranda, please continue."

Drex leaned towards Grimm with her face inches away from his. "How pathetic you look, Grimm." She laughed, but the sound was a harsh, hollow imitation of her normal laugh.

"I want you to cast a spell of light," she said, "just a harmless little glowing ball, nothing more. I've seen you do that a few times now."

Grimm nodded. They'll never know if I cast a Light spell or not, he thought. Still, perhaps I'll play along a little longer, to make them think they really have me

cowed.

He had no need of his personal spell-language for such a basic spell; all he needed was a simple effort of will.

In a moment, the glowing, blue sphere appeared, hovering over his head like a guardian angel.

"Very good," Drex said, clapping her hands in a parody of congratulations. "Perhaps you thought of using a different spell; a more potent one?"

Grimm's heart leapt, but he kept his expression impassive.

Is Drex reading my mind? Surely not; if

she wanted to convince me of that, she'd have told me before now.

"I'd be lying if I said I hadn't," he said aloud. "But what's the point? You seem to have every advantage over me."

"I thought you'd say that," the girl said. "Well; perhaps we could take things a little further. Reverend Mother, may I show Master Afelnor the full extent of our control over him?" Lizaveta nodded. "Please do, Sister."

"Now, Grimm," Drex said, "I order you to put Mother Lizaveta and me to sleep with your magic." Grimm hesitated. "You might hurt yourself when you fall, Drex," he said. "I wouldn't want that."

"We will sit during the exercise." Lizaveta fetched a pair of stools from the corner of the chamber. The two women sat opposite Grimm.

"Well, go ahead, Grimm," Drex said. "Do as I told you. We can't hurt ourselves now." They really think I'm ensorcelled!

The mage considered the characteristics of impending sleep: heavy eyelids, wandering thoughts and lassitude. Now visualising the effect he wanted, he let the energies within him build and concentrate, confident that his Questor language would pattern it in the correct fashion. He had no direct control over what he shouted when casting, but it

always achieved the desired effect. Just a pinch of power; I don't want to put Drex in a coma, he thought, readying himself to release his spell.

Nothing emerged from his lips, and Grimm blinked in surprise. He felt the ordered threads of thaumaturgic force awaiting his bidding, but he could not unleash them. The knot of energy expanded, swelling like a bone-dry, sponge pressed into a sheet and dropped in water. His heart began to pound. I can't turn it off! I can't—

With the discipline of a battle-hardened Mage Questor, Grimm crushed his rising panic, trying to concentrate on the task at

hand. He shut his eyes and tried to force himself to relax, a seeming impossibility for a Secular, perhaps, but not for a Guild Mage. Nonetheless, the power within him began to rise to incredible, uncontrollable levels.

It's a Resonance! I'm trapped inside it, and I can't stop it!

This time, the traitorous, terrified thought went unchallenged. Grimm now knew he was fighting for his life. He felt as if his body and soul were trying to explode into a million pieces, and he shuddered with the effort to contain them. Sweat ran down Grimm's face as he struggled to contain the roiling forces within him.

"Help me!" The strangled, desperate cry seemed to come from far away, but the mage knew this hoarse, terrified voice was his.

"All right, Grimm; you can stop now."

In an instant, Grimm regained control of his magic, dispersing it into harmless motes within his mind. For several moments, he rolled in his chair, incapable of speech as he drew whooping gasps of air into his burning lungs.

Drex smiled. "Do you see, Grimm? I have total control over you and your emotions. Back in your camp, I found it



so easy to manipulate your emotions. When I wanted you angry, you were angry. When I wanted you to crawl, you fawned like a naughty puppy seeking forgiveness. Your infatuation for me gives me all the control I need."

"I never knew you liked dogs so much, Drex," Grimm croaked. "I'll buy you one when we're out of this." Drexelica leapt to her feet and lunged towards the Questor, slapping him hard on the left cheek. Grimm ignored the brief burning; he had suffered far worse physical punishment in his time.

"My name is Weranda!" she screamed. "Don't ever be flippant with me again, rapist!"

"So I'm a rapist, am I? I seem to remember our physical relationship was your idea, my darling." Drex screwed up her face in an expression of wild, unreasoning hatred, drawing back her small, clenched fist to strike again.

Yes, get angry, Drex! Grimm thought, willing her to hit him. Forget whatever Lizaveta told you and fight!

Lizaveta took Drex's right wrist in her scrawny hand. "You'll never hurt him that way, Sister. This creature is a Mage Questor! I'm sure he's been through a lot worse than being pummelled by a girl; even a witch such as you."

Drexelica dipped into a deep curtsy as soon as the Prioress released her. "Forgive me, Reverend Mother," she said, almost touching her forehead to the floor. "I lost control of my emotions, and I beg forgiveness."

Grimm's head lolled onto his heaving chest, and he knew true desolation. Drex had not even put up a token fight against Lizaveta's influence. He burned with shame that his former lover had been able to mould his behaviour with such ease.

"I will overlook your transgression on this occasion." Lizaveta's voice sounded like footsteps crunching through a carpet of desiccated corpses. "Just remember,

Sister Weranda: women's emotions are like a free, trickling stream; those of men are like a dammed lake, waiting to be released. Women use their emotions; men are controlled by them.

"You were correct to chastise your subject for insolence, Sister, but incorrect in your choice of method. Your link with the subject is the emotion he feels for you; you maintain that link only through the iron control of your own will. Always remember that."

"I will, Reverend Mother," Drex replied, sinking deeper into her curtsy.

"You may leave us for the time being, Sister," Lizaveta said. "The others of the

Score may require your assistance in dealing with Afelnor's friends. I understand the spell is quite potent. I will call you if I need you again."

"May I ask the form of this spell, Reverend Mother?"

"Indeed, my dear; at this moment, the ground is opening up all around them, disgorging an army of undead warriors, all thirsting for blood. The name of Merrydeath Road is no mere jest. Your friends stand no chance at all."

Grimm shivered. He, like many others, had an ingrained, instinctive horror of zombies. He knew from the Deeds of the Questors that such beings existed, and

that they knew neither fear nor the slightest concept of surrender.

Perhaps Necromancer Numal will know how to deal with them. After all, he reasoned, Numal's imposed discipline involved communication with the dead. Nonetheless, Grimm had severe doubts about Numal's courage.

As Drexelica backed out of the room and closed the door, Grimm felt his entrails begin to quiver. Tied to his chair, bereft of magic except what his captors allowed him, he knew true despair. Lizaveta rose from her chair and walked slowly around the trussed magic-user. "So, the mighty Loras Afelnor's grandson is mine at last. You and I will

soon know each other well, my dear; very well indeed."

"Burn in Hell, witch." Grimm knew it was a feeble sally, but it made him feel a little better. "You can't make me do anything I don't want to do, and I have no intention of killing Horin. He's not suffering an agonising decline like Prelate Geral was, and you'll never convince me otherwise." Lizaveta clapped her hands. "Excellent! Domination is always more effective when the subject fights back. Sister Weranda didn't surrender to the Order for quite some time. She needed to be broken, as do you.

"After that, you'll come to love me as you've never loved before."

"Never!" Grimm vowed. "All I want is to see you die, hag."

Lizaveta smiled and muttered a few strange words. Grimm shuddered as if a projectile had hit him, and he gasped. His heart pounded and his tongue, already dry, felt like a lump of wood. He could not tear his eyes from the wizened old woman.

"This is infatuation, Grimm." Lizaveta's voice did not seem as harsh and unpleasant as it once had. "The first manifestation of love."



"I feel it, Prioress," Grimm forced the words past his parched lips and tongue, "but I still detest you. It's a false emotion. It comes from you, not from me."

"Shall we kiss him?" the Prioress crooned, leaning close to Grimm, her lips only inches away from his.

"Shall we make sweet communion together?"

"If you try, I'll bite your tongue off!"

Lizaveta laughed, and Grimm fought to retain his hatred for the Prioress. He dug his fingernails into his palms and bit his lower lip hard, denying the

overwhelming sensations of desire. I am a Mage Questor! he screamed inside his head. She cannot overcome my will, however powerful she may be!

"I believe you could, young Afelnor," the nun said. "You are indeed powerful, as I hoped, so I won't risk you breaking the control we have over you. Changing your mind will be a challenge, and I have never been one to shrink from a challenge. I am also very, very patient."

"So am I." Grimm gasped. "So why not spare us both the bother? The spells you placed on me only worked because I didn't want to hurt Drex, and I don't want to kill the Dominie. You can't make me kill him, so forget the idea. Thorn will

never be Dominie as long as I have breath in my body." Lizaveta cackled again, this time shaking with mirth as tears rolled down her cheeks. "My traitorous son thinks I know so little of his pathetic machinations, but I know full well he intended you to kill me so I would leave him in peace. Thorn is no longer my son, and he lives only because it amuses me to let him think he knows something I don't. I have tolerated his disobedience and treachery for long enough. I don't care what happens to him at all."

Grimm felt a cold shock tingle through his nervous system. "Then why do you still want me to kill Horin, if Thorn isn't

to take his place?"

"I have another candidate for the role, Lord Mage. He is a poor specimen, but I think I will find him far easier to control than my traitorous son. Also, unlike Thorn, he has ambition. I can work on that desire with ease."

"Not Guy!" Grimm screamed, his heart pounding. "If that egotistic, petty oaf ever becomes Dominie..." He could not bring himself to think of the consequences.

"That's not something you need to worry about, Grimm Afelnor. I learnt much from dealing with Loras, I don't need to worry about your death revealing my

magic this time. I shall use neither Geas nor Compulsion, my dear. By the time you commit the act, you will truly believe that what you are doing is right.

"You will stand trial and condemn yourself, with joy running through your heart as you do so. You will be condemned to death and executed as a traitor, and Guy will rise in the eyes of the Guild, even if he is not declared Dominie on the spot after discovering your treason. The evidence, of course, will be absolutely incontrovertible."

She's insane. I'm in the hands of a madwoman, and I can't escape!

"And now, my darling Questor, we need

to work on making you love me; and you will love me." Thribble! Surely Thribble will find a way out of this! I'll bet he's sneaking around the Priory even now!

"If you are wondering about your charming little pet imp," the Prioress said, "don't worry; we discovered and captured him shortly after you came here. He is a most engaging little toy, and I will take great care of him."

She can read my mind! The thought blazed through the young mage's cerebrum like a raging forest fire. He was truly helpless!

Grimm gritted his teeth and waited for

the inevitable emotional assault. He had no idea what he could do to overcome this lunatic, but he intended to fight to the last iota of his resistance.

"Shall we begin?" the old woman said, as if offering some great treat. "Fight me as much as you wish—we have many avenues to explore. This, for example, is self-pity, something I'm sure you know well..."

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## **Chapter 3: Success!**

Magemaster Kargan wanted a hot bath more than anything else in the world. His robes were stiff with dried perspiration,

and his grey hair hung in bedraggled tendrils.

The Great Spell cast on Loras so long ago remained intact, but Kargan was proud of the seven hard-won gold rings on his staff, Seeker: he had no intention of surrendering before he had tried every suitable spell at his command.

After an hour spent in casting one fruitless spell after another, he located the block on the former Questor's abilities, which he visualised as an iron clamp constraining Loras' psyche. However, Kargan knew that finding the mental impediment was one thing, but removing it was another. He had used all the power he had poured into Seeker,



and he had been forced to use Loras as a human battery; fortunately, the former Questor had plenty to spare after decades as an enforced Secular. The Magemaster had hoped to be able to remove the block by a series of Persuasions and Easements, cajoling, enticing and commanding the barrier as if it were a living thing, but he had failed so far. The Magemaster tried to relax for a few moments, running through the list of spells he had memorised after half a Secular lifetime in the Craft.

Sural's Freedom? No: that's just a tertiary adjunct to Barin's spell, and I've already tried that in the primary case.

Hap's Assertion? Orgel's Clarifier? No, they're Internal spells, and I doubt I could strengthen either of them to External form without months of research...

I'm going about this the wrong way, he told himself, fighting frustration and a sense of impotence. I've been gently pushing and pulling at Loras' mind or at the block, trying to ease it off like a mother trying to remove a saucepan from a child's head. I really need to shatter the block... How can I do that without shattering Loras' mind, too?

Kargan almost gasped as the realisation came to him; if Loras' soul was absent from his body, he could hammer and

batter the block to his heart's content.

Kor's Mind-Steal! I'd have to act fast, but—

"Do you have a solution yet, Magemaster Kargan?"

"Perhaps, Master Loras, if you're willing to take a risk."

"Just what risk would I be taking, Magemaster?"

Kargan shrugged. "Maybe even your mortal life, Loras. I've gone easy on the block so far, because I've worried above all about damaging your mind. However, I know a spell capable of extracting your

innermost mind and memories into Seeker. It would be a hazardous undertaking; every minute's delay will increase the risk that your body will refuse to accept your mind back again."

"You took my soul from my body with that time-travelling spell, Magemaster Kargan, did you not? I feel no ill effects from that."

Kargan shook his head. "That was different. This spell would strip your soul bare while leaving it in your body. After a while, the mindless soul will begin to assert itself, resisting the invasion of your mind. How long we have before the resistance becomes too strong depends upon your willpower.

Without a body, your mind will begin to wither and die."

The Mentalist paused for a moment to let this sink in before continuing. "Another, lesser risk is that you will resist the spell. I need your utmost co-operation. You'll need a lot of willpower to submit to it." Loras rolled his eyes. "I was a Mage Questor, and such men are renowned for their willpower. I accept the risk if you will."

"I don't know how long we have," Kargan confessed. "It could be hours or minutes."

"Do it, Magemaster Kargan. I absolve you of any and all consequences. I feel

imprisoned and powerless, and I wish to be free."

"Very well, Master Loras." Kargan nodded and sighed. "I will try this for your sake."

"For the record," the burly smith said, "I thank you with all my heart for your thaumaturgic skills and your attempts on my behalf. Drima has given her assent to these activities, whatever happens." Kargan sat for a moment in silence, readying his mind. At last, he nodded.

"Place your right hand on Seeker, and give me your will," he said. Loras nodded and put his hand on the staff's brass-capped extremity.

Kargan began to chant, the runic syllables tumbling from his mouth in a cool, melodious tenor.

"Sha-ra-kak-oh-ma-do..." he began, ignoring the rivulets of sweat trickling down his face. The least tremor or hesitation could ruin the spell.

He sensed the personality within Loras' soul; every memory, every fleeting expression, every factor that contributed to the man's being. Still chanting the complex sequence of runes, he pulled at the mind, feeling it pop into Seeker as he trilled the last three syllables.

He felt no pain or nausea: the spell was good. Now, there was no time to waste.

Drawing strength from the smith's drained body; Kargan located the mental block and began to chant anew. This was no melodious incantation, but an insistent drone. The Magemaster hammered, chipped and slammed the magical clamp, pouring destructive strength into it for minute after long minute. Come on; break, you bastard! Break!

With a huge access of relief, as if he had rid himself of a troublesome, unyielding tooth after weeks of relentless pain, he felt the magical structure crumble and shatter. Loras' soul is free at last!

Don't sit around congratulating yourself—get him out of there! Kargan's ever-



present mental guard screamed. Move, Mentalist!

With a mental push, something no Secular could ever understand, Kargan impelled the imprisoned psyche back to its body: he fell back in his chair, dropping Seeker to the stone floor. His vision blurring, he saw Loras lying back with a dull, fixed smile on his face. Had the smith's soul rejected its burden? Had the Magemaster failed?

"Master Loras, speak to me!" he croaked, panic rising within him like a bubble of sulphurous gas in a hot column of lava. "Are you there?"

Loras' mouth moved, but no coherent

speech emerged. Kargan felt the cold, slimy tentacles of pure horror running through him; he had failed, failed, failed. The Magemaster lowered his head into his hands and mourned the loss of a good man.

"Mmstilere..."

Kargan looked up with a sudden jerk: this was more than an idiot's random mumbling. He looked closely into the smith's eyes; they were dull, but clearing, and they fastened upon his own. Loras coughed, blinked and sat up.

"I am still here," the smith said with care, shaking his head as if to shoo away a wasp. The Magemaster almost cried

with relief. "Did your spell succeed?"

Kargan shrugged. "There's only one way to tell."

Loras levered himself into a sitting position, but his eyes were now bright and focused. "Let me try something..." he muttered. For several moments, the smith sat on the mattress, his expression tense and pensive.

As Kargan waited with bated breath, Loras cried, "Japlya-redeteris!" Nothing happened, and the smith's shoulders sagged.

"How did that feel?" Kargan asked, his voice soft and cautious.

Loras looked at the ceiling and shrugged. "I felt the power gathering, just as it always used to, and it drew my special Questor spell-language from me. I was trying to create a simple ball of light, but I failed. Whether that was because of a miscast, or because the block remains, I do not know." Kargan rubbed his chin. "If you cast a simple runic spell, instead of one of those bizarre Questor concoctions, you'd know soon enough, Loras."

Every 'normal' spell carried a penalty for a miscast, ranging from a mild pang to the agonised death of the caster, depending on the power used. Only Questors, with their unique form of

magic, seemed immune to such punishment.

"Do you remember the Minor Magic Light spell?"

"How could I ever forget it?" Loras rolled his eyes. "Magemaster Tomas hammered that spell into me day after day"

Kargan nodded. "Tomas was my Neophyte tutor. He was a very old man then, but strict.

"Try the Light spell, Master Loras. You'll soon know if you still have magic." Loras' lips moved in silence for a moment, and he nodded his head in a

complex rhythm as he rehearsed the spell in his mind.

"Ap-chet-jak-tat-de-ran!"

The spell was simple enough, but the tricky cadence held several traps for the lazy or inattentive Student. Even before the gentle, formless glow appeared in the centre of the room, Kargan's critical ears knew the chant was perfect.

Loras' eyes widened in disbelief, and Kargan clapped his hands in pure joy. I've done it! The thought blazed in the Mentalist's head with an intensity that far outshone the spell's feeble glow.

"Welcome back, Questor Loras!"

Kargan said, feeling a broad smile spreading across his face. Loras snuffed out the spell, cried, "Puridemendyuramat!", and gestured towards the small fireplace in the bedroom. The paper and kindling exploded from the grate, and Kargan ducked to avoid a flaming, splintered fragment of wood that flew over his head.

"We need to work a little on your control, Afelnor," the Mentalist said in a parody of his Magemaster's tone. "But I believe you understand the basic principle."

"You did it, Magemaster Kargan! I am a Questor again!" Loras wheeled and grabbed the Mentalist in bear-like arms,

crushing the breath from Kargan.

"I am Loras Firelord!"

The Magemaster saw bright motes dancing before his eyes, but the awful pressure on his ribs eased, and he drew a rasping breath. For once in his life, Kargan could not think of a thing to say. The Questor regarded his scarred, shovel-like hands as if noticing them for the first time.

"You lack two important things, Questor Loras:" Kargan said softly, "a Guild Ring and a Mage Staff. Questor Grimm bears the former, but you know what to do about the latter." Loras nodded. "Blade must be buried somewhere in the



bowels of Arnor House. Even when the Conclave took my powers away, they could not destroy Blade, of course." Kargan nodded: once forged by magic, such a weapon could never be destroyed while its creator lived. Wherever hidden, a Mage Staff could not be concealed from its rightful owner: if it would fly to his hand if called, or, if the path was blocked, it would teleport to him, bypassing any intervening obstructions. Loras bit his lip and called, "Blade! Come to me!"

\* \* \* \*

Thorn yawned and wandered down to the lower levels of the House. Today, he thought, he would look in on the two

renegade mages, Magemaster Crohn and Questor Dalquist.

They should be softened up by now.

He had given Questor Xylox and Magemaster Faffel orders to allow the two prisoners no rest, and they had alternated watches for three days now. Sleepless and imprisoned in their iron-walled cells—pure iron being the only element capable of suppressing magic—Dalquist and Crohn should be groggy and confused now.

Thorn would ensure they were properly washed and dressed before they appeared before the Presidium, but he wanted them subdued and befuddled

when they came to trial.

They should soon be ready for preliminary interrogation, he thought, as he descended the stone staircase from his private chamber. Kargan's the senior Mentalist; I'll appoint him to carry out the first interrogation.

The Prelate stepped into the Great Hall, to see Doorkeeper shambling towards the Scholasticate.

"Good morning, Doorkeeper!" he carolled, feeling in good humour.

Doorkeeper spun around like a frightened rabbit fearing that a weasel might be behind him.

"Good morning, yes, a very good morning to you, Lord Prelate!" he twittered. "All is well, as far as I know; still, there may be some naughty Students playing pranks during the holiday! You know what boys are like, Lord Prelate; always seeking some kind of mischief —"

"Thank you, Doorkeeper. Boys will be boys, I suppose."

"My work is never done," Doorkeeper complained. "I do my best to ensure that proper House protocol is—"

"Doorkeeper," Thorn said firmly. "Please locate Magemaster Kargan and ask him to visit me at his earliest

convenience."

The old mage looked blank for a few moments before his face cleared. "Magemaster Kargan, Lord Prelate?" he said. "Why, it quite slipped my mind! He told me that he was going away for a couple of days for some research. Some kind of—"

Thorn frowned. "Research? Kargan is no Scholar! What would he need to research?" Doorkeeper seemed to shrink, and his mouth worked like that of a grounded fish gasping for air.

"That was a rhetorical question, Doorkeeper!" Thorn snapped.

"I was asking myself, not you," he explained with a sigh, as Doorkeeper's eyes widened further in apparent confusion. The addled major-domo nodded, although he still seemed baffled; this was not unusual. Thorn stopped himself from growing angry; he knew it would only confuse Doorkeeper further.

"Where is Magemaster Kargan?" he demanded.

"He is—where is it...? It involved Lord Prelate Algar, I'm sure."

"Lord Algar," Thorn said softly, as if trying to pacify a fractious child.

"Or Lord Rulec," Doorkeeper scratched

his bushy, grey eyebrows. “Yes, it was definitely Lord Rulec.

"Magemaster Kargan said he wanted to go to Kuloka, to find Lord Rulec's family records. I told him it was too far for one day, but he said—"

"Thank you, Doorkeeper," Thorn interrupted the slow-witted factotum in order to restrain his frustration.

“Do you know when Magemaster Kargan will be back?”

Doorkeeper shrugged. “He told me a day and a half,” he said, “but he's not back yet. As you know, I can always tell—”

"It can wait, Doorkeeper."

Kargan's absence bothered Thorn a little, but the man was no charity Student, required to remain on the premises at all times. Normal protocol required a Magemaster to request leave from the Senior Magemaster, but, of course, Crohn was unavailable, and Thorn had made no announcement concerning him. At least Kargan had informed Doorkeeper of his whereabouts.

It did not occur to the Prelate to inquire when the Mage Mentalist had left the House; he assumed that this had been after Thorn declared the impromptu holiday. It was perfectly reasonable that



Kargan use his free time to indulge his hobbies.

"Thank you, Doorkeeper," he said, with a faint imitation of a smile. "I will not keep you from your pressing duties any longer."

"Thank you, Lord Prelate, thank you so much. So few people understand all the work I have to do. I'm never still, never a moment's rest for me..."

Thorn waved a cool, dismissive hand and walked away from Doorkeeper, heading for the doorway to the secret dungeon level of which so few House alumni were aware. He waited by the black, pyramidal Breaking Stone,

making a show of minute inspection of the ebon surface until the major-domo shuffled out of sight, still muttering about his endless travails for the House. Looking around to ensure he remained unobserved, Thorn unlocked the door to the lower level, opened it and stepped inside. The winding steps were uneven and the light was poor, so Thorn made his way down the stairs with the greatest care. The walls and floors were damp and covered with moss and lichen, the only plants capable of growing in the low, flickering light.

By the time he reached the slimy flagstones at the foot of the stairs, his eyes had adapted to the gloom. His feet

squished as he moved along the mossy corridor.

The passageway opened up to reveal four rusty metal doors and Questor Xylox, perched on a tall stool. He wore a heavy, blue cape around his shoulders, presumably to ward off the dismal hallway's pervasive chill. As he caught sight of his Prelate, he bounded to his feet, almost losing his balance on the slick flagstones in the process.

"Greetings, Lord Prelate."

"Greetings, Questor Xylox. How goes the vigil?"

"Slowly, Prelate Thorn. The traitors are

in separate cells, as you commanded, and I check on each of them every hour. If they appear asleep or drowsy, I rouse them. However, they remain defiant. This is hard work."

Thorn nodded. "Patience, good Questor. Their treachery is undeniable, but we must persuade the miscreants to acknowledge their wrongdoing before trying them. I trust you and Magemaster Faffel to convince them to admit their treason."

"Lord Prelate," Xylox said. "I thank you for the trust you have placed in me." Thorn started at a sudden banging from behind one of the doors. Xylox jumped into action, battering the door with his

staff.

"Be still, traitor!" he shouted, and the noise stopped.

Xylox sighed. "It is like this all day, Lord Prelate."

Thorn patted the mage on his shoulder with what he hoped was a gesture of paternal comfort.

"You serve your House and your Guild well, Questor Xylox. It will be remembered, I promise you." The Prelate stepped carefully to the end of the corridor and took a small key from his pocket. Looking round to check that Xylox remained focused on his duty, he

opened the door and walked into a small room lined with shelves.

My charms, he thought, regarding the objects on the dusty shelves: a bizarre collection of curios from his past. He picked up a boxy, fanged skull the size of a large dog's, a relic of his first Quest and fondled the bleached skull with something approaching reverence.

Olaf was slow to react when the were-beast attacked the party. However, my spell dispatched the creature in an instant; I reacted as quickly as thought. I was young, strong, swift and fearless then. Thorn sighed. I feared nothing but Mother's wrath. I thought the old bitch might be pleased when I gained the first

gold ring on my staff, but all she did was to remind me that Loras had two on his. Whatever I did was never enough for her.

He put down the skull and turned to face the middle shelf opposite the door. Its sole occupant was a black rod, six feet in length, with brass-bound ends. The staff's brass shoes were now dull and tarnished, and the once-gleaming black wood was now covered in dust—to touch another mage's staff without his explicit permission was to court injury, or even death—but the seven gold rings at the right-hand end still shone dimly through the grime.

I should have stood by you, Loras, and we could have defeated Mother together. I just wish it hadn't taken me so long to realise that. If only we'd—

Thorn felt his heart surge as the staff shimmered and vanished. He needed to exert the utmost control over his bladder and bowels so that he would not soil himself. There was only one possible explanation for the baton's disappearance: somehow, Loras had regained his powers!

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## **Chapter 4: Arguments**

Kargan had not eaten for a day and a



half, and he devoured the substantial meal before him with gusto. It was simple enough fare: thick-cut ham, boiled cabbage and home-made mustard. Nonetheless, there was plenty of it, and the Magemaster enjoyed it as much as any splendid repast from the House Refectory. Kargan leaned back in his chair and suppressed a satisfied belch. "That was excellent, Mistress Drima,"

he said with feeling.

"Not quite up to Guild standards, I imagine, Magemaster Kargan," Drima replied, smiling and revealing a set of flawless, pearl-like teeth.

"You do yourself an injustice, madam,"

the mage declared, wiping his lips and beard with his napkin. "I often suspect that our cooks disguise indifferent ingredients by smothering them with sauces and spices. You have no such need to hide the quality of your cooking. A simple meal it was, but deeply satisfying." Drima opened her mouth to speak, but her words were interrupted by the creak of a door. Kargan turned around to see Loras standing in the doorway, no longer wearing his rough smith's clothes. Instead of patched, stained dungarees, he wore a full set of scarlet, silk robes. The full sleeves and voluminous cowl might have looked foppish on a lesser man, but not on the tall, muscular Loras. Black eyes blazed

from under the cowl, as if daring any man to mock their owner. The former Questor looked almost terrifying in his intensity and his bearing. The seven-ringed Mage Staff in Loras' right hand completed the image of a powerful and dangerous master of thaumaturgy.

Drima's eyes widened and her jaw dropped, as if she had never laid eyes on this red-clad man before in her life.

"Loras!" she exclaimed. "You look so..."

"Dangerous," Kargan added, after a few moments.

"I am," the smith said in a cool voice. "I am a Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank,

and I was betrayed by a man who swore undying brotherhood to me—a man I regarded as my most loyal friend. For all these years, he allowed me to wallow in guilt and self-condemnation; a far worse punishment than the most painful death.

"Worse than what I will now do to him in the name of justice." Drima frowned. "That was a long, long time ago, Loras. Can't you just let it go?" Loras shook his head. "This evil man has authority over my ... our grandson, Drima. I pleaded with Thorn, begging him to accept Grimm. The gratitude and joy I felt when Thorn accepted him as a Student knew no bounds ... gratitude to a forsworn traitor and liar."

"You hurt, Loras, I know," Drima said, her large eyes pleading. "I've felt your pain many times, but thought it better to say nothing, even after I knew the cause.

"I've shared your anguish, my love; a hundred, a thousand times. Don't I deserve some respite?" Loras' stark, rigid expression softened and he leant to cup his wife's chin in his right hand. He gazed into her wide, hopeful eyes for many moments, after which he kissed her on the lips with evident passion. Kargan looked at a knot in the floor for a few moments; he would not dream of lessening the moment's impact by intruding.

At last, from the corner of his eye,

Kargan saw the smith pull gently away from his wife and straighten up.

"I love you more than anything in the world, Drima," Loras said, his voice soft. "I meant every word of my marriage oath to you, and I still do."

Drima started to speak. "In that case, Loras—"

Loras silenced her by raising his right index finger to his lips.

"Please let me finish," the Questor said. "I consider any sworn vow an unbreakable covenant, Drima; it is how I was brought up. However, before ever I met you, I swore another oath on my

eternal soul, and I have suffered these past thirty years, believing that I betrayed it. You have no idea how much pain that caused me; part of me died when I was dismissed from the Guild as a renegade, a forsworn traitor.

"I believe with all my heart that only meeting you stopped me from taking my life. For that, and for your indefatigable, uncomplaining support during the difficult years we have spent together, I thank you more than words can ever express."

Loras wiped his brow with a steady hand.

"Nonetheless," he continued, in a calm

voice, "there is a canker at the heart of the Guild, a sickness that must be eradicated before it infects all my former brethren and my beloved grandson. I must face Thorn and compel him to confess to the Lord Dominie ... or kill him."

Drima looked close to tears, her face reddening with emotion. "But why you, Loras? Can't you just tell the Dominie the truth of the matter and let him resolve the issue?"

"The Presidium," the smith said, "is unlikely to accept the word of a convicted turncoat."

"Suppose you do have to fight Thorn,"



Drima said, her hands on her hips. "You are still a strong man, but you've cast no magic for three decades. What makes you think you can beat him? Even if you do, your precious Presidium will surely have you killed. What makes you think you'll even get through the House door alive?"

"I do not know." Loras shrugged. "I have mulled over the possibilities ever since I saw the truth of the matter with my own eyes. I want you to believe that I would let the past die if my disgrace were the only consideration.

"But Grimm is in Thorn's power, as are scores of innocent young Students and Neophytes. I cannot sit back and do

nothing. I must confront Thorn, for their sakes."

Drima wheeled to face Kargan. "You got Loras into this!" she screamed, ruddy-faced and angry, with such force that the Mentalist backed away from her. "Can't you make him see sense?" Does she mean, 'can I dissuade Questor Loras from this risky course of action?' he wondered. I could—just a few little runic syllables might suffice—but I won't.

He sighed; he knew he could never face himself in a mirror again if he tried to tamper with the Questor's mind; Loras was a Brother Mage who had been

grievously wronged. Arnor House itself was in the control of a traitor, and two dedicated men, Crohn and Dalquist, were even now in his hands. He looked down at the small, angry woman and he felt her pain; all Mistress Drima wanted was a normal, peaceful life. The life of a mage was often tumultuous, and the demands of House and Guild must place a great strain on any emotional relationship. A wife and family were hostages to fate, and it was inevitable that at some point the thaumaturge would need to make a choice between the imperatives of the heart and the needs of the Guild. Marriage was not forbidden, but a married man was finished as an active mage. Although Kargan often

yearned to settle down with a good woman, he understood why he could not.

"I could, Mistress Drima," he said, "but I won't. It's not my decision to make; this is between you and your husband."

"Damn you, mage!" Drima shouted, her cheeks wet. "Damn you and your bloody House, you unfeeling bastard! What does your sexless, loveless Guild know about feelings and relationships? Does it care?"

"That is enough, Drima," Loras rumbled, interposing himself between his wife and Kargan. "Do not blame Magemaster Kargan for my decision; all he did was to place the facts before me."

"All he did was to create turmoil where we had peace, Loras," Drima said in a lower voice, shaking with emotion. "Our life together was often hard, but I accepted that. For years, I shared your pain and shame, trying to support you as best I could.

"When Sammel was born, I thought it would bring stability to our lives. All that seemed to interest you was whether he had mage power."

"That is unfair, Drima, and you know it!" Loras snapped. "I loved Sammel as much as any father ever could. All I wanted was for him to have the best possible start in life. Yes, I wanted to know if the power existed within him,

and I was overjoyed when the blood proved true.

"However, if you remember, we discussed sending Sammel to the House when he was seven, but you convinced me to keep him with us. I felt disappointed, but I did not demur; he was a strong lad, happy with life in the smithy. After our discussion, I thought of nothing but training him to take my place here, and I never raised the subject again. I felt so proud when Sammel gained his trade credentials, and even more so when he married Shura, and they bore us a grandson."

"And then he died," Drima replied, her

voice cold and brittle. "He and Shura died in a cart you built—" Loras seemed to slump, as if life had left him, and his face turned putty-grey. He slapped a hand to his mouth, and he turned away from his wife.

"Loras, I'm sorry!" Drima's face lost its ruby cast, and her voice softened. "That was completely unfair of me; of course the accident wasn't your fault. But can't you see how much I care about you? We've lost our son and daughter-in-law, and I couldn't face it if I lost you, too."

"What about Grimm?" Loras asked. "I felt the same sorrow and loss you did when we sent him away to Arnor; you know I did. But he was not suited to

smithy life, and you could only teach him so much of less physical activities. Yes, I felt hope that the lad might grow to expunge my ... my guilt, but that was never why I sent him to Arnor."

"You deceived me, Loras." Drima cupped her right hand under the smith's chin and turned his face towards her own. "I knew enough of your past by then: your mutterings during all those nightmares told me all I needed to know. I went along with your lies because I felt your pain. But you deceived me, nonetheless."

Loras wrenched his head away from her guiding hand, and the empathic Kargan



felt his pain like a knife-thrust through his own vitals.

The smith's voice trembled as he spoke: "I know, Drima, and I feel shame for that; a shame greater than I ever felt for what ... for what I thought I had done. I have no right to ask this, but I beg you to believe that this is not for me and my pride alone. This is for all the Students, Neophytes, Adepts and Mages whose lives will be perverted and turned by Thorn's influence; but, most of all, it is for the sake of our grandson.

"I leave for Arnor House to do what I know is right, Drima; if it is with your blessing, I welcome that more than you can imagine. However, if I have to do

this alone, without your support, then so be it. Perhaps I will lose; maybe I will die; but I will risk that in order to expose Thorn's treachery.

"I am leaving, Drima, and I ask you to forgive me for what I have done, and for what I must do." Drima laughed, but there was no humour in the harsh sound. "Of course I forgive you, Loras," she said, with a catch in her voice. "I don't agree, and if I thought I had the slightest chance of changing your stubborn, mule-like mind, I'd fight to the end of the world to dissuade you. Still, I know how hard it is to persuade you when your mind's made up, so all I can do is to go along with this insane plan." Her eyes

filled with tears once more as she whispered, "I love you, you pig-headed idiot." Loras faced his wife, and Kargan saw the traces of moisture on the Questor's face, too. "I love you, too, Drima; I love you as much as life itself."

"Go, then!" the old lady cried. "Just promise me that you won't be seduced by the damned House or the Guild while you're away. If I—"

Loras stopped Drima's mouth with his own, and Kargan stared at the ceiling, wishing he were somewhere else. After many moments, he lowered his gaze, as he felt a firm tap on his right shoulder.

"We are leaving, Magemaster," Loras

said, his expression calm, almost beatific. "I fancy I can take us to the House faster than a pair of horses.

"Woman; wife; beloved: believe me when I tell you that no power on Earth can persuade me to stay away as long as I have you waiting for me."

"Go, Loras," Drima whispered. "Take care of yourself."

"Always, my love. Be sure of it." Loras took a firm grip on his staff and turned to Kargan.

"Put your arms around my neck, Magemaster," he said, "and trust me—both of you." Kargan nodded, not trusting

himself to speak. He did as Loras bade him, as the smith began a guttural, droning, Questor chant that seemed to come from the centre of his chest: "Ominaomadiya-redessamu..." As a deep-blue coruscation began to play around him, Kargan heard Drima muttering. He could not make out the words, but her expression made her meaning clear. The Magemaster suppressed a pang of envy at the love between Drima and her husband, an emotion he would never experience.

"...rumandatana-getiyu..." The walls of the smithy blurred, and the very air seemed to take on a soupy, heavy consistency.

"...simonumat'ur-gamnusim..."

Kargan felt a moment of panic as the walls, ceiling and floor disappeared, to be replaced by a black void filled with blue motes. He knew he was moving, but without any sense of direction.

"...amatumonimasadata!"

Kargan's stomach lurched as he felt sudden discontinuity and deceleration, and he found his feet again on firm ground.

The Magemaster closed his eyes and gulped, seized by momentary nausea. When he opened them again, he saw the stark, forbidding face of Arnor House.

Even in the golden, evening light, he saw only corruption and senescence in the ancient fortress' blurred outlines. Releasing the Questor, Kargan staggered and suppressed a sudden upsurge of hot, acrid bile within him. He swallowed, fighting his protesting body's demands.

"We are ... home, Magemaster Kargan," Loras said, seemingly none the worse for the dizzying journey.

"I believe you hold the key."

Kargan, his head spinning, held up his left hand with its blue-gold Guild ring. He stared at it for a few moments: the band which showed his love and dedication to a corrupted House; the

band which denied him a normal life.

"I am ready, Questor Loras," he muttered, moving his left palm towards the black, oaken portal. The door swung open in a smooth, silent arc, and saw the hunched figure of Doorkeeper rushing towards the entrance.

"Welcome; welcome back, Brother Mage," the beaming major-domo crowed. "It is good to—" Loras, resplendent and terrifying in his scarlet apparel, stepped from the shadows. "Greetings, Mage Doorkeeper. I trust you are well."

Doorkeeper's smile fell; he looked from the Questor to the Magemaster and back



again, his expression like that of a confused, frightened child.

In a dull voice he said, "Greetings, Questor Loras. I am under orders to report your arrival to Lord Thorn."

Before Kargan or Loras could protest, the old man shuffled away with surprising speed, and they were left alone.

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## **Chapter 5: Undead Or Alive**

General Quelgrum had stood watch many times in his long life. He had often felt the cold, leaden sensation of fearful

anticipation in the pit of his stomach; at other times, he felt only boredom. The old soldier thought he had experienced the gamut of human feeling and emotion, but something seemed different about this watch: a sick sensation of unnameable dread. The stark, skeletal trees around the camp creaked in the evening breeze, and Quelgrum heard the eerie, intermittent cries of a screech-owl in the distance.

However, these sounds did not disturb him as much as the utter, cloying silence that clung between them. At last, the owl finished its mournful ululation and the breeze died away; silence reigned, and the General shivered, as if the very

stillness were seeping into his bones.

Something's coming, he thought, although he had never before believed in fortune-tellers, predestination or precognition. Something bad.

At the sudden rustle of fallen leaves behind him, his heart leapt in his chest and he wheeled, his finger taking first pressure on the trigger of his automatic rifle, which he held at chest height, ready to fire.

"Oh, it's you, Lord Seneschal," he said, suppressing a relieved sigh.

"Who were you expecting, General? I am here to relieve you," Shakkar

rumbled, towering over the soldier.

"I don't know, Lord Seneschal," Quelgrum confessed. "I just feel a little ... jumpy tonight. If it's all the same to you, I'll stay on watch with you; I don't think I could sleep right now. Besides, I want to be ready in case Baron Grimm comes barrelling out of the Priory with a hundred screaming witches at his heels. I don't normally feel this edgy, but something seems—oh, I don't know. I suppose you think it's just an old man's addled imagination."

"Not at all, General. I, too, am concerned for the Lord Baron, Questor Guy, and Lady Drexelica."

"It's not just that," Quelgrum said, trying to put his inner disquiet into words. "It feels like—

"What was that?"

Quelgrum spun around at a faint knocking, creaking sound that seemed to come from ground level. He shot a swift glance at Shakkar, wondering if he had imagined the sound, but the demon's lowered brows and bared fangs showed that he had heard it, too.

"Who's there?" he demanded. "Show yourself!"

Now, the General heard a similar sound from his left flank, a little closer.

"Everybody up, now!" Quelgrum yelled. "Something's happening!" Another tapping, creaking sound, this time to the General's right. Quelgrum squeezed the trigger and loosed three bullets in the sound's general direction.

He heard another subterranean creak, and another.

"What is it, Sir?"

Quelgrum turned to see a breathless Sergeant Erik, his rifle in his hands.

"I don't know, Sergeant, but I don't like it."

Numal arrived, leading the blinded

Tordun by the hand. Even in the campfire's dim illumination, his face appeared pale.

"Fan out," Quelgrum ordered. "Whatever's coming, it seems to be all around us."

"It's probably just squirrels, General," Tordun said. "Just throw—" At that moment, the soldier heard a rumbling, tearing sound and the ground seemed to open up. A scant thirty feet ahead of him, Quelgrum saw a humanoid figure arise from the very earth, emitting a bone-chilling groan of hatred and anguish. The General felt the short hairs on the back of his neck stand to attention. Flakes of earth dripped from the unearthly

creature, and hot resolve replaced cold disquiet. Quelgrum squeezed the trigger of his weapon and launched a trio of bullets into the being as it stumbled towards him. The creature staggered, but it did not slow in its advance. Erik's weapon spat fire towards the advancing, shambling entity, cutting it in half. The two halves of the creature fell in opposite directions, each hitting the ground with a dull thump. However, no spray of blood accompanied the destruction.

"A zombie," Numal said in a tremulous voice, "one of the Undead! And yet I don't see any sign of Necromancy; what's causing this?"



Quelgrum saw three more beings arising from the ground: one bore a mantle of grey-green slime and dripped a rain of pale maggots; the other two were bleached skeletons. This time, the General and the Sergeant did not wait for the creatures to find their feet before firing. Swaying their weapons back and forth in sawing motions, they bisected the undead monsters in an instant. Another tremor rumbled, and more zombies appeared. Quelgrum squeezed his trigger again, and a scant five bullets emerged before he heard a dull click from his rifle. As the creatures advanced further, he forced down his rising emotions, ejected the spent magazine and pushed in another. He heard Erik's

weapon run dry as Shakkar ran forward.

The monsters scored deep gashes in the demon's sides as he tore them apart, and the Seneschal roared, perhaps more in defiance than in pain.

"If you can give us any advice on these things, Necromancer Numal, I'm sure we'd all be grateful,"

Quelgrum shouted, as he saw the mage swing his staff in a wide arc to decapitate yet another creature.

"This is outside my training and experience, General," Numal said and moaned. "If you can protect me and leave one of the creatures intact while I

try to gain control of it, I might be able to persuade it to attack the others."

The ground shivered again. "Here they come again!" shouted Erik. "I've only got three magazines left. I'm going to try a few grenades—let's see how they like that!"

Quelgrum swung his firing rifle in a wide arc—the damned things are all around us!—and he heard the dull thump of grenades exploding amongst the hordes of undead assailants. Only those creatures immediately next to the explosions seemed affected by Erik's grenades; any human within several yards would have been torn apart by the flying metal shards, but the zombies

continued to advance. Some limped, some had lost arms, but the ghastly attack did not slow.

Tordun leaped into the middle of the forward group of attackers, knocking many away with his hammer-like fists but only slowing the advance. Quelgrum heard the now-familiar groans and rumbles on all sides, and he knew panic for the first time since his extreme youth. He looked behind him to see Numal flailing with his staff like some mad reaper, and he knew the group could not last long in the midst of this awful killing ground.

The General aimed single shots at the

heads of the advancing horde, trying to conserve his ammunition; occasionally, he was rewarded by the sight of an exploding skull and a falling foe, but, more often, a shambling monster just ignored the damage.

"Get to the road and regroup, people!" Quelgrum shouted. He saw Shakkar swing around, as a group of seven zombies began to rip the cart apart behind them. "Forget it, Shakkar!" he screamed, his voice a counterpoint to the frightened, brutalised horses' whinnying, as they were torn apart by the monsters' claws. "Let's get to the road.

"Move it!"

He laid down what he hoped was a suppressing fire, joined by the reliable Sergeant, urging the small party down to the hard-packed road; surely nobody could be buried there. At last, they reached the parched thoroughfare, and Quelgrum breathed a sigh of relief; both Shakkar and Tordun had scarlet gashes on their bodies, but their wounds did not appear serious. At least the zombies moved slowly, and the road was well-lit by the bright, full moon.

"Let's hope the wagon keeps them occupied for a while," Quelgrum said. "Necromancer Numal; is there anything you can do?"

"I'll try to take control of some of the

undead creatures, General. Maybe I can persuade them to attack each other."

"Better make it fast, Lord Mage," Erik advised. "They're still moving." A large group of zombies now made its way through the undergrowth. They were still distant and their pace appeared leisurely, but Quelgrum saw more of the creatures emerging from the other side of the road.

"They're trying to outflank us!" the General said. "Let's pull back!"

"Look, General," Shakkar rumbled. "Look!"

Quelgrum's eyes followed the direction

of the pointing, taloned finger; shambling streams of the undead monsters had begun to stumble onto the road behind them. They were still at some distance, but the closing ring of zombies precluded any simple escape except towards the Priory. Numal shook his head and his forehead crinkled. "Somebody has to be controlling them," he said. "The Undead have no volition or desires."

"Well, find them!" Quelgrum commanded. "Sergeant, how many grenades do you have left?"

"A couple, Sir."

"See if you can take out the group behind



us, so we can retreat back down the road. At least we could put some distance between us and them while we decide what to do next." Erik raised his weapon and launched his remaining grenades to land behind the shambling group, which was now at least three deep. The explosions made a satisfying noise, tearing apart many of the undead assailants, but the whirling fragments had little effect on the others.

"We'll break through," the General said, hearing the relentless tread of the approaching zombies on each flank. "Lord Seneschal, will you attempt an assault on the rear group while Sergeant Erik and I try to hold back the others?"

"I'll attack them head on, General," Tordun said, his voice firm with resolve. "I can make out their outlines well enough. Perhaps friend Shakkar could fly over them and attack them from behind."

"Do it!" Quelgrum shouted, trying to contain his inner terror as he and the Sergeant fired at the flanking zombies, trying to pick their targets and aim for their heads.

Tordun launched himself at the mass of slow-moving creatures, screaming in rage as Shakkar surged into the air. Quelgrum heard the dull click of the hammer falling on the empty chamber, and he tried to remain calm as he ejected

the spent magazine and slammed in his last. He concentrated on the left flank, trusting Erik to make his shots count on the right. The stuttering bullets felled scores of the creatures, but others seemed to fill the gaps as soon as their rotting comrades fell. Still no zombies appeared from the direction of the Priory, and Quelgrum felt sure that the unseen controller was trying to lure them towards it; he was determined not to rush into a trap.

The General slung his rifle over his shoulder as the hammer clicked on the empty chamber; he heard Erik insert what must be his last magazine. Quelgrum drew his pistol, a twelve-shot

weapon, and began to fire anew. The line of creatures grew no closer as more zombies fell, but Quelgrum knew it was only a matter of time; the supply of undead seemed inexhaustible.

"It's no good, General," Tordun said, and Quelgrum saw the albino was bleeding from many deep slashes and cuts on his face. "I tried to hold them, but there are too many of them."

"What happened to Seneschal Shakkar?" Erik asked, still firing single shots.

"I don't know, Sergeant," the pale giant said, who appeared exhausted. "They hurt him badly, and he flew off."

Quelgrum felt a sharp pang of betrayal; if there was one member of the party on whom he had felt sure he could rely, it was the demon.

"I can't find the source," Numal whined, as if in deep anguish, interrupting the General's thoughts. "This just cannot be thaumaturgy."

"It must be Prioress Lizaveta's witches," Quelgrum shouted. His pistol clicked, and Quelgrum knew effective resistance was impossible. He wrestled with his emotions; only one course of action was possible; something he had done only once in his long life.

"Gentlemen, that's it," he cried, as the

flanking zombies began to spill onto the wide, moonlit road. "We'll have to surrender."

He turned towards the Priory and shouted, "Do you hear me? We surrender!" Erik gasped, but the General knew that to resist further would mean death. Silence reigned for a few moments, and Quelgrum now smelt the encroaching horde; the sickly-sweet stench of rotting flesh made him gag.

It'll soon be over, he thought, steeling himself to accept death from a hundred slashing claws. I've not had a bad life, I suppose.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Erik

holding his empty rifle like a club, Tordun trying to assume a fighter's stance, and Numal holding his staff over his head, ready to strike. Then the zombies stopped their relentless approach, a scant arm's length away from them. Quelgrum squinted down the road, and he saw a small figure, blue in the blazing moonlight, walking towards him. He felt no relief at the fact that he would not be torn apart by the zombies; just a dull, sick sense of despair. Baron Grimm had been merciful after his own victory over the General's men, after Questor Dalquist's persuasive ruse de guerre, at his desert base, but that had not lessened the pain of his capitulation.

He knew he could not expect such generosity from these foes.

The General dropped his empty pistol and raised his hands in the universal gesture of surrender. The approaching blue figure was a small, dumpy woman of middle years, dressed in a nun's formal, restrictive robes; not what Quelgrum had expected.

"I am Sister Judan," the woman said, in a contralto that Quelgrum might have considered pleasant at a more auspicious time. "I am not alone. My least cry will bring the undead creatures down upon you." With a heavy heart, Quelgrum said, "I understand, Sister Judan. We surrender; we have little



choice."

"How true," the nun said. Her voice was light and airy, but Quelgrum saw the steel in her expression; this was not a woman with whom to trifle. "You, warrior," she snapped, turning towards Erik, "drop that metallic abomination at once!"

Erik glanced towards Quelgrum. The General gave a heavy, resigned nod, and flung his own empty rifle aside, raising his hands as he did so.

Judan nodded. "That's much better," she said. "Come with me."

Tordun, swaying on his feet, growled,

but Quelgrum quelled him with a shake of his head. "We've lost, Tordun," he said. "It's all over."

"You may keep your staff, thaumaturge," Judan said to Numal. "Just remember that the least attempt at bravado will mean the end for all of you."

Quelgrum and his companions followed the small woman down the road at a snail's pace, and the zombies followed them.

Just like sheepdogs leading lambs to the slaughter, thought the old soldier.

"Why haven't you just killed us all?" he asked the nun.

Judan laughed—a merry, tinkling sound, at odds with the grim situation. “Why, we have no wish to kill you, General,” she said. “We just wish to educate you. Questor Grimm will need a retinue when he returns to High Lodge. You will be proud to accompany him when we have finished with you.” Quelgrum could not guess what Prioress Lizaveta had in store for them, but he guessed it would not be pleasant. He considered ending it all by killing Judan; they would all die at the hands of the zombies, but it might be worth it. Only one thought stopped him from committing suicide and condemning his comrades to painful death:

Our only hope lies with Baron Grimm

now. He's an impulsive lad at times, but resourceful. He wouldn't surrender without a fight. We've just got to hope he can win through.

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## **Chapter 6: Dominance or Submission**

Grimm sat cross-legged on a thin layer of straw on the floor of a small cell with a flimsy, wooden door. If this is meant to break me down, they're going about it the wrong way, he thought. This is no worse than my cell back at the House when I was a Student.

He eyed the pathetic door with some amusement; a single Questor spell would

shatter the door into dust, and he would be free to work havoc on Lizaveta and her acolytes.

The concept of retribution against the Prioress began to reverberate in his mind, and he quickly quashed the idea before it could build into a full-blown, incapacitating Resonance. Grimm drew a deep sigh.

Quelgrum, Shakkar and the others will soon realise something's wrong. Lizaveta said the Score had animated an army of corpses to attack the General and the others, but I'm pretty sure she has little comprehension of the powers of Technological weaponry. I'll bet the others are on their way here right now—

Grimm started as he heard the door creak open and he saw Drex, dressed in her cool, white robes.

"We got them," she said, her voice laden with the syrupy tone of deep satisfaction. "Nobody's coming to save you, Grimm, so put that thought out of your head, right now. Your dreams of glory are finished. How does it feel, rapist?"

Grimm narrowed his eyes, meeting Drex's gaze. Emotions swirled and eddied within him, but his predominant feeling was one of pity for the girl he still loved.

"You're as much a prisoner of Lizaveta's

schemes as I am, Drex,” he said. “What did that bitch do to you to make you—”

Drex's brows lowered; the Questor howled in anguish as he felt vicious waves of self-loathing and suicidal despair beating against the core of his being. He felt tears running unabated from his eyes as the Geomantic spell wracked him.

"Don't you dare pity me!" Her voice grew tremulous and brittle.

Grimm could only groan in response.

"Yes, I suffered," Drexelica continued, "but only so Prioress Lizaveta could undo the oppressive conditioning you

placed on me. She understands me as a fellow woman. She appreciates my talents, which is more than you ever did!

"Only by suffering will you ever understand her love and dedication to her cause." Grimm wailed and thrashed as she held the spell on him, but a thought rose up from his innermost being: I am a Mage Questor! I've suffered, too, my love. I've known torment and pain in full measure, all so I could learn to control my powers and my emotions.

I am Grimm Dragonblaster!

He stayed his thrashing limbs, accepting the induced emotions and dismissing



them. Trembling with the effort, he pushed himself to his feet, looking down at Drex.

"Lizaveta is a twisted, evil hag," he said, struggling to keep his voice level. "My grandfather spurned her, long ago, and she wants to take her revenge by possessing me in body and soul.

"She's the rapist, not me."

Grimm collapsed again, as Drex redoubled the spell's intensity. He felt his mind, his very soul, compress to a tiny bubble under the spurious sensations of self-hatred, but he would not surrender to them.

"I ... love you, Drex," he gasped, his vision blurring. "That cow knows nothing but hatred and revenge. Will you feel the same about her when she compels me to make love to her?" Colours turned to grey, then to black, but Grimm would not give up the struggle. At last, the Geomantic assault ceased, and the mage saw the wet gleam in his beloved's eyes.

"Prioress Lizaveta would never do that!" she yelled, stamping her foot in a pale the petulant manner of the shabby, adolescent street urchin Grimm had first met in the town of Griven. "And my name's Weranda!" The mage felt a hot, bright upsurge of hope; he was now the

manipulator of emotions, not Drex.

"You liked Shakkar," he said, sitting up, not tearing his eyes from hers. "You know you did. You liked General Quelgrum and Tordun, too!"

"They're all just oppressors and would-be rapists!" Drex cried, tears now rolling down her red cheeks.

"Do you remember how embarrassed Tordun was when Questor Xylox put him in the tent with you?"

Grimm demanded. "Although you couldn't have resisted him for a moment, he never laid a finger on you, and you know it!"

"Shakkar would walk through fire to protect you, as would Quelgrum: as would I. We gave you love, respect and protection; all Lizaveta has done is give you pain, and that's all she'll ever give you, until she's finished with you!"

"No!" Drex sobbed, almost bent double. Grimm knew he was winning the exchange by sheer force of will. "She's a good woman, a holy woman!"

Grimm snorted. "She's holy, sure enough: wholly corrupt! Fight her, Drex; you know I'm right!" The girl's mouth opened and closed, but no words emerged as she drew a series of whooping, convulsive breaths.

"Sister Weranda!" Lizaveta's husky voice snapped from the doorway. "Straighten up and control yourself!"

As if she were a flesh marionette, Drex jerked into an upright position in an instant, tugged by unseen strings. At once, her expression became as blank as the stone blocks of the small cell. She wiped the moisture from her cheeks and bowed her head.

"I apologise, Reverend Mother. The prisoner attempted to impose his filthy will on mine. I was weak, and I will do Penance in atonement for my lapse."

"He is a Seventh Rank Questor, Sister," the Prioress purred, stepping into the

cell. "Willpower is the cornerstone of his power. You erred in seeking to engage him in conversation.

"During two hours' Penance—a Second Level Penance should suffice—I wish you to meditate on your error. From now on, you will confine your interaction with the subject to his education; is that clear?"

"Quite clear, Reverend Mother," Drex replied. Her face was as expressionless now as the cell's stone walls.

"Go now and do your Penance," Lizaveta said. "I will take care of our pet Questor now." Drex bobbed a faultless curtsey that would not have

shamed a lady-in-waiting at a royal court, and she left the room. Grimm summoned his defiance once more, determined to fight the Prioress to the end, even if he could not use his magic on her. For the space of a few heartbeats, he had seen the woman he loved emerge from Lizaveta's imposed cage, and that gave him hope.

"So, we are alone at last, my love." The harsh sibilants made the words sound anything but inviting. Grimm forced himself again to his feet. "I am not your love, hag."

"But you will be, Grimm; you will be."

"Never!"

Lizaveta shook her head, as if disappointed by a beloved child's tantrum. "There are many emotions you have not yet sampled, Grimm Afelnor," she said, "and I know them all. I know you are familiar with anger, love, self-loathing and despair, but what do you know of the pangs of mind-numbing, strength-sapping terror?"

Before Grimm could speak, it seemed as if an apple had been rammed into his throat, and he felt his heart pound in his chest. His tongue seemed to turn to dry wood, and his limbs trembled as a clammy sweat broke out all over his body.

It's not real! he raged inside his mind.



"Kill me, witch!" he croaked. "I am not afraid of you. You will not—" The dreadful sensations surged and multiplied again to an impossible intensity, and Grimm gasped, only remaining on his feet by a supreme effort of will.

"I think we'll try this with a touch of self-loathing this time." The Prioress sounded as if she were a physician prescribing a course of medication. "Let's see how you like this!" Every fibre of Grimm's being clamoured for attention, a screaming chorus of anguish. I can't beat her! She's too strong...

No! I am stronger! I am a Questor! I

won't surrender!

"No!" The single, hoarse word tore its way through his vocal chords.

"I expected no less from the grandson of Loras Afelnor," Lizaveta said. "Your resistance and strength are refreshing. However, I am in my sphere of power, and I can call on as much energy as I need to defeat you. I do wish I could spar a little longer with you, Grimm, but time is pressing.

"Let us try this."

Grimm closed his eyes and gritted his teeth, expecting more pain, but his eyes flew open and his jaw slackened as the

spell hit him. He gasped, and tears ran down his cheeks as he felt his bones turn to water.

Joy! Pure, unalloyed ecstasy flowed through the mage, threatening to unman him as he rolled over onto his side, drooling and groaning in sheer rapture.

Grimm could not stop this new sensation from flooding through his embattled soul, and he found himself accepting his domination, welcoming it. The lone, faint spark of defiance, his only link to what he was, who he had been, surged briefly, guttered and died.

The past was unimportant; all that mattered was now. He might be

thrashing around like a pig in ordure, but he no longer cared. He let the feuding emotions run through him, accepting that he was a worthless, despicable person and enjoying the fact.

Nonetheless, compressed and embattled as it was, the tiny spark that constituted his inner being refused to be quenched. Trapped in a prison of raucous, warring emotions, it watched and waited.

\* \* \* \*

A sea change: with a sudden shock of awareness, he was himself again, and his flailing limbs ceased their rebellion. As full awareness returned to him, he realised that he was lying in a noxious,

malodorous pool of his own making. He tried to stand, filled with disgust, but his legs and arms felt as heavy and dead as stone pillars.

He looked up to see Prioress Lizaveta standing over him. Several locks of greasy, white hair had escaped from her starched wimple, and her face was ashen. To his eyes, she seemed almost dead on her feet. For the very briefest of moments, he felt a surge of black despair. It's gone! Please, Reverend Mother, bring it back!

He crushed his momentary horror into a tiny mote, forcing his true personality to reassert its dominance over his being.

You'll never break me, hag!

The triumphant thought blazed into life, seeming to illuminate the darkened corners of his abused psyche. The knowledge that he had withstood her vicious emotional assault strengthened and succoured him. Only his brutal Questor training had given him the strength to resist. Grimm smiled, finding sufficient strength in his arms to drag his body out of the disgusting mire of bodily humours. Rolling over onto his front, he managed to push himself up into a crouch, although his legs were too weak to support him fully.

He laughed; a hoarse, hacking sound. "I still hate you, Lizaveta," he croaked

through chapped, dry lips.

“You've lost.”

The Prioress raised her head a little, and turned to face him, her eyes glazed and lifeless.

“I see my mistake now,” she muttered. “A direct emotional assault on a Questor in his prime of youth and power was foolish. Physical pain cannot defeat you, but it will weaken you to the point where you can no longer resist me. I haven't lost, Grimm; I have learned a little more about you.”

“You'll never possess me, witch,” Grimm growled. “I won't give in to you,

whatever you do to me. I won't betray Drex—the memory of the true Drex I know and love—or my Guild, so just kill me and be done with it."

"You will die when I give you permission and not before," the Prioress intoned, but Grimm managed another lop-sided smile.

"I don't doubt it, Prioress," he said. "But that's all you can do. You may have power over my mortal body, but my soul will remain my own."

Lizaveta grunted and staggered from the cell, and Grimm was alone again. Now, the fierce joy of triumph ebbed, and he gasped as his body imposed its



demands: his head now felt as if it were stuffed full of nails; his joints screamed with pain, and he feared he had torn several ligaments. He accepted the pain, welcoming it; at least he was alive and in his own mind. I'll take whatever Lizaveta throws at me, he swore to himself. For a few brief moments, he had opened up a narrow fissure leading to Drexelica's true self, and he vowed to work to widen that breach whenever he had the opportunity.

All I need is to be able to endure, and to hope that Lizaveta trusts in her conditioning of Drex enough to leave her alone with me again.

I'm in no condition to fight now. I need

to gather my strength if I'm to endure what Lizaveta has in store for me.

Grimm closed his eyes and began to meditate. As a Student, he had hated the hours spent sitting cross-legged, staring into space, but he now blessed the Magemasters he had cursed as a callow youth. Even though he had never seen the worth of his long, painful meditation lessons before, he saw it now; it just might give him the chance he needed to prevail.

He knew he had at least a slim chance, and that frail hope was all he needed to sustain him. The brief glimpse he had seen of Drexelica, as opposed to the

angry Sister Weranda, had given him the hope the Prioress had tried to deny him. He knew he might have only a few moments of blessed solitude, and he would make the most of them.

I'll bring you back, Drex. You once swore you'd stay with me until you saved my life as I'd saved yours; it's time to save me now, my love. Together, we'll beat her.

Blessed peace and freedom from earthly cares reigned, as Grimm lapsed into a contemplative, restorative state. He was alive, and that was all that counted; all he needed.

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## Chapter 7: Resistance

Kargan turned to Loras, looking him straight in the eyes.

"Questor Loras, if Thorn asks of my whereabouts, tell him I have fled the House, fearing his wrath," he said, speaking quickly; time was of the essence.

"Why, Mentalist Kargan?"

"It's best you know as little as possible. Do you think you could hide a lie from Thorn?"

"I do not know," Loras said. "He will surely scan my aura at the earliest

opportunity—as I will his. He is likely to notice any deception on my part."

Kargan held out Seeker. "Take hold for a moment, Questor Loras," he said, and the smith extended a gnarled hand to grasp the rod; a Mage Staff did no harm if its owner gave permission to touch it. The Magemaster closed his eyes for a moment, accessing a spell hidden within Seeker and sending it into Loras.

"There," he said. "Any signs of deception in your aura should be masked now."

"A useful sleight," Loras said, raising his eyebrows in appreciation. "I have never heard of such a spell outside the

realms of Geomancy."

"It's one I devised," Kargan said.  
"Doorkeeper will return soon; I must go."

\* \* \* \*

"Good hunting, Mentalist," Loras muttered, as Kargan hurried off into the depths of the Hall. The Great Portal swung shut, leaving the smith outside. Loras had no intention of setting one foot inside Thorn's demesnes for the moment.

The evening breeze freshened, and the smith drew his red cloak closer around his body. Long minutes passed. Loras heard the distant, shrill bark of a fox,

and a terrified avian cacophony soon followed.

Good hunting for somebody, he thought with a faint smile. I trust my own delving will be as successful. He knew he had always been a stronger Questor than Thorn, but he lacked practice in the arcane arts. Drima's warning came back to him:

"What makes you think you can beat Thorn?"

Loras had to acknowledge that her doubts might be justified. Righteous rage was a poor substitute for confident, practiced skills.

At last, the door swung open, spilling golden night into the dusk, and Loras beheld a man he had not seen for more than half a Secular lifetime. For a few moments, he did not recognise Thorn; time had not been kind to the Prelate. The flowing blond locks of youth had been replaced by a few, greasy, white tendrils plastered over a ruddy pate, and the once-wiry Questor now bore a distinct paunch and heavy jowls. Nonetheless, the amber eyes and heavy brows were unmistakable. This was, indeed, Thorn Virias.

"Greetings, Loras," the Prelate said, his mouth crinkling into a smile. "It is good to see you." Loras bit back a vicious



retort; he longed to launch a meaty fist into Thorn's flabby jaw, but he restrained himself.

"I wish I could say the same, Thorn," Loras growled, "but I cannot. You betrayed not just me, but also our House and our Guild. I am here to demand that you resign your post and submit yourself to the High Dominie's scrutiny. I know all: how you placed the pillow in my hands and summoned Urel and Olaf; how you engineered my disgrace and the false shame under which I have laboured for the past decades. It is over, Thorn."

"I have waited for this moment, Loras," Thorn whispered. "For as long as you have suffered, so have I. Waiting,

fearing your return and your wrath. Now you are here, I feel only relief that this ordeal is over." Loras defocused his eyes, accessing his Mage Sight to scan Thorn's aura. He saw the characteristic hues of sorrow, shame, resignation and trepidation, but no deception at all.

"It was entirely my mother's doing, Loras. She used me as much as you, for her own ends. I was a puppet in her hands until she forced me to cast a Compulsion on your grandson, Grimm; he is a remarkably potent Questor, and his resistance provoked a Resonance that nearly killed me. It was only by shaking off that Resonance that I managed also to break free of my

mother's influence. Since that moment, I have been dedicated to her downfall."

Can it be true? Loras wondered. Thorn's aura says so.

Lizaveta was so beautiful and beguiling ... she nearly ensnared me, and I only shook off her Geomantic blandishments with the greatest effort of will.

"I have been under her influence for the whole of my life, Loras," Thorn said. "I was brought up under her domination and power. When I placed that pillow in your hands, I was as much a puppet as you.

"Do you not remember how I pleaded

for your life at your trial?" You did indeed, Thorn. The other members of the Conclave howled for my blood, and only you spoke out for me.

"If I accept your story, Thorn," Loras said, still wary, "will you accompany me to High Lodge to put matters straight?"

"I can do no less, I suppose," Thorn said. "What do you wish from me?"

"My reinstatement as a Guild Questor, the clearing of my family name and your resignation from the Guild," Loras replied, fighting to keep his voice level as Thorn responded with a slow nod. This was going better than he could have

dreamed.

"I see the justice in your demands," Thorn said, "but I have a duty to the House, and I am no longer under my mother's influence. I cannot in conscience just resign for something that was not my fault. May we discuss this in the warmth of my study? It is getting cold out here." Loras looked again at Thorn's aura. Relief, concern and indecision flickered through the astral shades, but he saw no sign of deceit.

"What of my grandson, Grimm, since you placed the Compulsion on him?" demanded Loras. "Where is he?"

"I have supported him whole-heartedly,

Loras,” Thorn declared. “Once my own spell was lifted, I recognised the threat my mother posed to our Guild, and I despatched him to depose or destroy her at all costs. He has a retinue of warriors and two Guild Mages at his disposal, since I deemed that no cost was too great. The Dominie has sanctioned the Quest.”

Loras’ eyes narrowed. “Does the Dominie know the full truth, Thorn?”

"I ... I was weak," confessed Thorn. "It is not a prideful thing for a Questor of the Seventh Rank to confess that he was under another's spell.

"I intend to rectify matters, but only after

Questor Grimm succeeds in his Quest, as I am sure he will." Loras scanned Thorn's aura once more, with minute scrutiny; his old friend seemed to be telling the undiluted truth. He shivered in the evening breeze and nodded.

"Very well, Thorn," he said. "We will discuss the matter further inside the House. However, I should warn you that I have regained my powers in full measure, and I am well capable of defending myself if you resort to magic."

"You were always suspicious, Loras!" Thorn crowed, reaching forward to clap the smith on his right shoulder. "However, as your Sight will have told you, I intend no treachery."

\* \* \* \*

Kargan stood at the end of the long, dark, subterranean tunnel, taking a series of deep breaths. For many decades, he had held sway only over groups of unruly, high-spirited boys. He had played a role for most of that time as a slightly insane demagogue who lived only for his work, and he had played it well. However, now he would have to play another part to the limit of his abilities. Kargan hoped the guardian at the end of the corridor was the vain, shallow Faffel, but he saw Questor Xylox standing outside the cells. Gathering his resolve, he stepped forward and almost lost his



footing on the slippery, damp flagstones. Seeker's brass-shod foot clanged on the floor as Kargan struggled to regain his balance.

"Hold!" the Questor shouted, spinning around. "Who is that?" For a moment, Kargan feared that Thorn might have declared him a renegade, but he was relieved that Xylox seemed to accept his presence, as the Magemaster stepped into the pool of light around the cell doors.

"Oh; greetings, Magemaster Kargan," he said. "What brings you here?"

"Greetings, Questor Xylox!" Kargan crowed, playing the ebullient eccentric

to the hilt. "I have returned from my furlough, and Lord Thorn has requested that I relieve you. He wishes you to inspect the schoolrooms, after I told him that I heard a strange noise in one of the classrooms. I fear there may be unauthorised intruders. A Questor will be better able to deal with interlopers than a mere Mentalist."

"I was not told of this," Xylox grumbled. "I am not due to finish this watch for another three hours. Magemaster Faffel is to relieve me. I need to speak to Lord Thorn before I quit my post." Kargan fought rising panic, and he gripped Seeker in a white-knuckled hand. "Lord Thorn is attending to urgent House

business, Questor Xylox, and he cannot be disturbed. Please inspect my aura, and you will see I tell the truth."

Kargan bargained on the fact that Mage Sight was second nature to a Guild Mage, and that a clean aura was regarded as the sign of an honest man. He fought to keep his breathing even as Xylox inspected his soul's masked signature. He felt sure his spell was good, but it had never needed to stand up to a Questor's scrutiny before.

"Magemaster Kargan, this is most irregular, not to mention improbable!" the younger mage growled, "but I have no cause to doubt your word, and you are the Senior Magemaster in residence.

From which classroom did the noise come?"

"I really cannot say, Questor Xylox," Kargan said, with an airy gesture. "When the Students make their nocturnal racket, it is hard to tell the location of any unusual noise. It might be best to check all of the classrooms, just to be sure."

Xylox grunted. "Well, it cannot be a worse assignment than waiting here for hours on end," he said. "You are to hammer on the cell doors from time to time and demand a response. If none is given, you are to stride into the cell and rouse its inmate. It is an unpleasant duty,

but Lord Thorn has decreed it."

"Fear not, Questor Xylox," Kargan said, with a manic grin. "There will be no unauthorised sleeping on my watch, I assure you!"

Xylox grunted, handed the Magemaster a thick bunch of keys, and strode off, muttering, "Most irregular."

Kargan wiped a slick sheen of sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief. As soon as he heard the end door open and close, he opened the nearest cell door after fumbling with the keys Xylox had given him.

A hot, cloying, overwhelming stink

greeted him, redolent with the stomach-churning, foetid stench of ordure, and he feared for the life or sanity of the cell's occupant. His mouth filling with saliva and his entrails protesting and twisting, he forced himself to enter the noisome chamber. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he saw a hunched figure crouched on the damp flagstones. It seemed almost impossible to believe that this huddled mass of misery was a human being, but he realised that this soggy bag of mortality was the once-proud Magemaster Crohn.

The old tutor, known as "The Mindstealer", looked as if his own mind had been stolen. Gaggling in the ghastly

stench, Kargan grasped Crohn under the armpits and began to haul him out of the dingy cell.

"Come on, old friend," he gasped, trying to breathe only through his mouth. "You're free.

"Come on; help me, damn you!"

"I've done noth'n wrong," Crohn slurred, making no effort to aid Kargan. "Sleep..." Kargan gave the Senior Magemaster a burst of energy from Seeker. "Soon, you can rest, Crohn!" he shouted into the man's ear. "Now, you must fight! I have to get you and Questor Dalquist out of here, and you have to help me!"

"Questor Dalquist," Crohn said, his voice a little stronger and clearer. "Yes, help him." Kargan pulled the mage from the stinking room into the corridor and gave him another burst of much-needed strength.

"Rest here," he gasped, lowering Crohn to the floor. "I'll get Questor Dalquist out, but you'll both have to help me!"

"I will do what I can," Crohn said, looking more helpless than Kargan had ever seen him. "I am so tired..."

Even in this miserable state, he still uses Mage Speech, Kargan thought, with a frisson of admiration. Such a resolute man deserves to be saved!



He tried the same key on the next door, without success. Sweating with the fear that Xylox or Faffel might return at any minute, he tried another key; after two further abortive trials, the third key turned smoothly in the lock.

As the door swung open, Kargan gagged at the noisome smell, marvelling at Xylox's powers of intestinal fortitude.

Dalquist sat slumped against a corner of the cell, and Kargan could see the Questor's eyes were wide open, if glassy. His beard and hair were matted and unkempt, and the young mage muttered a repetitive mantra:

"Damn you all; I am innocent. I am a

Guild Questor above all. Damn you all..."

"Yes, damn them all!" Kargan cried, conscious that, at any minute, someone might intrude on his treason.

"Wake up, Questor Dalquist! You are innocent, and we need to get away from here!"

"Damn you all," Dalquist muttered, his eyelids flickering as he toppled forward. Kargan delved deep into Seeker's remaining reserves and took Dalquist's right hand, wrapping the limp fingers around the staff.

Dalquist's blood-shot eyes jerked open,

and his hand clenched tight around the staff. He gasped as a ruddy flush ran into his pale, grimy face.

"Enough!" Kargan groaned, a grey mist beginning to cloud his vision. With a sudden surge of panic, he realised that Dalquist had already drained Seeker's resources and was now accessing his own vital force with rapacious speed. His heart pounding, he drew a measure of the energy back into his own body. The Questor tore his hand away from the staff as if it had turned red-hot.

"I'm sorry, Magemaster Kargan," he said, his voice vibrant with its normal confidence. "I must be getting greedy. Thank you so much for helping me."

"Can you spare a little of that strength for Magemaster Crohn?" Kargan said as the mists cleared from his vision. "I gave him a little before I got you out of that hell-hole, but I don't think it was enough."

"Of course," Dalquist said. He called out "Shakhmat!" and his staff appeared in his hand.

"I've missed you, old friend," he muttered, clutching it to his chest like a boy embracing a pet dog. The Questor moved towards the slumped figure of the hapless Crohn, and said, "There's plenty of energy to spare in here, Mindstealer, and you need it badly."

Crohn nodded, and placed his hand on Shakhmat, just under the bottommost of the seven gold rings. Kargan marvelled at the sight of vitality returning to the Senior Magemaster, as if he were being inflated by an air pump.

"Thank you, Questor Dalquist," the Magemaster intoned after a few seconds. "I fancy I can shift for myself now."

In an instant, Crohn's own staff appeared in his hand, and the senior mage completed his transformation from a semi-comatose geriatric to a Seventh Rank Mage in full command of his faculties and his powers.

"I am filthy," Crohn declared, his steel-

grey eyes shining once more as he ran his fingers through his matted hair and beard. "I need a bath."

"We have more pressing concerns," Kargan said, all too conscious of the pressure of time. "We have a formidable cabal now. I suggest we confront Thorn at once and demand that he submit himself to the Dominie's justice. Questor Loras is with him, but I fancy he is out of practice. He may need help."

"Two Questors, a Mentalist and a Manipulator ought to be able to make the Prelate see sense," Dalquist said, shaking down his grubby robes, "even if we don't quite look the part."

"What in Perdition are you doing, Magemaster Kargan?" came a voice from the far end of the corridor, and Kargan spun to see the figure of Xylox, his staff at the ready. "Have you forgotten Lord Thorn's orders?" The Questor's eyes seemed to blaze, and blue flames flickered at the end of his staff. Dalquist leapt to the fore: he slipped on the slick floor, and Kargan winced as he heard the sickening crack of the young Questor's head impacting the wall. Dalquist twitched a couple of times and lay still.

"So you are in this filthy conspiracy, too, Kargan." Xylox stepped forward, his eyes narrowed to slits.

“You're finished; all of you. Or perhaps you fancy your rune magic against my Questor powers? That, I assure you, gentlemen, would prove a foolish and fatal mistake.”

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## **Chapter 8: Traitors**

Crohn stepped forward, his presence commanding despite his filthy appearance. “Where lies your loyalty, Questor Xylox?” he demanded, his voice like ice. “Have you forgotten your solemn oath; an oath that should be sacred to you?”

"Answer me!"



"You are a damned, bloody traitor, Crohn," Xylox said through clenched teeth. "I have no need to justify myself to you or your co-conspirators."

"Your primary responsibility is to the Guild!" Crohn snapped. "You have forgotten an accused mage's right to a fair trial without coercion, torture or other compulsion. Lord Thorn himself chose to flout this rule because he preferred a pair of subdued, mindless puppets to healthy men able to defend themselves and expose his own treasonous activities!"

"Lord Thorn regards you as dangerous renegades," Xylox said. "Such traitorous dogs cannot be left in full possession of

their powers. Perhaps a few rules have been bent; what is that compared to the security of the House?"

Guild Law 19.8.1," the Magemaster snapped. His blue-grey eyes shone like chips of ice. "Any accusation of treason or other serious transgression is considered as invalid until the accused mage is arraigned before a duly assembled Conclave of his peers, such an assembly to be called by the accused mage's House Prelate at the earliest opportunity'.

"Law 19.8.2 tells us that any mage accused of a serious breach of Guild Law shall submit to confinement in

‘humane conditions until such a Conclave may be assembled. No physical, psychological or thaumaturgic influence shall be used to force any confession or admission from the accused man before this time’.

"Do you think you, Magemaster Faffel, or Prelate Thorn have complied with these inflexible, explicit rules, Questor Xylox? Or do you doubt my recollection of these laws?" Crohn's voice was low but intense.

Xylox snorted. "I owe you no allegiance, Crohn! In this House, Lord Thorn is the law. He—"

"Law 21.5!" Crohn screamed, cutting off

the Questor. "Any and all regulations apply in equal measure and in every particular to all members of every House! No deviation, waiver, amendment or change to these laws and regulations may be made without the majority decision of the Guild Presidium, as recorded in the official records of High Lodge! The body of Guild Law is a single, cohesive framework, supporting and sustaining our Brotherhood! Guilt arising from any knowing breach of these Laws is considered shared between all participants. No defence based upon assumed authority shall be deemed valid!"

"You are a damned, bloody traitor, Questor Xylox. You, Magemaster Faffel and, above all, Lord Thorn, are forsworn Oathbreakers!"

Kargan felt a cold shock run through him as Crohn projected a copious bolt of sputum at the wide-eyed, immobile Questor.

"I revile you, scum," he said, his voice rich with contempt.

Xylox bared his teeth in a snarl and raised his staff over his head. Crohn stepped forward until his nose was mere inches away from the Questor's more impressive, beak-like appendage, and flung his staff clattering to the slick

flagstones.

"Strike if you dare, Questor!" he cried. "It will not change my opinion of you. Lord Thorn may have enslaved you, but neither you nor he will do that to me."

The Questor growled and his staff-tip twitched a little, but he did not bring it down.

"You're a blind fool, Xylox," Kargan said, finding his voice at last. "You confuse might with right. Why would a House Questor and two Magemasters dare to rebel against their Prelate?"

"Have you even once stopped to consider that they might be in the right?"

We swore the same Oath as you and we regard it as sacrosanct. We still stand by that Oath, whereas you seem to have forgotten or ignored it.

"Where lies a mage's first allegiance?"

Xylox rolled his eyes. "I have no intention of discussing—"

"ANSWER ME!" Kargan screamed, feeling irate blood pounding in his temples. "Where lies a mage's primary allegiance?"

"A mage's primary allegiance is to the Lord High Dominie," the Questor droned. "However, the Dominie's representative within the House—"

"Law 21.5 still applies in full measure!" Crohn snapped.

He bowed his head. "There; it is said. Do what you will with me. You may as well kill me, for if Guild Law can be flouted with impunity, then I am already dead. I will meet my end with pride, for I shall have defended my beliefs with my life, as I swore to do before you were born." The old Magemaster sank to his knees before the burly Questor, and Kargan followed suit. I really hope Questor Xylox isn't as pig-headed as he looks, the Mentalist thought, or this could be over very soon.

Long moments passed, as Kargan fixed his gaze on the lichen-encrusted floor,



expecting death at any moment.

"Very well, gentlemen." Xylox's voice was a low growl. "You say Lord Thorn is a traitor, and I have to acknowledge the transgression of a few Guild Laws. What evidence do you have for your allegations?"

\* \* \* \*

"Please, Questor Loras, be seated," Thorn said, his voice amicable as he slid himself into the leather-upholstered chair behind his desk. "Let us discuss your terms." Loras hid his gratitude as he sank into the chair, facing the Prelate; the damper weather of recent days had taken a toll on his arthritic knees and hips.

"My terms are simple," he said, crossing his arms across his chest, Blade cradled in the crook of his right elbow. "I demand a solemn affidavit from you to the Lord Dominie, confirming my innocence, and your recommendation of my reinstatement to the Guild rolls."

Thorn nodded. "Now that I am free of my mother's influence, I am happy to do that," he said.

"Secondly," Loras continued, "I demand that my grandson, Grimm Afelnor, be accorded the respect due to a relative of an honoured Guildbrother. His obligation to the House for his tuition shall be set at nought, and he shall be free to choose his own path in this

world."

"He already has the means to defray his financial obligation," Thorn said, with an airy gesture. "He is independently wealthy as a result of his Quests, and yet he chooses not to do so." Loras blinked twice. On the only occasion he had met Grimm since the boy had come to Arnor House, his grandson had been dressed in the simple robes of a poor mage.

"Is this true?" he said, his voice little more than a whisper.

"Feel free to use your Sight on me at any time," the Prelate said. "You know it is true. Questor Grimm is a very valuable asset to me and to the Guild. Questors of

the Seventh Rank are rare birds, as you know."

"Grimm has reached the Seventh Rank?" Loras gasped, his eyes wide. "Why, he is not yet eighteen years of age!"

"He was elevated to the Seventh Rank on the basis of my personal recommendation to Lord Horin, after two very successful and important Quests."

Loras shook his head, trying to clear his thoughts.

"Two Quests?" Loras' voice was little more than a hoarse squeak. It had taken him four arduous expeditions to achieve

the same accolade, and he had been reckoned a remarkable prodigy. Thorn had only gained the seventh gold ring on his staff after seven Quests.

His heart swelled with pride and admiration for his grandson, and he found himself unable to speak further. Thorn had been good to the boy, despite his grandfather's manufactured disgrace and the Prelate's complicity in it.

"I value Questor Grimm," Thorn said, with a warm smile. "Times have been lean here at Arnor House, and we have only three Questors young enough to carry out the Guild's work. I regard his success as a credit to the Guild and to the House; paying Scholasticate intake

has increased by one-half since High Lodge announced his Acclamation. Thanks to the accession of Questor Grimm and his friend, Questor Dalquist, this House has become a fashionable place to send one's offspring for education, for the first time since our heyday.

"We Questors have a certain glamour and cachet."

Loras felt moisture prickling at the margins of his eyes, and he found himself warming to his old friend. You always were a charmer, Thorn, he thought, before bringing himself up short. Thorn was susceptible to his mother's

influence and must be considered unreliable.

"I thank you for your faith in my kin, Prelate Thorn," he said, struggling to keep his voice level.

"Nonetheless, I still demand that you stand down from your post in favour of a less ... vulnerable mage." Thorn sighed. "I have erred, Loras," he admitted, smiling. "However, I declare my vulnerability at an end. I have left Questor Grimm in no doubt that my mother's detestable influence is to be eliminated, and I have the most implicit trust in him. From now on, I wish only to do my sworn duty." Loras scanned the Prelate's aura once more, finding only

the signatures of innocent sincerity. Something is wrong, he thought. What is it?

The thought rattled around in the smith-Questor's mind, like an angry wasp trapped in a bottle. Then it hit him: Thorn's smile was just a little too friendly, and a minute bead of sweat twinkled on the Prelate's cheek.

He could never fool me when we were Students, he thought. He is lying. No! This was impossible: a man's aura did not lie!

My aura lies, he thought, shock running through him like an icy torrent. It was a tentative diagnosis; the tell-tale signs of



a young man's guilt might not be the same in his older self. How to be sure? Could Loras force Thorn to lie?

Loras smiled, recalling an incident in his old Scholasticate days. "I am pleased to hear that you are free from domination," he said, his voice as smooth as the finest silk. "I am sorry that I might have thought ill of you, old friend. Old age can make a man suspicious and grudging.

"When old Magemaster Brinn—may he rest in peace—thought you cheated in that Signatures examination," he said, laughing. "I never doubted you, but I felt very grateful when that bully, Usur Melditch, owned up to copying your paper."

Thorn's answering laugh was deep and rich. "Of course, Brinn knew at once that I was telling the truth,"

he said. "How can a Student lie to a Magemaster?"

Loras nodded, his smile unwavering.

"Geomancy, Thorn."

The Prelate's smile disappeared as quickly as summer mist in the heat of the morning sun.

"I saw Usur's notes after he was dismissed, Thorn," Loras continued. "I said nothing, because I was glad to see

him dismissed. You had the trick of hiding your true aura even then, did you not? As you do now. I imagine you learned that trick at your mother's knee: a Geomantic spell that no Guild Mage could ever detect."

Thorn's ruddy face turned pale, and he blustered as he had in his youth, covering his embarrassment with a jolly laugh. "You always made more of a simple matter than it was worth, Loras," he said.

"So I helped to get rid of a bully. All I wanted to do was—"

"You got rid of a rival as well, old friend," Loras said, taking a firm grip on

Blade, welcoming its long-lost, warm intimacy. "I saw no guilt or deception in your aura then, either." At last, the Prelate nodded slowly.

"You are right, Loras," he said. "I am at your mercy. May I at least explain myself?"

"Please do, Thorn."

The Prelate closed his eyes for a moment and then jerked them open after his lips had mumbled only a few syllables.

"If that was intended as a spell, I am not impressed," Loras said, secure in his strength. "You will have to do better

than that.

"You are forsworn, and I call upon you to resign."

"You were always stronger than me, Loras," Thorn said. "Can you even comprehend how that felt to me? My bitch mother always pushed me one way; the Scholasticate, the other, I hardly knew who I was from one day to the other."

Loras snorted. "I will approach the Dominie myself," he said. "You are—" The door to the chamber swung open with a bang, and Loras jerked his head around to see a young, pale, feverish-looking boy, his eyes wide and wild.

The rough, black robes of a newly-crowned mage or Adept seemed almost to swamp his rake-thin figure, and he bore no Mage Staff or ring. The boy's eyes seemed depthless, as if they were a window into the depths of his soul, but Loras saw no trace of emotion, reason or humanity.

A thick string of drool hung from the left side of the young man's mouth, running down to his chest.

"This is Questor Chag," Thorn said. "He is a Questor in all but name. He is my Questor, and he—" Loras leapt to his feet with all the speed and athleticism he could manage, but he heard a mad, keening cackle behind him. His nerves

seemed to stretch and snap and, like a puppet whose strings had been cut, he dropped to the floor.

"Questor Chag is now my personal bodyguard, Loras," Thorn crooned. "Do you really think you can take him?"

Loras shook his head. The vacuous-looking boy's sudden, vicious burst had surprised him, but his automatic Questor defences had not been breached. Ignoring Thorn, he turned to the drooling, wild-eyed boy. He rose to his feet, ignoring his protesting joints, and faced the blank-faced youth.

"Do you like to dance, Chag?" he said. "Do you like to read? Do you like

anything at all?"

"I live to serve Lord Thorn," the boy said, and the dead coldness of his tone sent shivers through Loras'

spine. "You are an obstacle."

"I'm sorry, Loras," the Prelate said. "Experience versus youth, fanaticism and vigour: which will win, I wonder?"

"This boy is as much a victim as I was," Loras said, shuddering as a hate-filled bolt of power hit him.

"You are strong, Chag," he said and gasped, trying to steady his twitching eyes. He had visions of scorched, raw,



weeping spots on his lungs as he drew a series of hacking breaths, but he was a powerful, experienced mage, with over twenty Quests to his credit. "But you are just a boy, perverted by a sick and insecure man."

Without turning his head, he screamed, "Ajaman'dama-nas! Guramen'dimni-nura!" Another, wordless, soulless, hateful bolt from Chag hit him; nonetheless, Loras felt a fierce pang of pleasure as he heard Thorn tumble from his seat with an agonised yell.

"Thorn is poison, boy," Loras said. "The dance has just begun. You will soon see that mindless loyalty leads nowhere."

This time, Loras anticipated Chag's assault, and he fended it off with practiced ease, adding a little finesse of his own. The youth stumbled to the floor, and Loras shook his voluminous sleeves back from his wrists to his elbows.

"It's time to go back to school, gentlemen," he said. "Thorn, you have made the worst mistake of your life."

"You have no idea what Questor Chag can do! He will leave you like a wet, discarded piece of meat!"

"I will bring Questor Chag something he has never known:" Loras said, "compassion."

"I need no compassion!" Chag shrieked.

Loras tried to absorb the power into Blade without success. He shuddered as the remainder of the nameless, formless energy trickled into him, but he felt more alive than he had in decades.

"The fight is on, Thorn!" Loras cried. "When I have pacified your poor slave, I will turn on you! Your tyranny is at an end!"

"Good luck, Loras," Thorn replied, as Loras staggered under another assault. "Just let me know when you wish to surrender."

Loras sought to find the nonsense words

for another spell, but Chag's mindless hatred hit him once more, and he slumped to his knees.

What did you do to this poor boy, Thorn? he wondered, as hot, electric flames burnt through his nerves.

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## **Chapter 9: 'A Little Out Of Practice'**

Crohn rose to his feet and made as if to brush dust and dirt from his filthy robes. To cover his embarrassment at this futile exercise, he cleared his throat, as he often did when addressing a roomful of Students. He stepped back a little from Xylox.

We have won the first battle by persuading Questor Xylox to listen to us, but direct confrontation may be inadvisable.

"Did you hear of a Neophyte named Erek Garan?" he asked.

"I heard something about it," Xylox replied, shrugging. "As I understand it, Senior Magemaster Urel exceeded his orders and pushed the boy beyond the limits of his endurance, with tragic results."

"That is the official story," Crohn said. "I believed it at the time. However, I now know it as a lie." Xylox leant on his staff in an almost jaunty pose, but there

was no joy or merriment in his face. "What makes you believe this, Crohn?"

"I am to be addressed as Senior Magemaster Crohn, or Manipulant Crohn until my guilt is proved!" Xylox shrugged. "My apologies, Senior Magemaster Crohn," he said with just a trace of sarcastic emphasis on the title. "Pray continue."

"I have only circumstantial evidence," Crohn admitted. "However, it is all of a pattern with our other contentions. The individual threads come together to form whole cloth." Xylox said nothing, and Crohn marshalled his argument.

"I knew Senior Magemaster Urel for

more than forty years,” he said. “I never met a more dedicated or diligent educator.”

"Senior Magemaster Urel was my tutor when I was a Neophyte," the Questor said. "He was a martinet, and he was swift to fall on the least transgression. I can believe with ease that such a man could go too far when training a Neophyte."

"Did he ever punish you, Questor Xylox?"

The Questor snorted. "I should say so!" he said with vehemence. "He would scream at me for no reason, and he often beat me for inattention, for supposed

insolence, or for what he considered laziness. The man was a bully."

Crohn nodded. "How long did you remain a Neophyte before your Outbreak?" he asked.

"One year, five months and four days," Xylox snapped. "Almost eighteen months of unending torment. I understand now the need for the unremitting pressure, for it made a Questor of me. However, I once hated the man with all my soul."

"Eighteen months!" Crohn said. "Fancy that!"

"I believe Lord Thorn's Ordeal lasted



two years,"

"Not so different from mine," Xylox said. "What of it?"

"I suggest that Magemaster Urel's apparent, insensate rage was a front. Did he beat you or scream at you every day?"

"No, Magemaster Crohn," admitted Xylox. "For several days after a beating, he might seem almost pleasant. Nonetheless, after a while, the assault would begin anew, worse than before." Kargan stepped forward. "Urel was testing you, Questor Xylox," he said. "He was seeing how far you could go without breaking, and then backing off. He was stretching you to the limit to a

calculated schedule."

"Eighteen months—" Xylox began.

"Neophyte Erek broke out after less than three months, with fatal results," Crohn interrupted.

"The boy was a neurotic," Xylox said, shifting his staff to his left side. "Urel should never have selected him for the Ordeal. It is further proof, if any were needed, of his recklessness."

"Erek was artistic and highly-strung, but I always found him a diligent and well-behaved Student," Crohn said, stretching to relieve the nagging aches in his legs.

"So did I," Kargan said. "Erek only became neurotic during his Ordeal."

"Perhaps the boy was unsuitable as Questor material," Crohn allowed. "However, Senior Magemaster Urel did not select him for the Ordeal; Lord Thorn did. I was in the Prelate's office on one occasion, when Urel burst in to protest to Lord Thorn about the treatment he was visiting on Erek. Was that the action of an uncaring brute?"

"Before the Prelate dismissed me—with some urgency, I might add—I heard him overrule the Senior Magemaster's objections and order him to intensify the boy's training.

"It was all Lord Thorn's doing: he ordered Urel to give Erek no respite. The Prelate drove the boy to madness by sheer ruthlessness."

"A miscalculation," Xylox declared. "I wager that Lord Thorn regrets it, but it is no proof of evil intent."

"Questor Grimm's training was no different," Crohn said. "He was beaten, excoriated and vilified daily for six months, without a break. By the end, he was almost a human vegetable."

"The boy is precocious," Xylox said. "I will grant him that."

"Three times as precocious as you?"

Crohn said, trying to prick the Questor's pride. "He is strong, but not that strong."

"You say he was beaten every day," Xylox said, straightening up. "How do you know this?"

"Because I beat him," Crohn said, his voice almost a whisper, "to my eternal shame. Lord Thorn pressed me and harangued me to maintain the severity of his training. I turned the Students against him, forbade him to associate with his friends and barred him from the Scholasticate Library. I thought I was doing right; that Lord Thorn had the best interests of the Guild at heart.

"I now doubt that."

"The boy became a Questor," Xylox said, shrugging. "He did not kill you." The Questor's casual attitude infuriated Crohn. He tore open the front of his robes to reveal a mass of weeping, half-healed lesions on his chest and upper arms. "Did you do this to Urel?" the Magemaster demanded.

Xylox lost some of his former composure, his face growing pale. He shook his head. "I ... I struck him on the jaw," he said. "As he fell to the floor, I used my emerging power to lift a heavy table, but something stopped me from dropping it on him. Instead, I smashed it into fragments with magic. I then screamed and broke all the windows in

the room. Urel told me I had done well. He wrapped his arms around me and told me my Ordeal was at an end."

"Neophyte Grimm destroyed—devastated—an entire classroom," Crohn said. "He was almost insane with rage and pain."

"Pain I visited upon him."

"I know pain," Xylox replied. "It is a Questor's—"

Crohn saw the Questor's eyes bulge, his fists clench and his jaw drop, as all colour fled from his face. Then, with a hoarse, agonised groan, Xylox collapsed to the flagstones.

"You know pain now, Questor Xylox," came a voice from the floor, and Crohn saw Questor Dalquist sitting up, rubbing an egg-sized lump on his temple and grimacing.

"What magic did you cast on him?" Kargan asked.



"I didn't," confessed the younger Questor. "I just brought Shakhmat up between his legs; crude, but effective. We don't have time for diplomacy and civilised debate."

"Bundle him into one of the cells," Crohn ordered, suppressing a smile at Xylox's ignominious downfall. In a moment, Kargan and Dalquist had thrust the almost comatose Xylox into a clean cell, and Crohn locked the door.

"Let us pay Lord Thorn a visit," he said.

\* \* \* \*

Loras struggled to summon his power, but Chag's mindless, wordless, insane

assault continued unabated. It was all he could do to resist the formless bolts of naked power, and he knew he could not defend himself much longer.

He writhed on the floor, his eyes shut and his teeth clenched in agony, when the magical beating stopped. Opening his eyes, he saw Thorn standing over him, the drooling, wild-eyed boy at his side.

"I like my position, Loras," the Prelate said, his tone almost apologetic. "I am sorry, old friend. Will you not reconsider your demands? I would prefer not to have to kill you."

"How kind of you, Thorn," gasped Loras, licking his sore, teeth-torn lips

and tasting the acrid, metallic tang of blood.

"What do you think of our new Questor?" the Prelate asked. "Of course, he will never go to the Breaking Stone, but he makes a formidable bodyguard, does he not?"

"Questor?" Loras said, spitting out a broken incisor. "He is a chimera, an inhuman abomination, not a Guild Mage.

"May the Names forgive you, for I cannot."

Thorn sighed, and sat back in his chair.

"Is that your final word, Loras?"

Remember that it is in your power to remit your suffering. I would prefer to have you at my side as a reinstated Guild Mage and an ally.

"Think hard, my friend."

Loras thought, I cannot beat this boy; I have no Questor defence against his perverted power. It would be foolish to throw my life away in this manner. Personal pride is insufficient reason.

"If I agree to maintain your fantasy," he croaked, "what happens then?"

"I remain Prelate," Thorn said. "I admit my mother's part in your disgrace and recommend your absolution by the Lord

Dominie. I will declare Questor Grimm free of his obligation to the House, and you may both resume a normal life in honour or remain here as full Questors, as you wish. Either way, I will arrange a comfortable stipend for you."

"I am a married man," Loras said, sitting up with some difficulty. "I will not renounce my wife, and a Guild Mage cannot engage in any liaison with a woman."

"I am sure that problem can be overlooked," Thorn said, with a casual shrug. "The circumstances are, after all, most unusual."

"And what must I do, Thorn?"

The Prelate smiled. "All you have to do is to agree to a little Compulsion not to betray my ... my less conventional decisions," he said. "I fancy I can only do this to a Questor of your strength with your acquiescence."

"What else will you put in my head if I agree, Thorn?" Loras demanded. "How do I know I will not end up as much a slave as this poor boy?"

"I am not my mother," Thorn replied, "and I have no desire to subdue or dominate you. I ask only a little security in my position, and I do not wish to become Dominie. I am content in statu quo, and that is all I want."

"What about the boy, Chag?"

"If you wish, I will put him in the care of a competent Mentalist and a Mage Healer," Thorn said, opening both hands towards Loras, "after you have agreed to my little caveat. Chag need remember nothing of this, and no word will go outside this door."

It all sounds so reasonable.

Loras might have to swallow a little injured pride, but he could have almost all he wanted: his family; his redemption in the eyes of the Guild; freedom from poverty. After years of struggling, self-condemnation and penury, he might be free.

It was all he might have hoped for, and the smith-Questor felt the strings of temptation tugging at his heart.

What will happen if I refuse? Loras wondered. What will happen to Drima without my support? What will happen to...

Loras clamped down on his train of thought with the discipline of a full Mage Questor, killing it.

"You told me that Grimm is on a Quest to eliminate Lizaveta," he said, feeling an electric pang of horror that he had spared his grandson so little thought. "Where is he?" Thorn shrugged again, as if the answer to the question were



unimportant. "He must be in Rendale," he said. "Most of the nuns know little of my mother's darker activities; only twenty witches know her true nature. Questor Grimm and his well-armed retinue should be able to overcome them. Set your mind at rest on that score.

"If you wish to add your skills to his, I will be happy to allow you to do so, once we have completed our negotiations."

Loras had never voyaged to Rendale, and he knew nothing of its possible perils. He scanned Thorn's aura, seeing only calm, blue shades of unconcerned contentment.

He felt a cold shock scurrying up his neck.

He's lying; or, at least, he's found some way to hide the fact from me!

He's already used magic on me! he thought, with a shiver. He's been pushing all thought of Grimm out of my head! He's been playing with me all the time!

One part of Loras' psyche screamed at him to throw the Prelate's false generosity back in his face, while another pleaded for a more cautious approach.

What to do? he wondered, casting a nervous eye at the drooling, lethal Chag.

Do I die, saving my honour at the possible expense of my family, or do I pretend to go along with Thorn, waiting for a propitious moment that may never come?

"Do you agree, Loras?" Thorn asked.

The smith felt as if his tongue had turned to ashes. He knew he must give some kind of response: a cold refusal or a false, cloying acceptance.

"Thorn," he said, indecision clinging to him like a thick, stifling cloud, "I must know—" At that moment, the thick, oaken door to the office disappeared in a blizzard of blue sparks, and Thorn sprang to his feet, his eyes wide. Loras

saw an unfamiliar, young man with a seven-ringed staff step through the opening, with Magemasters Crohn and Kargan just behind him. Chag uttered a guttural growl, raising his hands. As the insane youth diverted his attention from Loras, the smith saw his moment.

"Aghamaner-setset!" he screamed, feeling the incomparable, long-forgotten joy of thaumaturgic release as he launched an impromptu spell of lassitude at the boy. "Orgimaringem'ist framintes!" Chag spun towards him, his mouth slack as his knees began to buckle, and Thorn flung his head back, beginning to chant.

Still holding the spell on the tumbling boy, revelling in the stream of magical

power flowing from him, Loras took a strong, two-handed grip on Blade and swung it at Thorn's chest. Blue motes flew as the two staves, Loras' and Thorn's, smashed into each other, but the smith had the advantage of greater momentum.

The Prelate gave an eerie, high-pitched squeal as he flew back to thud into the wall with a wet sound like a plank hitting a freshly-plastered wall. He sank to the floor and lay still.

"Greetings ... gentlemen," Loras gasped, grimacing at the strain of maintaining his spell on the dormant Chag. "Would one of you please restrain this poor boy? I

am a little out of practice, and this lad is a touch excitable."

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## **Chapter 10: Sand of Time**

Loras raised his right hand and rapped on the oak door. Hearing no response, he clenched his fist and pounded harder.

"What is it?" a peevish, slurred voice demanded.

"It is Brother Bile, Questor Olaf!" he called. "I need to talk—" The door flew open, and Loras beheld a stooped, dishevelled man. An unruly shock of greasy, white hair hung either side of a

lined countenance, as if Olaf wore a map of his long life on his face.

"Loras?" the ancient mage croaked, staring at the smith-Questor with wide, grey, rheumy eyes. "What in Perdition are you doing here? To set foot on Guild property means your death!"

"I know, Questor Olaf," Loras said, forcing himself to remember that this crabbed, wizened old man was his esteemed former colleague and friend. "However, you would not condemn a man before hearing his defence, would you?"

"I heard your defence many years ago," Olaf growled. "You confessed. You had

your trial, and you were convicted. What more is there to say?"

"I placed the pillow over Prelate Geral's face; I admit it," Loras said.

"You could hardly deny it!" the older man snapped. "I saw it with my own eyes!"

"I was ensorcelled by Geomancy, Olaf. The act was mine, but the will—the intent—was not. I am guilty neither of high treason nor of attempted murder."

"So you say," Olaf said, with a snort. "Why should I believe you?"

"Will you at least hear me out?" Loras



pleaded. "If there is one man in this House I trust, it is you. If you will listen to me, and you remain unconvinced, I will not resist. Nonetheless, if there is even a chance that a miscarriage of justice has occurred, is it not your duty to consider the evidence?"

"No," Olaf replied. "It is the duty of a duly-assembled Conclave to determine guilt or innocence." Loras sighed. "Olaf Demonscourage. For the sake of the fraternal bond we once shared, will you not at least listen? That is not too much to ask, is it?"

"We were friends," Olaf admitted. "However, you were always closer to Lord Thorn. I suggest that you throw

yourself on his mercy; you mean nothing to me now. The Loras Afelnor I once knew is long dead."

"I choose you, Olaf, for reasons that should become clear."

Long moments passed as the older Questor scanned the smith from head to toes, as if seeing him for the first time.

"I grant you thirty minutes to plead your case," Olaf said. "No more."

"Agreed," Loras replied. "Must we discuss the matter in the corridor?" Olaf grunted and stepped away from the door.

"Very well; come in,"

Loras beheld a chaotic jumble of books, scrolls, alembics and bizarre curios littering every surface. A single candle lit the room, throwing fugitive shadows across the floor. Olaf must be a wealthy man after all those Quests, the smith thought as he stepped through the doorway. Why does he choose to live in such squalor?

"Sit there," Olaf said in a stiff, flat voice, pointing to a chair with faded, cracked, leather upholstery opposite a moth-eaten bed with a thin mattress. "Mind my treasures; some of them are irreplaceable." Placing his feet with care, Loras did as he was bidden, and Olaf sat on the bed, which creaked

alarmingly. The older Questor rummaged through a pile of items at his feet for a few moments, and came up with a sand-glass. Inverting the glass, he placed it atop a precarious pile of papers and sat back, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What have you to say that has not already been said, Loras?" Loras knew his life, and those of his companions-in-crime, might rest on his argument. He thought of Drima, waiting back at the smithy, anxious and helpless in her ignorance of his fate. He had never been an eloquent man, but he knew his arguments must be convincing if he were to prevail, for the sake of those he loved

and respected.

"Feel free to examine my aura at any time, Olaf," he said. "You will see I tell the truth."

"Mage Sight is not infallible," the older mage said. "You have had many years to rehearse your story; for all I know, you may well believe it yourself."

"Was I a weak Questor, Olaf?" Loras asked, trying another tack, trying not to think of the sand trickling into the bottom of the glass. "Was I careless, flighty or impulsive?"

"No," the shrivelled man replied, shrugging. "I was more than satisfied

with your conduct on our Quests together. Your self-control in times of crisis was admirable."

"Prelate Geral was dying," Loras said. "He was a delirious wraith of a man, was he not?" Olaf nodded. "Agreed. You took advantage of that fact, hoping that his death would be considered natural. Unfortunately for you, Lord Thorn discovered your treachery."

"Let us suppose for a moment, that you, as a Seventh Rank Questor, considered it desirable to dispose of such a man," Loras said. "Surrounded by powerful mages, how would you have chosen to carry out your evil act and avoid discovery? Would you have placed a

pillow over his face to suffocate him, a task that might take many minutes?"

"That is irrelevant," Olaf said. "What is undeniable is that you chose that method of murder." Were you born with the brain of an ox, Olaf, or did you have to work at it? Can't you think for yourself?

Fighting to regain his composure, Loras said, "If I had wanted Geral dead, I could have achieved it in many ways. He was in no condition to resist any magic I might cast. Weak and mindless as Lord Geral was, I could have achieved it from the sanctuary of my own cell in the space of a heartbeat. Is it reasonable that I would have dared to choose such a

clumsy, Secular method?"

"But you did!" Olaf said. "I saw you! Whatever your reason, the facts are undeniable. I cannot pretend to know why you chose that particular method of dispatch, but the fact remains that you did!"

"I laboured under a powerful spell, Olaf!" Loras cried. "I have already admitted the act, but can you not admit my behaviour was, at least, bizarre for a Seventh Rank Questor—a feared Weapon of the Guild?"

"Perhaps," agreed the old man, "but I do not profess to understand the mind of a damned traitor!" He spat the last word



out with venom. "Is this the main thrust of your so-called 'proof'?" Loras clenched and unclenched his fists, trying to find some argument that would sway his old friend.

"You saw how Thorn stopped me," he said. "He first tried to wrest the pillow from my grasp—a foolish move, since I was far stronger than he—and then struck me across the chest with his staff. I should have been hurled across the room, senseless or dead, but I remained on my feet. Then, he chose a showy, time-consuming method of subduing me, instead of blowing me into a thousand motes." Olaf shook his head. "Lord Geral was too close; a destructive spell

might have splashed onto him,” he drawled. “Lord Thorn chose to use caution. Remember also how he pleaded for your life at your trial. Most eloquently, as I remember.”

The smith clenched his teeth; Olaf seemed quite incapable of putting himself in another man's shoes. I am losing this battle, he thought. Fight, damn you! Fight!

"Wake up, Questor Olaf!" he cried. "If you had struck me with your staff, after discovering me trying to murder the Prelate, would I have remained conscious? Thorn was just ensuring that he had plenty of witnesses to my treachery!"

"If Geral had died of natural causes, who do you think would have been elected to replace him?" Loras did not wait for a reply. "You and I were senior to Thorn, and I had just been granted a commendation from High Lodge. You were a full member of the Presidium, and you must have known that I was recommended as Geral's replacement. I only had to wait, and Geral could barely have lasted another week. It made no sense for me to attack him."

Olaf shrugged. "Perhaps, as Lord Thorn said at your trial, you acted out of misguided mercy, seeking to put an end to Lord Geral's suffering. I don't know."

The vulgar contraction, 'don't', told Loras he had disturbed Olaf a little, and this gave him new hope. Push, push, PUSH!

"Was it not fortunate for Thorn to discover me standing over Geral?" he demanded. "It led directly to his becoming Prelate."

Olaf leaned forward to look at the glass. "As far as I am concerned, you are just wasting sand, Loras,"

he said. "All you have said is circumstantial. You said you were acting under a Geomantic spell. Lord Thorn was a Questor, not a witch."

"His mother is," Loras shot back. "As I now know, she is Prioress of the Sisters of Divine Mercy at Rendale. She has an inner coterie of fellow witches who aid her in her more devious and powerful spells. What was cast on me was the Geomantic equivalent of a Great Spell; all so Thorn could become Prelate."

Olaf snorted. "One wonders why you were allowed to run around free after such a mighty Compulsion!

If he betrayed you, why did Lord Thorn not slay you when he had the chance? I am unimpressed." Was ever a man born with such a lack of imagination? Loras raged, inside his head. What will it take to reach him?

"A Geomantic spell enters a mage's soul, and it may be revealed to all if he dies," Loras growled. "That is why Thorn pleaded so eloquently for my life. Had I been killed, the spell would have been apparent to all."

"Perhaps ten minutes' worth of sand remains in this glass," Olaf said, his tone cold. "I promised you thirty minutes in which to convince me. I will give you the remaining time, until the last grain falls, but all you have offered me is unsubstantiated anecdotes and innuendo. Do you have anything else to offer, or may we curtail our discussions now?"

"You only prolong the inevitable, Loras."

I would remind you that I am well within my rights to kill you in an instant."

Inspiration flooded into Loras like a beacon, lighting up the dusty recesses of his mind.

"I can prove my accusations to you, Questor Olaf," he said. "Kill me, and you will see the Geomantic spell rise from my body."

Olaf's expression softened. "I misjudged you, Questor Loras. You are not evil, but mentally disturbed! I am sure that I can arrange for your sentence to be commuted to tenure in a charitable asylum. They will take care of you."

Loras looked the older mage straight in the eye; he felt sure now that he had the proof Olaf demanded. The risk was great, but he knew he had gone too far to surrender now.

"I am not deranged, Olaf," he said. "Many years ago, you used a spell you called the 'Little Death'. I was never able to duplicate it, but, as I recall, it caused the death of an unresisting person within a few minutes. I ask you to invoke this spell again; you should see something ... interesting.

"If you avert the magic when you see the effect, I need not die. I do not wish to die before my time is up." Olaf rubbed his forehead with his right hand.



"I have not cast this spell for over four decades, Loras; in any case, what is to stop you from showing me some fantastic Questor illusion?"

"I believe you will not see the truth of my words until I am on the very point of death," he said. "Could I hide that from you?"

The old man shook his head. "I doubt it," he said. "Are you resolute in this? Execution would be swifter and more merciful, and I am not certain I could abort the spell in time to save you."

"I have been dead to the Guild for half a Secular lifetime," Loras said. "My

grandson was brought up here as the progeny of a traitor.

"I wish to live but, now that I know myself blameless of the crime for which I was convicted, I cannot allow a greater crime to go unpunished. Every sleepless night, every bad dream, every pang of guilt I have felt for the last forty years was caused by the weakness of a man I thought my blood brother. I now trust only one man, Olaf: you."

"I may kill you, Loras," Olaf said, his voice soft but intense. "I have cast no powerful Questor magic for many years."

Loras laughed, stopping the sound before

it became tinged with incipient hysteria.

"You were quite prepared to kill me only a few minutes ago, Olaf!" he cried. "Why are you so worried to do so now?"

Olaf shook his head. "I do not know."

"You kicked me as I lay unconscious," Loras said, looking straight into the grey eyes, "with your right foot. Your boot was unlaced."

"I felt a personal betrayal at your action," Olaf said, "I ... how did you know about my bootlace? I nearly tripped over it as I walked down the stairs!"

Loras smiled. "A kind Brother Mage showed me the truth of what happened," he said, a little pleased at Olaf's apparent confusion. "All I want is for you to know it, too."

"There, the sand in your glass has run out," he said, pointing at the timer. "You are welcome to kill me in any way you wish."

Olaf looked into Loras' eyes, and the smith now saw the potent gaze of the Questor he had known so long ago. Without looking down, the senior mage picked up the glass and inverted it.

"If you wish to risk death so easily," he said, "I will accommodate you. Is that

what you want?" Loras shook his head. "No, Questor Olaf; but I need you to believe me!" Olaf sighed, and shook back his voluminous, brown sleeves. "Please lie back," he said. "Are you ready?" Loras nodded as his mind raged, What in Perdition are you doing, Afelnor?

Too late; the chant had begun. Loras felt his fingers and toes becoming numb.

"Ojimandelatimatomanerat ...  
irandemanigotimanforanet."

Cold, slimy fingers seemed to wander through Loras' body unchecked, making him shiver. With a shock of sheer terror, the smith realised that he could not

control the flow of life-force from him.

"Merimondimenosimarit..."

Loras Afelnor felt his inner essence plunging into oblivion, growing smaller and smaller. Now, it was the size of a marble; now, the size of a barleycorn; now, the size of a grain of sand... He could neither see nor remember his own name: he was a mass of cold numbness, floating in a dark void.

An iridescent bird arose from him, threatening to tear the soul from his body ... but it was so glorious!

So sweet to die like this...

With a thump, the nameless soul dropped back into his cooling cadaver. The agony of returning to the mortal world tore a harsh cry from Loras' mouth: every nerve burnt; every fibre screamed as feeling returned. Loras gasped, coughed and shivered. Death had seemed a release; almost pleasant.

Only life hurt.

"I believe you!" Olaf shouted, and Loras smiled, bereft of all his strength. "I saw it! I have no idea if Lord Thorn was behind it, but you were held by some kind of a spell. You deserve another trial; I will call Lord Thorn at once."

"Thorn is involved in the spell, as I told

you,” Loras croaked, feeling the words peeling from him like leaves from a dying tree. “He is imprisoned, as is Questor Xylox. Questor Dalquist and Magemasters Crohn and Kargan are with me. Doorkeeper will know by now...”

"Thank you for telling me that now, Loras." Olaf groaned, rolling his eyes. "Now I am convinced at last that there may be some doubt concerning your guilt, you tell me that you have imprisoned a lawfully-elected House Prelate! Are you going out of your way to make my life difficult, Brother Bile, or is this just a knack?"

Loras smiled. "We Questors are trouble, are we not?"



"I declare myself acting Prelate," the older mage said, raising his right hand, "until a High Lodge Conclave may be assembled to investigate your contentions. You, Questor Loras, and your confederates, are my prisoners."

"I am your prisoner," Loras agreed. "All I ask is that you arrange for the detention cells to be cleaned; I understand the sanitary facilities there leave something to be desired."

"You will have your retrial," Olaf growled, standing up, "but do not presume too much upon my good nature. You are under arrest."

Loras stretched and rose to his feet. Now the pain of his rebirth had passed, it felt good to be alive.

"As you command, Lord Prelate," he said.

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## **Chapter 11: 'Laudable Aims'**

"May the Order free my mind from base, unclean desire."

Crack!

The kneeling Sister Weranda bit her lip almost hard enough to draw blood as she brought down the lash once more onto

her naked back. Nonetheless, she did not hold back, and the leather thongs bit into her spine and ribs once more.

"Let the Order grant me serenity, and the courage to do right." Her hand trembled, but it did not betray her.

Crack!

"Let the Order show me enlightenment!"

Weranda tottered and almost fell, but she raised the lash again.

This must end soon, a rebellious part of her mind cried, but she pushed the thought away, crushing it into nothingness. Penance was just, and it

was unworthy of a potential member of the Anointed Score to wish it over before it was finished.

"Blessed be the Order!"

Her right hand rebelled, refusing to lift the whip. She gritted her teeth, trying to overcome the traitorous member, but without success. Tears of shame and helplessness spilled down her cheeks.

"Sister," she said to her attendant, Sister Brin, without raising her head, "My body has betrayed me. Please wield the Corrective for me."

"This happens to us all sometimes, Sister," Brin said, a slender woman of

maybe thirty years. She wore a perpetual expression of serene contentment and never raised her voice. "You completed the chant, and I did not see you skimp a single lash. As your petty Superior, I give you permission to forgo the final stroke, in recognition of your diligence."

Weranda opened her mouth to protest, but it would be a fault of Obedience to disobey even a temporary Superior, who represented the Reverend Mother in her absence.

"Thank you, Sister Brin," she said, instead. "Blessed be the Reverend Mother!"

"Blessed be she, the Wielder of Truth!"

Brin responded, bending over to pick up the lash. "I declare you shriven."

With shaking hands, Weranda drew her habit around her shoulders, cursing herself for her human frailty. Brin seemed so kind, so beatific, and Weranda longed to unburden her troubled soul to her. However, the Order's strict rules forbade this.

"Take a few minutes to collect your thoughts and compose yourself, Sister," Brin said. "Give thanks that your vocation is still strong, and reflect on what you have learned." Her head still bowed, Weranda heard the nun's soft footsteps tapping on the flagstones, followed by the creak and bang of the

chapel door. She was alone with her thoughts, and she felt more alone than she had in her entire life.

This is your fault, Afelnor, she raged internally, as saline streams ran down her cheeks. You have ruined my inner peace, you foul rapist! I found my vocation, and you did your best to destroy it! I hate you and all those like you.

Instead of finding solace in her meditation, as she had so often done before, Weranda became more and more agitated. Her bloody back and her aching knees screamed at her with their trifling, physical demands, and she wished Brin

had not removed the Corrective.

Although she tried to push away the memory, her mind went back to their times together in the big bed in Grimm's tower at Crar.

How nervous he was at first, she thought, so careful not to hurt me, trying to please me... No! That was just his perverted male artifice! Mother Lizaveta has shown me the true way, free of physical lust and distraction. I will never again surrender my soul to a filthy male!

Denied the painful, mind-numbing solace of the Corrective, Weranda pounded her shoulders and breasts with her small



fists, trying to rid herself of the foul image of the flushed, sweaty male grimacing and grunting over her like some filthy, rutting animal, but she could not. I hope the Reverend Mother is ripping the flesh from his back right now; him and his bestial confederates!

She longed for Sister Brin to return, to bring a measure of order and serenity back to her life. The normal peace and contentment of meditation had been denied her, and she could not drag her mind from memories of her former, debased existence. Perhaps it would help her to see Grimm being punished for his evil acts.

\* \* \* \*

"Thank you," Grimm whispered, forcing himself to stay on his knees. His head lolled on his heaving chest, but he did not—would not—fall.

Another pain, dull and inchoate, and he felt his head pulled back by the hair. His eyes focussed on a wizened, sweaty, hate-filled face he dimly recognised as that of Lizaveta.

"Why do you thank me?" the Prioress's harsh voice demanded. "Why do you not curse me?" Grimm spat a thick gout of bloody sputum onto the floor. "Because you want me to curse you, witch," he croaked through cracked lips. "I had to thank Magemaster Crohn whenever he

beat me as a Neophyte Questor. He knows more about torment than you ever will; he broke me, but you won't.

"Your only recourse is to kill me."

Lizaveta's face contorted, and Grimm's body writhed within the grip of the demanding tentacles of self-doubt and fear. However, he knew now how to resist the Prioress's emotional attacks: he let them wash over and through him, but he retained a small inner mental sanctum, an island of resistance within the sea of pain and misery.

"Thank you," he gasped, as the Prioress released his hair.

Grimm collapsed to the floor, the shackles on his arms preventing him from holding himself upright, but he felt a warm glow of satisfaction. He had taken everything she and her two attendants had thrown at him, and he had prevailed. He could not attack them with his body or his magic, but he had withstood them. Nonetheless, the onslaught of physical violence and Geomancy had been shocking, and he wondered how many more of these sessions he could stand. He knew he could hide his inner drives and personality from Lizaveta, but he feared permanent damage to his body and his sanity. Lizaveta clapped her hands. "You may leave, Sisters," she said. The two

attendant nuns curtsied, and the Prioress waited until they left the room.

"It does not end here, Grimm," she croaked, her face pale. "This is just the beginning. I am patient and resolute, and I never give up."

"Then we will both suffer a long, painful and fruitless experience, Reverend Mother," Grimm said, forcing himself to sit up. "You will never break me this way. It's too intense, too swift. It gives me no time to reflect, to doubt myself. You think your methods sophisticated and irresistible, but you're just an amateur; Magemaster Crohn's worth ten of you."

Lizaveta struck his left temple with a knotted fist, and he fell again, but the pain was subsumed within the other agonies clamouring for his attention; his arms, legs, stomach, head and, above all, his testicles. His tongue ran across loose teeth, and he offered a bloody smile.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Take the bait, bitch, he thought.

"We start again tomorrow." The Prioress's face contorted in rage. "I see we may need to revise our approach."

Grimm's heart soared, before Lizaveta's words sent him crashing back to the floor.

"We went too easily with you," she said. "Tomorrow, we'll work with renewed zest. Sleep as well as you can tonight; you may consider the last two days as rehearsals."

Where is Shakkar? Grimm wondered, fighting rising panic. He wouldn't just have left us for no reason!

He must be coming!

He tried to keep his expression calm, as if his battered body meant nothing to him.

"As you wish, Reverend Mother," he said. "That will only make it easier. After another few days like this, I'll die,

and you still won't have broken me.

"I'll have won. Even if I'm wrong and you do break down my resistance, I'm bound to invite suspicion if I saunter into High Lodge looking like tenderised meat."

"Geomancy is not restricted to emotional control, young Questor," Lizaveta said, replacing her enraged grimace with an almost beatific smile. "If you become so damaged that your life is in danger, we can repair the injuries, so you will be fit to undergo further instruction. By the time you are ready for your mission, you will be whole and undamaged."

"Are you now so confident, Grimm?"



The mage knew he had failed to hide his dismay from his face. The prospect of death had been almost a comfort to him, and the Prioress had snatched that hope away from him. I can't resist this for day after day! Grimm raged, inside his head, before his Questor will clamped down on his wayward emotions.

I've just got to believe that Shakkar hasn't deserted us, he thought. I've got to work on Drex whenever I can. Perhaps the General will find a way out. Perhaps Guy will break away from her control...

"No, Prioress," he said at last. "I admit you have shaken my confidence. However, I will still fight you to the last vestiges of my will. We Questors are not

easy to control, as you will find."

"Pride, defiance, and self-determination are admirable qualities," the Prioress said. "The Guild forges its Questors in the hot fire of the Ordeal and then tempers them in the cool balm of brotherhood. A tempered blade does not break with a single blow. Instead, one must work it repeatedly, weakening it further with each bend until it fractures. Your resilience enables us to prolong the experience; when you break, it will be decisive and irrevocable."

Grimm knew what Lizaveta said was true. She would break him, sooner or later. It was only a matter of time.

"So, how does your beloved grandson respond to this treatment?" he asked. "Is he bending, or has he already broken?"

Lizaveta snorted. "I have no need to treat Guy so," she said. "He despises Horin and he is ambitious. I only need to work on his existing drives. Some misguided principle makes him resist us, but his defiance is not as strong as yours. Where you must be broken, Guy just requires a little gentle bending until he takes on the form we desire."

"Why are you doing this, Lizaveta?" Grimm asked. "First Thorn and now Guy; why?" Lizaveta shrugged. "Witches are tolerated in the Guild demesnes, like troublesome, senile relatives. Where are

the splendid establishments for young girls to learn the way of our Craft? Where is our High Lodge?

"It pleases me for my kin to be the means of the Guild's downfall; its systematic enfeeblement, destruction and remoulding. In its place will arise a new magical hierarchy, based on feminine principles of decency, justice, and respect."

She's insane, Grimm thought.

"So what you are doing to me, what you do to your nuns; is that decent, just, or respectful?" he demanded.

Lizaveta shrugged. "I am a pragmatist,"

she said, her eyes distant and dreamy. "I take no pleasure in doing what I must, but I will not waver. I will brook no defiance, for my aims are just. I will not rest until Geomancy is as respected as Thaumaturgy, until the two crafts are equal in pre-eminence." Grimm shook his head in wonder and then regretted it, as a carillon of agony clanged and chimed in his brain.

She really believes it! he thought, as the clamour in his head began to subside. Can I make her see the insanity of this? Is it worth even trying?

Perhaps not, but I doubt agreeing with her will make my lot any easier.

"Laudable aims, Prioress," he said aloud, dragging himself to his feet and facing the Prioress. "If I thought you meant those stirring words, that would be one thing; however, I don't. You don't want equality; you want complete domination of both mages and witches. How does torturing your wards free them? How do you defend that?"

"Who are you to lecture me about torture?" Lizaveta demanded, a pair of small, red patches blooming on her pale cheeks. "How did your beloved Guild turn you into a Questor? Were you not tortured for their ends? They make you risk your life again and again, to pay for the abuse they heaped on you! Is that

just?"

Grimm opened his mouth to retort, but he closed it without speaking, as a troubled thought swam into his consciousness: She's right! How many times have I been told that the Questor Ordeal is a distasteful but unavoidable facet of Guild operations? My Ordeal can't have been any worse than that of hundreds of other Charity Students, and the same torture is probably going on right now in a forgotten corner of some Guild House. When I think of poor Erek, who chose to commit suicide rather than face another day of his abuse...

Are Lizaveta's methods any worse?

"Think about it, Grimm," the Prioress said, her voice softer, if still harsh and unpleasant. "I beat you, and you thank me because that is how you were taught to respond to abuse, like a good little automaton. Is that the mark of an enlightened, honourable regime? Can such brutality be overcome with soft words and gentle rebukes? Yes, I am inflexible and stern; it is my only means of changing a system that should be detestable to any right-thinking person.

"You will suffer again tomorrow, and again the day after that, and for as long as is necessary, Grimm. After all, you are a proud, indomitable Mage Questor, are you not? Just ask yourself one



question as you writhe in pain: why are you fighting?

"Do you think the Guild loves you? The indoctrination is so strong that even my own son, Thorn, sent you to try to kill me. All I ever did was to try to raise him to the peak of Guild status, to bring about the replacement of a corrupt and perverted establishment that isolates its members from women; half the world's population, dismissed by a lie!"

Grimm gulped. He knew the Guild regulations concerning physical relations between men and women were based on untruth; a mage did not lose his powers after sexual congress. Why did these strictures exist? Surely for no reason

other than the total subjugation of Guild men and boys!

Crack!

Grimm raised a trembling hand to his burning left cheek.

"Thank me for that if you wish," Lizaveta snarled. "You have given your life over to suffering. If that is your desire, I'll give you suffering."

Grimm tried to speak, but he could not. Strong emotion welled within him, threatening to overwhelm him. Drawing great, hacking breaths, he fought to control himself. He waved his hands and screwed his eyes shut; Lizaveta's

rhetoric had provoked a greater result than all the pain he had suffered in the previous two days.

"You're just playing with my mind, witch," he said, almost sobbing.

"Is that so bad?" Lizaveta asked, running her fingers over his bruised face. "Why fight it? I need you to love me so that you will help me achieve my ends, but I bear you no personal animosity." The Prioress' face looked almost appealing, attractive ... for just a moment. The vision of Drexelica as Lizaveta's indoctrinated, willing slave destroyed the brief image.

"I will fight you to the end of my life,

bitch,” he whispered, although he knew his feeble voice lacked conviction. “I will fight you every step of the way.”

"That is your privilege, Grimm," Lizaveta said. "Just remember that a single, heartfelt kiss will stop the pain and the suffering. Did your precious Guild ever offer you that escape?"

"I will send food, and I advise you to eat every scrap. If you are as resolute as you say, tomorrow will be hard on you."

With that, she was gone, and Grimm fought the urge to call the Prioress back. I will fight, he thought. I'll beat her yet!

He crushed down the traitorous thought

that bubbled up from within: Why?

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## **Chapter 12: Sickness**

Seneschal Shakkar's head lolled on his scaly neck. He knew he was close to exhaustion as he approached the southern boundary of Anjar. His right wing had been badly torn in the encounter with the zombies, and he could not sustain flight for long. His legs were designed to ensnare and disembowel prey, not to carry him swiftly over long distances. He also had lost a considerable amount of blood, and he needed frequent rest periods.

He was accustomed to physical wounds healing within a few hours, but the zombies' claw-gashes remained open, weeping with blood and cloudy fluids. His steps were slow and clumsy; the only thing that kept him going was the knowledge that Baron Grimm and his retinue were now in the power of Prioress Lizaveta, as was Mistress Drexelica.

Of my own free will, I swore an oath to Baron Grimm, he told himself. He has been a friend to me ever since he freed me from Starmor's evil influence. I cannot and will not let him down. Or Sergeant Erik, he thought, forcing his taloned feet to keep moving. Erik has

been a good companion and I would prefer him to remain alive. I also admire Tordun; he is a powerful and resourceful fighter. General Quelgrum is an efficient organiser and he motivates his men; Crar would be the poorer without him.

He did not think much of Necromancer Numal, who was no warrior, and he disliked the manner in which Questor Guy had sought to belittle Baron Grimm at every opportunity, but he had no wish to see them dead. Once, he had despised humans, and, out of necessity, he had consumed the flesh of many when he was Starmor's prisoner. Nonetheless, he now saw much to admire in these strange, short-lived creatures; they did not all

cower in fear and succumb to domination when threatened, and the demon had seen evidence of nobility, self-sacrifice and honour in several of the frail beings. I will never eat the meat of humans again, he muttered. I will eat grass, earth or stones before I ever consume manflesh again.

He could not admit, even to himself, that he had come to admire humankind, but he acknowledged some admirable qualities on occasion.

These creatures deserve the opportunity to grow and develop, he thought, his lungs burning as he trudged towards a large building. Perhaps they are worth saving, after all.



To Shakkar's surprise, the streets looked deserted; the last time he had seen Anjar, it had been a hive of industry, with scores of Anjarians buying, selling and going about their daily business. As he drew closer to the building, a human emerged from a small side doorway.

"Hold, demon!" the man shouted, from a distance of thirty feet. "Who are you, and what do you want?"

"My name is Shakkar, Seneschal of the Barony of Crar; I beseech your help," The man approached the demon and whistled through his teeth as his eyes fell on Shakkar's suppurating wounds.

"I presume you've fallen foul of the Night Ones," he said. "I'll ask our resident Healer, Porpitt, to tend to your injuries. He used to be a Guild Mage, and he has some knowledge of the demonic physique." The man extended his right hand to Shakkar, which the demon recognised as a sign of non-confrontation. The Seneschal followed suit, taking the human's appendage in a careful, gentle grip.

"I am Peder Mallion, Mayor of Anjar," the man said, pumping Shakkar's heavy hand with some difficulty.

"I'm happy to see that your confrontation with the Night Ones was not fatal, but you need medical care."

"I will not argue with that, Mayor Peder," Shakkar said, "but I must make a few other demands on your time first."

"In good time, Lord Seneschal," Peder replied. "I insist that Healer Porpitt attend to those gashes first; the Night Ones' blows cause fatal infections if not treated in time." Shakkar's wounded left leg buckled and he sprawled to the dirt, almost taking Peder with him.

"Very well, Mayor Peder," he said, his head spinning. "I agree. I am not in quite full fighting condition, and the undead monsters may have infected me with some strange sickness." His head fell back; his neck seemed unwilling to

support his weight. "I feel a little strange," he mumbled.

"I'll assemble a party of men to carry you into the Great House. This can't wait," the Mayor said, running into the large building at considerable speed.

Shakkar had never suffered a bodily illness before in his life but, now, his heart pounded and his scaly skin grew even colder as weakness flooded through his once-mighty frame. Now, his vision blurred, and he began to mumble in his native demon tongue. The last thing Shakkar saw before blackness took him was the image of his long-dead clutch-mother.

\* \* \* \*

Grimm awoke with a start as he heard the key clang in the lock of his cell door.

"Good morning, Questor Grimm," Prioress Lizaveta said, resplendent in pearl-white robes. "Did you sleep well?"

"Where are your attendants today, Prioress?" he demanded, sitting up with some difficulty. Lizaveta laughed; a sound like gravel being crushed under an iron boot. "They await my call, young mage. I thought it would be pleasant to have a little chat with you before your more ... physical education begins; if that should become necessary."

"You're wasting your time, Lizaveta," Grimm growled, with a fervour he did not feel. "You may as well summon them right now. I will not betray my House or my Guild!"

"Spoken like a true slave," the Prioress replied, clapping her hands like a happy child. "Do you enjoy pain? Are you so eager to suffer again, just so your vaunted High Dominie can live like a prince?"

"He resisted your advances, Prioress, as did my grandfather. Should I submit where they did not?" Choler flooded into Lizaveta's cheeks.

"That bloated idiot, Horin," she said, her

words slow and deliberate, “only withstood my magic with your aid. I hoped that your grandfather, Loras, would respond to me without Geomantic persuasion, but he did not.

"Consider my position," she continued, her eyes gleaming like chips of glass. "I am proud to be a witch; I hail my calling, as you hail yours. Why should I be considered a second-class magic-user because of my sex? Why must I seek respect from within the insipid refuge of religion? Do you think of women as mere baubles, to be displayed on some Guild ornament-shelf?"

Grimm shrugged.

"The question is a reasonable one," Lizaveta demanded. "Is your only answer a slovenly shrug?"

"I'm not responsible for the way the world is!" Grimm snapped. "Yes, women are treated badly in our society. Can I change that? No!

"Should I then help to tear down the regime which gave me, a disgraced blacksmith's grandson, a sense of self-worth and self-respect? The Guild gave me all you seek, when I had no right to demand it; I won't betray it."

Lizaveta came close to Grimm, until her lined forehead almost touched his. "Should I then abandon my dreams



because I should not change what is?

"Answer my question: why should not witches be granted equal respect to their male counterparts? Your beloved Drexelica is a witch, but you prefer to see her as a concubine, do you not; a comfortable pillow, to give you solace and understanding when you return from your arduous travails? When she came here, she was ashamed of her magical legacy. I taxed her, harangued her and bullied her, until she recognised the true power within her.

"Does that sound familiar, Questor Grimm?"

She's twisting words! Grimm thought,

trying to find a way to answer the shrivelled woman.

"You just want me to say women are better than men," he said at last. "That witches are more principled and egalitarian than mages."

"I did not say that!" Lizaveta said, her brows raised. "I just asked you to tell me how you think of women in general and of witches in particular. Is that such a hard question to answer?" Grimm fought to find a suitable riposte, but he found none. However, every moment he forestalled the unwelcome attentions of Lizaveta's lieutenants was another moment of respite, another moment of hope. He knew he must speak.

"Women are oppressed in our society," he admitted, opening his palms towards the Prioress. "Witches are held in lower regard than Guild Mages; perhaps unfairly. However, I have met only three witches in my life, as far as I know: you, Sister Madeleine and Drex. You condemned my grandfather to a life of misery and self-contempt; Madeleine tried to enslave me and failed, and you killed her; Drex, the love of my life, calls me a despoiler of women, at your command. Should I hail you as a liberator? I don't think so. Just call in your torturers.

"That's all I have to say. Do what you

want."

Grimm hoped he had persuaded Lizaveta to talk further, to allow him to regain a little strength, but he knew a sudden shift in allegiance would seem suspect.

The Prioress said, "Madeleine died after I beat her; a weak heart, I suspect. Did your friend, Neophyte Erek, fare any better as a Neophyte Questor—a youth in such despair he took his own life? How many times did you consider suicide during your own Ordeal, Grimm?"

"How did you hear about Erek? Was it pillow-talk from Lord Horin when you held him under your spell?"

"Thorn told me," Lizaveta replied, with the trace of a smile on her lips. Grimm felt a shock of horror blaze through his body like a flash-fire. He had guessed that Lizaveta had tried to control Thorn, but he had assumed that the Prelate had shaken off the shackles of her control since she disowned him.

"I know what you are thinking, Grimm. You think he resisted me from the first, don't you? I assure you, this defiance is a recent development. He has been telling me Guild and House secrets for years." Grimm nodded, mute; learning from Lizaveta that Thorn was her son had been shock enough, but to think that his Lord Prelate was a traitor to the Guild...

"You're lying," he said. "Lord Thorn ... I think you tried to control him, but you failed."

"Thorn knew all about what happened to your grandfather."

Grimm felt his eyes bulge.

"Indeed, he benefited from it. He was a full, if unwilling, participant. While my spell held Loras' will in abeyance, Thorn placed the pillow in his hands. He raised the alarm, so that other mages could witness his heroic rescue of Geral.

"I have owned Thorn's will all his life."

Grimm's world seemed to tumble around him like an ill-built house of cards. The very metaphor brought back vivid memories of his own Questor training, when he had been required to construct such a pasteboard edifice with the power of his mind alone.

This time, more than his pride was at stake.

His hatred had been reserved for Lizaveta alone, ever since he had discovered her part in Loras'

downfall. Now, he had to accept that Lord Thorn, a man in whom he had placed his implicit trust, had betrayed Loras as part of a plot to destabilise the

very Guild he claimed to serve. As Grimm fought to rationalise this new learning, he heard a soft rap at the door.

"Enter," Lizaveta barked, turning her back on him.

The door opened to reveal Sister Judan, who gave a respectful curtsy. "Begging your indulgence, Reverend Mother," she said. "The pale giant is very sick. He does not respond to the standard healing spells. The sickness is eating him up; I've never seen a disease advance so quickly. I consulted Sister Mercia, Reverend Mother, but even she could not help."

Lizaveta shook her head, and turned



back towards Grimm, her face ashen.  
“Our discussion can wait,”

she said. “I understand you have some knowledge of herbs. Perhaps you would like to minister to your friend?”

The Questor saw deep concern etched into her face.

Grimm's mind reeled. “Why do you care what happens to Tordun, or Erik, or any of us?” he demanded.

“We're all just pawns in your game, aren't we?”

"I dislike needless death, Grimm. Your friends are not essential to my plan, but I

do not wish them to die, either."

This woman's just full of surprises, Grimm thought. I'll bet she poisoned Tordun, just to see my reaction. This must be some sort of test.

"Of course I want to help, if I can," he said. "How far does your largesse extend, Reverend Mother?"

"What do you mean, Questor Grimm?"

"How about healing some of my injuries?" he asked. "I'm not in the best condition to play Healer at the moment."

Lizaveta shrugged. "Of course," she said.

"I'll need medicinal herbs—I don't know which ones at the moment. I may also need to talk to my other companions."

The Prioress nodded, but did not speak. If she was acting, she was a superb actress!

What's she up to? he wondered, before clarity flashed into his mind: Of course! She doesn't know what it is, and she's worried that it might be contagious! So much for the new, caring Lizaveta!

"You will receive whatever you need, Questor," the Prioress said in a low voice, and Grimm could swear he heard a tremor of fear in her tone. "This cannot wait."

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## **Chapter 13: Contagion**

Grimm stared in wonder as his cuts and bruises faded away. He had seen magical healing at work before, but always to the accompaniment of runic chants and hand gestures. Sister Judan did her work in complete silence, her hands still and hovering inches over the centre of his chest as she crouched over him. As he had been bidden, he lay on his back in the middle of the cell, his arms and legs splayed. The aches and pains suffusing his body began to shrink, drawing away from the periphery of his body like ice thawing on a lake. He

gasped at a sudden, biting pang under his sternum, but it soon passed.

"There," Sister Judan said, standing and wiping her forehead with a handkerchief. "You are whole again."

"Thank you, Sister," he said, marvelling at the absence of pain as he sat up. "You are a miracle-worker!" Judan frowned. "Do not blaspheme, young man!" she reproved him, her voice as prim and affronted as that of the most repressed maiden aunt.

These ladies are a mass of contradictions, he thought. How can somebody engage in torture one moment and be horrified by a few words the

next?

"My apologies, Sister," he said, with just a trace of sarcasm colouring his voice. "I have been under some strain, and my mind must have strayed from my religious sensibilities for a moment." Judan sniffed. "We will attend your poor, sick friend now," she said. "It is such a shame for a fit young man to be stricken so."

"Kindly lead the way, Sister," he said, rising to his feet.

Are they all madwomen here? Grimm wondered.

Judan led him out of the cell to the long

corridor outside, where Lizaveta waited. Grimm's heart beat faster as he saw Drex standing beside the Prioress.

"I have instructed Sister Weranda to accompany you and ensure your good behaviour," Lizaveta said.

"Sister Mercia, our resident Herbalist, will be in attendance, and she is not a member of the Score. As far as she is concerned, you are all our honoured guests, and you are not to disabuse her of this belief. Is that understood?"

Grimm raised an eyebrow.

I would have thought a stinking cell and a battered patient would give the game

away at least a little, he thought, but he nodded.

"I understand, Reverend Mother. I will tell Sister Mercia that I am here of my own free will."

"I will see to that, Questor Grimm," Drex said, her face like stone. "You are not to address me except in response to a direct question, and you will keep your filthy hands away from me. If you do not comply, you will soon regret it!"

"Take care, Sister," Lizaveta said. "Questor Grimm must retain enough freedom of movement to see to the pale man's needs."



Drex curtsied. "As you wish, Reverend Mother."

"Sister Judan; you shall wait outside the door. If anything untoward occurs, it may be necessary to restructure Sister Mercia's memory a little."

"I understand, Reverend Mother," Judan said, bobbing. "Let us visit the patient." To Grimm's surprise, the older Sister led him past the main row of cells and down a flight of stairs. "The Reverend Mother had the poor man moved to her own quarters—such is her mercy." Grimm nodded.

Of course; Lizaveta's just playing the bounteous hostess.

The mage squinted as the dim illumination of the corridor gave way to the well-lit vestibule outside Lizaveta's private chambers.

Drex brought her mouth close to his right ear. "Just remember, Grimm," she whispered, "I'll hurt you if you step out of line by a single pace. Prioress Lizaveta's taught me a lot, and I can do all kinds of nasty things to you, if I choose. After what you did to me, I'm just waiting for the chance." We'll see about that, Drex, Grimm thought. I know you're in there somewhere, and I'll bring you back, I swear.

Judan approached the white door and opened it, revealing the marbled

splendour of Lizaveta's outer chamber. The mage and the younger nun stepped inside, and Judan closed the door behind them. Drex opened the inner door to the Prioress' bedchamber. In the plush, silk-covered bed lay the stricken Tordun, and Grimm almost recoiled in horror at the giant albino's grey, mottled face, his roaming, sightless gaze and his matted hair.

Tordun's really sick!

He rushed to the bed, beside which knelt a young woman, her face a mask of worry and compassion, deep lines of concern etched into her features.

"I am Sister Mercia," the nun said,

turning a pair of large, moist, blue eyes towards him. "Can you help us, Lord Mage? I've tried everything I know."

"What can you tell me, Sister?" Grimm asked. "I am no Mage Healer, but I have studied the properties of herbs."

"His body bears several wounds that look as if they came from the claws of an animal," she said. "An infection is spreading outwards from them and consuming his flesh. I cannot drive out the infection. He has a very high temperature, and I fear he is slipping away. His pulse is fast, but weak."

"Have you tried feverfew or dragon-tail?" he asked, searching his memory

for suitable febrifuges.

"Both, Lord Mage," Mercia said. "I also applied tincture of sea-balm. Nothing seems to work."

"I need to see the wounds," Grimm said, and the young nun drew back the covers. The mage gagged as a musty stench filled the air. Holding his breath, he leant closer. He saw a series of five black, gaping wounds along the left side of Tordun's ribs, bordered in angry red and exuding pus. They ranged from just above the warrior's left hip to just under his armpit. The smell appalled him: it seemed as if the wounds were growing in length and width as he watched, eating up Tordun's' muscular body.

This has to be something to do with those undead monsters they faced. It has to be!

Tordun groaned, as if from the depths of some nightmare, and Grimm turned to Drex.

"I need to speak to Necromancer Numal immediately," he said, his voice firm.

"I will take you, Lord Mage," Drex said. "Sister Mercia, you stay with the patient."

\* \* \* \*

Numal lay back on a straw mattress, but

he leapt to his feet as Grimm and Drex entered the noisome cell. His clothes and hair were dishevelled, but he seemed otherwise unhurt.

"It's good to see you, Questor Grimm," Numal said. "What's the matter with Tordun? I heard he was sick."

"I don't know, Brother Mage," Grimm said. "I think it must be something to do with your zombie friends; Tordun's blood seems to be poisoned, stemming from the wounds he received fighting them." Numal gulped. "I've heard of that; I was taught to invoke a warding spell whenever dealing with them; something to do with keeping the tainted air away. I'm using one now."

"Tordun's dying," Grimm said. "What can we do to save him? Do you know anything that may help?" The Necromancer responded with a despairing shrug. "I'm only a Second Rank Necromancer," he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I didn't ask what you are, Necromancer Numal!" Grimm snapped. "I asked what you know!" The Necromancer nodded. "I'm sorry, Questor Grimm; I didn't mean to be defensive. There is a disease of the blood that can arise from contact with the dead; some kind of corpse-dust. Normally, it's only a problem when inhaled, or if it enters the body through



an open wound. It is not contagious. Have no fear on that score. I may be able to help more if I may see Tordun; I was given some training in the treatment of this disease, since it is of great relevance to Necromancers." Grimm turned to Drex. "With your permission, Sister?"

"I suppose it can do no harm," she said and sighed, pressing a hand to her forehead and closing her eyes, as if in pain. "Do what you must."

Grimm led Numal from the cell without waiting for further response. The two mages hurried along the corridor and down the staircase as quickly as their robes would allow. Sister Judan,

standing outside the door to Lizaveta's apartments, frowned. "Who is this, Questor Grimm?

And where is Sister Weranda?"

"This is Necromancer Numal," the Questor said. "He may be able to help; Sister Weranda gave her permission. She is just behind us."

Judan nodded and waved the two mages through the door as if shooing away flies, putting a hand over her nose and mouth as she did so.

The young nun, Mercia, looked up.

"Numal may have some knowledge that

will help to save this man,” Grimm said, indicating his companion. “Numal, this is Sister Mercia.”

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mage Numal," the nun said in a small voice. "Are you a Healer?" Numal shook his head. "No, Sister, I'm a Necromancer," he said, throwing back his cowl and revealing his bone-white, hairless head and dark, sunken eyes.

Mercia started a little, her eyes wide, but she said nothing. Numal drew back the covers to reveal the warrior's ravaged form.

The Necromancer recoiled and looked at Grimm with wide eyes. "This is the

disease,” he said, his voice tremulous, “but it should never have advanced so far in such a short period. No Guild Necromancer would raise the dead without taking at least basic precautions; this looks like a Resonance in the spell.” The stink of death seemed even worse to Grimm than it had a few minutes before, and he had to fight to retain the contents of his stomach. The red-black, oozing wounds had now blurred into each other, so that he could no longer distinguish where one ended and the next began. He had never felt so helpless in his life, as he gazed in horror at the sight of the proud, valorous warrior twitching on the stained bed.” What can be done, Numal?” he pleaded. “There must be

something!" Numal leaned over Tordun once more; perhaps he was more accustomed than Grimm to such smells.

"Certain fungi can help," he said. "Black Boletus, Bishops' Agaric or Monks'-cowl."

"I'm sure they don't grow in this region, Lord Mage," Sister Mercia said, her eyes moist. "Are there any herbs which could provide a cure?"

Numal straightened up and faced the nun. "I don't know," he confessed. "I'm no Herbalist, I'm afraid. Even the fungi don't cure the condition; they just strengthen the patient so his own bodily processes can fight it."

Grimm thought back to his youthful studies of plants in the Arnor House Scholasticate Library. "What are the signatures of the fungi you mentioned, Numal?" he said. "I know herbs." Numal licked his lips and scratched his bald pate. "Um ... the primary attributes are 'bitter', 'frangible'

and ... 'fumiferous', if I remember correctly," he said. "Secondaries include 'clarificatory',

'spirit-strengthening' and—what is it?—ah, yes, 'forceful'. I don't know the tertiary attributes; I haven't gone that far yet. They're complex rune sequences, and I couldn't hope to invoke them without months of dedicated study."

Grimm clenched his fists in frustration. All mages other than Questors relied on complex sequences of runes with which to accomplish their spells; Questors only had to visualise a spell's effects in order to be able to cast it.

His right hand strayed towards a small pouch hanging around his neck by a leather cord. He looked down at the bag of herbs, which he had carried with him ever since his deliverance from the vile addiction he had suffered after defeating the demon Baron, Starmor, on his first Quest. He had only defeated the emotion-hungry Starmor by using one herb, Trina, to dull his emotions, and

another, Virion, to strengthen his sense of purpose. He had sworn never to take either of the potent herbs' smoke again since his addiction; how could he consider the possibility of leaving another in their thrall?

He knew both herbs had medicinal applications, but he had no idea of the required dosage; perhaps Sister Mercia would know better.

I must act quickly! he thought. Tordun's dying!

"Dried Virion matches the primary and secondary attributes, Sister," he said, resolved to do whatever it took to arrest this terrible disease in his friend and



companion. "Do you know the proper dosage for such a substance, applied as smoke?"

Mercia shook her head. "The application of psychoactive substances is forbidden within the Order, Lord Mage," she said. "Nothing is allowed which might interfere with a Sister's religious conscience. Such herbs are proscribed, although I know something of them from my former life in the World."

"Tordun is dying," Grimm replied, trying to keep his voice calm and reasonable. "He is not of your Order, and Virion may be his only hope. Will you let him die?"

The nun sighed. "I cannot allow an honoured guest to die," she said, shaking her head. "A quantity of dried Virion sufficient to cover a thumbnail is the normal pharmaceutical dose, I believe." Grimm blinked; he had used a whole handful of the substance, since he had had no idea of the effective quantity; such information was not included in the House literature.

Mercia took a small, ceramic crucible from a pocket in her robes. "Do you have fire?" she asked. "I have no flint."

The Questor raised his right hand, but he then remembered the restrictions placed upon him; he could not cast magic without the ensorcelled Drex's

permission. He turned around, but she was not in the room. As he opened his mouth, he heard a distant, muffled cry, almost a scream: "Sister Weranda is diseased!

She has the sickness!" The voice was distant, but the words acted as an imperative on the Questor. His mouth dry and his heart pounding, Grimm turned to Numal, tearing the bag from his neck and tossing it to the Necromancer, who caught it clumsily. "You can cast Fire, can't you, Numal? Just do it! Use the dark grey herb, not the yellow one."

Without waiting for an answer, he ran from Lizaveta's rooms, up the stairs and

along the corridor, to see Sister Judan standing over the slumped figure of Drex. Grimm's heart surged, and he gasped at the sight of his lover's flushed, expressionless face.

"Where is Prioress Lizaveta?" Grimm demanded. "I need to talk to her!" Judan raised a teary, blotched face towards him, damning him with her eyes. "We are locked in!" she said. "There is no way out of here; we are all going to die! I hope you are happy with the Names'

judgement on your filthy ways!"

The nun raised her right arm, allowing her long sleeve to slide down. The angry, red marks on her triceps showed

the incipient path of the disease that had already begun to claim Tordun and Drex. Grimm fell to his knees, giving way to his emotions, sobbing at his utter inability to affect the situation. All his mighty Questor powers could not stop the march of the virulent germs the Prioress had unwittingly released.

"Damn Lizaveta!" he screamed. "This is her fault, for playing with powers she didn't understand! Damn you! Damn your bloody Order!"

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## **Chapter 14: Motivation**

Grimm took a series of deep breaths,

fighting to quash his inner fear and anger as he knelt on the corridor's cold flagstones.

Think, Afelnor! Are you just going to surrender without a fight?

He thought back to what Magemaster Crohn had barked at him when he was still learning to control his new powers: "You do not need one spell for this, one spell for that, and another for the third Wednesday in June! You are a Questor!"

That was his strength, but it was also his weakness; he had no idea of the sickness affecting Drex, Tordun and Sister Judan, so he could not visualise any spell that might act upon it. He looked up to see

Sister Judan on her knees beside him, her hands clasped, her eyes closed and her lips moving without sound. A little further on lay the prostrate figure of Drex, moist, pink lines showing through the back of her white robe as she moaned. Tears prickled at the margins of his eyes, but he could not seem to put his mind to work on the problem at hand.

Perhaps Judan's praying to whatever goddess the nuns of the Anointed Score worship, he thought. I suppose that's as good as anything I can do...

No! I won't wait here for some malign fate to sweep me up like a twig in a hurricane!

He stood up.

"Sister Judan."

Judan did not react.

"Sister Judan!" His voice cracked like a whip; the nun opened her eyes and looked up.

"What is it, Thaumaturge?" she said, her mouth twisting at the generic term for a male magic-user, as if she had been forced to utter an obscenity. "Can you not just accept what is and leave me to put my spiritual affairs in order? The pain grows worse by the minute; I will not live much longer. I hope your own death is worse than mine, for all the



miserly you and your kind have visited on the world."

"Charming sentiments!" Grimm snapped. "This filthy disease may have been caused by your own Prioress playing with Necromancy, using powers she did not comprehend!"

"Mere supposition, mage," Judan replied. "What do you want? Or do you just enjoy robbing women of their spiritual serenity in their final hours?"

"I want you to open the other cells, Sister," the Questor said, ignoring Judan's rhetorical question. "I have no intention of giving up and dying, and I must consult my imprisoned friends."

The Sister crossed her hands over her breastbone. "I will do nothing to help you, Questor. The keys are secreted in my bosom. Take them if you dare, and prove yourself a despoiler of women. I will fight you and scratch you; then, we will see how long you remain unaffected by this rotting plague!" Grimm stepped back three paces, eying the Sister's hands and noting her long, sharp-looking fingernails, each extending an inch or more from the end of its associated digit. A scratch on the face from any one of these could seal his fate in short order if, as he assumed, the illness struck its victims through broken flesh.

"I do not need to sully your pristine body

with my hands, Sister,” he said, smiling. “I can take the keys from you with the power of my mind alone, ripping them through the material of your bodice, and I will do so if you refuse me. I promise not to look.”

Judan narrowed her eyes like those of an alley-cat cornered by a brace of hungry dogs, and she cast her eyes around as if seeking an escape route.

Then the nun smiled. “You can cast no magic without permission,” she reminded him. “Your threat is hollow.”

Grimm knew his Geomantic prohibition was caused by his link with Drex, and she seemed in no condition to maintain

such a powerful spell.

"K'chuk!"

Just a pinch of power, just a fragment of his spell-language was all it took to kindle a cool, blue flame on the tip of his right index finger, and he smiled, holding up the ensorcelled digit.

"I think not," he said. "I advise you to reconsider. I can think of a dozen ways to kill you before you can make peace with whatever dark deity you worship."

Staring at the small flame, Judan grasped a cord around her neck and lifted a bunch of keys from between her breasts, flinging it at him as if throwing a javelin.

He resisted the impulse to catch it, stepping swiftly aside to let it clatter to the floor; there was no sense in risking an infected cut from the keys' sharp edges.

"Thank you, Sister," he said, bending to pick it up. "Enjoy your meditation." Wait! his hind-brain screamed, as he hefted the key-ring. If the others are injured, they may be exposed to the disease if I open the doors!

Changing his mind, Grimm raced along the corridor and down the stairs to Lizaveta's chamber. Tordun still lay in the ridiculous, pink-upholstered bed, with Sister Mercia and Necromancer Numal in attendance, but the stench of

Tordun's advancing illness seemed to have lost a little of its edge. Numal, crouched to the right of the bed, looked up. "Virion seems to have had some effect," he said, with a lopsided smile. "It hasn't eradicated the disease, but it seems to have at least delayed it. He's still a very sick man, but we've won some time; I don't know how much."

"How many doses do we have?" Grimm asked. He knew the little pouch had held little more than a generous pinch of the potent herbs.

"Four ... maybe five," Numal said, shrugging. "This plague doesn't appear to have affected me or Sister Mercia.

Whatever it is, it doesn't seem to be all-powerful."

Grimm glanced at the young nun. Her eyes were closed as she prayed, and her face was pale, but she appeared to be in good health. He guessed that either Mercia's skin was unmarked, or Numal's ward extended far enough to include her in its protection. On the other hand, Mercia was in the room before he released Numal...

Enough of this! he thought. Drex is dying, and I don't want to expose the others to this hell-plague!

"I need your warding spell, Numal," Grimm said. "I want to let the others out,

and I don't want them to catch it."

Numal scratched his bald head. "I can write it down, if you have ink and a parchment."

"I don't. But, if you'll let me use my Sight, I may be able to work out what it does." Numal shrugged. "Feel free, Grimm," he said, "but I haven't had much sleep recently. I'm not sure how accurate Sight would be, and a miscast could be disastrous. It's too risky, if you ask me." A miscast could topple the mightiest of mages other than Questors, and Numal was no magical titan. Grimm could not risk it ... could he? He felt time slipping away as he struggled with indecision; a luxury he could ill afford.



Action, now! he chided himself.

"Sister Mercia," he said in a gentle voice, turning away from the useless Numal. The nun opened her eyes and unclasped her hands. "Yes, Questor Grimm?"

"Sister Weranda and Sister Judan are sick," he said. "Will you please administer the herbal smoke to them at once?"

He hesitated at the thought of using his dwindling supply of Virion on Judan, but he could not bring himself to allow her to rot away in agony.

"At once, Lord Mage," Mercia said, rising to her feet and taking the small bag from the foot of Tordun's—Lizaveta's—bed. "Will you cast the flame?"

"Use the torches," Grimm advised. "I need to talk to Necromancer Numal for a while. Please be frugal with the leaves; we may need them for others. Breathe in the smoke yourself. We can't afford to lose you!"

"I understand, Lord Mage," the nun said, her lips crinkling in a brave smile. "We'll beat this illness, somehow, I'm sure." In a moment, she was gone.

The Questor's heart went out to her.

Poor girl, he thought. I'll bet she knows next to nothing about the evil that goes on here, or about this disease, but she maintains her composure. She seems to believe in me for some reason. I wish I could.

Tordun's breathing had eased a little, and his skin had lost some of its former blue-grey tint. He appeared far from healthy, but he seemed, at least, stable.

"Numal," he said. The Necromancer started and looked back at him, his eyes wide and expectant. Grimm stifled a groan. I hoped Numal would take the lead here, he thought. Instead, he seems to expect me to perform some bloody miracle!

"We may have found a little respite," he said, choosing his words with care, "a little time to think. We need it. Lizaveta has locked us in here, to prevent the infection spreading further. We're on our own." Numal's jaw dropped, and Grimm feared the Necromancer would lose control, but the older man just nodded.

"I understand, Questor Grimm," he said in a quiet voice. "What is your plan?"

"I don't have one," Grimm said, through clenched teeth. "I hoped you'd be able to shed some light on the problem."

Numal stood up, his face crimson with rage or embarrassment; Grimm could not

tell which.

"Why me?" he demanded, his fists clenched. "I'm only—"

"I'm fed up of hearing what you're only, Numal! You are a Guild Mage! I don't want excuses, rationales or reasons for what you can't do! I want you to tell me what you can do!

"I'm out of ideas, my friend. Tell my something about this disease: ideas, opinions, anything!" Grimm sighed.

"I won't open the cell doors for the moment," he said. "It was a stupid idea, bred out of panic; I've no idea what this miasma can do, and I don't want to

expose our friends to it. I wanted you to show me your warding spell, so we can prevent them from catching the infection in the first place; you don't want to miscast, so I guess that's out of the question.

"Why don't you come up with a few ideas for a change?" he demanded, "I'm asking you to help me, Numal; I'm out of ideas!"

"You're a Seventh Rank Questor!" Numal snapped, crossing his arms over his chest. "What can a lowly Second Rank Specialist hope to contribute, if you're stumped?"

"You're a Mage Necromancer, Numal,"

Grimm replied “This disease may concern those zombies that attacked you. That sounds like your bailiwick, now, doesn't it? I'm not asking you to perform a miracle. I just want you to think! The Virion fumes will work for forty-five minutes at most. I want us to come up with a plan of action before that time elapses. So let's get to it!" Grimm did not feel ready to tell the Necromancer of his addiction to Virion after the defeat of Starmor on his first Quest; he knew that he must appear strong and indomitable, at least for the moment, if he were to motivate the jittery mage.

"You told me the disease was not contagious," he said. "Can you tell me

why this variant is so active?" Numal shrugged. "I was evidently wrong," he said, his lips extending into a sulky pout. "I'm sorry." We don't have time for this! the Questor thought, clenching his fists. We're going to squabble like fractious children for hours at this rate.

"Stop acting like a damned adolescent, Numal!" he said, frowning. "I don't want blame, accusations or excuses—I'm trying to come up with some data on which we can work. In your opinion as a Mage Necromancer, why is this disease so different from the ailment you described? The effects are the same, but it progresses much faster. Why might that be so?"



Numal's face was still blank; he looked more like a village idiot than a Guild Mage. How on Earth did a man this obtuse ever win the Guild ring? he wondered.

"Do you know how to animate a corpse, even if you can't do it yourself?"

"It depends." Numal sighed. "There's a Third Rank spell for animating a body dead for less than two hours, a Fifth Rank spell for corpses up to a week old, and a Seventh Rank spell for rotted creatures or skeletons."

Now we we're getting somewhere! Grimm thought.

"In what condition were the creatures that attacked you, Numal?" The older mage's eyes rolled. "Oh, they were long gone," he said. "All of them were pretty far gone, and most were just skeletons. Only Seventh Rank magic and a huge amount of power could have animated all of them."

The Questor nodded. "Do you know why each type of cadaver needs a different spell?" he asked. "Is a different principle involved for each?"

Numal began to give his usual, non-committal gesture but then stopped in mid-shrug, his face clearing.

"There is, Grimm!" he said, wide-eyed,

in a sudden access of enthusiasm. "I see what you're getting at here. The easiest spell involves accessing the intact nervous system, before corruption takes hold. The Fifth Rank magic requires the mage to insert intricate webs of force in place of the decayed nerves. The ultimate spell involves the mage extending a field of energy from his soul, animating the dead matter.

"If disease germs were affected, there's no telling..."

The Necromancer's voice faltered for a moment, and his face fell. "No, that's not the answer. The full spell is selective. Corruptive influences aren't included in the animation." Despite his worry,

Grimm smiled, and he patted the older mage's left shoulder in encouragement. "It wasn't a Thaumaturgic spell, Numal," he said. "It was Geomantic. I suspect Lizaveta wasn't sufficiently careful in her application, and she energised the disease agents along with the corpses, making them more virulent. Does that make sense?"

Numal nodded slowly. "I suppose it does. Necromancy is a difficult discipline, and we're barred from any unauthorised research.

"Still, how does that help us, Questor Grimm? Even if we know what's going on, we're no closer to finding the answer

to the sickness."

It was Grimm's turn to shrug. "I'm not sure," he said, "but I think I have the ghost of an idea." He sighed. "I wish I hadn't said that; I don't think I'm going to enjoy this at all." As a bemused-looking Numal looked on, Grimm sank to the floor in a cross-legged stance of meditation and began to chant.

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## **Chapter 15: The Inner Light**

Grimm was familiar now with the techniques of Astral Projection, but he had never before considered what he was about to attempt. He guessed that

Lizaveta's spell had given the disease germs a form of sentience. If he was wrong, if he had failed to take into account any one of a number of relevant factors, then Drex and Tordun would be condemned to a creeping, agonising death; however, this was his only plan, and he was determined to try it.

He felt the familiar lurch and brief moment of disorientation as his spirit left his body. He looked down from the ceiling to see his body, eyes closed, sitting cross-legged on the floor. That's the easy bit, he thought. Now, it gets ... interesting.

Spirit-Grimm regarded the stricken albino, assessing the crimson-black

gashes that stood in stark contrast to the warrior's otherwise livid skin.

Yes ... just there!

He willed himself to shrink, as he had done when facing the disembodied, insane mage, Garropode, within the brain of the dream-dragon, Gruon. The infected area on the albino's flesh appeared to grow, looking now like a vast chasm in a desert of snow. Still he shrank, further and further... Single hairs now stood like scaly, curving, translucent tree-trunks, rising from islands of pale pink. Then, the descending spirit saw only the wound's steep walls, exuding heavy, bulging,

straw-yellow droplets. Spirit-Grimm headed for one of these, imagining he felt a brief moment of tension before he popped into the yellow globe.

This is the true battleground for Tordun's life, he thought, remembering his lessons in Basic Healing. The germ theory of disease was one artefact from the reign of Science that had survived the Guild's ruthless suppression of the ancient arts, and Grimm was familiar with it.

He knew he needed to shrink further to distinguish the tiny combatants in this life-and-death struggle, and he maintained his remorseless diminution of scale. The pale liquid became viscid and mucilaginous, but spirit-Grimm's



insubstantial form felt no impediment or pressure as he continued to decrease in size. Had he possessed his mortal senses and emotions, he might have felt terrified at this dizzying descent into the invisible, but he knew only determination, empowering him, driving him on and in. Now, the formless fluid began to clear, as enmeshed tendrils and motes came into view, and spirit-Grimm tried to make sense of the scene: a frenzied dance of particles with gelatinous, translucent, blue blobs swimming into view and fading to grey as they tangled with a greater number of green, barbed cylinders, which writhed and multiplied as he watched, lengthening and splitting into two, four,

eight, sixteen ... an inexorable, exponential increase.

Spirit-Grimm stopped shrinking and floated in the midst of the microscopic battlefield, surveying the conflict that was killing his friend. The blue fighters tried to envelop the invaders, but the attackers seemed to shimmer and slip from their grasp, shooting sharp, whip-like tendrils into the hapless defenders, killing them before moving on to fly upwards and outwards. A hundred, a thousand, ten thousand valiant sentries died before him in moments. The blue warriors came in a dazzling variety of shapes and forms, trying to subsume the green assailants, but they were too slow;

the tiny, mindless soldiers were helpless in the face of the invaders' ruthless, ever-changing strategies. The battle was more one-sided than any in the bloody history of humankind, and the corporeal Grimm might have felt horror at the microscopic carnage. However, his spirit body felt only wonder at the intricacies of the mortal drama unfolding before him.

There!

Life, control, self-determination; animalistic and cunning, remorseless... Spirit-Grimm reached towards one of the rapacious, green cylinders. Despite his tiny size, he had all the Guild-honed willpower of a Mage Questor; the battle

of wills was over in a moment. You are mine, he commanded. The tiny creature struggled for the briefest of moments and ceased its depredations.

We are going on a journey, he told the mindless creature. Up!

Spirit-Grimm flew up from the battlefield, carrying his green prisoner with him at an acceleration that would have crushed any mortal being to paste in an instant. The precipitous valley now lay far below him, and spirit-Grimm began to search for a specific tendril of thought: an emotion; a concept; a direction... Now, there was only purpose: a distant goal, towards which

he flew at the speed of thought. A vertical field of vast peaks and valleys stopped him, as if a chain of mountains had been tipped on its side. He saw countless green creatures batter themselves to death on the rutted surface as they sought fresh victims. Others rebounded, flying off in new directions.

However, spirit-Grimm guessed he had one sense they lacked; he still felt the weak but insistent tug of gravitation, even if it did not discommode him. The air felt as thick as broth, buoying up his prisoner, but the nagging, ever-present force gave him a sense of position.

This must be the door to the main stairwell, he thought. Ah, here we are!

A mighty, ragged chasm appeared, devoid of the microscopic, unintelligent warriors; it seemed that they had no concept of true strategy. Like hungry wasps, they flew only towards the scent of prey: wet, bleeding, human flesh. If denied, they battered themselves against their barrier, or sought another, more accessible victim.

Spirit-Grimm felt the pull of another sense: the signature of the mortal soul he sought. He dashed through the dense, hazy medium of the air without restriction, seeking his goal. Twists, turns, precipitous dives and climbs; he followed the unmistakable spoor of his

prey without hesitation, pursuing his quarry, following the steep gradient of mortal awareness. At last, a craggy, vertical plain stood before him, pulsating and swaying, and Grimm guessed this was Lizaveta's face.

How do these things know where to attack? spirit-Grimm wondered.

He began to shrink further, entering the germ, becoming one with its primitive, alien, magic-stimulated intelligence.

Naked desire, akin to an all-consuming hunger, was all the minuscule life-form knew, shocking in its intensity.

We must eat, he thought, feeling the

primitive creature's basic drives and desires, becoming one with it. He took the germ's bright surge of energy as affirmation.

A faint, metallic sensation, red and moist, entered his sensorium. Was it olfactory, visual or tactile? The strange feeling seemed to fall into none of these convenient categories, but it was strong, nonetheless. Flailing its long tentacles, the germ tried to take him away from the Prioress, but the Questor's spirit insisted, No, no; here, my friend; we must find a closer target.

Had spirit-Grimm possessed teeth, he would have ground them; the creature's drive and passion was phenomenal for



any being, let alone such a tiny one. Nevertheless, after a period of frenzied thrashing, the germ seemed to acquiesce, allowing the mage's shade to steer it around the titanic, fleshy edifice. We scent an opening!

It was faint but discernable; the sensation was weaker than before, but it grew undeniably stronger, as spirit-Grimm let the hungry, green being choose its own path. Still, he saw nothing, but the germ seemed to have located some blemish or contusion in the Prioress' skin. Down they went, faster and faster through the dense air, and the spirit-mage at last saw a yellow-red crater coming into view, starkly

delineated in the rugged, magnified landscape. Larger and larger it grew, until it assumed the dimensions of a vast volcano. The germ shot its spiny tentacles forward. With a distinct pop, spirit-Grimm knew he was in the Prioress' body.

The green creature surged inwards, seeking sustenance to aid it in its reproduction, but the astral mage stayed it.

Not yet, he thought. Soon, my friend; soon we can eat.

Lizaveta; can you hear us?

A sense of shock: another mind, strong

and implacable.

Afelnor! You are foolish to confront me so, in my own domain—

The alien mind dripped with vengeance, hatred and horror.

We are not alone, witch, spirit-Grimm thought. We have brought one of the disease-creatures with us. You may be able to crush our mind, as you did our grandfather's, and we invite you to try. If we die, this tiny, isolated being, animated through your own, botched spell, will revert to type: attacking you, multiplying and adapting to your body's defences. You live only because we will it. You may die in agony, if you wish;

you and all your flock. Otherwise, we advise you to heed us. After a long pause, spirit-Grimm sensed Lizaveta's thought-processes blazing and swirling; trying, no doubt, to find some way out of her predicament.

Think quickly, witch, he pulsed. Our friend hungers for human flesh, and we find him ever more difficult to control as time goes on.

Feeling the creature's ravenous rage strengthening, he passed the sensation on to Lizaveta. What do you want?

The distant mind's turmoil subsided to the heavy, turbid rippling of resignation, tinged with a little fear. You must return

your undead warriors to whence they came. Cancel your animation spell; that is what makes the disease so unstoppable. Once you have done that, we can talk further. Just remember; the least trace of treachery, and we unleash the disease. Even if our companion loses its former virility, it has us to guide it. We have seen its strategies, and we know its secrets. We can re-animate this single cell in an instant, as you did, and the result will be as if you did nothing, even if you destroy our physical or astral form.

After a few moments, spirit-Grimm saw golden motes of magic drifting upwards, and he felt the germ's uncanny fervour

fade to a low, inchoate want. All traces of intelligence had left the tiny being, which no longer struggled against his restraint, and whose colour faded from vibrant green to a dull grey. The sense of 'we', a single, combined entity, had gone.

I have done as you ordered. Do you want more?

Yes. You will send messengers to the lower levels at once, to tell Sister Mercia that the disease can now be controlled by her standard methods. You will ensure that Drexelica and warrior Tordun are healed first. Sister Judan is also affected, as may be others of my party; you are to heal them all, without

exception.

Spirit-Grimm detected a swaying, tumbling motion, but he felt unaffected by it; he knew only a distant, vague satisfaction at the thought that Lizaveta seemed to be obeying his commands. Comply with my demands and I will destroy the germ, he shot into the Prioress' mind, but remember, Reverend Mother, if you or your minions destroy my mortal body, I will still have sufficient time to remind my tiny friend of his former mission before I die. It will take me the merest fraction of a mortal heartbeat. In my present form, death holds no fear for me.

More trembling and shaking ensued as the Prioress moved around.

I have passed on your orders, Questor. Now I have fulfilled your requirements, will you destroy the disease agent and quit my mind?

Not yet, spirit-Grimm thought. I intend to leave here with all my companions, including Drex. Not Sister Weranda, your slave, but the woman I love.

Impossible, the Prioress snapped, her answering thought cracking like a whip. Such a thing cannot be done in an instant. I will let you leave with your companions, but I doubt Sister Weranda will wish to go with you.



Spirit-Grimm cogitated for a few moments. Then you may cast a Geas on her to compel her to come, and to refrain from using her magic on me except when I ask her to; I know you can do this. That could take hours, Lizaveta responded. Can you control that ... thing for so long?

Spirit-Grimm knew he could not, as he felt the insistent tug of the silver cord binding him to his body. His physical form needed him back, and soon.

I have no desire to end up a wandering spirit, he thought, but what can I do? If I give up now, she will find some way to trick me. It's not worth the risk.

He assessed the energy-carrying

capabilities of the shining cord; he had used minimal amounts of magical energy so far, but he felt he had to try. The pragmatic, driven spirit began to draw his physical mind's power into it as quickly as possible, hoping the cord would hold.

It did.

What are you doing, mage? the witch demanded.

Spirit-Grimm needed no mortal words to pattern his power.

Ensuring you keep your promise, Lizaveta. This is something I should have done long ago, but never had the

chance to do.

After a blinding flash, spirit-Grimm found himself flying backwards, expanding at an ever-increasing rate. With a bump, Grimm was again.

His first sensations were of numb legs and an aching back, but he knew it was better to be alive and hurting than to be a lost soul. He fell backwards and opened his eyes to see Numal standing over him.

"Grimm!" the Necromancer said, helping the Questor to sit up. "It's good to see you back. Sister Mercia's methods seem to be working at last!"

"How are Drex and Tordun, Numal?"

"They're still sick, but the disease seems to abate almost as quickly as it came. All the cells are open, and the Sister's making sure nobody else is infected. Isn't that good news?" Grimm managed to stand, aided by the Necromancer. Tordun's former, gaping wounds seemed to shrink as he watched, and the grey tone of the giant albino's skin had fadeed from grey to its normal, healthy pallor.

The younger mage smiled. "Very good news, Necromancer Numal," he said. "Now, I must see Drex."

"I'll take you," the older mage said, with an answering grin, escorting the Questor to the door. "What did you say to Lizaveta to change her mind over

locking us in?"

"I appealed to her better instincts," Grimm said, wincing as the blood returned to his legs. "Then, I found out she didn't have any, so I changed her mind permanently."

"A Geas? A Compulsion?" the older man queried, as they reached the stairwell.

"No; I just turned a little light on," Grimm said. "I—"

He and Numal started at the distant sound of a horrified, feminine scream. "I think somebody's just found her," he said. "She's dead, Numal."

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## **Chapter 16: Happy Ever After**

Grimm heard a second scream, louder than the first, tinged with hysteria, and he felt the hair on the back of his neck bristling. As a spirit entity, he had terminated the Prioress' life without compunction, knowing that he needed to return to his body, and that any kind of compact or deal with her would be betrayed, but he now felt a vague, growing sense of unease. Numal did not hesitate, running up the stairs. Now that sensation and strength had at last returned to Grimm's legs, he followed the Necromancer. Nuns seemed to be

running from every direction, hurrying through the doorway to a large, marbled hall. Grimm and Numal stopped in their tracks, cut off by the stampede of white, starched robes.

"It's good to see you well, Baron Grimm," a familiar voice shouted behind the mage. "What in Perdition is going on? A nun came to open the cells, and then we heard those screams." Grimm spun around to see General Quelgrum and Sergeant Erik approaching, and he smiled, relieved that his companions appeared to have been spared the dread plague.

"I'm glad to see you're unhurt, General, Sergeant," Grimm said. "I killed

Lizaveta with a burst of energy from inside her body. Don't ask how," he continued, waving his raised hands as the General's mouth opened to speak. "It's a long story. I don't know what happened, but it seems to have been pretty effective."

The stream of running women lessened, and Grimm said, "I want to see the effects of my handiwork." His tone was more callous than he had intended; his returning emotions screamed that he had killed an old woman, no matter how misguided or malevolent. Grimm had done what he had felt was necessary, but he did not like it.



Nonetheless, he had to know he had succeeded.

"Is that wise?" Numal asked. "Most of the nuns won't know who we are or why we're here and there may be some of Lizaveta's acolytes around."

"The Anointed Score," Grimm replied, nodding. "The Prioress herself couldn't beat me, even when they took my magic. Now I have it back, they would do better to stay out of my way." With a confident stride, he led the way into the large hall, towards the throng of nuns clustered in the centre. Some wept, others bore twisted expressions of horror, and some wore blank, uncomprehending expressions, but none of them noticed the

ragged-robed Questor merging with the crowd. He heard brief, hushed snatches of conversation from the horde of nuns: "...some kind of brainstorm ... a tragedy ... awful ... what shall we do?"

At last, he drew close enough to see the fallen figure, and he gulped, grimacing as he fought to retain the contents of his stomach. His head spun as he saw what had once been a living, breathing woman. Lizaveta's dull eyes bulged from their sockets. Her head lay in a wet, ruddy lake. A few curved, pale sticks sprung from the red-stained robe, and Grimm realised they were ribs, thrust through the chest wall by the energy volcano that had erupted within her

body. An engorged, brown tongue extended from between the lips of the corpse.

Grimm could stand no more. His head spinning, he turned tail and fled whence he had come, drawing whooping breaths as he pushed his way through the throng of nuns, straight past Numal and Quelgrum, shaking his head, speechless with horror at what he had done. He ran headlong back down the stairs towards Lizaveta's chamber and sat at their foot, trying to collect his thoughts.

"I had to do it," he muttered, trying to convince himself that those shattered remains in the hall were the result of a justifiable act. "She didn't suffer; it was

quick, almost instantaneous. I took the only chance I was ever going to get to beat her. She deserved to die; sooner or later, I would have been convinced I needed to kill Horin so that Guy could take over. After what she did to Drex..."  
Drex!

This spell had been ugly, but more merciful than the fate the Prioress had in mind for him. However, as a result of that impulsive, instinctive act, Drex might continue to hate him. He doubted that she could control him as she had, denied the support of the Prioress' mighty Geomantic power, but the knowledge that she would continue to hate and oppose him was almost

unbearable. However long it took, he swore he would bring her back ... somehow. The vow gave him new purpose, sustaining him. As he rose to his feet, he heard footsteps behind him and turned around to see the green-clad figures of General Quelgrum and Sergeant Erik.

"That was messy, Lord Grimm," the officer said, "but unavoidable."

"I know, General, but it was disgusting, and it threw me for a minute. I'm all right now. I just want to see how Drex and Tordun are."

The General frowned. "We'll have to leave them here, Lord Baron. We should

make our exit while we still can."

"I'm not abandoning Drex," Grimm replied, his voice low and intense, "and I won't leave Tordun here to become some mindless slave or puppet. Thribble's around here somewhere, too, and I mean to find him." Quelgrum's lowered brows showed no sign of conciliation. "Noble sentiments, Lord Baron: I wish I could echo them. However, the Sisters won't stay stunned forever. Sooner or later, the Score will come for us, and we'll be back where we started. We have no weapons, no transport and no chance of finding any."

"I insist we leave now, while we still have the chance!"

The old man's eyes gleamed like chips of black diamond.

"All right," Grimm said. "You, Erik and Numal may leave now. I'm almost sure I can handle the Score if they come knocking, and I won't leave the others behind."

"What about Questor Guy, Lord Mage?" Erik asked.

"What about Guy?" Grimm demanded. "For all we know, he's already—" He stopped, seeing a familiar, black-robed figure standing at the top of the stairs. The General and the Sergeant turned to face Guy Great Flame, behind whom

stood a white-faced Numal.

"Taking my name in vain, eh, Dragonblaster? So you thought you'd leave me here, did you? That's no way to treat a brother Questor."

Grimm's eyes narrowed. He did not trust Guy an inch, and he had no idea what wiles Lizaveta might have worked on her favoured grandson. He considered direct confrontation but decided against it. He engaged his Mage Sight, seeing in Guy's aura shades of mendacity, disdain and contempt—in other words, just what he expected to see. He saw no sign of unfamiliar hues that might indicate the grip of Geomantic ensorcelment, but he now knew this most basic of mage skills



was not an infallible guide.

"I'm glad you're safe, Questor Guy," he said at last. He refused to be drawn by Guy's taunting, teasing sneer, which reminded him of his Scholasticate nemesis, Shumal.

"Don't worry on my behalf, youngster," the Great Flame said. "I've been well-treated since I've been here. I just told my ever-present Sisters whatever they wanted to hear. Yes, I'd like to be Dominie some day, when I'm old, doddering and grey, but I'll make a lot more money as a Questor—" Guy stopped in mid-speech, and he gaped. "You really thought I'd gone over to her

side, didn't you?" he said, his eyes wide. "That was touching faith in your brother mage, I must say! I'll have you know that I like being a Seventh Rank Mage Questor; it keeps me in good clothes, good food and good wine.

"Dear Grandma always thought she could turn me around her little finger, ever since I was young, but I always knew the right things to say. I thought I'd have a nice little sinecure as a paid Student, and she sent me to the Guild as a bloody Charity case. I suffered plenty, Dragonblaster, as you did, and I'm not about to give up a lucrative, hard-earned career as a Questor to satisfy her insane lust for power. I know you don't like me,

youngster, but I'm not about to change for you or anyone else! Oh, well, kiss my arse or go to Hell; I'm off."

Guy spun on his heel and began to walk away.

"Questor Guy!" Grimm felt an unexpected surge of kinship with the independent, headstrong mage. He had no brother or sister, and he felt the absence of that close relationship. Although he would have hated Guy as his sibling, Grimm still felt a link with him, as someone who had faced the same Ordeal he had. He knew Lizaveta could be subtle, but he had no reason to disbelieve the proud Questor.

"What is it, Dragonblaster?" Guy demanded, turning around. "Do you want to kiss me? Not my style, I'm afraid; fancy a little match-up outside, instead?"

Now, that's just pure Guy, Grimm thought. I hate to acknowledge it, but he's a Questor, after all; perhaps he really has resisted whatever Lizaveta threw at him. After all, I did.

"Not right now, Great Flame," he said. "Just take care of yourself until we can meet up in a more congenial location. Then, I'll give you a fight to remember!"

"Sounds good to me, Dragonblaster. I wouldn't miss it for the world. It's a date." Guy winked and blew a kiss over

his shoulder as he left, heading for the main hall. Grimm shook his head in perplexity. The older mage's sudden mood swings seemed bizarre, but, perhaps, the Questor Ordeal affected people in different ways; this might just be the Great Flame's way of dealing with the lingering after-effects of his own torments.

"General Quelgrum; Sergeant Erik; Necromancer Numal," the Questor said. "I want you to go back to Anjar and wait for me. I have a few errands still to do."

Without waiting for an answer, Grimm marched down the corridor to the cell block; he wanted to see Drex, no matter what her reaction to him might be. All

the doors were open, and, in the fifth cell on the left—his own former prison—he saw Sister Mercia crouched over a pale figure lying on a rude straw mattress and covered by a grey blanket.

On Grimm's entrance, the young nun looked up and proffered a weary smile. "Greetings, Lord Mage,"

she said, brushing a few rogue tendrils of hair from her eyes. "I must apologise for the poor condition of your quarters; the guest suites must all be occupied."

She really has no idea, thought the mage. She still thinks we were honoured guests. It's strange that she doesn't ask about those screams; perhaps they're not

all that uncommon in this awful place. How is ... Sister Weranda?" he asked, with a catch in his voice. "Will she..." Mercia laughed; a merry, tinkling sound that seemed at odds with the austere Priory. "Don't worry, Lord Mage," she said, her face beaming, open and guileless. "Your concern for our dear Sister is gratifying. She improves at an encouraging rate, and I think I'll soon be able to leave the remainder of her treatment to the Names and her own bodily defences. She is young and strong, and I have every reason to believe she'll make a full recovery."

Grimm sighed in relief; where there was life, there was hope.

"Sister Judan is almost healed," Mercia said, her cheerful grin intensifying. "Isn't that good news? Her wounds were relatively light, and the infection didn't have time to advance far." Alarm bells rang in Grimm's head; Judan was the senior Sister of the Score, and he knew he would have to face her, sooner or later. Perhaps it was better to cross that river now, while she was still relatively weak.

"May I see Sister Judan?" he asked.

"Of course, Lord Mage," Mercia said, her cheeks dimpling. "She is poorly but awake. She's convalescing in the next room. Soon, she can move back to her own cell, but I judged it better that she



rest here for a little while before trying to walk. The illness has taken a lot out of her, as you might imagine."

"Thank you, Sister," he said. "Your dedication to your craft is an inspiration to us all." Mercia shrugged, her complexion reddening a little. "We all do what we can," she said. "That's what a community is all about, isn't it?"

As the young nun turned to tend to her patient once more, Grimm stepped back into the corridor. He felt a brief pang of disappointment that his other companions were not in evidence. Oh, well, he thought. I ordered them to go, after all.

As he walked to the next cell, he saw Judan sitting cross-legged on the flagstones, in the same position of prayer in which he had last seen her, lips moving in silent prayer. He cleared his throat, eliciting no response.

"Sister Judan," he said, and the nun opened her eyes.

"The Reverend Mother has passed on," she said, her tone and her eyes accusing him, scorching him.

"You murdered her!"

Grimm nodded. "Aren't you going to call down the wrath of the Score upon me, Sister?" he asked.

"The Score is shattered." The nun's face reddened, and she shook with evidently sincere rage. "I cannot hear their thoughts, and I cannot converse with them. Our common link was through the Reverend Mother, and you have destroyed her. May the Names forgive you, assassin, for I cannot. Kill me if you wish; without the Reverend Mother's strength to succour and support me, I doubt I have enough power to stop you.

"Go or stay, mage, as you will. You have destroyed something serene, something beautiful; have the decency to allow me to mourn its passing in my own way."

She shut her eyes and bent again to her

prayers.

"Serene? Beautiful?" the Questor replied, burning with indignation and disbelief at the woman's sanctimonious manner. "You worked to rob me of my mind so I could murder another person. Was that serenity? Was that beauty?"

"It was necessary," Judan mumbled. "Go away, and do not disturb me again. I never want to see you again. I was raised here from an early age, and you have destroyed the inner peace I fought for years to attain. Just go away."

Grimm had been prepared to face the Score in their anger and their power, but he felt almost robbed by Judan's pathetic

acquiescence. His Quest was over, and he had won, but he felt only emptiness instead of triumphant joy.

Judan swayed, moaning, lost in some religious trance, and Grimm left the dismal cell, unsure of what to do.

Outside the next cell stood Sister Mercia, her face transfigured by an expression of transcendental joy.

"Lord Mage," she said, "Sister Weranda is conscious now, and she wishes to see you. If you'll excuse me, I wish to check on Master Tordun's condition."

Grimm nodded; his heart leaden, as the young nun hurried back down the

corridor. As a member of the Score, Drex must also be aware of Lizaveta's death, and, no doubt, she wished to give him a magic-addled tirade of hate.

"Grimm! My love!" a familiar voice called; Grimm's heart leapt.

He rushed into the cell, to see a smiling Drex on her feet, her arms open. She was pale, but she seemed strong, just as he remembered and knew her from their brief, idyllic tryst in Crar.

"Kiss me, my darling!" she cried. "I have felt so worried about you!" Grimm needed no further encouragement. He rushed over to meet her, tears prickling on his eyelids, and swept her up, his lips

seeking hers. Drex's mouth seemed to devour his, the fury of his lover's fierce, almost animalistic, passion both overpowering and gratifying him. He drank deep, taking in her strength; her joy; her love.

At last, the long, dreamy kiss ended, and he held Drex at arms' length, his heart almost bursting with happiness.

"Everything's all right now, my love," she said. "I can't tell you how happy I feel."

"I must ensure the remaining members of the Score pose no further threat," Grimm said, his heart pounding. "I need to find Thribble and some transport out of this

hellhole, but there's no reason why we can't go home after that."

"The Score won't trouble you now," Drex said, her eyes gleaming. "Why not rest here a while, so Tordun can heal, and I can regain my strength? The Order will need leadership until a new Prioress can be found. It wouldn't be right to abandon them at this difficult time. Just wait a few days, and I'm sure everything will become clearer."

Grimm felt a hot flash of astonishment run through him. "After all you've been through, I'd have thought you'd have jumped at the chance of getting out of here, Drex!"



"I feel safe, now," she said, nestling close to him. "I have my very own Mage Questor to protect me. I feel some kinship with these poor women, and I can't just abandon them." The mage blinked, vacillating between the desire to escape this awful place and the wish to please the woman he loved. He buried his face in Drex's wimple and tried to collect his thoughts.

"Drex; I—"

"Lord Mage," a soft voice from the doorway said, and Grimm looked up to see the dumpy figure of Sister Judan.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"I have communed with the spirits," the nun said, her face calm, almost beatific. "The scales have fallen from my eyes, and I see how you have been wronged. Your vengeance was just, at least in your own eyes, and I have no right to judge you. Please, Lord Mage, stay a while and help us in our hour of need. You will not be beaten or tortured again; I swear it on my head and on the blessed Names."

"Please, Grimm," Drex said, looking up at him with wide, pleading eyes. "Just stay a little longer." Grimm, almost drowning in confusion, closed his eyes and looked into himself. Am I ensorcelled? he wondered. Is Drex still

under a spell; is she trying to trick me?

Opening his eyes, he pointed his left forefinger at the far wall and muttered a brief, nonsense syllable. A small, bright globe, spinning and sparkling, formed on the extended digit, detached and flew to the wall, spreading over it until the small chamber was suffused in warm, cheerful luminescence. While he had his power under his control, he knew he was still whole and a formidable opponent.

"Very well," he said, on pure impulse. "I'll stay a while."

He stepped back from Drex, so he could look her straight in the eyes. "I'm only

doing this for you, my love,” he said. “You know that, don't you?”

She smiled. “Of course, darling,” she said, her voice laden with warmth and happiness. “You have no idea how much I appreciate that. Later tonight, I'll show you just how happy I am.” Grimm felt a hot flush on his cheeks.

He smiled.

Drex seemed her old self again.

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## **Chapter 17: Suspicion**

General Quelgrum had no intention of

abandoning Baron Grimm. His first priority was to procure transport and supplies for the journey to Crar, since the party's wagon had been destroyed by the marauding zombies in Merrydeath Road. He also wanted to retrieve his weapons, even though he knew ammunition would be unobtainable.

As three nuns laid the dead Prioress' shattered body on a makeshift bier in the main hall of the Priory, another group began to mop the bloodstains from the marble floor.

"I don't reckon any of these ladies carry any weight around here, General," Sergeant Erik observed. "We need whatever passes for an officer around

here."

Quelgrum nodded. "That would be a member of the Anointed Score, Sergeant. Still, I'd rather not deal with them if we can avoid it; I was entertained by one of them when I was first taken prisoner. She told me how she'd take great pleasure in breaking me, and how she looked forward to having me crawl to her, pleading for punishment."

"Perhaps there's a nun who acts as an ostler or a wrangler, or some such," Numal hazarded. "If we..." The Necromancer's voice faded away, and he stared past the General's right shoulder. Quelgrum turned to see a tall,

slender, middle-aged nun, and he recognised her as the one who had so enjoyed baiting him.

"Sister Kellen," he said. "Are you going to threaten me again? Or do you want me to beg for forgiveness?"

The nun did not meet his stern gaze, looking instead at the floor. "I am sorry, my lord," she whispered. "I was under a spell when first we met; a spell augmented by many years of pain and suffering. After the Reverend Mother's death, things seem much clearer. She was an evil, manipulative woman; I see that, now. I will aid you in any way I can."

Quelgrum jerked a thumb over his shoulder towards the reverent nuns tending to Lizaveta's corpse. "Is this how you treat a despised slave-mistress, someone who stole your mind?"

"I do not mourn Prioress Lizaveta's passing," Kellen said, "but the loss of guidance, leadership and stability. Brutal as her reign may have been, I found comfort in its routine and constancy.

"Only we of the Score live with the shame of knowing the acts to which the Reverend Mother drove us, as we revelled in the power she gave us. All the Sisters know the lash and the discipline, but few, indeed, know the



inner workings of the Order. That is the shame, the dishonour, with which I must live." Kellen bowed her head; her shoulders began to shake. Quelgrum heard a few sobs from under the nun's lowered cowl, but he felt in no mood to comfort the woman.

"Should I cry, Sister?" he asked, with a humourless, contemptuous laugh. "She's dead, and, I say, good riddance to her."

Kellen stiffened and straightened up, this time looking the General straight in the eyes. "What do you want, General?" she asked, her voice cold. "We are a poor Order, and material goods hold little interest for us; if it is money you want,

we cannot oblige you. I did not expect you to understand our traditions, but I do ask you to respect them."

"I want a cart or a wagon, four horses and provisions for five men for at least three weeks," Quelgrum said. He knew a direct journey to Crar would not take that long, but he wanted to give Brianston and Yoren the widest possible berth.

"I see," the nun said, her expression impenetrable. "What else?"

"You say you have no money," the old soldier said, "but you still have the gold you stole from us—yes, stole, saintly Sister—and our other effects. If such

things are unimportant to you, you won't mind giving them back, will you?

"We're not thieves. All we want is transport to replace what your late, beloved Prioress' undead friends destroyed, and our property."

Kellen shrugged and nodded.

"Very well, General," she said in a husky voice. "It will take a few days to arrange food and transport for you; the other mage took our cart, our only pair of horses, and a large quantity of provisions. I have no idea where the Reverend Mother secreted your goods, but I will do my best to return them to you."

"The other mage?" Numal said, his brows raised.

"Questor Guy," Kellen said, and the Necromancer nodded.

"I see," he said, his tone level, slowly nodding. "I suppose it was too much to ask that he share his transport with the likes of us."

"Your internecine squabbles have nothing to do with us," the nun snapped, and Quelgrum saw a trace of the old Sister Kellen. "I will do my best. If that is not enough for you, then take your chances on the road."

Soft-hard, Quelgrum thought. I've

interrogated enough people in my time to recognise the approach. If that's the way she wants to play her little game, let's just test the water.

"Very well, Sister," he said, cold and business-like. "We spent our time here in cold, hard cells, and I won't go back to one. I don't want to impose too much on your poor Order's generosity, so give us what we need to build a temporary shelter outside. We'll stay there until we can leave. All we'll want then is firewood and daily food."

Kellen laughed. "I am sorry, General," she said. "If I seemed too harsh in my concern for the Order's future, I apologise; I would not dream of

allowing you to languish outside in the cold, after the way you have been treated. We have comfortable and serviceable guest suites here, and I invite you to rest there while we satisfy your requirements. All I ask is that you do not trouble the worried Sisters during your stay. As I said, they know nothing of the ugly truth about the Order." Quelgrum nodded in apparent acquiescence, but he felt his suspicions confirmed. She wants us to stay here, he thought, I'll bet the only reason she doesn't attack us is because her power was somehow tied up with Lizaveta. I don't know what she and the Score intend for us, but it must involve the Baron.

"I must discuss this with Baron Grimm first," he said, his stern tone brooking no argument. Kellen's lower lip trembled for just a few heartbeats. "I will see what I can do, my lord," she said at last, the very image of the dutiful penitent. "Will you please wait here?"

"Of course," the General said. "Where else would we go?"

The nun rushed off, and the soldier looked at the women tending to the corpse and the floor. They moved like clumsy machines, their faces as expressionless as stone. Quelgrum believed that they had no idea of Lizaveta's true personality or acts, but he did not believe that the Score had

exchanged the dowdy mantle of slavery for the glowing cloak of enlightenment.

The General said to the other men, "It's a trick, as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow. They'll give us a series of delays, problems and reasons why we should stay just a little longer, just a few days more ... until they spring whatever trap they have in mind."

"Why don't we just walk out then, General?" Erik asked. "There aren't so many of them here, and I don't think they could stop us. Anjar looked all right; I bet they'll sell us what we need."

"I won't go without Baron Grimm," Quelgrum replied. "We're without



weapons, food, transport or money. The good merchants of Anjar won't just give us what we need, and I reckon we'd starve on the road; this isn't exactly a good hunting ground. On the other hand, perhaps Baron Grimm can magic us out of here."

\* \* \* \*

Grimm turned towards Drex, staring into her large, beautiful eyes. "I want to find Thribble," he said. "I hate to think of him imprisoned."

"Later, my love." Drex leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up at him with an adoring expression.

"I've missed you so much. Can't it wait? I'm sure he's happy where he is." The young Questor felt his heart pounding, wanting to release his long-pent emotions more than anything

... almost anything. He had expected a Drexelica enslaved by weeks of torture, ready to tear out his heart with her bare hands, and he had found, instead, a willing, compliant lover who craved his touch. It's too good, he thought. This isn't the dreamy, drunken infatuation I felt for Madeleine, back in High Lodge. It's not the hungry lust for blood I felt at Yoren ... but it still feels false. What in Perdition is wrong here?

He looked down again into Drex's

pleading face, but he began to feel revulsion rather than love. This woman did not merely want to be with him; she wanted to possess him.

I don't know her, he thought, with a cold rush of realisation. It looks like Drex, it sounds like her, and it smells like her; but it's not her.

"I'm sorry, Drex," he said. "I won't be able to sleep while Thribble remains in a cage. Can't we get him out before we ... do anything else?"

"Is saving your little demon more important than spending time with me?" Drex demanded. "I thought you loved me."

She licked her lips and waggled her hips in a flirty gyration, looking less like Drex than ever. Without thinking, Grimm accessed his Mage Sight, but, as soon as he did so, he chided himself as a fool. In place of a normal, variegated field of colours, he saw only the impenetrable, immaculate white aura of a witch, as he should have expected.

He wanted Drex, his Drex, more than anything in the world, but this young woman seemed a mere caricature of the girl he loved.

She's been through a nightmare, he thought. I'd have to be a fool to think it wouldn't have changed her, but I just don't recognise her.

"Can't we do both?" he pleaded, trying to buy time. "Thribble's my friend. Come on, Drex, it wouldn't take long to release him."

"I'm beginning to think you don't—"

She cut off her words at the appearance of a woman Grimm recognised as Sister Kellen, one of the Anointed Score; one of the nuns who had abused him.

While Kellen was still at the end of the long corridor, Drex turned to him and said, "This won't take long," she said, proffering another dazzling smile. "Excuse me for a moment." She looks like her feet are on fire, Grimm thought,

as the image of his beloved hurried to meet the nun. What's so urgent?

He thought for a moment that Kellen stumbled when Drex approached her, but he realised it was an aborted curtsey. Even his sensitive ears could not make out the two women's conversation, but there was no mistaking the older nun's deferent pose and Drexelica's domineering attitude. He heard but a few disjointed phrases: "No, absolutely not ..."; "...he insists..."; "Must I repeat ... some excuse ... succumbed to the disease. Get..." However, there was no mistaking the authoritarian tone of Drex's voice.

Grimm saw her flick a nervous glance at

him, and he made a show of looking at his feet, at the ceiling and into the cell, as if unconcerned. Nonetheless, his suspicions strengthened; somehow, the spirit of Lizaveta must have entered Drex's body.

She couldn't beat me through torture, or through the false emotions she flung at me, so she's trying to use my love for Drex now. I'll bet that after a night in bed with me, she reckons I'll be eating out of her hand. He felt a moment of cold horror at the thought of having kissed the Prioress, when he thought he had kissed Drex, but he determined that he would go no further than that, regardless of her blandishments. As he inspected his nails,

he saw an approaching shadow, and he looked up to see her returning down the corridor, alone.

"Is everything all right, Drex?" he asked innocently. "Was Sister Kellen giving you any trouble?"

"No trouble at all, Grimm," she said, smiling. "She wanted to apologise for treating me so badly. Since the Prioress' spell ended with her death, Kellen has lived in shame, and she only wanted to expiate it. I was a little angry with her at first, but I forgave her.

"Now; where were we? I believe we were discussing a little night-time entertainment." Her tone was intense,



almost desperate, and Grimm nodded.

She's lost her powers, he thought. This Priory was Lizaveta's source of energy, her main sphere of influence, and she's trying to re-establish the link from within an unfamiliar body. She wants to gain control over me first, and she thinks sex is the best way to do it. Lizaveta told me so many times that this would be where it would end: with me loving her, desiring her....

His heart began to pound. Is my Drex still in there? Has Lizaveta, somehow, thrown out her spirit?

If she's killed Drex, then so much the worse for her! Whatever my true worth,

I am a Guild Questor of the Seventh Rank, and I will honour my destiny! Who is Lizaveta to oppose me?

"What do you want?" he demanded, his voice as cold and hard as a flint. "Shall we dance here?"

"If you want," the image of Drex said. "I'd prefer somewhere more private, but —"

"Shall we perform in front of Sister Judan? Perhaps you'd prefer it in the Main Hall?"

"What is the matter with you, Grimm?" she cried. "I just wanted—"

"You wanted my soul, Lizaveta!" Grimm felt the hot blood pounding in his head and his chest. "You wanted to take possession of more than my body; don't bother to deny it. I hate you, and I will destroy you!"

Almost in a trance, he raised his right hand and spat out the nonsense phrase, "Ap'shgat'oye'madas!" A green stream of sheer hatred exploded from his hand, hammering the stone roof over his head, showering the corridor with tiny, pale motes. A red-glowing, wagon-sized hole in the ceiling showed the hall above, with the confused faces of several frightened nuns peering through it.

"I am power!" he screamed, ignoring the

rain of pulverised material. "I am your nemesis, woman; I will kill you, one way or another! Release Drex, and I will spare you my righteous wrath; deny me, and I will make you suffer more than the worst nightmare you ever tried to give me! I do not beguile my victims—I destroy them! I will tear this stinking hell-place apart, if I have to!

"I am destruction!"

With a sheer effort of will, Grimm shattered the cell in which he had been tortured, blasting the stone walls apart as if they were made of rice-paper. He felt apprehensive no longer; he was the Dragonblaster, the avenger of the family

name this female demon had tried to immure since before he was born!

He clutched Redeemer, one friend who would never betray him as long as he lived, feeling its warmth and its empowering strength.

"I won't hesitate to destroy Drex's body if you've expunged her soul," he snarled. "I can make you suffer more than you would believe.

"Choose: quit Drex's body and give her back to me, or see what a true, unfettered Questor can do to you. You told me, many times, that a woman understands more of pain than a man ever can; but what does a shrivelled, unemotional

husk like you understand of insecurity, grief, blasted hopes and self-doubt? Thanks to you, witch, I understand those feelings well now." Grimm raised his arms over his head, letting the motes of blue mage-light play around his body like cerulean fireflies. He could not be beaten, and he knew it, revelling in and savouring his arcane strength for the first time in his life. He laughed: a hacking, humourless sound.

"I am power!"

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## **Chapter 18: 'All Is In Your Hands'**

Quelgrum turned to Sergeant Erik.

“Sergeant, I don't believe dear Sister Kellen's little story. I want you to covertly reconnoitre the Priory and its grounds. I want to know if there's any transport here they're not telling us about. Take note of any of the Anointed Score you see: the ones who met us at the gate when we were escorted here. Are they huddled together, cooking up some nasty little surprise for us? If they are, I want to know about it.”

Erik snapped to attention, performing a parade-ground perfect salute. “Yes, Sir. What do I do if one of the nuns challenges me?”

“I don't know, Sergeant. Tell them ... tell them you're looking for the jakes or

something! Use your imagination. Just try to stay out of sight if you can. I'll meet you back here in an hour, if I'm able."

"I understand, Sir, but what if the nuns take you by surprise? How will I know?" Quelgrum shrugged. "By the clock at the end of the hall: if I'm not back here within an hour, get out of here by any means possible. Go to Anjar, and, if I don't turn up there within two days, get back to Crar any way you can. Give Colonel Shandimar the codeword 'Blazon', and he'll get the whole army out here to raze the damn' place to the ground."

Erik surged to attention and saluted



crisply. "Orders received and understood, Sir! Wait for one hour, go to Anjar, wait two days and report to base if no further contact with you. Codeword is 'Blazon'."

"Excuse me, General," Necromancer Numal said, standing just behind Erik. "I'd like to go with the Sergeant. If there's any trouble, a Mage Staff is a pretty good weapon. We Mage Necromancers also have some affinity with shadows."

While Quelgrum doubted Numal's reliability under fire, a lack of offensive weaponry might be a major disadvantage. Since encountering the zombies in Merrydeath Road, the

Necromancer had become somewhat more outgoing and confident, and the General did not want to crush those nascent qualities. He felt encouraged that Numal had volunteered his services for an uncertain mission.

"You're not under my command, Lord Mage," he said, "you're a free agent, as far as I'm concerned. If you want to go with Erik, I can't stop you. I just ask you to defer to the Sergeant in tactical matters."

"Orders received and understood, General," the mage said, touching his right brow in a creditable attempt at a salute.

As Numal turned to follow Erik, Quelgrum said, "Lord Mage?"

"Yes, General?" the Necromancer replied, stopping and turning his head.

"Thank you."

Numal just nodded and hurried away.

Quelgrum sighed; it felt as if a lifetime of conflict, command and responsibility had lodged in his chest in one, solid, heavy mass.

Why does everybody expect me to make all the bloody decisions?

Numal wanted me to make his mind up

for him, and he's not even in my army. Is it just my rank, does something about me make people think I'll solve all their freaking problems? Have I got a tattoo on my forehead that says 'Get your decisions here, free to all-comers'?

What have I to show for a life of service, other than scars? I should be at home, dandling grandchildren on my knees, a loving, supportive wife at my side. I'm tired of fighting and making decisions. If I ever get back to Crar, Shandimar can have the bloody army! Why do I still need to fight at my age?

Another part of his mind shot back, Because nobody will fight without somebody to take responsibility or lead

the way. It's relatively easy to be a common soldier. He may have to fight and die, but somebody else thinks for him. That doesn't come easily to many people. Ordinary soldiers don't have to worry about food, drink, clothing or housing. Many soldiers prefer to follow orders without thinking; the removal of individual responsibility makes it easier for them. Committee discussions or arguments delay action, and usually lead to unsatisfactory compromises. If an army were some democratic commune, where every order was debated, there'd be chaos!

Quelgrum's inner dialogue stuttered to a halt, as the General saw the

unmistakeable, wand-thin figure of Sister Kellen emerging from the archway to the stairs and approaching him.

"May I inquire where your companions are, General?" she asked.

Quelgrum shrugged. "We've been cramped up for days, madam. Sergeant Erik wanted to stretch his legs, and Necromancer Numal chose to join him. I have no idea where they went. What of my request to see Baron Grimm?"

"I regret that that Questor Grimm is very sick and in quarantine." Sister Kellen's face was now the very picture of contrition and sorrow. "The illness struck him with frightening ferocity after

he visited your sick friend, Tordun. For your own safety, I beg you to stay away from him. I will pray for him, and I urge you to do the same. He may not survive."

"I don't believe you, Sister," Quelgrum said, battling a born peasant's ingrained dread of capricious disease. "I saw him only about quarter of an hour ago, and he was in perfect health!" Kellen shook her head. "The infection is swifter than any mortal disease, General. It took us all by surprise. Everyone is forbidden to see him, by the order of Sister Judan. Only our Healer, Sister Mercia is permitted to attend him, and she is locked in the room with him.

"I am so sorry."

Quelgrum's eyes scanned the nun's face, A lifetime of dealing with men and women, of interrogations and court-martial, had given him what amounted almost to a sixth sense, enabling him to detect the most delicate scents of deceit and falsehood. This lie-sense was not infallible, but it was more than capable of detecting the outright stench of dishonesty, and this nun dissembled poorly. Her eyes were a touch too wide, the tremble in her lower lip just a trifle overdone. The woman was lying.

"Very well, Sister," he said, not taking his eyes off Kellen for an instant. "In that case, we will talk with Sister Weranda.



She must be worried."

Kellen cringed like a peasant slave before her high-born, imperious master. "Impossible, I am afraid, my Lord. Sister Judan's order is that nobody is allowed to enter or leave the cell block. She would be angry with me. You have no idea how stern Sister Judan can be when she is balked. I would be very grateful if you spared me her wrath."

She fluttered her eyelids in what might have been an alluring gesture in a younger woman: however, on Kellen, it looked as brash and insincere as a Countess affecting gutter patois in order to ingratiate herself with a rough-hewn labourer.

Bad move, Quelgrum thought. First, it was concern for Baron Grimm; then, for us. Now, she's trying to make me feel pity or passion for her. She's just looking for a lever—

At that moment, he felt the floor tremble. A tracery of cracks appeared in the marble, leading from the vicinity of the slave block. The General heard several screams and turned to see Lizaveta's bier almost toppled, as several nuns fought to keep it upright. When the tremor passed, they went back to their work, as if nothing had happened.

These nuns astound me, he thought. They seem to be able to accept anything weird

that happens around them. I guess that's due to years of being punished for asking questions.

"I didn't know there were earthquakes in this region, Sister." Kellen smiled ... again, just a little too widely. "Ah, yes ... it is quite bad sometimes, General. That was a mild one, I assure you."

"So why are this marble floor and these stone walls so undamaged, if these earth tremors are a common event?"

Kellen just shrugged, and the old soldier lost patience with this verbal fencing.

"You're lying, Sister," he said. "That was no earth tremor, and you know it."

Questor Grimm is no sicker than you or me, is he? That was his doing, wasn't it? Admit it!"

The nun's face contorted into an ugly grimace. "Do not try to browbeat me, General," she said. "I can make you regret it, I promise you."

"But you choose not to, in your bounteous mercy," he said, with a contemptuous laugh. He raised a large, liver-spotted fist whose protruding knuckles bore an intricate tracery of white and pink scars.

"I've never hit a lady before," he said, "but I really don't think you qualify, Kellen. Get out of my way; I'm in no

mood to argue. I've just about had a gutful of this place. Stand aside; or I swear I'll knock you to the floor."

"I have Geomantic powers," she warned him.

Quelgrum swore under his breath, and made to barge past the slender nun, who made a balletic jump backwards, raising her hands as if to cast a spell. He looked at her with an expression of sheer contempt.

"I don't have time for this," he said, landing his meaty left fist on the point of her jaw, pulling the blow only a little. Kellen's eyes rolled upwards as she crumpled to the floor like a collapsing

house. With a trace of disgust, the General saw that the paper-thin skin over his two larger knuckles had split, sending a thin tracery of red over the back of his left hand.

"I'm getting too old for hand-to-hand combat," he muttered, stepping over the unconscious woman and racing down the stairs.

Turning right into the cell corridor, he saw a scene of devastation: pale dust floated through the air, and the floor was littered with fragments and larger pieces of stone. As he stepped into the haze, he saw a large, ragged hole in the ceiling, with Questor Grimm and Drexelica standing underneath it. Grimm's face was

twisted in anger as he looked down at the girl. Drexelica, her back toward the General, seemed to be standing up to him. Behind Grimm stood the ashen-faced figures of Sister Judan and a younger nun the old soldier did not recognise.

The young mage looked up as Quelgrum approached. "Treachery is afoot, General," he said, his dark eyes glittering. "Lizaveta's spirit has possessed Drex's body, and, I think she's trying to re-establish her link with the structure of the Priory; the source of her Geomantic power."

"Approach no further, General," the

body of Drexelica said, turning to face Quelgrum, and the military man saw that she held a small dagger poised between her breasts. Her face bore a cool smile, and her voice was calm. "If you attempt to surprise me, I will kill this body and move on to another; yours, perhaps."

"That's an empty threat, Prioress, and you know it," Grimm said, shaking his head. "You'll need a female body with Geomantic sleight. It wouldn't break my heart if I were forced to destroy Sister Judan, I assure you."

Grimm stood still and closed his eyes, and Drexelica-Lizaveta shook her head.

"Stop that!" she shouted, "When you



gather your crude tendrils of magic, I can see it as easily as you can breathe. If you think to destroy my dagger, I'll kill the girl before you ever complete the spell. There are many witches in this Priory apart from Sister Judan, and my roving spirit will not be contained by stone walls."

The General saw the Baron gripping his staff tighter, but Grimm did not speak. Quelgrum's mind spun like a top as he tried to collect his thoughts. This seemed to be a classic stand-off. If Drexelica's body were to die, there was no telling where Lizaveta's essence might go; every moment of inaction might make her stronger. It seemed imperative to contain

the situation in this narrow corridor, if at all possible, but this impasse could not continue forever.

It seemed that Lizaveta had come to the same conclusion, as her avatar turned back to Grimm and said,

“We have a difficult situation, do we not? Perhaps we can come to some sort of compromise ... a compact, if you will.”

Baron Grimm's face was expressionless, his eyes hooded. “What do you propose, witch?” he asked.

"I have something you want,” she said, “your loved one. She has no love for you

in her present form, but I can remove her conditioning, if you wish. She is still here, but subordinated to my will. I can relinquish until a more suitable, willing host comes to light."

Quelgrum saw a flicker of hope, a frisson of indecision in Grimm's eyes, and he felt moved to speak.

"And just what do you gain from this, Prioress?" he demanded. "Won't Lady Drexelica need to die before you can move to another luckless host?"

"Questor Grimm's colleagues in Arnor House and High Lodge will be able to extract me from this body, I'm sure," she said, still facing Grimm. "Thaumaturgy

is a crude, mechanistic art, but it can still achieve many ends that Geomancy cannot."

"I don't believe you, Prioress," Grimm said. "I think if you still had the power to transmigrate, you'd kill Drex in an instant, just to escape."

"I think you're trapped right now, and you're just trying to buy time. You tried to infatuate me because that would let you access my powers, augmenting your own. Lord Horin would never consider liberating your soul just so I could have Drex back. He'll destroy her to be rid of you. You offer nothing." Good man! Quelgrum thought, pleased that Grimm seemed unprepared to clutch at this thin,

insubstantial straw. Don't trust her an inch.

"I have something else you want, Grimm perhaps even more than the return of your slut," Drex said in a low, almost seductive voice. "I, and only I, can prove your grandfather's innocence beyond a doubt. Only I can provide the proof that will clear your family name. I offer to accompany you to High Lodge and do this in exchange for my soul's freedom, as sworn by the High Dominie on his name and on his Guild Ring. You can have everything: your lover; the redemption of your name; Loras' total exoneration.

"All I ask is for the freedom of my spirit; I swear it on my name, my craft and my soul. Deny me this, and I'll kill the girl and seek my fortune where I may; it's in your hands. That is my final offer, Grimm. Take it or leave it."

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## **Chapter 19: Preparations for Departure**

Shakkar had slept more over the last few days than in the previous decade, but, as he awoke from a pleasant, formless dream, he felt refreshed. Perhaps he might engage in this mortal practice a little more often in future!

He lay on a straw pallet in a large barn, since the Anjarians had been unable to find more comfortable accommodation for someone of his size. Dimly remembering how he had thrashed and kicked whilst delirious, he understood only too well their desire to limit the destruction he could cause. Even in his weakened state, he was capable of wreaking considerable havoc.

Nonetheless, he had no complaints about his basic lodgings. They were capacious and well-lit from several high openings that also let in plenty of fresh air. Shakkar disliked the cramped, constricting chambers which humans seemed to prefer, and the wooden

structure seemed more than adequate to his needs.

He heard the barn door creak, and he turned his head to see the bald-headed, spare form of his physician, Porpitt.

"Good morning, Doctor Porpitt," he rumbled.

"Well met, Lord Shakkar," the doctor said with a cheerful, breezy air, despite his formal Mage Speech.

"How do you feel on this fine day? You look much better than when I first saw you." Shakkar raised himself from his straw pallet and swung his arms in a series of wide arcs, feeling the counter-



play of the opposing sets of muscles beneath his tough, leathery skin. He felt some soreness and stiffness in the joints, but he expected this after the last few days' immobility. Grunting in satisfaction, he flexed his wings several times, feeling a little tightness in the scar tissue on his side, but no pain. For the first time since the disease seized him, his mind was clear.

"I feel in excellent health, Doctor," he declared, moulding his sharp-fanged mouth into his nearest approximation of a human smile. "I owe you my life, and I thank you." Porpitt shrugged. "You were very ill indeed, Lord Demon," he said. "I feared for your life on several

occasions—I have never seen the sickness advance with such fury. I wish I could take full credit for your condition, but your underworld physique and an unexpected abatement of the disease played the greater part in your recovery."

"You are too modest," protested Shakkar, shaking his head, now free from dizziness and pain. "Your expertise was paramount."

Porpitt rubbed his lined brow with the back of his right hand. "I have treated the Night Ones' wounds before," he said, "but not often. One or two of the creatures have been known to walk abroad on occasion, and most Anjarians

know well enough to stay indoors at these times: we have nocturnal lookouts, whose sole job is to watch for the Night Ones' approach and to warn us by ringing the town bell, although the monsters never stray far from their earthy beds. I have saved wanderers from small scratches and bites, but you had long, deep gashes all down your right side and your back. The watchmen told me that it was as if the whole graveyard erupted the night you were attacked. The Night Ones usually wander only in small groups."

Shakkar grunted. "I do not believe the undead monsters arose of their own accord, Doctor," he said, "I believe they

were summoned."

"Summoned? I've studied these monstrosities in some depth, Lord Shakkar. Even a powerful Necromancer can only call one or two of them. It's said that the graveyard at Merrydeath Road was the scene of an ancient battle between two mighty mages, and the continued restlessness of the cadavers is due to lingering energies from the confrontation."

The demon said, "I think the undead warriors were summoned by witchcraft. It does not seem to function on the same principles as Thaumaturgy." He frowned. "If the battle was so long ago, Doctor, then why were some of the

animated corpses so uncorrupted?"

Porpitt pursed his lips, as if unsure how to reply at first. Then he nodded. "I haven't been able to save all the victims, and Merrydeath Road is the only logical place to bury the bodies. We daren't inter them here. The Night Ones may pass their walking curse on to their victims, and our religion forbids cremation.

"We bury them with full ceremony at high noon, when the Night Ones are dormant." Shakkar nodded. "A prudent precaution," he said, after a while. "Now, Doctor, how may I repay you for your care and your compassion? I am

needed in Rendale, and I dare not delay longer. I carry no money with me, but I have access to considerable funds from the Crarian city coffers." Porpitt shook his head. "The city fathers of Anjar pay me an adequate salary and a bonus payment for each person I treat," he said. "I cannot accept additional payment just for doing my job—especially since I have no idea why your illness came to such a swift end, and I played little part in that.

"If you insist on doing something for me, all I ask is that you recommend me as a physician to any ailing person you may meet around here ... and that you take care to steer clear of zombies in the

future." Shakkar smiled again, finding that the expression came to him more easily this time. "I will do so with pleasure, Doctor Porpitt," he said. "I regret that I cannot stay longer in Anjar, but I ask that you thank Mayor Peder and his colleagues for the hospitality you have shown me during my stay here. I hope to show my gratitude to you in a more tangible fashion later, but I regret that my presence in Rendale is imperative."

Porpitt nodded. "I understand, Lord Seneschal," he said. "I am happy that you're quite recovered now. You seem to be a person of some importance, and I don't want to delay your urgent mission

any longer than necessary. If you run into any unexpected problems in Rendale, I advise you to apply to the Priory. The Sisters of Divine Mercy will be more than happy to help you, I'm sure. They are frequent and valued visitors here in Anjar."



Shakkar nodded. "The Priory will be my first port of call," he rumbled, looking over his shoulder as he headed for the barn door. "Goodbye, good physician, and thank you."

\* \* \* \*

Grimm realised his mouth had dropped open, and he closed it again. Lizaveta had touched a raw nerve. He had sworn to redeem his family name; he had even named his Mage Staff 'Redeemer'. He first learned of the Prioress' role in his grandfather's betrayal while fighting for his life in the Pit at Yoren, and he had vowed to destroy her.

Now, the old woman offered to prove

Loras' innocence of the charge of attempted murder in exchange for the freedom of her spirit to wander.

It did not ring true

She won't be happy to roam the world as a disembodied spirit, he thought. She'll go in search of some poor, blameless witch and possess her body as she has Drex's—if she has any intention of ever doing so. For all I know, Drex is already dead.

His fists clenched and unclenched in indecision, and he touched his brow to Redeemer, trying to order his whirling thoughts.

How to tell if Drex's shade still resided in her body? He could astrally project and search for her, but that would leave his own body inert and vulnerable. He had no intention of according Lizaveta the least advantage.

"How do I know you haven't just destroyed or evicted Drex's spirit?" he demanded. "Let me talk to her. If she's there, let her come out, and stay out. If not, I'll tear this whole Hell-cursed place down around your ears. I don't want another word from you until we arrive at High Lodge."

"Very well, Questor," the Prioress said, after a brief pause. She shut her eyes—Drex's eyes!—and, after a few moments,

opened them again.

"I trust you are satisfied, rapist! Does your victory taste sweet? I would die a thousand deaths for the Reverend Mother, and the only reason I do not kill myself now is that she needs me. Rest assured that, although you may be able to force yourself upon me, you will never have my spirit or my heart." Grimm's heart surged. Although these were not the words he wanted to hear, he recognised it at once as Drex's Priory-moulded diction, rather than Lizaveta's crude attempt at deception.

"I never forced myself upon you, Drex," he said in a soft voice, "and I never will.

I'm just glad you're still alive. I won't lay a hand on you without your explicit permission." Drex snorted, her eyes bulging in apparent fury. "Then you be waiting full long time ... that is, I have not the slightest intention of surrendering to your foul, masculine demands. And you will call me Sister Weranda; I will no longer answer to any other appellation from either of you—the foul rapist or the old lecher."

Grimm suppressed a relieved smile: the brief return of her unmistakable Grivense street patois told him that his Drex, still existed, buried under the Order's brutal conditioning.

"I can accept that, Sister Weranda," he

said. "However, will you agree to go to High Lodge without trying to use magic on me?"

She raised her eyes with the air of a martyr. "Since the Reverend Mother wills it, I will comply," she said, clasping her hands together in prayer. "It will be a burden, but I will bear it." Grimm turned to General Quelgrum. "Do we have transport yet, General? I don't want to stay here a moment longer than necessary."

"Sergeant Erik and Necromancer Numal have been trying to arrange some transport, Lord Baron," the soldier said. "They should be reporting back to the

Main Hall in forty minutes or so."

"That's excellent, General," Grimm replied. He turned to Sister Mercia. "How is Tordun, Sister?" The young nun regarded him with wary, frightened eyes; this was not the compassionate, deferent healer he had first met in Lizaveta's private chamber.

"I will look," she said, her voice sullen and distrustful. "I gave him a narcotic earlier on, to speed his recovery. He may wake up soon."

She brushed past him in a flurry of white. Then she stopped and turned around, her head lowered.

"You are a destroyer and a killer, Lord Mage," she said, her voice tremulous and full of passion. "I hope you are at ease with your conscience, but I cannot find it in my heart to forgive what you have done. I will try not to hate you, but you make that very difficult. May the Names forgive you; you have not only killed the body of our Reverend Mother, but you have also destroyed the peace of our Order." Grimm's heart was heavy; he had no idea how this poor, virtuous young woman had suffered under Lizaveta's regime, but he recognised the truth in her words.

A destroyer ... a killer, he thought, rubbing his beard in agitation. She's



right: I am. Is that how I want to spend the rest of my life? I just feel so tired.

A rush of memories assaulted his mind, spinning it around like a solid blow from a heavyweight prize-fighter: the brutal assault on Lizaveta; the destruction of the beautiful, golden dragon, Gruon; the killing of the bar-room assailant on his first Quest; his violent explosion of wrath in the Scholasticate yard. All he had ever done as a Questor was to kill; to destroy; to brutalise. His reward was seven thin gold rings on a staff he had made himself. He was rich beyond the dreams of most men, but he was not free; the Guild still held the lien on his soul and his will. Everything he had,

including his life, could be stripped from him in a moment by the whim of a distant, unaccountable authority.

"I won't let you down, Granfer. The name of Afelnor will shine again; I swear it." The last of a series of memories to swim into his consciousness was that of this solemn vow by a tearful, determined youth. The memory gave Grimm strength and resolve.

Yes, he had killed and destroyed. That he had done so at the behest of the Guild did not matter; he had killed nobody who deserved to live. He had never killed for pleasure, for personal gain or for the approval of others, and he never would.

"I'm sorry, Sister Mercia," he said, bending to look into her accusing eyes. "I'm sorry for your lost serenity and your shattered dreams. I'm sorry for your loss of innocence. I'm not sorry for what I have done, and I'd do it again and again, if I had to. Life's easy when others make all your decisions for you, but that isn't freedom.

"Freedom is the ability to make your own decisions, Mercia. If I have forced that freedom upon you, I apologise. Your beloved Prioress was an evil, manipulating woman, and my only wish is that I'd known enough to blast her spirit into nothingness when I had the

chance.

"You are a healer, a preserver of life, and I am a killer. I accept my role, and I won't apologise for it. It's part of who I am."

"Well spoken, Lord Mage," a familiar voice rumbled, and Grimm looked up to see the pale, imposing figure of Tordun standing in the corridor.

"Listen to him, little angel," the albino said, "People like you are precious, but you must also recognise what needs to be changed. Sometimes, the only way to change something is to tear it down and start again. For that, you need a destroyer. Like me."

"Like Questor Grimm." Mercia's brow furrowed, as if she were trying to make sense of something abstruse and contradictory. Shaking her head, she continued down the corridor and disappeared from sight.

Well, that's a start, Grimm thought. Perhaps confusion is the first step on the road to acceptance.

"Warrior Tordun, I'm so happy to see you looking so well," he said.

"...were very worried about you," finished a smiling Quelgrum, who had started to speak at the same time as the Questor.

Tordun blinked myopically. "I did not catch all of that," he said, "but I do appreciate the sentiments. I feel quite fit to travel, and my eyesight has even improved a little—I can now distinguish colours and faces."

"I saw how he lusted after me," Drex muttered. "Another Name-cursed pervert ... the oversized ogler."

'Foul rapist', 'old lecher' and now 'oversized ogler', Grimm thought, his heart beating a little faster. So that's how it works—Drex has a little mantra or nickname for each of us. If we can erase those simple stereotypes, perhaps we can bring Drex back.

"That's good news," the beaming General said to Tordun. He turned to Grimm, snapping off an impeccable salute. "Lord Baron," he said, "All we need now is to meet up with Sergeant Erik and Necromancer Numal, procure some transport, and we can be out of here."

"That's not quite all, General," Grimm said. "We also need to rescue poor Thribble—I won't leave him here."

He turned around to face Drex. "Where is the small demon?" he asked.

"I cannot see why you care so much for a stunted reptile," grumbled Drex. "However, in the interests of removing

the pollution of your filthy presence from the Priory, I can tell you that he is in the Reverend Mother's private chapel, on the lowest level of the building. I can take you."

"No, thank you, Sister Weranda," Grimm said. "I prefer to find my own way, without a chaperone. We will go to the Great Hall to wait for our other two colleagues—I don't feel confident to leave you without at least one mage in attendance."

"The fumbling pederast?" Drex scoffed. "He's no true mage."

"I trust his Mage Staff to keep you in check," Grimm said.



"Well, at least I will feel a little less threatened by Numal," she said. "He is no more than a fumbling ped..."

As Drex's voice faltered to a halt, Grimm now felt sure the key to her ensorcelment lay in the application of trite, basic labels or insults for each member of the party. He pretended not to have noticed her verbal slip, covering his smile by turning it into a sneeze.

Grimm wiped his nose with a silk handkerchief from one of his robe's many pockets and turned towards Quelgrum. "Let's get to the Hall, General," he said. "This dust is playing havoc with my sinuses."

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## **Chapter 20: Blood!**

Although Drex seemed to have accepted her malign fate, Grimm did not trust her for a moment. Despite niggling demands from his bladder as he waited with Quelgrum in the hall, he dismissed the discomfort; he dared not take his eyes from his former beloved.

It seemed an age had passed by the time Numal and Erik came into view, walking from a side corridor. Quelgrum wandered across the cracked marble floor towards the two men before they had come within twenty yards. Grimm saw the urgent expression on Erik's face

as the Sergeant reported to his senior, although he could not make out the two soldiers' words. The Questor glanced at Drex: her expression appeared bored, disinterested, her eyes focused only on the high, vaulted ceiling, but he guessed that she, too, was trying to make out Erik and Quelgrum's conversation. However, he knew his ears were more sensitive than hers.

Quelgrum sauntered over to the group, accompanied by Necromancer Numal. "Lord Baron," he said, saluting, "Sergeant Erik would like your opinion on a few horses he saw grazing in a nearby field. I don't know much about horseflesh, but I thought you might have

a better idea, having been born in a smithy."

"Why does he not approach?" Drex demanded, her eyes hooded. "Why does he skulk in the shadows and whisper?"

"That, dear lady, is a situation of your own making," the General said, with a sardonic smile. "He seems to think you don't like him for some reason."

"I'll go, General," Grimm said, feigning a resolute sigh. "It'll give me something to do, I suppose." He trusted in Numal's Mage Staff to keep order in his absence, and he sauntered over to the green-clad soldier with every appearance of resignation, resisting the urge to run. As

he approached, Erik snapped into another of his crisp salutes.

"Sergeant Erik reporting, Lord Baron!" he said, his right hand quivering at his temple. "I have news to—"

"That's all right, Sergeant," Grimm said. "I'm not a soldier, so you needn't bother with the military formalities. What's going on?"

"Would you mind coming down here, please, Lord Baron?" Erik asked, jerking a thumb towards the corridor from which he had emerged. "We're meant to be looking at some horses." Shrugging, Grimm followed the soldier into the passageway, and Erik beckoned

him into a dimly-lit culvert half-way along it.

"Some of those Score women are planning something for tonight," Erik muttered at last, his eyes blazing.

"I didn't catch everything, but I know it involves a sacrifice at midnight, in the Lower Chapel. I heard the Prioress' name mentioned. There were eight nuns, and they all seemed to be fighting for the chance to be the ... the lucky one."

Grimm slowly nodded. "I imagine they're looking either to reincarnate Lizaveta, or to link another of their number with the Priory, giving her its power," he said, rubbing his beard,

“presumably Sister Judan. Either way could spell trouble.”

"It certainly could, Sir," the Sergeant said, his eyes gleaming. "Necromancer Numal said it made him think of the crypt under High Lodge. I didn't understand what he meant, but he said you'd know, Sir." Of course! Grimm thought. That was how Lizaveta gained power at High Lodge: the blood of sacrifices, all linked to her in some way. The blood soaked into the earth, giving some sort of perverted communion with its power. I thwarted her by drawing the blood out of the ground, severing her link with it. Geomancy, as its name suggested, derived from the earth's inner

energies; the deeper the link, the greater the power. Many witches communed with trees or half-buried rocks, and their power was slight, giving only access to minor skills. Lizaveta had perverted the art, linking life-blood with earth-magic to give her almost unlimited strength. At this time, sequestered in a borrowed body, her powers were diminished; Drex and the others of the Score had no such link to the depths of the earth. It seemed as if members of the Score were attempting to re-establish this Geomantic communion.

"...after all, you know a lot more about nags than I do, Lord Baron," Erik said suddenly, and Grimm nodded.



"I'll take a look at them, Sergeant," was his immediate response, and he saw one of the nuns passing down the corridor. When she had passed, he nodded.

"I think I know what to do, Sergeant," he said. "I think I may be able stop this little cabal's plans."

"That's good to know, Sir," Erik said, with a deep sigh. "Anyway, Sir, I did see some horses nearby; would you take a look at them? We don't want to go back too soon, and the nags might help to get us back to civilisation."

Grimm nodded. "Very well, Sergeant; we should have plenty of time, if your information's correct."

\* \* \* \*

"Sergeant Erik's horses are fit only for the knacker's yard, General," the Questor said, as he walked back to the Main Hall, with Erik in tow. "I believe the Sisters told the truth about the lack of transport around here. I'd suggest that you try to get our money back, and we'll take our chances in Anjar; it's not far. I don't want to stay here a moment longer than necessary."

"It will be dark in a few hours," Drex said, shrugging. "Why do we not wait until the morning? I'm hungry—aren't you? We have plenty of good food here." Her manner was almost friendly and enticing. Now, that's just a little too

friendly, Grimm thought. Whatever's going on, Drex and Lizaveta seem to be in on it; and they don't want us to leave until the fun starts.

He turned towards her, reminding himself that she was not the woman he loved. He knew she was suspicious, and he thought it best if his story was as plausible as possible.

"Sister Weranda; Prioress Lizaveta; whoever I'm talking to," he said, his mouth compressed into a tight line, his lips barely moving, "I don't want us to spend another moment in this hell-hole. I don't know what you're planning, but I doubt it's anything for our benefit. We're

moving out of here, right now. Is that acceptable to you, or must I tear this hell-damned place down to the bedrock? I promise you, I can, and I will, if I have to."

He saw Drex's lips open, as if she were about to speak, but her eyes began to wander before a word emerged; he had no doubt she was in commune with her inner mistress.

At last, she sighed and waved her hands, as if she were resigned to his will. "There is no need to show your power," she said. "We ... I have no desire to keep you here any longer than you wish to stay."

"It does not matter. Our power has a long reach, you foul rapist." Drex did not say those words, but they lit up in Grimm's inner brain, anyway, as if she had. Not for much longer, he thought, if I have anything to do with it.

He nodded. "In that case, I ask you to accompany my friends to Anjar. I'll catch up with you very soon, once I've rescued Thribble from the Chapel. I trust this will be acceptable to you." Drex shrugged. "If you must, Questor; it's only an old Chapel, and we hardly use it. All I ask is that you do not damage the sconces, ornaments or icons. Some of them are irreplaceable." Her tone was level and casual, but Grimm guessed she

was trying to blind him as to the Chapel's true importance.

"I won't touch them, Sister," he said. "You have my word as a mage."

"Perhaps it would be better if Sister Judan or I escorted you," Drex said, still maintaining her air of complete unconcern. "It's easy to get lost in the catacombs."

"I have an excellent sense of direction," Grimm declared, "and I don't trust you not to try Geomancy on me again. I know where the Chapel lies, more or less, and I should be able to sense Thribble as I approach."

This last was a lie, but the Questor did not wish to reveal that he knew the Chapel's true purpose. He hoped that Lizaveta did not know that the loss of her magic in High Lodge was due to Grimm's destruction of her power centre in the crypts.

"Very well, mage," she said, turning to General Quelgrum. "Will you shackle me, old man, so you can abuse me more easily later on? I won't resist, but I will despise you all the more."

"I won't shackle you, young lady," the soldier said. "Not unless I have to, and even then we won't molest you. You have my word on that. You can show your good faith by returning our gold."

"If it will remove your foul, masculine stench from these hallowed walls," Drex said, with the air of a martyr. "Come with me."

"Where shall we meet, Lord Baron?" Quelgrum asked. "Do you want us to return here?" Grimm shook his head. "Definitely not, General," he said, his tone brooking no argument. "As soon as you have the gold, I want you to head back up Merrydeath Road while it's still light. I'll either catch up with you on the road, or I'll meet you in Anjar. I don't trust these lovely ladies any further than I could throw them if I had both hands tied behind my back. Every moment we



spend here increases the risk of them trying something."

"Our magic came from the Reverend Mother," Drex said, with a disdainful snort. "It's gone. Are you scared of a few powerless women, mighty mage?"

"Understood, Lord Baron," Quelgrum said, ignoring the theatrical outburst. "We'll get the money and be out of here as soon as possible." He looked down at Drex. "By your leave, Sister?" She gave another dismissive snort and spun on her heel, striding away, the other members of the team hurrying after her.

Grimm waited until they were out of sight and accessed his Mage Sight,

concentrating hard. During his sessions with Lizaveta and her cohorts, he had learned to recognise the almost invisible green wisps of Geomancy, and he saw them now. The tendrils of power imparted a vague, unpleasant odour of burning brimstone to his sensorium, at the very limit of his perception. This 'Mage Smell' was a new concept to him, but, then, Geomancy was a very different discipline to Thaumaturgy, and it must have different rules and precepts. Slowly, carefully, he began to turn, assessing the concentration of Geomantic power in each quadrant.

Ah; there it is, he thought, detecting the direction of increasing magical flux.

West it is. This will be something new to present to the Mage Scholars if or when I get back.

He smiled. "Thank you, Lizaveta," he muttered. "Without your gentle attentions, I'd never have made this useful discovery."

With a determined tread, he walked towards his goal.

\* \* \* \*

Grimm lost count of the twists and turns as he descended into the bowels of Rendale Priory, but there was no mistaking the acrid odour's ever-increasing intensity. He passed several

nuns on the way, but none impeded his progress or challenged him. With each deeper level he met fewer women, until the corridors were deserted.

The sulphurous smell was almost overpowering, as Grimm approached a black, gnarled door, and he felt this must be the entrance to the Lower Chapel. Taking a deep breath, he twisted the iron ring and stepped inside.

The place was cold and forbidding. Although several brightly-flickering torches lit the chamber, Grimm had the overwhelming and contradictory sensation of utter darkness. Realising he no longer needed his new magical sense to guide him, he dismissed it, and the

scene cleared.

"Friend Grimm!" a familiar voice squeaked to his right, and he turned to see an ornate cage of grey metal hanging from the ceiling, its bars closely-spaced. Inside it stood the tiny form of Thribble, jumping up and down in agitation, causing the cage to swing from side to side.

"I knew you would come," the netherworld creature said. "Something about these bars prevents me from using my powers of translocation; please let me out."

Grimm smiled. "It's good to see you, Thribble, I imagine they're made of pure

iron—the metal seems to block magic. Don't worry. I'll soon have you out of there."

The cage's delicate-looking, ornate padlock looked a likely target.

"Stand back, Thribble," he counselled, hoisting Redeemer. With a single blow, the staff shattered the lock, and the cage door swung open.

Grimm held out his left hand, and the demon jumped into it with a joyous cry.

"You must tell me of your adventures since we were parted," the demon shrilled. "I want to hear everything. All that ugly old woman ever did was to set

me swinging here and mock me. I need more stories."

"Later, Thribble," Grimm said, opening his pocket for his friend to hop inside. "I have a more urgent task to perform right now."

"Very well, human," the minuscule demon grumbled, hopping into the pocket. "I will wait," he added in his now-muffled falsetto.

Scanning the floor, Grimm made out a shallow, but distinct hollow in the flagstones. Just as in High Lodge, the stones were set in dry mortar, a perfect medium to absorb sacrificial blood.

"It must be here," he muttered. "All I have to do is to get the blood out, and this damn Priory should lose its power."

He knelt in the centre of the depression, his mind reaching deep into the earth as he gathered his power and began to chant. He soon felt the pull of the lost souls trapped in the soil beneath the Chapel. As he concentrated on them, he became aware of a thin, red mist filling the room, and he smiled. The spirits of a bleating lamb, a new-born baby, a goat and a full-grown woman escaped the clutches of the earth, each rejoicing with its new-found freedom after ... how long? He did not know, but he felt happiness at their release.



Still the red mist poured into the Chapel, getting thicker and thicker, and he sneezed. The ruddy fountain darkened the chamber, showing no sign of weakening, but Grimm did not stop. As his eyes began to water, he raised his right hand and screamed "Ajer'ning mand'krint!" He added more power. Another, more vicious, spell, and the hole widened and became more ragged, extending to the next level up, and the next.

The souls of birds, pigs, men, lizards and other species flew away in increasing numbers, but the dusty flow of dried blood did not diminish. Coughing, his eyes streaming, Grimm blasted an

opening all the way to the roof of the Priory, shooting the ruddy powder into the late afternoon sky. The mage heard a low groan from beneath the floor, and he felt the whole building tremble, but he now felt unable to stop himself. The whole Priory was soaked in blood, founded on it, and he was determined to free Rendale from its pernicious influence. Laughing and crying in equal measures, he continued to reach down, down into the very bedrock beneath the Chapel, with no further care for his life or his safety.

All that remained was the desire to free these imprisoned souls.

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## Chapter 21: Collapse

Shakkar strode from the barn into the bright morning sunlight, took a deep breath and flexed his wide, leathery wings. To his immense satisfaction, his body seemed in fine shape, and he began to exercise, as he had often seen Baron Grimm do in the early morning.

A few Anjarrians stopped what they were doing to watch him, but only for a few moments. As the demon finished his impromptu callisthenics, the townspeople and shopkeepers turned away, returning to their seemingly customary haggling.

It is a good day to fly, he thought, admiring the way the fields shimmered and shone like fine gold: something he had never appreciated before in his long life. He found unexpected pleasure also in the cheerful twitter and warble of the birds in the trees. After another deep, satisfied breath, he flapped his wings, which bore him aloft without effort.

Shakkar used the thermals and air currents with the unthinking intuition of a creature born to fly, without the least consideration or understanding of the principles of aerodynamics. Sheer instinct guided him, telling him when to twist a wing; when to shift his centre of mass; when to beat his wings just that

little bit harder. He revelled in the incomparable freedom of flight, rejoicing in his restored strength. Woe betide you, Prioress Lizaveta, and your cohorts! he thought, baring his teeth. Tremble, mortals, for Shakkar, the Mighty and Indomitable, approaches!

He had never thought of himself in these terms before, but he was beginning to appreciate the sense of confidence and power such grandiose titles often gave humans, enabling them to overcome odds disproportionate to their size and strength. He remembered the mantra he had heard Baron Grimm mutter on occasion: "I am strength! I am power!"

"I am vengeance," the demon growled,

his eyes almost closed against the wind caused by his passage through the air.

After perhaps five minutes of flight, he felt a growing, burning sensation in his chest and back, and he began to wonder if his proud words had been uttered in haste. He reduced his speed, trying to favour the aching muscles and tendons, but the pain grew worse, until it seemed as if some sadistic interrogator had thrust red-hot blades under his flesh. He struggled on until the pain became unbearable, and he then banked his wings and descended to the ground. To his chagrin, he saw the mighty Priory as a mere dot on the horizon, and he knew he still had many miles to cover. He

trudged through the tall grass of the field in which he had landed, until he reached the road. He began to stride down the long thoroughfare with the resolute, mile-eating tread he had seen Quelgrum's men use on many occasions. His leg muscles now began to ache and tremble, too, and he felt mortified by the thought that mere mortals could march for many hours without tiring. He, Shakkar, a demon of the highest caste, felt exhausted after only minutes.

He knew his recent sickness and convalescence, brief though it had been, must have sapped much of his strength and endurance. To Shakkar, his physical superiority over humans had been an

axiom, a self-evident fact. He had felt no great pride in this, but it had been a comfort to him since he had come to appreciate the resourcefulness and intelligence of these short-lived, feeble creatures. Not for the first time, he cursed the memory of Baron Starmor, who had robbed him of his magical powers and left him in this cold, miserable realm. Lord Grimm had saved him from Starmor's dismal punishment pillar and given him a new purpose in life, and he resolved anew to come to the mage's aid, come what might. Even if he had to hobble into Rendale on bloody stumps, he swore he would never forget or disregard that debt. A true demon would never, never surrender his



honour.

\* \* \* \*

"Where is Questor Grimm?" Sister Weranda demanded, as she strode alongside General Quelgrum. She had not looked at or addressed any member of the group since they had left the Priory, and Quelgrum saw that she still maintained her 'custody of the eyes'. "All he had to do was let a pathetic little reptile out of its cage. What's keeping him?"

"Not me," the old soldier replied.

At last, Drex looked up, and her eyes met Quelgrum's for a moment. "What do

you mean by that, General?"

Quelgrum noted her scathing tone, but it bothered him not at all; he had suffered too much for too long to be troubled by such trifling things as disdain. Most people he had met for the last three decades either idolised him or were terrified of him. There seemed to be no middle ground.

"Simply that," he said, not lessening his pace in the least. "I'm not Baron Grimm's keeper. He is his own man, and he can take care of himself. Perhaps he's painting derogatory slogans on the Priory walls; perhaps he's picking flowers to put on Prioress Lizaveta's bier. I don't know where he is!"

"General, look!" Numal shouted from just behind the soldier. Quelgrum stopped and spun around to see a red-brown plume rising from the roof of the Priory, shooting hundreds of feet into the sky. "It's on fire!" Quelgrum heard Drex gasp, but he ignored her. "That's not fire," he declared, noting the straight sides of the plume before it opened up into an umbrella-like canopy. "It looks more like some sort of fountain."

"Permission to investigate, General?" Erik asked, giving another of his parade-ground salutes. "It wouldn't take me long to check it out."

"I don't think so, Sergeant. It would be

foolish to split up our forces. We'll all take a—" He started, as he heard a loud, basso roar behind him, and turned to see a distant, misshapen figure shambling down the road. His hand flew to the hilt of his sidearm before he remembered that he had no ammunition.

"It's Seneschal Shakkar, Sir!" Erik's voice was a full octave above its usual register. "I knew he wouldn't desert us!"

Quelgrum squinted at the approaching creature and realised Erik was right. This limping thing was, indeed, the once-mighty demon.

What happened to Shakkar? he wondered. He looks like a wreck!

He ran forward to meet the demon, accompanied by the now-smiling Sergeant.

"Lord Seneschal," Erik crowed, "I thought you must have died! Are you well?"

"It is ... good to see you, gentlemen," Shakkar rumbled as they approached him. Quelgrum would have sworn that the Seneschal was gasping from lack of breath. "I ... I have been ill, but I am recovering. Wh

... where is B-baron Grimm?"

Quelgrum jerked a thumb over his shoulder, indicating the Priory and its

red-brown plume. "He's still in there, Lord Seneschal. We have no idea what's going on, and we're a little worried."

"General!" Numal yelled, "Look!"

Quelgrum turned to see one of the Priory's turrets canting over at a precarious angle. As he watched, the tower teetered and crashed to the ground in a billowing cloud of yellow-grey dust.

\* \* \* \*

Grimm blinked and coughed, seeing the floor of the Chapel only through a rust-coloured fog, but he was fully committed to his spell and he could not have

stopped if he wished to. With his Mage Sight, he saw a blurred profusion of souls escaping from their earthy confinement, and he could no longer distinguish one from another. A tangled, confused mess of sensations ran through him: joy mingled with indignation; love blended with hatred; and serenity entwined with vengeance. He no longer knew where the released spirits ended and he began. All he knew was that he must complete what he had started. As if from a distance, he heard the structure of the Priory groan and creak, and he felt a series of dull, heavy shudders run through the flagstone floor, each sending a shower of yellow dust from the vaulted ceiling, adding its hue to the haze that

filled the room.

"Lord Baron!" Thribble shrilled, his tremulous voice keening like a sequence of treble notes from a piccolo. "This place is not safe! We must leave!"

"Soon, Thribble," Grimm replied, his voice distant and dreamy, "when I have finished." A heavy stone block crashed to the floor a few feet from the mage with a shuddering thump, shattering into marble-sized fragments, a few of which scored hot streaks across his forehead, cheeks and chin. The mage scarcely noticed them. All that mattered was his self-appointed mission. With a sharp, cracking sound, a fissure snaked its way down the opposite wall, spreading



sinuous tributaries from ceiling to floor. Grimm heard similar noises erupt in a staccato fusillade, and the instinct of self-preservation drifted into his sensorium, clamouring for his attention. We're almost there, he thought, trying to still the wayward, insistent demands from his stem-brain. Just a few more seconds...

He gritted his teeth, his head pounding with the effort to maintain his concentration on the task at hand. He could no longer distinguish between the flood of escaping spirits, the rumbling cacophony of protesting masonry and the acrid scent in his nostrils; his senses blurring together in a soupy melange.

Ah!

Grimm felt a sharp pain in his right temple as the last soul fled from its underground prison and the spell came to an abrupt end.

He fell backwards, as if a restraining cord had been cut. Another stone block crashed to the centre of the floor, over which he had been leaning a heartbeat before.

His disregarded, suppressed senses returned with full force. Grimm realised his life was in danger, as the fabric of the Priory began to disintegrate around him. With horror, he realised that he was at the very lowest point of the crumbling

edifice, and he felt a numbing flood of claustrophobia wash through him.

"Baron Grimm; we must leave!" Thribble twittered, his voice all but indistinguishable over the overpowering carronade of sound.

"I agree, my friend," Grimm shouted, surging to his feet. "It is getting a little precarious here." He ran to the door and tugged the handle with all his strength, but the portal did not move. Without a heartbeat of consideration, he yelled a nonsense phrase, backed by a goodly dose of thaumaturgic energy, and the door crumbled into dust. Coughing and spluttering, he staggered from the Chapel, almost blind from the dense

dust-cloud. The stairs were coated in dust and larger fragments of stone, and his feet skidded on the rubble as he raced upwards, threatening at any time to send him crashing back to the lower level.

Turn right, Grimm, he told himself, stumbling up another flight of stairs, fighting the cold fingers of panic that ran along his spine. Now, turn left. Left again...

Guided by intuition, dodging stony missiles erupting from the ceiling and walls, he hurtled towards the upper level of the Priory. Twice, he almost fell, but a combination of sheer luck and

instinctive magic kept him on his feet. Redeemer, as if of its own volition, lashed out at hurtling missiles, shattering them before they reached him, but the Questor knew his luck could not hold for much longer. There!

With a brief shock of joy, he saw the Great Hall before him, and the hope of escape. What had once been a splendorous structure now resembled a scene from an artist's vision of Hell. Screams and shouts from a milling throng of women filled the air as the huge building writhed like some maddened, chained beast snapping at a pack of tormenting hounds. A young nun, her wimple pushed back to reveal a

short, ragged tangle of brown hair, raced for the open door at the far end of the hall, only to disappear in a spray of scarlet mist as a huge stone block fell on her.

Several women tried to make their way to the wide, beckoning exit beyond the rain of death. Only a few succeeded; most were felled by the tumbling missiles, and others were on their knees, praying. Let them die! They all threw their lot in with Lizaveta and her cursed Score. They don't deserve any pity. His right arm twitched, and Redeemer turned another pair of yellow projectiles into dust as it swung in a tight arc around his head.

You haven't much longer! Get out while you have the chance. The doorway's in sight!

They only did what she told them. So did Granfer Loras. They had no more choice than he. You can't let them die!

Redeemer flashed out again, but too late, as a fist-sized rock thudded into his left shoulder, and he felt a sharp, sickening pain as a bone snapped.

He ran forward a few steps as the pain bloomed into fiery effulgence. The building seemed to howl above him, and he screamed an instinctive spell.

"A'jakareman'e ma'jastanemik!"

The cacophony did not reduce, but the rain of stone ceased to pound on the shattered marble floor.

"Get out, everyone, NOW!" he howled in a hoarse voice. "I don't know how long I'll be able to hold this spell!"

Several nuns raced through the door, which was now wreathed in a shimmering, blue light. Grimm groaned, feeling the energy pouring from him like water from a fountain.

"Do you want to die?" the mage yelled to the remaining, still-praying women. "Get OUT!" Most of the nuns heeded his agonised imperative, scuttling out of the crumbling building, although, a handful



remained. Grimm staggered towards them, trying to impel them from the ruin by sheer force of will. One of the remaining women, he saw, was Sister Mercia, her lips moving in silent devotion. Moving towards her, he shouted straight in her ear: "Stay here, Sister, if you wish, but I'll stay with you until the end. I don't want to be crushed by these stones, and I don't know how much longer I can hold them up. Please; for my sake, get out of here."

Mercia completed her chant and looked up at him. "You are a destroyer," she said. "You may reap what you have sown, if that is what you wish."

Grimm groaned, feeling the weight of

masonry bearing down on his improvised ward.

"I don't want to see a blameless woman cut down in her prime," he croaked, his vision blurring. "Please, save yourself ... and me."

Her mouth twisted into a parody of a smile. "So, this is your idea of liberation," she said. "You have—"

"Now!" The word tore itself from his larynx like a long splinter pulled from a wound. "Do you want to die alongside a destroyer? What purpose will that serve?"

Mercia's eyes rolled, and she rose to her

feet. "Sisters," she cried, "we can serve the Names better alive than dead. Let us take our chances in the world."

As she ran towards the open doorway, the other nuns followed, and Grimm felt a deep surge of relief, before realising that he was alone in the collapsing Priory. Forcing life into his legs, he staggered towards the inviting arch of light. Blood pounding in his spinning head, he drove himself onwards. Inches seemed to turn to miles, and he screamed his habitual, defiant mantra as he approached the welcoming light: "I am strength! I am power!"

His strength failed in an instant, and pain and confusion vanished into blackness as

the open doorway collapsed onto him.

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## **Chapter 22: Death and Rebirth**

As Quelgrum's party approached the Priory, the General beheld a scene of utter chaos. White-robed figures milled around the grounds: some wept; some wandered aimlessly in stunned silence; others, perhaps more devout, knelt on the dusty grass and prayed. The entire area lay under a pall of yellow dust, and the Priory seemed to be in the throes of self-destruction, lurching and tottering like a drunken titan.

As he and his companions hurried

through the throng, the building gave a convulsive shudder, and a thick cloud of dust belched from what, moments before, had been the imposing main entrance. The ruin gave a last, almost petulant shrug and then lay still, looking like the remains of a broken tooth. For a moment, complete, unnatural silence reigned; the weeping nuns, and even the birds in the trees, fell quiet.

Quelgrum scanned the area for a hint of Baron Grimm's blue-and-yellow robes, but all he saw was the nuns' dusty habits.

The General felt numb, knowing that the Baron had been down in the lowest reaches of the Priory, which must now

be buried under tons of rubble.

Not even a Seventh Rank Questor could have survived that, he told himself, punctuating the thought with a deep sigh.

The poor young bastard went through so much, and for what? Was it all for nothing?

At a soft tug on his sleeve, Quelgrum turned to his left to see a small, solemn nun. Despite a thick layer of grime on her face, he recognised the young healer, Sister Mercia. Quelgrum noted her earnest, pleading expression, and he saw pink rivulets in her dusty cheeks.

"There may be other Sisters entombed in

the ruins," she whispered, her voice shaking a little. "We cannot leave them there to rot. They should be rescued or decently buried. Will you help us? Please?"

"My concern is to find Questor Grimm's body," the General said, strong emotion sharpening his voice. "If we find any trapped Sisters while we're searching for him, and if we can move any of these huge blocks, of course we'll get them out."

"I was foolish," Mercia muttered. "I thought it would be better to die here, but I see no glory in such a pointless death, now. Questor Grimm destroyed the Priory; I know that. But he died to

save us, at the end, and I ... we..."

The young nun dissolved in a fit of tearful sobbing, and her voice failed her. Quelgrum felt a brief pang of pity, but it was soon washed away by a flood of righteous anger.

The Order tortured us and tried to make us slaves, he thought, feeling a large blood-vessel pounding in his right temple. Questor Grimm saved us from that. My pity should be for him, not for them!

"He died to save us." Mercia's words blazed into his mind, echoing, growing louder with each reverberation.



He grasped the weeping nun's shoulders in his rough hands and turned her to face him in a single, brusque movement.

"What do you mean?" he demanded. "Do you know where Grimm was when the building collapsed? Tell me!"

Mercia hung limp in his grip, still shivering and trembling, but she nodded.

"Where?" he shouted, shaking the nun. "Tell me!" He felt a hot flush of rage, and he saw a vision of himself pulling back a hand to strike the girl. On impulse, he released her and took a step back, breathing heavily.

The nun gulped and sniffed; her eyes red

and wide with fear. "It ... it was in the main hall," she said. "He cast a s-spell to stop the stones f-falling. He could have left us there ... I w-wanted to stay, but he made us go. He waited until we'd left, and then he..."

She waved a feeble, limp hand at the toppled remains of the Priory. "The doorway." She stifled a sob.

"He was so close..."

Quelgrum turned around. He saw Shakkar, standing with head bowed; Numal, who looked a picture of misery; and Erik, who looked almost lost.

Drex—Sister Weranda!—knelt, lost

either in prayer or exhaustion. The General could not tell which.

"Gentlemen!" he snapped, and his companions looked up. "Do you feel up to some heavy lifting?" Shakkar grunted, and he flexed his huge biceps and quadriceps, standing tall. "I am not at my strongest, General," he growled, "but I owe Baron Grimm my freedom and my self-respect. I will move the world to retrieve him."

"I'm not strong, but my magic may be able to locate his body and some of the others," Numal said; his eyes were red and his voice tremulous, but his expression was stern and resolute.

"There's beams and planks in the ruins, Sir," Erik declared, casting a practised eye over the ruins. "We can use them as levers, if the nuns will help us."

Quelgrum nodded. "Thank you, gentlemen," he said. "I knew I could rely on you." He turned back to Sister Mercia. "Will your Sisters aid us?" he asked. "We'll do what we can, until we've retrieved as many bodies as possible—even after we've located Questor Grimm's body."

"I think I saw Sister Judan amongst the crowd," the nun said, all traces of grief departing, her voice steady and determined. "She could motivate them better than I could." Quelgrum

suppressed a curse at the knowledge that the Score's senior member had escaped. I might have known Judan would have saved her skin.

"Very well, Sister; Sergeant Erik will organise the operation," he said, turning back to Erik and nodding. Erik saluted. "At once, Sir! Would you mind grabbing anything we can use as a lever, Sir?" Quelgrum smiled. "I think I can do that, Sergeant."

Erik turned to Mercia, towering over her. "Will you come with me, Sister?" The tall Sergeant and the nun disappeared into the milling, directionless throng, and the General

beckoned to the other two men. The recovery operation was under way, and Quelgrum felt relieved that he was doing something, instead of being a mere spectator to the disaster.

\* \* \* \*

Guy Great Flame whistled a merry tune as he rode. With money in his pockets and a good steed beneath him, he felt happier than he had for many years; in fact, for most of his life. Where next? he wondered. I suppose I really ought to go back to bloody Eron House. Prelate Hammor, rot his bones, is probably wondering where I am.

His mouth dried in an instant, despite

having taken a deep swallow from his full canteen just moments before.

You will go to High Lodge ... you will go to High Lodge...

The phrase repeated itself in his head, growing louder and louder until he let go the reins, clutched his hand to his temples and gritted his teeth until he thought they would splinter. The pain bloomed and intensified until it seemed as if his head were on fire and about to explode. His limbs felt about to char and crack open, spilling marrow to the ground.

"I will!" he screamed to the sky, not knowing why. "I'll go to High Lodge, I

swear!" At once, the pain disappeared like a summer shower, and Guy gasped for a few minutes, wiping cold sweat from his brow. In a few moments, the memory of his brief fit left him, and he took another drink of water.

Thirsty work, this riding, he thought. I just hope that flatulent oaf, Horin, will be pleased to see me when I get back to High Lodge.

\* \* \* \*

Loras grunted as he put himself through his habitual, rigorous sequence of morning exercises. Not bad for an ancient man, he thought, straightening up after fifty gruelling press-ups, with only



a twinge from his aged bones.

Wiping himself down with a grey towel, he looked around his room, as if it might show him something new. For a prison, it was a considerable improvement on the cell in which he had grown up as a Charity Scholar. His mattress was not too lumpy or thin, and the food was far better than he had expected. Loras also had sufficient room to perform his morning callisthenics, if little else. However, it was still a prison. He was forbidden books, and he was forbidden to speak to anybody unless addressed. He yearned for news of the outside world; in particular, news of his grandson, Grimm, and his wife, Drima,

but none came.

At first, he had comforted himself with visions of Grimm, now a full Seventh Rank Questor, a true Weapon of the Guild, bestriding the world like a Titan. After a while, this had begun to pall, and he started to worry about his wife. She was a strong woman, Lower Frunstock was no bed of thieves, and she had Smith Harvel, a man he had known and trusted for many years, to protect her. Nonetheless, he knew Drima would be worried by his extended absence, and he knew their tough decades together had been hard on her.

When ... if I am reconfirmed as a Questor, I will resign the position, he

swore to himself. I owe the Guild nothing. I will undergo this trial for Grimm and Drima, and to restore the family name. As best he could, he washed himself with the contents of a pitcher of water, a bar of grey, gritty soap and a small, metal bowl. He then sat back on his bed and worked on his power, gathering it into a tight knot and then releasing it. He called Blade to his side and then instantly dismissed it, repeating this exercise over and over again. The cell's iron wall ensured that no magic escaped the small chamber. He had little sense of time, since no external light entered the cell at any time; the only illumination came from a single globe of Mage Light.

Loras started at a sharp rap on the door.

"Enter," he said, rising to his feet as a key jangled in the lock. Loras felt surprised to see the tall, gaunt figure of Questor Olaf in the doorway, since he had not seen the acting Prelate since his imprisonment. Olaf bore a brown-paper parcel and a tray of food. "The date of your trial has been announced, Loras,"

he said, his voice gruff and cold. "It will be a week from today, and we must leave tomorrow. I have procured you a fresh set of scarlet silk robes, your favourite colour, as I remember. I can do no more for you."

The acting Prelate thrust the parcel

towards Loras, who had no need of a Mentalist's skills to divine that Olaf felt more than a jailer's duty towards a condemned man. He had to restrain himself from hugging the frowning Questor as he took the package.

"Thank you, Brother Mage," he said, fighting conflicting tugs of emotion. "You have treated me better than I could have hoped. I trust I will prove I am innocent of any treason and vindicate your trust in me."

"The Conclave will decide on your guilt or innocence, Loras. I must not make any comment or pre-judgement."

Olaf delivered his words with full,

impenetrable gravitas, and Loras nodded. "I understand, Questor Olaf," he said, nodding. "I thank you, nonetheless."

The acting Prelate grunted and placed the tray of food on the bed beside the prisoner.

"Eat well, Brother Bile," he said, his expression twisting into what might just have been a half-smile. "Eat while the meal is still hot. You must be at your most eloquent during the trial. I will be there, and I wish to hear no accusations of brutality or mistreatment of my prisoners."

"You will hear none from me, Questor

Olaf,” Loras declared, delivering a full smile. “Thank you very much, old friend.”

Olaf grunted, and he dipped his shoulders just a little as he backed out of the room, locking the door behind him.

Loras fell on his breakfast like a starving man, devouring the eggs, the meat and the bread with a new-found enthusiasm, knowing that all his problems would soon be solved, one way or another. Grimm, Drima, Crohn, Kargan, he thought as he consumed the meal. I dedicate this meal, and any others I will eat until my death, to you.

I will win this fight, he vowed. I will

regain my Guild Ring and my rank, and I will acknowledge you, Grimm, my beloved grandson, as a Brother Mage, within these very halls. Drawing Blade to him, he regarded the staff with fondness.

"Now we are together again, Blade," he whispered, "nobody can beat us. All I want to do is to greet Grimm and Drima, with you at my side, as a full Guild Mage; and I shall." He fell back on the bed and drifted into a blissful reverie; his fate was in the hands of others, and anxiety would serve no purpose.

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## **Chapter 23: Hoping**



Despite shaving every day for forty years, Loras had allowed his beard to grow for the last few days; a beard was almost as much a sign of a Guild Mage as the staff and the ring. He had exchanged his moth-eaten, faded robes for the fine, red vestments Olaf had given him, and he had burnished and polished Blade until it gleamed.

He scratched at a shallow, itching indentation around his ring finger and gave a rueful smile. It will all be over soon, he thought, slumping onto his thin mattress. Either I will come back exonerated, with a Guild Ring on my finger, or I will be carried back to Lower Frunstock in a wooden box.

Either way, I will be free at last.

His mind turned again to his Drima, who must be worrying herself sick back at the forge. It is far harder on Drima than on me, he chided himself. If only I could write her a letter, telling her how much I love her ... I must win through, for her sake as much as for mine. Mentalist Kargan will surely provide strong evidence, as long as the Conclave believes his spell is true, and not some kind of illusion. Mentalist Crohn and Questor Dalquist will be convincing witnesses ... unless the Conclave thinks I perverted their memories with some twisted Questor magic.

Thorn can be very a very convincing

man when he puts his mind to it.

His mind twisted and spun in bewildering circles, his thoughts leading nowhere. Loras just wished for an end to this uncertainty and waiting. After several hours of nervous, unproductive inner torture, he felt a blessed, cool rush of relief on hearing a firm rap at the door and the crisp sound of the key being turned in the lock.

Olaf stood in the open doorway, and he uttered the words Loras had longed to hear: "It is time to leave, Brother Bile. Prelate Thorn, Questor Dalquist and Magemaster Crohn have already departed, accompanied by Questor

Xylox."

Loras nodded, and rose to his feet, feeling a moment of dismay at the sight of heavy iron shackles in Olaf's hands.

"A necessary precaution, I am afraid," the acting Prelate said, in an apologetic tone. "The other defendants, including Lord Thorn, are similarly restrained, I assure you. The manacles will be removed when we reach the Hearing Hall at High Lodge, for there will be a Cordon of Suppression erected around it. No magic will be possible inside it."

Loras whistled; the spell, he knew, was a potent and costly one, requiring the cooperation of many mages. A moment

of panic seized him: Kargan's spell might be his only chance of proving his case.

"No magic, you say?" he said, feeling a cold river run down his spine. "Part of my defence requires a demonstration of magic."

Olaf shrugged. "It is a Specialist spell," he said, rolling his eyes. "What know Questors of such thaumaturgy? I will be sure to bring your concerns to the Dominie's attention before the trial commences.

"Your hands, please, Master Loras?"

Loras sighed and extended his hands,

taking a tight grip on Blade; once the metal cuffs were upon him, the staff might no longer obey his mental commands.

As a Student, he had learned from a copy of a pre-Fall book that iron was the most 'stable', most 'tightly bound' of metals; that it was in the 'lowest energy state'. Although the ancient phrases meant little to him then, and he found them no more comprehensible now, he understood that this ancient knowledge was tied up with why iron disrupted magical fields. Loras had worked so long with the metal as a smith that he appreciated its special, almost magical qualities. The nearest thing to magic he had achieved during

his long exile had been the transformation of dull pig-iron into gleaming, resilient steel. He felt as much pride in this art as any Seventh Rank Mage Alchemist might find in the transformation of lead into gold. With a loud click, the latch slipped home, first on one wrist and then the other, a solid bar holding his hands apart. In a few moments, Olaf fastened a second pair of shackles, linked to the centre of the bar by a strong chain, to his ankles.

"Are you ready, Master Loras?" asked Olaf.

Loras cast his eyes around the small, bare cell and then nodded.

"I am ready, Questor Olaf."

"Follow me," the older mage said. "You must not attempt to communicate with the other defendant during the journey. Any attempted exchange of information may prejudice your case. At the first sign of collusion, I will not hesitate to gag both of you, and I will watch you closely. Is that understood?" Loras nodded as he followed Olaf from the cell. He doubted he would have much to say to his fellow prisoners in any case; his heart felt too full.

On leaving his grim prison cell, he felt almost the same wonder he had on first seeing the Great Hall as a seven-year-old boy. The celestial dome, with its



myriad twinkling lights, the opulent blue-and-gold honeycomb of the floor and the soft, ethereal music served to remind him of what Thorn's treachery had cost him, and he felt a brief stab of self-pity. With the ruthless self-control of a Mage Questor, he crushed the nascent emotion into nothingness as he followed Olaf to the open portal. I would never have met Drima if I had remained a Questor, he told himself, squinting, as the setting sun shot bright rays into his eyes, and I would never have had the joy of seeing Grimm as a Mage Questor. As he clanked his way towards a small, covered wagon, he knew Grimm would have wanted to be present, had the boy known of the trial.

Nonetheless, he felt pride in the knowledge that his grandson was abroad in the world on some important Quest.

Encumbered as he was by his clumsy shackles and his lifeless staff, it took Loras several attempts to climb into the wagon. He sat on a rough, wooden bench to the right of the vehicle, and he smiled warmly at Mentalist Kargan, who sat opposite him. As Olaf bent to lock the chain to the vehicle's floor, Kargan returned a rueful grimace, proffering a friendly wink before the older Questor straightened up and took his own place beside Loras.

"Move on, driver," Olaf shouted. "You know your orders. Make all speed, and

do not stop unless I order it."

"I know the rules, Lord Mage," a peevish voice replied from beyond the canvas screen as the wagon jerked forward, with such violence that Loras almost tumbled to the wagon floor. "You don' 'ave to bang it home all the blessed time."

"Mind your manners, driver," Olaf snapped. "Remember to whom you are talking."

"Sorry, Sir," the unseen man replied, with just a little too much emphasis on the inappropriate honorific.

"Ang on, can't you?"

Loras heard a whip crack, and he just managed to stop himself from cannoning back into Olaf as the vehicle surged forward.

\* \* \* \*

Quelgrum wiped the sweat from his brow, feeling it running down his back and sides as he heaved and strained at the long, wooden lever. He had not engaged in such sustained physical effort since his long-ago time as a serf in Garley Province, and only then under a whip-wielding overseer's constant encouragement. He envied Shakkar and Tordun: although weakened, they seemed to cope far better than he as they worked. Quelgrum was determined that

his team would be the first to move one of the bigger stone blocks away from the rubble.

Grunting, he hoisted himself off the ground, exerting all his weight on the end of the lever, aided by ten uncomplaining, silent nuns. He tried not to envy Sergeant Erik, who walked around the ruins, directing the operation.

"Easy there!" Erik called to one of the ten teams. "The fulcrum's crumbling—back off carefully and choose another one."

Quelgrum saw that his team's lever, a former roof-beam, was distinctly bowed, but it seemed in no danger of

immediate breakage. Then, his feet touched the ground, and he saw the target block begin to wobble.

"Come on, ladies!" he yelled. "Move back towards me ... nearer ... that's it! Now, heave! It's going...!" The stone gave a sudden lurch and tumbled away from the pile of rubble, rolling end over end and settling onto the grass in a cloud of dust. The General tumbled backwards at the sudden release of resistance, wincing as the nun in front of him fell backwards into his groin.

I know I always tell the drill-sergeants to put the Privates through the wringer, he thought, as the sharp, sickening pain shot through his lower body and stabbed

into his entrails. Lizaveta obviously gave these ladies similar instructions.

"Well done!" Erik cried, running towards the sprawling group. "That's the spirit!" Some of the nuns on Quelgrum's team raised hoarse cheers as they rose to their feet, but the old soldier could only grunt as he tottered upright. The pain in his vitals had subsided to a more tolerable, dull, throbbing ache, but he felt the weight of every one of his sixty-odd years bearing down on him.

"Where next, Sergeant?" he croaked, as Erik surveyed his group's assigned area, near what had been the main entrance to the now-shattered Priory.

"That one, perhaps?" He pointed towards another block of similar size. The Sergeant shook his head. "I don't think so, Sir," he said. "It looks a little precarious. If we disturb it too much, it could just fall down to a lower level, taking a lot of other stuff with it. I'd advise clearing away some of the smaller rubble, so we can see what's going on."

The ground rumbled, and Shakkar's team cheered as another block fell away from the main mass of the ruins.

"There's a body!" one of the nuns shouted, and Quelgrum's heart leapt. "She's still alive!" The old soldier felt a moment of disappointment at the



feminine pronoun, but he suppressed it: at least the clearing operation was of some use. Several nuns rushed to the site and helped to extricate the casualty. Another, louder, cheer arose from Tordun's team as another block rolled away from the ruins.

"Excuse me, Sir," Erik said. "I'm needed. I advise you to continue clearing this area, carefully. Make sure your footing's firm before you start carrying away the material." He dashed away, and Quelgrum saw the nuns on his team looking at him with wide, expectant eyes. Again, he wondered why everybody always looked to him for guidance and leadership. Even as a

junior member of his renegade group of serfs, people had expected him to provide the answers. Why?

Because I always do, he answered himself with a rueful, twisted smile. Not everyone can make rapid decisions in a crisis.

He forced himself to stand up straight, and he invoked his habitual parade-ground voice. "You four ladies:" he barked, jabbing his right forefinger towards a quartet of women, "start clearing away the rocks around the opening on this side. You four can go around to the other side and do the same. Be careful not to let anything big fall into the hole, and lie flat on the rubble so you

don't exert too much pressure." He turned to the two remaining nuns, both stout ladies of middle age. "I'd like you ladies to lean over the hole and listen for any sounds of life as we remove the rubble."

The women went to their work in an enthusiastic manner; none raised the least protest at the soldier's assumption of authority. Quelgrum went in search of Necromancer Numal, who was aiding the other teams by indicating the probable positions of bodies with sticks inserted in the rubble. His face was a dull, grey mask of strain as he ran through a series of identical chants, hardly stopping to draw breath. When

the mage stopped to mop his brow, the soldier asked him, "How goes it, Necromancer Numal?"

"It's hard work, General," Numal said, "even though I'm not doing any heavy lifting. It's a demanding enough spell if you're trying to find even a single body. There must be dozens down there. I have no idea how many of them are still alive."

"Have you located Baron Grimm's body yet?"

Numal shook his head and brushed his hair from his eyes. "All the bodies I've located so far were women."

"Does that mean he might still be alive?" the General asked.

Numal shrugged. "Necromancers don't deal with the living," he said. "It could mean he's alive, but it could also mean that he's just buried too deep; stone attenuates the death-sign far more than soil does. I won't give up, though. I've located nine bodies so far."

"Good man, Lord Mage," Quelgrum said, clapping Numal on the shoulder in encouragement. He looked towards the western sky, where the baleful, ruddy sun hung a scant finger-width above the horizon.

"We'll need fires," he muttered, more to

himself than to Numal. "It'll be dark soon."

"I can do better than that, General," the Necromancer declared. "Mage Light's a cheap spell; I should be able to spare enough energy to cast light over the whole area, and a steady, white light would be far better than a flickering fire. I should be able to keep it going all night, if need be." Quelgrum felt a surge of pride.

I didn't think much of Numal at first, he thought. I thought he was a slack, useless coward then, but he's certainly pulling his weight now.

"We couldn't even think of doing this

without you, Lord Mage,” he said, smiling in appreciation.

“Seneschal Shakkar's and Tordun's strength are essential to the work, but, without knowing where to dig, we'd all just be floundering in the dark.”

Numal's face brightened, and Quelgrum realised the Necromancer must have little experience of encouragement and praise.

"You're doing a fine job, Necromancer," he declared, patting the mage's shoulder once more. "With your help, we'll get through this.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I must get

back to my team."

The painstaking, arduous work continued apace, and Quelgrum now felt strong enough to aid the nuns in their task. By now, a deep, black void had been revealed, over which hung many, many tons of stone. What's holding all this lot up? he wondered, gazing down into the pitch-black depths. A wooden beam couldn't support all this stone.

Leaning forward as far as he dared, he saw a faint gleam within the gloom. His arm reached towards it. He cried out, his head exploding with blazing light, and fell backwards, tumbling down the rubble-pile and banging his head on a rock. As his head whirled, and he tried



to bring his twitching eyes into focus, he saw three nuns racing towards him, their faces pale with concern.

"Are you all right, General?" the nearest nun cried, whose name he could not remember. "What's the matter? Do you need help?"

Quelgrum smiled, not bothering to try to stand. He had never before felt the avid bite of a Mage Staff, but he had seen its effect on others unlucky enough to get in the way of one. He had answered his own question: "What sort of wooden beam could hold up a hundred tons of rock?" An unbreakable Mage Staff was the only answer, and he knew such a

weapon died with its owner, reverting to a simple lump of wood.

"All I can get," he said. "Baron Grimm's down there, and he's alive! I don't know how we're going to get him out, but I want every available person here to aid in the effort." With some difficulty, the old soldier climbed to his feet, his legs feeling like useless, dead tree-trunks that might splinter at any moment.

"Sergeant Erik!" he yelled. "Seneschal Shakkar! Warrior Tordun! Please come here at once—the Baron's alive!"

"What about my Sisters?" a well-built, ferocious-looking nun demanded, her green eyes burning like were-gas over a

swamp.

"They can bloody well wait!" Quelgrum snapped, fighting exhaustion and disorientation. "We get Questor Grimm out first, or the deal's off! Is that abundantly clear?"

He did not even know if the woman replied, as he saw the Sergeant, the demon, the albino and Necromancer Numal racing towards him.

We'll get you out, boy, he thought. Don't worry; help's on its way.

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**Chapter      24:      Preparations      for**

## Extraction

General Quelgrum regarded Sergeant Erik with apprehensive eyes, as the younger man stood gazing into the dark chasm.

"Well, Sergeant?" he said. "You're the combat engineer. Can we get him out?" Erik straightened up and shook his head. "It'd be a tall order, even with a full squad of trained engineers and all the right tools, Sir," he said. "Even if we could construct a crane out of this old lumber, there's no safe footing.

"There's a large stone block resting on Baron Grimm's staff, Sir. All that's stopping it toppling over is the packed

rubble around it. If we open up the hole, the whole lot could collapse. The only solution I can think of at the moment is a large treadmill crane to lift it vertically, but there's nowhere to stand one. If we mount it a long way from the hole, a wooden lifting arm will never take the strain."

"If we level an area near the hole, can we make a crane?" Quelgrum hazarded. Erik shook his head. "I'm afraid not, Sir. We'd need tools, metal bolts and braces, strong ropes or chains, and some way of shackling them to the stone. A crane's out of the question, Sir." Quelgrum rubbed his forehead. "Can we brace the block in some way, so it won't fall if we clear

away the rubble?"

"I don't think so, Sir. These beams are pretty sturdy, but they were only meant to hold up the roof, braced by cross-trees. They were acting in compression or tension and at their strongest. If we try to brace the rock with them, they'll break for sure. If we try to slide one of them under the block, it'll break. In any case, we'd never reach far enough under the block to make sure it was firmly seated in the rubble. One false move, and this whole mass would collapse."

"So that's it, then?" Quelgrum said in a tart, sarcastic voice, his mouth twisting. "We just say goodbye to Baron Grimm and walk away: is that what you want,

Sergeant?"

"No, Sir," Erik replied, his face calm. "I don't want to give up on Baron Grimm any more than you do. Nonetheless, with the materials we have on hand, we can't save him. Two of these beams broke when we were just trying to use them as class-one levers, with the load near the fulcrum. None of them would take this block's weight bearing down on its centre."

Quelgrum compressed his lips and spun on his heel, his eyes closed. He did not like Erik's analysis, but he knew he was in no position to refute it.

"May I speak?"

Quelgrum opened his eyes to see the slight, bowed form of Necromancer Numal, and he nodded, too full for words.

"My staff is as unbreakable as Questor Grimm's. It can take the weight." Quelgrum turned his head to the right. "Well, Sergeant? Does this change the situation? We can roll the block back onto Necromancer Numal's staff, so it can be stable while we clear the rubble away." Erik rolled his eyes upwards as if scanning the heavens, his head cocked to one side. His lips moved without sound. After a few moments, he faced the officer again.

"It's worth a try, General," he said, "but



I can't see how we'd secure the staff in position without widening the hole further. That could tip the block over. If we try to slide the staff under the block, it'll probably be at an angle, and that could cause all sorts of trouble."

Silence descended for a few moments.

"Help! Somebody, please help!"

The faint, thready sound was at the very limit of Quelgrum's hearing, and, for a moment, he thought he had imagined it. He looked into Erik's face, to see a pair of wide, wondering eyes.

"Yes, Sir," the Sergeant whispered, in answer to the General's unasked

question. "I heard it, too." Quelgrum inched his way back up to the hole, his heart pounding in his chest.

"Necromancer Numal, can you cast another one of your globes of light here, so I can see into this Names-cursed hole?"

"Of course, General," Numal said. He uttered a swift, staccato stream of mage-words and soft, white globe of luminescence formed in the palm of his outstretched left hand, rose into the air and meandered in a lazy fashion over towards the small opening.

"Thank you, Lord Mage," Quelgrum said, gazing into the hole.

"Ah! Now I see," he muttered, as the small globe cast its cold, brilliant effulgence into the chasm. Redeemer was wedged across the gap, with the enormous stone block perched atop it. The cube must be at least six feet on a side, and it rested at an angle of perhaps forty-five degrees to the vertical, a bare hand's-width of stone overhanging Redeemer on its nearest side.

At least it isn't lying on edge, he thought, raising his head a little to ease the crick in his neck. That could have caused all sorts of problems. All we have to do now is thread a six-foot staff through an eighteen-inch hole so that it finds a firm footing at each end.... Still, perhaps

Questor Grimm can help, if that was his voice I heard.

Bending his head to the opening again, he called into the chamber, "Baron Grimm? Are you awake?"

"Questor Grimm is unconscious," a faint, high-pitched voice replied. "I, Thribble, raised the alarm, General. What kept you? Are you deaf?"

The General felt a fierce blaze of frustration: not only was Baron Grimm unconscious, perhaps badly injured, but the only hope of wedging Numal's staff in position rested on the narrow shoulders of a six-inch-tall creature from the underworld, whose main talents lay

in elaborate story-telling and mimicry.

"Your voice doesn't carry well, friend Thribble," he called, fighting to keep the bitter disappointment from his voice. "I came as soon as I heard you. It is good to know that you and Baron Grimm are still alive."

"How will you extricate us out from this dismal hole?" the tiny demon demanded, his piccolo-like voice tinged with unmistakeable peevishness.

"I don't know," the soldier admitted. "All we can think of is to wedge Necromancer Numal's staff under the block over your heads, and then remove the rubble slowly, letting the block settle

into a secure position. With luck, we can then hoist both of you out of there." He heard a faint snort, like a small child's sneeze.

"So why do you not do so, General? Questor Grimm requires medical assistance."

"We need to ease the staff into position from your side. Could you bear its weight?"

"I could probably manoeuvre it into position if you lowered it on a rope, General," Thribble declared.

"The hole's too small; we can only lower it vertically, friend demon. You'd

have to rotate it into position. I doubt you have the strength to do that, even if you found a convenient perch."

"A moment, please, Sir," Erik said, kneeling on Quelgrum's left side. "I have an idea." The General raised his eyebrows. "I'm open to any suggestions, Sergeant."

"If you don't mind, Sir, I'd like to ask little Thribble a few questions first," Erik replied. "There's no sense in getting our hopes up if my idea's no good."

Quelgrum nodded. "Go ahead, Sergeant."

Erik crouched over the hole and said,

“Master Thribble, we need to wedge Necromancer Numal's staff parallel to Baron Grimm's, perhaps two feet apart from it. Are there any ledges or stone blocks we can rest it on?”

"A moment, please, friend Erik."

Quelgrum heard faint scrabbling sounds to his left, a few moments of silence and then another brief interval of scratching to his right.

"I think so, Sergeant," the demon chirped, panting a little. "The floor of the hall subsided, but the lower supporting walls are still intact. They are supporting Questor Grimm's staff. I am sitting on one of them at the moment,



and it looks very sturdy. The walls are somewhat less than a man's height apart."

"Very good. Is there enough room to rotate the staff through a right angle from the vertical, if it's completely inside your chamber?"

"I think so, Sergeant."

"That's excellent, Thribble," Erik said, his voice intense and serious. "Now, my last question: if the staff hung horizontally, with all its weight supported on ropes, are you strong enough to guide it into position?"

"I could try," the demon twittered.

“Would it hurt me? I know what a Mage Staff can do to the unwary.” Erik turned towards Numal, who stood a little further down the rock-pile, his face pale and drawn. The Necromancer shook his head. “I heard, Sergeant. My staff will not hurt Thribble.”

"You won't be harmed, friend demon," Erik assured Thribble, a broad smile spreading across his face.

“Wait a few moments, and we'll see what we can do about getting you out of there.” Crawling back from the hole, he stood up and massaged his lower back.

Quelgrum followed the Sergeant's example; his spine seemed as if it were

on fire. "What are you planning, Sergeant?"

"Of course, Sir; it's really very simple. We use two ropes, tied around the staff about eighteen inches apart. We leave one rope slack, lower the staff and then use the other rope to pull it horizontal. With that arrangement, we can tilt it, turn it, or move it in any other direction, as guided by Thribble. We take the weight, and he can just finesse it into position."

Quelgrum nodded as the simplicity of the plan flooded into his forebrain. "That's so simple that it's almost brilliant, Sergeant," he said, mirroring Erik's smile for a few moments before his expression darkened. "I see only one

little flaw; we don't seem to have any ropes."

"We're only talking about supporting a few pounds' weight, Sir. Belts, pieces of string and strips of strong cloth should do; perhaps about ten feet for each rope."

Erik still wore his army uniform, equipped with a multiplicity of leather straps and burlap webbing, and he began to divest himself of these, his practiced hands joining them together with sturdy, locking knots.

"I reckon this will do for one rope, Sir," he said, grunting as he tugged on his improvised rope. "I just hope my

trousers don't fall down in front of all these ladies."

Quelgrum wore a leather belt and a single cross-strap angled across his chest, and he added them to the cause; the resulting rope was, however, some way short of the needed length. He considered asking the nuns to tear strips from their ample robes, but he thought better of it. He did not want to foster accusations of lewdness or prurience; he needed all the help he could get from these ladies. Shakkar wore no clothes, but after Numal provided the rope cincture from around his waist, and Tordun had contributed his ample belt, Erik pronounced himself satisfied. He

tested the knots and nodded.

"Your staff, please, Necromancer Numal?"

Numal handed the six-foot weapon to Erik.

"Don't worry if the knots come loose, Sergeant; I can always retrieve Justice with a word, if she falls. I've told her not to hurt you, demon Thribble or Questor Grimm."

"Thank you, Lord Mage," Erik replied.

His nimble hands made swift work of fastening the makeshift ropes around the staff. "I'm ready, General."

"Very good, Sergeant. Carry on."

Erik leant over the hole and began to lower Justice into the chamber. Quelgrum tried not to breathe.

"That is far enough, Sergeant," Thribble called from below. "You have just enough room to level the staff."

"So far, so good," Erik muttered, and he began slowly to manipulate the ropes, like a puppet-master playing a marionette's strings.

"Stop!" the demon squeaked. "Hold it steady, please."

The General heard a series of breathy,

high-pitched grunts as Thribble worked, unseen, below him.

"One side is in place," the imp declared, and Quelgrum fancied he heard a distinct tone of satisfaction in Thribble's voice. "Hold it there, please."

The General heard a rat-like, scrabbling, scurrying sound, followed by further grunts.

"You may release the ropes, Sergeant," the demon twittered after several minutes. "The staff is secure." Erik released his hold, and the improvised ropes shimmied into the hole, like a pair of rapacious snakes seeking prey.



"We must clear away the rubble on the far side of the hole, General," he said, locking Quelgrum's eyes with his own. "Once the block's revealed, we'll probably need to use the levers to ease the stuff away from it, starting next to the block and moving outwards. We can't rush this, Sir; we have to move it in small increments so it doesn't get away from us. If the block tumbles, we'll be in a world of hurt." Quelgrum clapped his hands to draw the attention of his crew of nuns, and he relayed Erik's earnest instructions to them. As they began to clear the rubble away with careful movements, he heard a harsh, peremptory cough behind him. Turning his head to his left, he saw Lady

Drexelica standing at the foot of the rock pile, her arms akimbo in an aggressive, unladylike stance. He noted the pursed mouth, as if she had drunk vinegar when expecting fine wine.

"How long will this ridiculous charade continue?" she demanded, her tone icy and brittle. "While you carry on with this futile exercise, there are innocent women dying down there; women who could be saved in a tenth of the time it would take you to rescue a foul rapist who may already be beyond help!"

"We haven't forgotten your sisters," Quelgrum replied, his voice as stern and uncompromising as Drex's.

“However, my first loyalty is to Baron Grimm. Further excavation may put him at risk, and I have no intention of allowing that.”

Drex snorted. “I thought you would say that,” she said, talking to herself as much as to the General. “I should have known better than to trust a group of males.”

She half-turned away from him, as if resigned to his decision, and began to walk away. After a few steps, she stiffened, spun around and surged towards the rock-pile. With a sick, cold shock, Quelgrum realised she was about to throw herself at the stone block, in an attempt to send the whole heap down on Baron Grimm. He tried to move to

interpose himself between her and the hole, but his feet skidded on the loose rubble, sending him sprawling on his face.

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## **Chapter 25: An Angry Mob**

Drex dashed up the slope like a soul possessed. From the corner of her eye, she saw figures running toward her, but they were too slow or too far away to catch her.

Justice will be done, she told herself. I will be free from the foul rapist at last. She laughed, preparing to launch herself against the stone block to send it

tumbling down onto Grimm, but the harsh laugh was crushed from her by a pair of strong arms, and she realised her feet were now pounding against nothing more substantial than thin air.

"No!" she screamed, putting all her strength into the cry, but all that emerged from her lips was a breathless gasp as she floated over the stone block, her flailing feet missing it by scant inches. Higher and higher she flew, rising up to dizzying heights. The milling people below now looked like insignificant mites. Her vision blurring, her lungs burning, she felt a cold shock of terror, expecting her abductor to drop her onto the stones below at any moment. Her

fear, however, soon gave way to a warm flood of inner peace and acceptance.

The Names will greet me with open arms, she thought, closing her eyes in a moment of spiritual rapture. I offer my soul to their beneficence and grace...

She felt almost disappointed when her feet again touched solid matter, and the cruel, crushing arms loosened their hold on her. Drawing a rasping, whooping breath, she opened her eyes, and she staggered from a sudden, dizzying fit of vertigo. She would have fallen, were it not for a scaly arm that restrained her.

"Peace, young mistress," a familiar, bass voice rumbled, as she stared down at the

sheer drop mere inches from the tips of her toes. "I have brought you up here to cool down a little. Do not worry; I will not let you fall."

As rationality returned to her, Drex found herself perched on the parapet of the Priory's only remaining turret.

"Why did you stop me, Seneschal Shakkar?" she demanded, spinning around in the demon's arms, her ire heated by the knowledge of her failure. "You know what that foul rapist has done to me and my beloved Order. He deserves to die."

"Have you no pithy, cutting epithet for me, Lady Drexelica?" demanded the

demon, looking down at her with those intense, scarlet eyes. "Scaly monster', perhaps? Or would 'fanged despoiler' be better?" Drex felt conflicting emotions snarling and fighting within her: rage at being denied; relief that she was not dead; misery at the loss of her brief, transcendental moment of grace. Most of all, she felt perplexity. Shakkar was friend to the man who had torn her innocence from her, but the demon had never behaved towards her in anything less than a gentle and protective manner. Alone among Grimm's companions, Shakkar evoked no angry reaction in her, and sheer confusion stayed her tongue.

"Maybe 'winged pervert' would suit me



better?" the demon Seneschal suggested, and Drex found her voice.

"Of course not, Seneschal Shakkar," she heard herself saying in a whining, little girl's voice, much to her disgust. "You are ... you are you, and you have always been kind to me."

"Do you prefer 'old lecher'?" Shakkar asked.

"That is General..." Drex began, trailing off as her head began to pound. She struggled to make sense of her whirling thoughts, but the loud, increasing noise in her brain made rational thought all but impossible.

"The 'foul rapist' is Baron Grimm, I understand," the demon continued, in a friendly, conversational tone.

"I imagine you reserve 'oversized ogler' for warrior Tordun. Am I right?" Drex said nothing; Grimm had roused the same confusion in her, just before his destruction of the Priory. The clamour in her head was now worse than the tumult in her home town of Griven on market-day, and her head throbbed with an abominable, stabbing ache.

"Necromancer Numal!" Shakkar snapped, showing his fearsome array of steak-knife teeth. "Who is he?

Speak, Lady Drexelica!"

"Numal is not worthy of your respect," she muttered. "He's nothing more than a fumbling—"

"Pederast?" Shakkar demanded, making the masonry beneath them shake with the power of his deep voice. "Is that not what you were going to say?"

"My eyesight is quite poor, but my hearing is excellent. I heard you muttering these imprecations like religious mantras, while the other nuns were working. They did not vary in cadence, tone or vehemence from one repetition to the next.

"You have been robbed of the gifts of thought and free speech, Lady Drexelica;

your mind is nothing more than a puppet. You do not insult me because you have not received a convenient label with which to belabour me."

"The Order is all," Drex muttered, trying to blot out the demon's words with the force of her faith. She tried to listen for the calming, soothing voice of Prioress Lizaveta within her, but the Reverend Mother's ever-present advice was drowned in the cascade of tumbling, colliding emotions.

"The Order is my only friend!"

Drex tried to find comfort in the familiar words, but they seemed cloy like cold, sulphurous ashes on her tongue.

"Warrior Tordun may be a man of great strength and violence when confronted by enemies," Shakkar rumbled, "but I have never seen him regard you with anything but ... I have never seen him look at you at all; your youth and beauty embarrass him, yet he would fight to the death to defend you. He is weakened by disease and half-blind, yet he has fought to the limits of his strength to help save your sisters. You prefer to dismiss this noble human with a trite rote phrase.

"On more than one occasion, I saw the way you looked at Baron Grimm, and he at you, when you were with him in Crar. You did not then regard him as a rapist; nor did he regard you as a chattel.

Somewhere deep within you, Lady Drexelica, you know this; yet you belittle him as a 'foul rapist'."

"Shut up!" Drex screamed, feeling as if her muscles were turning to water. Feeling the barb-like thoughts of Prioress Lizaveta begin to push through the tumultuous din of her roiling emotions, she screamed,

"Both of you! Shut up and let me think!"

Shakkar ignored her outcry. "I will stay with you, young mistress. You cannot run from me. You cannot trick me or deter me, but I will not kill you. Shall I take you back down there, to allow you to murder Baron Grimm? I will not do that,

either.

"You and I will stay here, Lady Drexelica, until you divest yourself of these asinine, thoughtless labels and try to think for yourself."

"Let me go!" Drexelica's eyes prickled from the sting of nascent, hot tears. "Let me go, you ... you big beast!"

"Was that an insult of your very own, Lady Drexelica? If so, I am honoured to wear the appellation. However, I am happy to stay here with you; protecting you, as I always have and always will. Rail as you will, but I will not let you go. I will, however, remain silent, so you can listen to your own thoughts."

With that, Shakkar fell silent. Drexelica groaned, helpless in the demon's arms. The sudden silence seemed a worse torture than any she had ever faced, as Shakkar's last words reverberated and rebounded in her head, but she tried to cut through the morass of conflicting influences. Somewhere, somehow, she must be able to regain the spiritual peace and comfort she had lost.

\* \* \* \*

As several nuns stared into the dark night sky, stunned by Drex's impulsive attempt at sabotage and by Shakkar's swift response, Quelgrum crawled towards the hole, shaking with relief. He fought with every fibre of his being to



control his trembling limbs, and, for the most part, he succeeded. I can't let the others see how shaken I was, how slow I'm becoming, he told himself. I must at least look as if I'm in control.

Steadying his breathing, he clapped his hands to attract the nuns' attention. "Ladies," he said, "we still have a job to do, in case you'd forgotten."

The women turned as one to face him, their faces aghast. "The monster has abducted Sister Weranda,"

one cried, pointing upwards, into the darkness. "We must save her!" A faint susurrations arose from the crowd, growing louder by the moment, and

Quelgrum feared he might be losing them.

"Sister Weranda was not always a member of your Order," he shouted, fighting to keep his voice level.

"Once, she lived in the Barony of Crar. Seneschal Shakkar, amongst his other duties, acted as her personal bodyguard and protector. He would no more hurt her than you would eat dung. She was trying to kill Baron Grimm, and Shakkar acted to remove the threat. He could have destroyed her in a heartbeat if that had been his wish, but he did not do so."

"What if Sister Weranda had killed your precious Baron?" Quelgrum recognised

the voice as that of Sister Judan. "There may be many other Sisters down there, who deserve help more than our Prioress'

murderer. He despoiled our home and besmirched our faith. He violated Weranda, back in the world, and he kept her prisoner!"

The murmurs grew uglier, and Quelgrum heard a few assenting shouts:

"Why save such an evil man?"

"He's just a Names-cursed destroyer!"

"Down with him!"

Quelgrum made to slip his pistol from its holster before remembering that he had no ammunition. The situation was becoming untenable, as the white-clad women began to close in from all sides. He shot a nervous glance at Sergeant Erik, but the younger man, his face ashen-pale in the cold glare of Numal's mage-light, shook his head; it was plain he had no idea of how to quell this growing rebellion. Some of the nuns had picked up the beams they had used as levers in the rescue effort, but it was plain they now had a darker purpose in mind as they moved towards the General and his companions. Tordun twisted and turned, his damaged eyes flicking back and forth as if trying to locate an unseen

tiger in a dense jungle. Numal's hands were raised in a threatening, spell-casting pose, but Quelgrum knew the Necromancer had little magic that could stem the advancing horde.

"STOP!"

At the high-pitched, tremulous cry, the General spun to see a diminutive figure standing a few paces behind him, her hands raised in supplication.

"Stop, I say!"

Sister Mercia's voice might not carry the weight of Shakkar's booming bass or Quelgrum's parade-ground bellow, but it stopped the women in their tracks,

except for the dumpy, grey-haired Sister Judan.

"Who are you, Sister, to countermand a member of the Score?" she demanded, her eyes blazing. "Have you thrown your lot in with this monstrous group of male destroyers?"

"How dare you!" Mercia's tone cracked like a whip. "While you and the other members of the score sat in judgement over the rest of the Order, eating veal and quails' eggs, I toiled for the good of us all, receiving no thanks and expecting none. I have only ever worked to help my Sisters." Speaking louder, she demanded, "How many here have been tended by me? Show yourselves!" A

forest of hands arose from the milling throng of women.

"I have treated pneumonia, bloody flux, marsh fever and a hundred other ailments during my time here. At times, I was sick to my stomach from the diseases I treated. Often, I caught the same diseases myself, but I never quailed, and I never complained about my allotted tasks.

"When was the last time you treated a case of bowel-wrack, Sister Judan?" Quelgrum heard a few amused chuckles, and he realised he had been holding his breath. He drew fresh air into his lungs in a convulsive gasp, but he felt

transfixed; in a heartbeat, this tiny woman might be dashed away like a sapling in a flash-flood, but she stood firm and seemingly unafraid.

"Pretty rhetoric, Sister." Judan's voice was a low hiss. "Each must play her part in our Order. Even we of the Score have \_\_\_\_"

"When was the last time you were whipped because your curtsey was not deep enough, or because your gown was untidy? Three months ago, you condemned me to kneel on sharp stones and hold a heavy stone over my head for two hours; just because you considered my morning devotional chant insufficiently sincere."



Judan's mouth opened to speak again, but Mercia continued: "I had been awake for three days, dealing with a virulent outbreak of measles. I told you so, but you added three hours of third-level Contrition to my punishment, for insolence."

Turning to the crowd, she demanded, "How many of you suffered similar injustices?" A loud chorus of affirmation greeted this last question, and Quelgrum guessed that peremptory punishment had been a prominent feature of Priory life. His heart went out to Mercia; this tiny, courageous slip of a girl was winning the argument, beyond doubt.

Judan shook her head as if confirming some painful doubt."You fool nobody, Sister," she said. "You have proved the justice in my opinion of you. You are insolent and ungrateful. We will—"

"We?" Mercia cried, and the soldier saw tears gleaming like jewels in her eyes. "Who is 'we'? I have served the Order since I was a small child, and my only reward was pain and humiliation.

"I once revered the Score, accepting my punishment as the Names' judgement on my fallible soul; I now see you and your kind as bloated betrayers of your fellow women." Mercia reached behind her, and Quelgrum heard the tearing of cloth. She spun in a slow circle, to show a

complex map of livid scars on her young back. Many were bordered in pink, showing recent abuse.

"How many women here bear similar marks?" she screamed. "Why do you not show us all your own, fresh scars, Sister Judan?"

A feral, angry cry arose from the crowd in response to this demand.

"I would never be so immodest," Judan blustered. "As all can see, you have proved yourself unworthy—"

"Questor Grimm killed Prioress Lizaveta," Mercia continued, again interrupting her senior. "He also brought

down this foul palace of pain and suffering. I and several other Sisters were in the Great Hall when the fall came. He saved us at the risk of his own life, using his last magic to hold up the collapsing roof as we escaped. That was not the act of a mindless, heedless destroyer." She pulled a small bag from between her breasts and held it over her head. "He also gave me the herbs that helped to save lives from the plague that Prioress Lizaveta unleashed on us all ... he saved your life, too, you ungrateful woman! For recognising that, you wish to punish me again.

"I do not accept your judgement, Sister! You will never beat me again!" The

crowd surged forward again, screaming imprecations, but Quelgrum could see that their angry eyes were now locked on Judan.

"Please, Sisters, no more vengeance!" Mercia cried, snatching up a broken, four-foot length of wood.

"We have had enough of that! We must work to save Questor Grimm, who saved us from slavery! Then, we must work to save our dear, lost Sisters!"

"YES, SISTER MERCIA!"

The huge cry almost rocked Quelgrum on his feet, and he saw Judan's face fall. He was close enough to touch the older

woman, and he whispered in her ear, "You've lost, lady. Better get out while you still can."

Judan looked at the angry faces around her and bustled away towards Merrydeath Road. The other nuns moved towards the excavation, still bearing their wooden planks and beams. Erik told the nuns where they should place their levers, and the General smiled as they hurried to carry out the Sergeant's instructions.

"Well done, Sister," Quelgrum said, as Mercia turned towards him. "That was a spectacular performance."

She snorted. "That was no performance,

General. I was acting only as my conscience guided me. I trust you will do the same."

"Steady, Sisters!" Erik shouted to the workers. "Let it down slowly!"

"I always have, sweet Sister, even if you don't believe it," Quelgrum said to the nun. "I was beaten every day when I was your age, and I rebelled against my masters, too. You did well." Mercia opened her mouth, but her words were stolen by a loud thump that rocked the ground. Quelgrum held his breath while Erik surveyed the excavation, and he felt sure the young nun felt no less involved in the work.

"It's good, General!" the Sergeant said. "The rock's stable. Now we can start clearing away the rubble. Hurry, now!"

From the corner of his eye, Quelgrum saw Numal tumbling to the ground in a dead faint, but he hardly noticed; he had eyes only for the beautiful, courageous nun. Since he had first rebelled against his masters, he had felt only the inexorable demands of real and imagined duty. He had never known any love but that for his army, and he found it hard to imagine that any woman could ever love him, but he now felt the strong, undeniable stirrings of long-denied and forgotten man-feelings within him.

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## **Chapter 26: Claustrophobia**

"Bless you, Sister," Quelgrum found himself saying, feeling hot blood flood into his face. "You are ... lovely."

Sister Mercia's lips twisted into an embarrassed half-smile, and she looked down at the ground, her only answer a brief, nervous laugh.

She likes me, he thought, his heart singing. For a moment, his mind conjured up a series of dreamy images of him and Mercia, walking hand in hand on a distant, golden beach... Pull yourself together, man, he told himself. You're old enough to be her grandfather,

you old fool. What could a young girl like that ever see in you? Mercia's just a kind soul; she'd act the same way towards anyone.

"I'm sorry, Sister," he said, pushing his dreams to the back of his mind as he had done before so often in his long life. "Please forgive a silly old man's babbling. I never meant to embarrass you." Mercia raised her head a little, but she did not look him in the eye. "This is hardly the time for such compliments, when lives must be saved, General; but I thank you in any case. They were kind words, and I appreciate them."

Quelgrum wanted to say more, but he dared not, trusting himself only to reply

with a brisk, impersonal nod.

"Let us go back to the excavation, General," Mercia said. "The work goes on apace, and my services may soon be needed ... if Questor Grimm still lives."

"He does," Quelgrum asserted. "If he died, I understand his staff would revert to a length of ordinary wood. It'd give way at once under all that weight."

The old soldier thought of taking Mercia's hand as they walked towards the rescue site, but he crushed the impulse at birth, instead trying to concentrate on the urgent work in progress. As the young nun had said, it was, indeed, proceeding at a prodigious

rate; the opening's eighteen-inch diameter had been widened by a good three feet on the far side of the stone block, easily wide enough to allow an adult male to descend into the chasm.

As he approached the Sergeant, standing alongside a shaky-legged Necromancer Numal, the General asked him why the excavation continued.

"I want to ensure there's plenty of clearance for a makeshift stretcher, if we need one, Sir," Erik replied.

"Baron Grimm may be badly hurt, and we may need a lot more room."

"Very good, Sergeant. Carry on."

Quelgrum recognised that he might be what members of his army called a 'fifth wheel' or a 'second wig'; someone superfluous to requirements.

Be content to delegate for once, he thought. Erik knows what he's doing, so just let him do it!

He forced himself to stand in silence as the blur of digging and hauling continued, with the half-blind albino, Tordun, seizing heavy rocks and hurling them aside under the Sergeant's cool, clear, patient direction.

"That's enough, I think, ladies and Warrior Tordun," Erik said, with a satisfied smile and nod. "Well done, and

thank you; you've carried out a difficult and hazardous task with stubborn determination. You should all be proud of yourselves; I know I am."

Diplomacy, too, Quelgrum thought, feeling his own heart swelling with pride. The man should be an officer.

The Sergeant stood at the edge of the hole and called down, "Friend Thribble, I am six feet tall. Can you estimate how far I'll have to drop if I'm held at arms' length?"

Quelgrum did not hear the tiny demon's reply, but he saw Erik nod in response, adding, "That's a short enough drop. Warrior Tordun; would you do the

honours, please?"

"Of course, Sergeant." The albino took Erik's wrists in his meaty hands. "I will not release you until you give the word. Trust me."

"I trust you, friend Tordun." Erik smiled. "Just don't crush my wrists to powder. I might need them again." The pale man nodded. "I'll be careful, Sergeant."

Tordun hoisted Erik clean off the ground with little effort and began to lower him into the pit, his muscular arms extending to their full length. With surprising grace, he sank to his knees and began to lean forward until he lay prostrate at the lip of the hole. Not for the first time, the

General marvelled at Tordun's awe-inspiring strength as he slowly lowered his outstretched arms into the opening. From the calm expression on the albino's face, the warrior barely seemed aware of the considerable strain on his arms and shoulders.

"That's far enough, Tordun," Erik shouted. "Let go."

A normal man's arms would have flown upward at the sudden release of weight, but all Quelgrum saw was a slight tremor in Tordun's shoulders as he released his burden.

\* \* \* \*



Erik thumped to the ground, bending his knees as he landed. It took him a few moments to orient himself in the gloom, but his eyes soon adjusted to the dim light. He whistled as he surveyed the scene; the floor was littered with large stones and rubble, making for treacherous footwork. He realised that, had he landed a mere hand's-breadth either side of his current position, he might have slipped and done himself considerable injury. The huge block that had caused so many problems rested on its slender supports at chest level, about three feet in front of him.

"At last!" a familiar, piping voice crowed, and the Sergeant looked down

to see Thribble perching on Numal's staff, his legs crossed in an almost jaunty manner as his thread-like tail swung back and forth like a pendulum. "You took your time, I must say, Sergeant."

"Well, I'm here now, demon!" Erik bit off an angry retort. "Where's Baron Grimm?"

"Kneel down, and you will see him, mortal."

Erik knelt, avoiding the sharper shards as best he could. The darkness under the stone block was absolute, and he could not see a thing. Standing up, he called out, "Necromancer Numal; can you send one of your lights down here, on the side

of the hole nearest you? I can't see a thing down here." After a few moments, he saw a pale gleam leaking from under the block, and he knelt back down. He squinted as the Mage Light scorched his dark-adapted eyes, but he soon grew accustomed to it. For a moment, the soldier saw only rubble, but he then made out a gleam of blue silk amongst the devastation. There, lying in the very corner of the subterranean chamber, lay the still figure of the young mage, his exposed left leg crooked at a bizarre angle, a bloody, dusty hand resting like a huge spider on the back of his head.

Erik felt his breathing becoming faster and shallower, and he forced himself to

remain calm; he would have to crawl right under the stone block, which was supported only by a pair of slender rods. If Baron Grimm died before he could extricate the mage, the staff would revert to a lifeless lump of wood in an instant, and Erik might be crushed to a red smear as the heavy mass tumbled to the floor. I really wish I didn't have to do this, the soldier thought, closing his eyes and rubbing his trembling hands together as he tried to compose himself.

He drew a series of deep breaths, his pounding heart threatening to burst from his chest, and he clapped his hands twice, the sound ringing in the enclosed space like a pair of gunshots. Erik

muttered, "Let's do it!" and began to crawl over the rubble towards the Baron. Forcing himself to ignore the looming threat above him, he turned the young man onto his back, taking the greatest care in case Grimm's spine was damaged. The broken leg was a secondary consideration. His heart eased as his battlefield training took hold. He checked that the Baron's mouth and nostrils were not obstructed, his hands steadying as they went through the comforting, familiar actions. The Sergeant was no medic, but every man in Quelgrum's army was trained in basic first aid. He put his ear against Grimm's chest and felt relieved to hear a steady heartbeat. It was fast, but strong, and the

mage's life seemed in no immediate danger. The next necessity was to check for blood loss. Erik noted a large area of matted hair on the back of the Baron's head, but the blood seemed to have clotted. He found several other bleeding wounds, but none was life-threatening. The Sergeant reached up under the Questor's robes, feeling for localised swellings that might indicate serious internal bleeding. As his hands assessed the integrity of the large blood vessels running from Grimm's groin to his thighs, he heard a faint, sibilant sound and froze. With a sudden shock of awareness, he realised that Grimm was trying to speak, although he could not make out the words. His heart pounding

anew, this time with hope, he slid forward and put his ear to the mage's lips.

"Speak to me, Lord Baron," he said.

Grimm's answering voice seemed no louder than the sound of a breeze ruffling the leaves of a distant copse, but Erik could make out the words: "I said, 'If you touch me there again, Sergeant, you'll have to marry me.' I—"

The Baron's words ended in a sharp gasp, followed by an agonised groan.

"Don't worry, Lord Baron," Erik said, louder than he had intended. "I'll get you out of here. I'll just—" For a moment, the

Sergeant thought Grimm had groaned again, before he realised that the sound had come from the rubble around Redeemer, which had begun to trickle away from the ledge.

"Fight, man!" Erik shouted, as he saw Grimm's half-open eyelids flicker. "I'm getting you out of here, but you have to help me. Don't you dare die on me, or ... or I'll be court-martialled! Do you want that?" The ominous creaking ceased, but he knew he dared not wait for a response; he must act quickly. "Don't go away," Erik said. "I'll be back in a few moments."

He began to crawl backwards, and he heard the faint rejoinder, "I'm not going



anywhere, Sergeant." As he stood up, Thribble asked him, "How is Questor Grimm, Sergeant?"

"It's touch-and-go, Thribble. Talk to him, and get him to answer if you can. He has to stay awake." He cupped his hands in front of him, and the grey imp hopped into them. He lowered Thribble to the ground, and the demon scurried into Grimm's corner.

Erik removed the two improvised ropes from Numal's staff and tied them into a single length. He had no idea if the makeshift line would support a man's weight, but he dared not risk delaying the operation longer in the hope of

finding a better substitute.

Crawling back under the stone block, he saw Thribble's bleak expression, but he dared not stop to enquire further. Kneeling beside the motionless mage, he fastened the rope under Grimm's armpits with a sturdy bowline.

Erik eyed the young man's damaged leg, and he knew a broken thigh-bone would mean death if it were to puncture a large blood-vessel. However, he could delay no longer.

"This will hurt, Lord Baron," he said, not knowing if the Questor heard his words or not. "I'm sorry, but it's the only way."

Grabbing the prone mage under the armpits, he began to turn him around to haul him over the rubble, eliciting a sharp cry.

That's good, he thought, grunting with the effort. Dead men don't feel pain.

"Come on, Thribble," he gasped. "We're getting out of here." With painful lethargy, the Sergeant lugged Baron Grimm from under the looming block, which teetered over as one of Redeemer's ends slipped downwards.

At last, he and his burden emerged into the rock-strewn clearing, but he knew the danger was not over; if Redeemer moved much more, the resultant collapse

might bring tons of rubble down onto them.

"I've got him, Tordun!" Erik yelled. "Get ready to pull; I'm throwing a rope up to you ... now!" The line snaked upwards as he hurled it towards the edge of the pit. For a moment, it seemed to hang in mid-air, and he thought the albino had caught it. Then, it fluttered back to the floor in a heavy, sinuous coil, and he drew a deep breath. Trying to ignore the ominous creaking, he gathered it up and threw it again. This time, he saw a pair of hands scrabbling for the rope, the end of the tether waving tantalising inches from Tordun's outstretched fingertips before it collapsed once more. Erik

heard a slithering, hissing sound, and he realised that some of the smaller debris was beginning to escape into the chamber as the block tilted further.

"Come on, Tordun!" he screamed, coiling the line for a third throw. "Catch the bloody thing! We don't have much longer.

"Three ... two ... one ... now!"

For what seemed an age, the slender, knotted rope arced into the air, uncoiling as it went, and Erik held his breath. The albino's fingers stretched out again, and the rope began to descend, tickling Tordun's left palm as it began to pick up speed. With a convulsive clench of his

fist, the pale giant's hand closed over the line and held it.

"I have it!" he shouted.

"Pull, Tordun! Pull!" Erik tried to ignore the hissing, intensifying rain of detritus pattering down around him. He stepped back, almost slipping on the rubble, as Grimm began to rise towards the light. The rope creaked, but it held.

At last, the mage's feet disappeared over the ledge. After a few moments more, Erik saw Tordun's hands extending over the hole again, and the looped end of the rope dropped back down. Without waiting, the Sergeant scooped the tiny demon up and shoved him into his right

jacket pocket, ignoring Thribble's indignant squeak of protest. He wriggled into the loop, so that it rested under his armpits.

"Pull, Tordun!"

He gasped as his feet jerked off the ground, taking a firm hold on the rope. At last, he saw the rim of the opening just above him, and he hauled himself over it, gasping and groaning with the effort. We made it! The words screamed in the Sergeant's brain, and he felt a warm sense of achievement. Rising onto unsteady legs, he saw the young nun, Mercia, bending over Baron Grimm's dusty figure. As he approached them, the healer looked up and proffered him a

dreamy smile, her face almost radiant.

"He'll live," she said. "He has a bad concussion. He also has a dislocated leg, a couple of broken ribs and some internal bleeding; but I can mend them, given time, even with the little magic left to me." Erik answered the nun with a bright smile, but he felt his heart surge as the ground gave a sudden heave. Tearing his eyes from the healer and stepping back, he saw the huge rock quiver and jump upward, sending a mighty burst of rubble into the chamber.

He shivered, as he realised that the rain of stones could have killed him.

"What have you kept in here, Sergeant?"



Thribble demanded, pushing his head out from Erik's pocket.

“It was awful!”

Erik burst out in a long, loud guffaw, stopping only when he heard a high-pitched, hysterical note invading his laughter.

He wanted a good, strong drink, but he would wait until the operation was finished. Plenty of work still lay ahead.

After his exertions in the cramped chamber, he stretched his muscles for a few minutes before turning to address the assembled nuns.

"Ladies," he said. "We've made a good start, but there's still a lot to do. Do you feel up to it?" He felt almost disappointed to hear the women's loud, enthusiastic cheer of assent, but he managed to raise a cheerful smile.

"Right, ladies," he said, cracking his knuckles. "I recommend we start our efforts over there."

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## **Chapter 27: Accusations**

Loras Afelnor hardly noticed the weight of the iron chains on his hands and feet as Questor Olaf led him and Magemaster Kargan down from the back of the

wagon.

I almost forgot what High Lodge looked like, he thought, gazing in wonder at the fantastic, towering edifice, its gleaming, white turrets seeming almost to pierce the sky. After his long exile in the grimy hamlet of Lower Frunstock, he felt again the wide-eyed wonder he had experienced on his first visit to the Guild's spiritual home, as a mere stripling of nineteen. This is a place of justice and honour, he told himself. They will consider all the evidence before reaching a decision—

"You are not here to admire the scenery," Olaf admonished Loras, tugging the former Questor's chain.

“Come on.”

For such an old man, Olaf was no slow-coach, hustling his charges towards the huge edifice at considerable speed. Loras stumbled several times, since his ankle-fetters restricted his progress, and he could see that Kargan was no less encumbered than he.

As the two prisoners and their warder reached the outer gate, two armoured guards moved to block the entrance with crossed halberds.

"I am Questor Olaf, Acting Prelate of Arnor House." The Questor held out his left hand to show his Guild Ring. "I

bring two prisoners for trial."

"You were expected two hours ago, Questor," the older of the two guards complained, a man of perhaps thirty summers. "What kept you?"

"Watch your manners!" Olaf snapped. "Do not seek to question me; remember who pays your wages."

"Sorry, Lord Mage," the sentry replied, in an almost bored voice. "Please use the East Turret entrance. It's just over—"

"I know where it is, watchman. I first came here before your grandparents first drew breath! I'm not in my dotage yet. Do you wish me to report your insolence

to the Dominie?" The Questor's voice cracked like a whip, and the guard's face reddened.

"My sincerest apologies, Lord Mage," he said, his spine stiffening as he raised the vicious weapon to the vertical, his companion following suit.

Olaf grunted, stepping between the guards and through the gate with his head held high, while Kargan and Loras stumbled behind him.

Loras was not out of breath by the time the group approached the East Turret; his time as a Mage Questor and his long tenure as a blacksmith had left him with a robust constitution. However, he noted

Kargan's grey face and heaving chest, and he called out to Olaf, "Please, slow down, Lord Mage! Will you deliver a pair of corpses to the Conclave?"

"Be quiet, prisoner," Olaf said, but he did relent a little, allowing a few moments' pause for Kargan to catch his breath before they carried on.

As they stood before a black door with a small, square opening at head-height, the Questor pounded his staff three times on the flagstones. In an instant, Loras saw an eye appear at the opening.

"Your business?" a muffled voice demanded.

"Questor Olaf, Arnor House. Two prisoners for trial."

"You have the watchword?" The eye was replaced by an ear.

Olaf leant forward to whisper into the square opening.

After a few moments of utter silence, Loras heard a series of clacks, bangs, and squeaks behind the door, which swung open silently. Olaf led his charges through the entrance, to reveal a spiral stone staircase. The watchman behind the door was nowhere to be seen, as Olaf led his prisoners up the steep stairs, their staves clattering against the curving walls as they climbed. After



passing two further doors, where unseen guardians demanded further passwords, Loras felt relieved to find himself standing in a large, dimly-lit chamber; it seemed the arduous journey was at an end, at least for the time being.

He noted basic but serviceable beds lining the room, with jugs of water and bowls of food on a large metal table in its centre. All the furniture was bolted to the stone floor, and all the vessels and utensils were chained to the table.

"Greetings, Brother Mages."

"Welcome, fellow prisoners."

Starting at two almost simultaneous

voices from the darkness, Loras squinted through the gloom to see Magemaster Crohn lying on one of the beds in the far corner. A long chain led from the manacle on his right hand to a large bolt in the floor beneath the central table. The smith's eyes followed a second chain from the bolt to another bed, on which sat Questor Dalquist.

While Olaf knelt, fastening Loras' and Kargan's fetters to the restraining stud in the floor, the two new prisoners greeted their fellow mages with polite nods.

Groaning as he straightened up, Olaf said, "This room is under observation. Any attempt to discuss matters relating to the forthcoming trial will result in you

all being confined to single punishment cells. I trust this will not be necessary."

"I understand, Questor Olaf," Loras said. "I will restrict myself to pleasantries."

"Of course, Lord Mage," Kargan responded, settling onto one of the empty beds with a loud thump.

"Now, I must report to the Lord Dominie," Olaf said, wincing as he rose to his full height. "For your own good, I beg you to observe the rules."

With that, he disappeared into the darkness. After a pair of loud, metallic clanks, all was quiet. After minutes of silence, Dalquist proffered, "At least the

food looks good." Loras regarded the bread, cheese, fruit, and meat on the table with distaste. A distant part of him registered hunger, but he felt nothing but a strong desire for the trial to begin. Sighing, he sat down onto the bed nearest to him.

"I cannot eat at this time," he said, mindful of the unseen, listening guardians. "I just want this damned trial to be over."

"I agree," Crohn responded, his tone dull and lifeless.

"I couldn't eat a mouthful," a laconic Dalquist said.

After waiting for a response from Kargan, Loras turned to see the Mentalist lying prostrate on his bed, his eyes shut. In a few moments, he heard the mage begin to snore.

Good idea, Kargan, he thought.

"I need some sleep, gentlemen." With that, he lowered his head onto the rough pillow and closed his eyes, seeking some quietus within his inner turmoil.

\* \* \* \*

Loras realised he had fallen asleep only when he felt a rough, impersonal hand shaking his shoulder. Jerking his eyelids open, he emitted a rough, incoherent

grunt as his head spun. After a few moments, his gaze focussed on a pair of grey eyes.

"It is time, prisoner," the Questor said, his voice little more than a whisper. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs from it, Loras sat up and nodded. He shook down his scarlet robes in an attempt to clear the dust of the journey, while Olaf disappeared beneath the metal table with its untouched goodies. The smith registered the sounds of his bonds being unfastened with little more than mild interest.

He rose to his feet, snatching up his staff as the aged Questor emerged from his task. "I am ready, Lord Mage," he said,

fixing the older mage's eyes with a frank, intense gaze. At last, the dim corridors gave way to wider, brighter passageways, down which Olaf led him until he stood before a pair of golden doors. Outside the portal, he saw a pair of tall, black-robed mages, their seven-ringed staves held out in challenge. Hoods obscured their features, and Loras found the two men eerie in the similarity of their stances, like a pair of dark statues.

"Give the watchword, Brother Mage," they growled, their bass voices coming so closely together that Loras could not tell who had spoken first.

Olaf stepped forward and rose on tiptoe to whisper into the nearest guard's cowl; he was almost six feet tall at full stretch, but the watchman had to lean down to hear the muttered password. The mage-sentry grunted and nodded at his companion. Both men stood away from the doors, which swung open on silent hinges. Olaf took a ring of keys from his belt and unfastened Loras' fetters, letting them fall to the marble floor with a reverberating clatter.

As he unlocked the last manacle, the old Questor whispered into the smith's ear, "You are on your own now, Brother Bile. Good luck." Without waiting for a response from his former friend, he



turned his back and strode away.

"Enter," the dark-clad mages chorused.

Loras nodded and stepped inside the doorway, with an air of confidence greater than he felt. As the doors clicked shut behind him, he walked through a dense bead curtain, which emitted a shimmering hiss as he did so.

The chamber in which he now found himself seemed without windows, and it was lit by two bright globes of green mage-light. The lights floated between him and whatever else might be in the room, and he saw nothing beyond them.

Bang-bang!

"Name?" a sharp, high-pitched voice barked from the darkness.

"Loras Afelnor," he replied in a firm, loud tone. "May I know the details of the charges—"

"You will remain silent except to answer direct questions, prisoner!" the unseen inquisitor snapped.

"Answer 'Yes' or 'No', unless further information is required. You will confine your answers strictly to the question asked. You are to address us as 'Honoured Justice.' Is that understood, prisoner?"

"Yes, Honoured Justice."

"Your name?"

"Loras Afelnor, Honoured Justice."

"What is your place of residence, prisoner?"

"The village of Lower Frunstock, Honoured Justice."

Loras heard a scratching sound, like that of a chicken's claws scrabbling for food in a barnyard.

"Did you once hold the title of Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank in Arnor House of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, with the Guild cognomen

‘The Firelord’?”

"I did, Honoured Justice."

Scratch, scratch.

"Were you dismissed from the Guild in dishonour, after committing an act of the gravest, foulest treason?" Loras frowned. If he were to answer in the affirmative, this might be taken as an acknowledgement of guilt. Were he to give a negative response, it might be taken that he denied being dismissed from the Guild; an act of perjury. His mouth opened and closed a few times, and he shook his head in frustration.

"A physical motion cannot be accepted

as testimony!" the hateful Voice screamed. "Answer 'yes' or 'no', prisoner."

"Your question is in two parts, Honoured Justice," Loras protested fighting rising anger. "I cannot, in conscience, answer it with a single word."

"You deny you were dismissed from the Guild?" The shrieking Voice scorched him with its intensity.

"No, Honoured Justice."

"Do you, then, deny committing an act of high treason?"

Loras felt an acrid burning in the pit of his stomach, and he began to wish he had eaten earlier. He knew he had committed treason, but he had been possessed by another will at the time. The question is unfair!

"May I answer the question in my own words, Honoured Justice?"

"You may not, prisoner! Did you attempt to murder Prelate Geral—yes or no?"

"Wait, Rithel."

It was a soft voice, but Loras' sensitive ears heard the words clearly enough. "I declare a point of personal privilege; I wish to address the prisoner directly."

"Of course, Lord Dominie," the Voice muttered, now deferent and soft.

"Master Afelnor," the unseen Dominie said. "I gather your objection revolves around the question of intent. Is that correct?"

"Yes, Lord ... Honoured Justice."

"We can dispense with honorifics for the moment." The Dominie's soft baritone sounded comforting after Rithel's hectoring scream. "In your own words, what led to your expulsion from the Guild?" Loras drew a deep breath, and he vowed to choose his words with care. "My hands pressed a pillow onto Prelate Geral's face in an attempt to kill

him," he said.

He heard a series of gasps from the unseen Conclave, but he continued. "The will behind them was not mine. I was ensorcelled by a devotee of the Geomantic art, and my will was not my own." After a further flurry of gasps, he heard a voice bearing the distinctive, harsh accent of the Challorean region: "Do you claim that you, a Seventh Rank Questor, were subdued by a mere witch?"

"Why did you not mention this at your first trial?" a second voice demanded.

"A seven-ring Questor admits to being the puppet of a mere witch?" His head



spinning, Loras said, in a feeble voice, "She was very strong ... I did not know. Even after the trial, I did not know. She was no ordinary witch..."

He felt a cool rush of relief as the invisible Dominie came again to his aid.

"Gentlemen, I know something of this woman, and I am in a position to declare that she is possessed of remarkable strength for a witch, as the prisoner testifies. The Conclave accepts the possibility that the prisoner's acts may have been forced by Geomantic influence.

"So stipulated."

The smith's head reeled anew. Has the Dominie fallen foul of Lizaveta? he wondered.

"Really, Lord Dominie," Rithel protested. "Are we to believe..."

"I said, 'so stipulated', Prosecutor. Are there any formal objections from the prosecution?"

"But a Questor, Lord Dominie..." the Callolean inquisitor moaned.

"Come to order!" the Dominie's voice cracked like a whip. "I possess confidential information which confirms in some detail the power of the aforementioned Geomantic agent. It is

stipulated that the prisoner's defence is permissible in principle."

"Agreed, Lord Dominie. So stipulated."

Loras knew he had won at least this point.

"Brother Rithel," the Dominie continued. "Please continue, remembering the aforementioned stipulation; and get on with it!"

Loras heard a long period of chicken-scratching after this imperious command.

"By your command, Lord Dominie," the Voice responded, with either a resigned sigh or a venomous hiss; Loras could not

tell which.

"Under the sentence of your first trial, were you forbidden to set foot on Guild land for the remainder of your life, on pain of death?"

"Yes, Honoured Justice." This much could not be denied, but Loras quailed inside at what he knew must be coming next.

"Do you deny breaking this condition of your sentence on the eleventh day of this month, by entering Arnor House?"

Loras gulped.

"No, Honoured Justice," he said. He

could make no other response to this direct question.

"The Prosecutor moves that the prisoner has breached the terms of his sentence, regardless of other considerations," Rithel crowed. "There can be only one punishment for this—the sentence of death; so moved."

Loras held his breath: he had, indeed, transgressed the conditions of his sentence.

"So moved," boomed a distant voice, which he had not heard before, with the sing-song accent of the Grivense people.

"I agree." This time, a Gallorleyan man,

from his accented vowels.

"So moved," another inquisitor echoed, and Loras bowed his head.

I am sorry, Drima, he thought. May the Names bless you, Grimm.

"I invoke a point of order," the Dominie drawled, sounding almost bored. "We note this breach of conditions of a former sentence, but we also note that all witnesses have not been heard: final sentence cannot be passed at this stage."

This time, Loras knew Rithel's initial response was no mere frustrated sigh; the man's hatred for him was plain.

"Accepted, Lord Dominie; however, this member wishes to stipulate the prisoner's response as a clear record of admission of prior guilt."

After a long pause, the Dominie answered, "So stipulated," and Loras fought to keep his shoulders straight.

The unseen pen scratched on its paper, sending a cold shiver up the smith's back.

"Lord Dominie," a voice at the very edge of Loras' awareness whispered. "Time grows late. May I remind you of our evening game of Birritch? I move that we adjourn for today." The former Questor felt cold hands of shock running

sinuous fingers along his spine. This is a bloody farce! he thought, trying not to panic. My life depends on a group of men whose main worry is about a damned card game!

"Are we agreed on adjournment?" Horin asked the Conclave, and Loras heard an enthusiastic chorus of assent. "So stipulated."

"With the greatest respect, Lord Dominie, that is 'so declared'," an anonymous inquisitor said.

"Oh, very well, Drimend. 'So declared', if you wish. Conclave is adjourned."

"The Conclave adjourns," Rithel



declared.

Bang-bang!

Loras swung around as golden light flooded into the room from behind him. He saw the two guards walking into the room, dark and forbidding, bearing his chains like garlands.

"Remove the prisoner!"

Loras walked towards the black-clothed men, struggling to retain his composure as they fastened iron manacles and fetters around his wrists, ankles and waist.

As he was led away from the dark,

green-lit room, he thought of the simple, poor existence he had led as a blacksmith in Lower Frunstock, compared to his glorious, rich incarnation as a Mage Questor. He now longer knew or cared which of these lives he preferred; he just knew he wanted to survive at any cost.

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## **Chapter 28: Behind the Scenes**

Thorn Virias lay on his bed and stared at the ceiling, lost in thought. As a Guild Prelate, albeit one accused of treason, he enjoyed certain privileges, one of which was a comfortable, single cell. Another was that the cell had no listening-ports,

so he knew nothing he said here would be overheard. Sitting up, he took the sheet of paper from a pocket and read it for the seventh time, as if the words held some enciphered mystery waiting to succumb to his sharp intellect.

First charge: conspiracy to pervert the will of a fellow Guild Mage, before, during and after the fact. Second charge: deception of senior Guild personnel in the furtherance of said crimes. Third charge: collusion in said crimes with an agency outside the Guild, before, during and after the fact. Fourth charge: causing the death of a Guild Neophyte through reckless and callous disregard of training protocol.

The remaining charges detailed on the sheet were less serious, but the least of them carried the automatic penalty of dismissal from the Guild. The three main charges mandated death. During his brief hearing earlier that day, Thorn had refused to answer all questions put to him until all other evidence had been heard; this was his personal privilege as a member of the Presidium, and a mere formality. Another privilege granted him was the right to pass a written statement to the Conclave, for the eyes of the Senior Inquisitor only, and he had taken full advantage of that right. We'll just have to wait and see if the bait's taken, he thought, folding the charge sheet and putting it back his pocket.

He closed his eyes and lay back.

After a period of dreamless sleep, Thorn awoke to a gentle rap at his cell door and sat up, the iron chains on his wrists and ankles clanking.

His heart pounding, he said, "Enter."

The door opened to reveal Lord Horin, clad in golden robes. Thorn rose to his feet, his heavy fetters permitting only a clumsy bow.

"Greetings, Lord Dominie."

"Greetings, Lord Prelate." Horin's impassive face gave Thorn no clue as to the Dominie's inner feelings, but the

mere fact of the senior mage's presence proved he had at least read the note. After an awkward silence, Horin pushed the door to and said, "I gave the guard permission to go and eat. We will not be disturbed."

Thorn nodded. "Thank you, Lord Dominie. You read my note?"

"I did, Thorn. If you are trying to usurp my position, you will have made the worst mistake of your life." Thorn smiled. "Have no fear on that score, Lord Dominie. I do not seek higher rank. I am more than happy to remain as a Prelate.

"How went Master Afelnor's hearing?"

Horin sighed. "I extended a point of personal privilege to grant him the defence of outside influence, as you suggested in your note, and I have barred the Conclave from accepting rebuttal evidence without my authority. We ended the hearing on the charge of wilful trespass, adjourning after Senior Mentalist Tritt intervened. I would have been here sooner, but I have been playing cards. Had I lost too suddenly, it might have aroused suspicion."

"You did well, Lord Dominie," Thorn said, as if he were the senior mage, bestowing praise on an inferior.

"By setting up Loras for an acquittal on the first charge, you will not need to hear

Magemaster Kargan's evidence on the matter. By allowing the defence of outside influence, I can claim the same mitigation."

"What do you expect from this trial?" Horin scowled, but Thorn had not expected him to be happy at the turn of events.

Thorn rubbed his chin. "A full acquittal, of course! Loras Afelnor's prior conviction should be quashed, and the more recent capital charges of trespass, petty treason and conspiracy should be upheld for him and his co-conspirators."

"You demand perversion of the course of justice," Horin snapped, a pair of



angry, red blotches appearing on his cheeks. "What makes you think I will go along with this ... this farrago?"

"You have already begun this process, Lord Horin," Thorn said, his voice as smooth and cold as iced silk. "You are no innocent participant in this affair."

"I have committed no crime," Horin blustered, but the Prelate knew the Dominie was hooked.

"Not yet," Thorn said. "Even so, you must admit you have already stretched the rules a little, Lord Dominie. I have a trusted ally within High Lodge. He has a copy of the note I sent you, and he is prepared to swear it is a true copy of the

one I gave to you. You must admit that it might make interesting reading if it were ever to reach the Conclave."

This was pure bluff on the Prelate's part, but he was more than willing to gamble that it would never occur to Horin to use Mage Sight on a fellow Guildbrother; this would be a gross breach of the Guild protocol ingrained in Horin since his first day as a Student. Thorn had, of course, been subject to the same indoctrination, but, where a Questor might spend fifteen years in training, a Specialist Mage might spend most of a Secular lifetime; fifty or sixty years at least.

"You said that you are in possession of

... controversial information concerning me,” Horin said, his eyes hooded. “Before we discuss the matter any further, I wish to know more.” Thorn made a lengthy show of inspecting his immaculate fingernails before he responded.

"Well, let us see," he said, admiring his flawless, manicured cuticles. "There is the matter of your ... unwilling entanglement with my mother. You might have committed no crime there, but your carefully-cultured image of strength, celibacy and self-control might be more than a little tarnished if that ever became public knowledge."

"You cannot possibly prove—"

"Oh, I have much more interesting titbits than that, Horin." Thorn deliberately omitted the honorific to underline his control of the situation. "I do not choose to give you full details at this time, but I trust you remember a young lady of negotiable virtue in the town of Marada, where, as I recall, you lost your purse and a rather important document after a passionate and drunken encounter.

"I have plenty of other interesting and embarrassing tales to recount, some of them quite shocking in their explicit detail."

"The Conclave would not believe you,

Lord Thorn." Horin's blazing red cheeks stood in stark contrast to his ashen face. "I could order your evidence to be expunged from the record as hearsay."

"But mud sticks, doesn't it, Horin? I can, of course, produce witnesses for many of these sordid little interludes, should it ever become necessary. If I am going down, I swear I will take you with me. Even without direct proof, I am sure the Conclave would love to hear of an interesting episode involving five thousand gold pieces that never found their way into the Giana House accounts when you were Prelate." After a long, tense period of silence, during which Thorn regarded Horin's bulging eyes and

slack jaw with cool amusement, the Prelate smiled.

"There is no need for these lurid little episodes ever to come to light," he said, in a soothing voice. "I am no threat to your position, Horin, as I have said. I am content with my current demesnes, and I would be happy to give you a witnessed affidavit attesting to the fact. All I want is for ... mutually acceptable justice to be done. Loras and the accused Magemasters have committed acts of conspiracy against a lawful authority, as well as the crime of petty treason. There can be no doubt about that. Justice is not always clear-cut."

Thorn noted Horin's tilted head and

suspicious expression, but he knew he just needed to add a little more sweetening to the pot.

"I cannot deny my own fallibility, and I would accept a recorded motion of severe censure from the Conclave, barring me from higher rank in perpetuity," he said, with a sigh, "as long as I am permitted to retain the rank of Prelate and my seat on the Presidium. That is all I ask for; all I want." Thorn's heart sang as Horin gave a resigned nod. "Very well. Some of the members of the Conclave, such as Tritt and Rethin, are my devoted allies and susceptible to persuasion. Others know I have hitherto chosen to overlook some of their own

transgressions. Also, as you say, Guild Laws have been broken here; this cannot be denied...

"Yes, we can do this, Lord Thorn."

He said 'we', the Prelate thought. That's a good sign. Horin won't let me down now. With any luck, he'll even begin to believe this was his idea.

"I commend myself to the Conclave's decision, Lord Dominie," he said, trying to keep his expression grave and sorrowful as he rejoiced inside. "Justice will be done."

"You may rest assured on that, Lord Thorn. I will make sure of it."



\* \* \* \*

Horin was an ambitious, powerful mage, and he had played the risky game of Guild politics for many years. He had managed to ascend the greasy rungs of the organisation's ladder of seniority by the ruthless garnering of information and its careful, strategic dissemination. The ambition of most mages was to reach the lofty position of House Prelate, but the Guild held far greater prizes, with the accolade of High Dominie as the ultimate lure. In order to retain this glittering crown, a man could not be content to sit back and bask in glory after decades of struggle and skulduggery. On his journey to the summit, he would have

trodden on many fingers: the fingers of other ambitious men who sought to find the smallest chink in his armour.

Men as hungry as he for power and prestige.

I see I made a bad mistake, he thought, taking a sip of wine from the goblet at his side as he sat in his comfortable, tastefully-appointed chamber. I appointed Thorn to the Presidium because I thought him safe and conservative; a useful buffer against some of the more hawkish members. Yes, I made a mistake there. However, if he thinks I'm in my dotage, he's got another think coming. If he thinks I'm stupid enough to bow to his demands in

the hope that he'll just sit back and throw away his evidence against me, he has no idea of how Guild politics really works. He sat back in his plush chair and smiled; it was a humourless expression that Thorn would not have liked, had he seen it.

Thorn made a far bigger mistake by showing his hand before all the money was on the table, Horin thought. I may have underestimated him at first, but I've played this little game at a much higher level than he has. With Thorn out of the way, nobody will dare testify against me. If I go along with his little plan, I have a senior man who knows he can blackmail me with abandon. If I get rid

of him, I have four Seventh Rank mages, good Guild men who will owe their lives to me. If I am responsible for Loras Afelnor's death, I may lose another Seventh Rank thaumaturge's loyalty; that of Loras' grandson, Grimm. If he's still alive, that is...

I'm sorry, Thorn, but the potential gains just don't square up with the risks. You lose, old friend. Horin drained his goblet, savouring the wine's heady aroma as it flooded into his appreciative nostrils. Ballemian Sunset, '48; he thought, eyeing the empty bottle with some regret, not such a bad little vintage after all. I should have trusted the Head Doorkeeper's advice; I'll have to ask him

to buy a few more cases.

\* \* \* \*

Loras could not sleep, however hard he tried to empty his mind. As soon as one tendril of thought drifted away from him, another slid into his sensorium to replace it.

Something is very odd here. At first, I thought Lord Horin was siding with me, the way he interrupted—what was his name?—Rithel. I thought he was a fair man, who wanted only justice. Then, he adjourned the Conclave for a game of cards, of all things. My guess is that he wanted further instructions before he went further, and I would be more than

willing to bet that Thorn is involved. Loras rolled over, to the dissonant accompaniment of clanking chains, cudgelling his brain in an attempt to retrieve long-buried information that might help him. For many minutes he fought to remember the details of the trial he had undergone so many years before. At the time, he had been so confused and consumed by guilt that he had barely registered the Conclave's pronouncements. Think, man; think, damn you! he raged inside his head. What are the rules concerning Guild trials?

A vision swam into his head.

\* \* \* \*

A row of grim, scowling men faced him, and he looked at the floor, too full of self-accusation and self-hatred to look them in the eyes. Thorn stood at his side and squeezed his shoulder in a friendly, fraternal gesture as the Prosecutor began to speak.

"This Conclave is called to order. Under Rule 28.1.19 of the Rules and Regulations of the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, I now pronounce the charges levied against Loras Afelnor, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, known by the Guild cognomen 'The Firelord'."

\* \* \* \*

That was one strike against this so-called Conclave: Rithel, acting as Prosecutor, had ignored an important rule of evidence, and he had refused to give details of the charges against Loras.

\* \* \* \*

The Prosecutor consulted the scroll before him, as Loras stood in misery, staring at the marble tiles.

"Charge One: in contravention of Law 1.6.8 of the Rules and Regulations of the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, the prisoner is accused of high treason against the Guild, in the person of its lawful representative..."



\* \* \* \*

That was not helpful, although the fact that the Prosecutor had taken care to enumerate the charges in detail was an interesting memory. There had been something else...

"Under Law..."

What Names-cursed Law had it been? Loras knew that, if he were to try to confront this farce of a Conclave on its own terms, he would need to be able to quote the Law with precise detail.

\* \* \* \*

"Under the requirements of Law 1.6.12,

we now invite the accused to offer his defence, if any, of the charges against him."

"I offer no defence at this time, Lord Prosecutor."

"Under the requirements of Law 1.6.14, I petition the Conclave for permission to offer mitigation against these charges!" Thorn cried, and Loras' heart surged with love for his loyal friend...

\* \* \* \*

Loras sat upright, his eyes staring and unseeing; his mouth gaping and unspeaking. This Conclave is illegal! he thought, his heart pounding as the

shocking awareness blazed inside his head. If need be, I will demand that Law 1.6 be read in full! I am entitled to hear the charges against me. I am entitled to present a defence. I am entitled to have another speak in my defence. They cannot deny me that!

We will see who can quote Laws and who cannot, he vowed to himself. I will demand that my trial, and that of my fellow prisoners, be conducted in full accordance with Guild Law, and I will be heard, if I have to scream my demands from the depths of the deepest dungeon.

If you want to condemn me, you will have to work at it, my friends. If you

think you can browbeat a Seventh Rank Questor into submission, you are making a grave error.

With that, he sank back on his bed and drifted into dreamless sleep with a faint smile of hope stitched across his mouth.

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## **Chapter 29: Return to the World**

Grimm ran through a golden, billowing field, hand in hand with a laughing, smiling Drexelica. His heart felt so full he half-expected it to burst from his chest at any moment, to fly away from him into the cloudless, sapphire sky.

"Stop, Grimm!" Drex gasped. "Stop!"

He came to a halt and looked down at his lover. "What's the matter, Drex?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just this..."

Standing on tiptoe, she planted a sweet, warm kiss on his lips, and he took her into his arms, giving himself over to the moment. Paramount among his swelling emotions was a glow of deep gratitude: how good it felt to be running free in this scene of bucolic beauty, feeling the soft breeze ruffling his hair; how pleasant to be free from all worry and responsibility; how blissful to be alone in this glorious field with the woman he loved!

"Are you awake, Questor Grimm?" Her voice was soft and inviting, and he savoured its heady melody.

"I don't know," he admitted, gazing into her large, dreamy eyes, "and I don't care. I don't want to be anywhere else or with anyone else. We are all that matters in this world right now. The Guild and the House can go to Perdition for all I care."

"Just relax," Drex said in a breathy whisper. "You will be all right..." The meadow began to spin gently around him, and he laughed, turning with it and holding Drex at arms'

length so that her legs flew out behind her. Faster and faster he spun, until he

could feel Drex's fingers begin to slip from his grasp. With growing panic numbing his bones, he realised he could not stop this mad, accelerating dance, and lost his hold on his beloved's hands. She flew away into the darkening sky, her arms and legs flailing as she disappeared into the distance, laughing as she did so. Still he rotated, feeling the corn growing and ensnaring his ankles. The sky was now a deep black, blacker than the darkest night, but the field was still lit in a glorious, golden light. The corn reached the level of his chest, winding around his torso and constricting his breathing. I can't ... BREATHE! Help me ... help me, somebody...

He saw a widening, white line descend from the ebon sky, reaching to the distant horizon, and he heard a booming voice that shook the ground.

"Your doom ... your doom ... your doom..."

The voice had a metronomic, hypnotic cadence, and Grimm felt himself drifting towards the glaring chasm, fighting for breath, his sight dimming.

"The day's travails are behind you, but the struggle begins anew!" The words of his former tutor, Magemaster Crohn, spoken as Grimm awoke after his Outbreak, burst into his head: a loud, staccato shout.



\* \* \* \*

Grimm drew a desperate, whooping breath and jerked his eyes open, clenching his fists in blind panic. Yourdoomyourdoomyourdoom... He realised that this ominous chant was the sound of his own heartbeat pounding in his ears.

He saw nothing for a moment, as various pains clamoured for his attention, each fighting for supremacy. Grimm drew another deep breath, which he found a little easier this time, despite the tightness in his chest, and full awareness came to him.

He was looking into the drawn, worried

face of Sister Mercia, looming over him under an improvised canopy of sticks and broad leaves.

This is the real world, he told himself, a sharp pang of realisation spearing his heart. The world where Drex hates me, where there is pain, suffering and duty.

He squeezed his eyes closed, as if he could blot out the harsh reality of the mortal world, and he felt a single hot, bitter tear run down his right cheek.

"How are you feeling, Questor Grimm?"

Grimm sighed and opened his eyes again. "I hurt, Sister," he said in a dull monotone. "I suppose that is a good sign.

It's what life is all about, isn't it?"

Mercia smiled. "I was a little worried about you, Lord Mage. You drifted away from us for a while. You have been unconscious for a day and a half."

"And now I am back." The dull words fell from his mouth like lead pellets. He tried to sit up, but Mercia's small hand pushed him back onto the grass with gentle persuasion.

"Please don't try to move, Lord Mage. Your neck and lower spine may be damaged. Do they hurt?"

"No more than the rest of my body, Sister."

"I can administer Trina fumes, Questor Grimm. They should ease the pain." Mercia held out a small pouch he recognised only too well.

"No!" This time, Grimm overpowered his nurse and jerked himself into a sitting position, his eyes blazing. He had struggled under the iron grip of an all-consuming hunger for that herb and its antagonistic companion, Virion, too long to risk re-addiction now.

Mercia flinched and scurried backwards from the fury of his shout, but he held his hands out to her, his palms downwards in a placatory gesture.

Not daring to look her in the eye, he said, "I'm sorry, Sister. That pouch belongs to me. If you don't mind, I'd like it back."

"Why?" Mercia's voice was the barest of whispers.

"To remind me," he told her, his tone rueful as he raised his head back up. "To remind me of what it is to be alive."

Her frightened expression giving way to one of puzzlement, she extended the bag

again, her fingers limp. Grimm nodded and drew it away from her and placed it back around his neck, feeling a certain comfort in the familiar sensation of the rough pouch lying against his chest.

"Thank you, Sister."

"Please, Lord Mage; do not mention it. At least it seems that your spine is not badly damaged, although that was a foolhardy way to find out. Apart from pains in your head, arms and legs, how do you feel?"

"My chest feels tight, and I'm having a little trouble breathing," he said, and Mercia nodded.

"You have a couple of broken ribs, so I have bound your chest with tight bandages under your robes. Let me know if they impede your breathing too much."

"No, Sister, I can live with it—what, under my robes?" Grimm felt a hot frisson of embarrassment at the thought that this young nun might have seen him naked.

"I did not expose any more of your body than necessary," Mercia assured him. "All I needed to do was to expose your upper torso. You had a dislocated hip, but your friend, Tordun, dealt with that, under my instruction. I did not look; it would not have been seemly. I treated your other injuries, a collapsed lung and

internal bleeding, with some healing spells. By good fortune, neither of the spells required much power; for some reason, my energy is at a low ebb since the Prioress' demise. I thank the Names that they were successful, even though several castings were required. Sister Judan knows far more magic than I, but she has fled the Priory."

Well, that's no bad thing, Grimm thought, flexing his arms to test the limits of his battered body's mobility. Not too bad, he told himself, wincing as he felt a rib grate when he pressed his hands together. With Mercia's aid, he rose to his feet. His left hip felt stiff, and it sent a metallic, shooting pain up his spine as



he essayed a couple of cautious steps. However, after a few cautious experiments, he found that if he kept his leg straight, the discomfort was much reduced. This made his progress clumsy and inelegant; but, at least, it was bearable.

"The discomfort will remain for a few days," Mercia informed him, "but there is no reason why you should not make a full recovery. I recommend that you convalesce here for a week or so, and you will then be ready to resume your journey."

"I can't afford to stay here a week, Sister!" he expostulated. "I have a duty to report back to the Lord Dominie at

High Lodge!"

"Your friends are prepared to wait for as long as necessary," Mercia said, her tone soft and soothing. "I am sure your Dominie would not expect you to travel when incapacitated. Please; just rest here and allow your body to mend itself."

Grimm nodded slowly. "I suppose you're right, Sister."

"I know what you are thinking: you think the mighty Thorn Virias resisted me from the first, do you not? I assure you, this defiance is a most recent development. He has been telling me Guild and House secrets for years."

The words of Prioress Lizaveta, spoken before the Death-sickness struck, echoed in his head, and he shivered with sudden, eager anticipation. He had no reason to assume the old witch had been lying to him, and, if he could persuade Lizaveta's disembodied shade to confess, it might put an end to Lord Thorn's treachery. More than that, it might lead to a full pardon for his beloved grandfather!

"No, Sister," he said, locking her eyes with his fierce, implacable, Questor stare. "I cannot wait. I thank you for your diligent attention and your healing skill, but I must go to High Lodge with all speed." Despite her cries of protest,

Grimm pushed past Mercia and through the sackcloth flap at the large tent's side.

He hobbled a few steps, screwing his eyes half-shut at the glaring, golden spears of sunlight, and then stopped, as his eyes adjusted to the brightness.

Where once had stood the magnificent Priory, he saw a scene of utter devastation: a huge crater extended before him, with a few isolated stubs of stone rising from the ground like the remains of a rotted tooth. Only a single turret remained intact, a lone sentry over the destruction. His jaw dropped, and he stared at the vast, bleak expanse of rubble.

I did this, he thought. I, Grimm Afelnor, a blacksmith's boy, turned a mighty fortress into a heap of fallen stone...

For the first time, he realised the true extent of the terrifying power a Questor held in his head. The scene before him was ghastly, yet he could not tear his eyes from it.

I can do anything! I am power! I am a weapon! I am DESTRUCTION!

The proud, defiant shout thrust upwards from his subconscious mind, blazing into his forebrain, but Grimm tried to push it aside and deny it.

"This cannot be all I am," he muttered,

shaking his head, feeling as if he were teetering on the brink of a deep slough of despair. "I refuse to dedicate my whole life to death and ruin!" He became aware of a presence behind him, and he turned to see Sister Mercia looking at him with an impenetrable expression on her face. Was it one of pity? Hatred? Contempt? He could not tell.

"What are you thinking, Questor Grimm?" she asked in a soft, level tone. "Are you proud of your work here?"

He heard no condemnation in her voice; only a weary desire for knowledge; for understanding.

"I'm scared, Sister," he confessed, trying

to make sense of his warring emotions. "I'm awe-stricken. So much destruction..."

"But are you proud?" she pressed him. "Thirty-eight good, blameless women are dead; women who devoted their lives to a cause they thought was right. Some of them died in my arms, and I was powerless to help them."

Grimm thought long and hard. Did Mercia want him to confess to shame? In truth, he felt none.

"I am sorry for their deaths," he said, with a catch in his voice. "I mean that with all my heart, Sister. But I will not lie to you; I am not ashamed. This place

was a home of evil, whether you see that or not. The foundations of the Priory were soaked in the blood of countless other tormented innocents, killed for no other reason than to give Prioress Lizaveta and her acolytes greater Geomantic power. I did not seek to kill those thirty-eight nuns; all I wanted was to free those poor, imprisoned souls, who numbered in the hundreds or thousands. Should I have turned a blind eye to their continuing suffering?

"I did not set out to raze the Priory. All I did was to draw the blood of the sacrificed from the earth. I could not have known that there was so much that its removal would undermine the very



foundations of the building. All I knew was that, once I had started, I couldn't stop. I just couldn't stop, Sister. All those anguished souls, crying for release ... so much pain, fear and death. I couldn't help myself! Must I be ashamed of that? I'm not a mindless murderer, Sister! I'm not."

He squeezed his eyes shut, his breathing fast, shallow and spasmodic, struggling to regain control over his rebellious emotions.

You're a Questor, Grimm Afelnor, whether you like it or not, he told himself. You're not supposed to have any damned emotions!

Drawing the deepest breath his tight bandages would allow, he opened his eyes again and met Mercia's gaze, his racing heartbeat steadying.

"No, Sister, I won't be ashamed. Not for you, and not for anyone. Because of me, thirty-eight women are dead, and I regret that. At least their spirits are free to find their eternal home. But, also because of my actions, countless tortured spirits are free from decades of torment and anguish. If I were confronted by the same situation, knowing what I know now, I'd do the same thing again.

"I would, Sister; accept that or not, as you will, but believe it. I'm sorry, but I'm not ashamed. Hate me if you must, but

don't despise me. I may be ... I am a killer and a destroyer. But I'm no murderer." He saw moisture beading the young woman's red-rimmed eyes. She looked so helpless and vulnerable as she stood before him, trembling and forlorn, that he longed to take her in his arms and comfort her. Nonetheless, he restrained himself, awaiting her judgement.

"I have been here since I was a little girl," she whispered, so that Grimm had to strain his ears to hear her words over the soft moan of the morning breeze. "I have known no other life.

"I am scared, too, Questor Grimm. All my life, I have fought to save lives, not

to destroy them, and your words trouble me. But I believe you speak the truth as you see it, even though I may never understand. I have seen much death in my life, although never in such profusion, and I have always fought against it as best I could."

The young nun shook her head, beautiful even in her misery. "The world is complex and frightening, Lord Mage, and I have seen so little of it."

Grimm clenched his fists, keeping them at his side as his Questor training reasserted itself.

"I must go back to High Lodge," he said, his voice a harsh monotone. "I have a

Quest to requite. Where are my companions?"

"They are in Anjar," Mercia said, a few fugitive tears leaving grubby tracks on her pale cheeks. "Some of the Sisters require more care than I could give them, and your friends have been ferrying them to Anjar for help. Others have left to make their way in the world."

She sniffed, as if trying to draw tears back into her eyes.

"Now ... now, there is only you and I. General Quelgrum said he would return tonight. I presume you will leave with him. He has a wagon, now, and he and

Sergeant Erik have retrieved some of your possessions from that haunted cemetery, including some of their death-Technology. They are strong now. If you must go, I cannot stop you."

Grimm nodded. "I don't have any choice in the matter, Sister. I dare not stay here any longer. I'm sorry." A long, uncomfortable silence descended like a grey cloud over the mage and the nun. She really is very pretty...

For the space of a few heartbeats, Grimm thought of his imaginary gambol with dream-Drexelica, but with Mercia in his beloved's place.

Drex hates me now ... no! he thought,

dismissing the idyllic image. I'll bring her back to me, whatever it takes. If it takes me a lifetime, I'll bring her back!

"I'm sorry, Sister Mercia," he repeated, "but I cannot bring your friends back. I thank you for your diligent attentions, with all my heart, but I will not apologise for their deaths, dear Sister. It couldn't be helped."

She snorted, and Grimm shrugged, his wayward feelings now back under his full control. He looked down at himself. His robes might be tattered and stained, but he took comfort in the blue glow from his Guild ring: Granfer's ring.

Only one thing was missing. Drawing

himself to his full height, despite the burning pain in his left hip, Grimm muttered "Redeemer; come to me."

As he felt his faithful, hand-carved staff slap into his waiting hand, the ground groaned and trembled, sending a dense cloud of yellow dust into the air with a sound like thunder. Now, he was complete. Names help Lord Thorn now! he thought.

"If my presence bothers you, Sister Mercia," he said, "I'll leave you and make my way up Merrydeath Road as best I can. I'm sure any town around here would welcome the services of a healer as talented and dedicated as you. Thank you, and goodbye. You don't have to



tolerate my presence a moment longer."

Ignoring the pain, he began to limp away to the north, turning his back on the devastation he had caused.

"Lord Mage, please wait!"

The nun's voice was so plaintive and desperate that it stopped Grimm in his tracks, sending another shooting pain through his lower body.

"Yes, Sister Mercia?"

"May I come with you ... please? I do not want to be alone."

"Are you sure, Sister? I may have to kill

again; you appreciate that, don't you?" The mage made his tone rough; almost brutal. "After all, that's what I am: a human weapon. I don't have to like it, but I won't deny it."

She sighed. "You risked your life for me and some of the other nuns. They have all left, leaving me with you. I owe you nothing, and you owe me nothing. But will you take me with you?" If this girl wants to come with us, how can I deny her? he thought. My heart is with Drex alone ... if she hasn't run away already.

"Very well, Sister," he said, trying not to reveal the growing anguish in his pelvis. "Just don't try to use any Geomancy on me."

"I do not think I have any magic left, Lord Mage," she said. "Please wait with me. I do not want to be left alone."

With some difficulty, Grimm sat down on a grassy hillock. After a few minutes, Mercia sat opposite him, her eyes wary. The Questor looked at the sky and sighed. A long wait might lie ahead of him, but he had no intention of flirting with this young woman, however great the temptation. Nonetheless, the stark ruins of the Priory seemed to mock Grimm's earlier proud defence of his calling, denying him the inner peace he sought. Every cold stone block seemed to cry, 'Murderer!'

Come on, Quelgrum; get me out of here, he thought. I just want to finish this cursed Quest.

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## **Chapter 30: Resolutions**

Grimm sat on the hillock next to Sister Mercia, regarding the shattered ruins of Rendale Priory. He still found it hard to believe that such devastation could have been wrought by one man alone. Dotted among the grass sward around the tumbled mass of stone, he saw numerous brown mounds; the last resting places of the blameless women who had died during the Priory's sudden collapse. According to Sister Mercia, thirty-eight

nuns had lost their lives in the disaster. Grimm could not bring himself to count them, for fear that she might have underestimated the total; thirty-eight innocent lives on his conscience seemed more than enough to bear.

"Are we just going to sit like this until the General and your other companions return from Anjar, Lord Grimm?" Mercia demanded, dragging Grimm's attention back into the world of the living.

"Perhaps it is best," he said, feeling a catch in his throat. "I know how you must hate me." He did not trust himself to say more.

"Do you want me to hate you?" she asked.

"You have that right," he said, not daring to turn around to meet her eyes. "Perhaps I deserve your hatred. I killed your friends and destroyed your home." In an attempt to cover his swelling emotions, his voice became rough and harsh. "That's what I do ... I kill people. I'm good at it, it seems."

"Do you enjoy destruction and death?" she pressed him, and he felt annoyance rising within him, to add to his inner turmoil.

He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but his throat felt as if an orange had

become stuck in it, blocking the passage of air. He waved his hands in a helpless, vague gesture.

"Enough!" He forced the single word through the blockage, hearing the tremor within it. "You hate me; I know ... I should be ... Oh, Mercia!"

At last, the long-dammed tears burst through their barrier, and the mage slumped into a sodden lump of misery, his shoulders shaking with the effort to regain outward composure. He felt the young nun's arm curl around him, drawing him close to her. He did not resist ... he could not resist.

"I do not hate you," she whispered,

rubbing him between his shoulder-blades with a comforting hand. "I might, if I thought you did not care about what you did, or if it had been a deliberate act. Now, I know it was all a tragic accident. I recognise what the Reverend Mother and the Score did to hundreds of innocent girls: they brutalised them, turned them into unseeing, unfeeling automata. That had to be stopped.

"You took the decision to end it, at serious risk to your own life, even though you could have walked away from the Priory.

"That took moral courage, Questor Grimm, and you did not flinch from it. There were over two hundred and fifty



women in the Priory, living a life that was no life. You freed more than two hundred and ten of them, the vast majority. You owed them nothing after the way you were treated. I did despise you at first, but I despise you no longer. You are a good man, Lord Grimm. I know that now.

"There; do not try to speak. Just release your grief and hurt. Let it all out." Grimm's face burrowed into Mercia's neck, feeling the stiff calico of her wimple bristling against his feverish brow.

It felt so good, so right to let go of his warring emotions ... perhaps too right...

"No," he said, drawing away from Mercia with a shudder and throwing off her arm. "That's enough." With his eyes squeezed shut, he drew a series of deep, shivering breaths and pushed the pain deep inside him, screwing it into a tight, inert parcel, as Magemaster Crohn had taught him to do so long ago. The pain, anger and confusion began to fade, just as Crohn had counselled him.

"I am sorry, Sister," he said, meeting her anxious gaze with no difficulty now. "I didn't mean to push you away like that. I feel much better now."

"Am I now speaking to Grimm, the man, or to the Guild Questor?" Mercia's tone was cool.

"I don't know," he confessed. "Nonetheless, you are speaking to me, as I now am. I am a human being, but I am a Questor, too. And I ... I like you, perhaps too much. I have another; whose name is Drexelica. I'll never feel comfortable to come too close to another girl."

"It is not good to bury your feelings so," Mercia whispered, but she kept her distance.

"Perhaps so," he admitted, "but it is a part of who I am."

As Mercia opened her mouth to speak, Grimm heard a distant rumbling, increasing in volume by the moment, and

he raised his right hand to stem her words.

"What is it?" she asked, her face blank.

"Unless I am mistaken," he said, "that is the sound of an approaching wagon." He stood up, wincing as his injured hip sent a bolt of pain up his spine, and he saw a growing cloud of dust from the direction of Merrydeath Road.

"I am not mistaken. That must be General Quelgrum."

Grimm caught sight of the seven gleaming rings on Redeemer, his hard-won symbols of rank as a Guild Mage. Regarding the staff with near-reverence,

he took firm hold and all remaining traces of guilt and worry flew from him, as if a cool, refreshing breeze had blown them away. Thank you, Redeemer, he thought, I won't forget where my duty lies again. For a few moments, he wondered if Redeemer were somehow enforcing Guild dogma on him, but he then realised it was just restoring the indomitable sense of purpose he had felt when he had carved the staff, imbuing it with his personality as he did so.

Now, he did not need to pretend to feel better; he did.

"Thank you for your kind words and support, Sister Mercia. I really appreciate them," he said.

"However, I do have a mission to fulfil ... three missions, in fact," Grimm added, thinking of his disgraced grandfather and his bewitched lover. "I intend to succeed in all of them." Mercia said nothing as the wagon came into view on the long, straight road, drawn by four horses. Then, she leaned close to him and whispered, "I am afraid, Questor Grimm."

"Don't worry, Sister," Grimm said. "You will be in the company of a Seventh Rank Questor, a mighty demon and three accomplished warriors. Only the most foolhardy of bandits would seek to attack us."

"It is not that which scares me, Lord Mage," Mercia replied. "I ... am seventeen years old, and I was sent here at the age of six. I know nothing of the larger world. I wish to travel with you and your companions because you seem so confident and accustomed to travel..." She shook her head. "No, I am being foolish. It is unfair of me to lay my burdens on you."

"Not at all, Sister," Grimm said. "I was sent to Arnor House at the age of seven and imprisoned in the Scholasticate until I was sixteen. I understand just how you feel, believe me. I can tell you, from personal experience, that you will soon overcome your fears. The world is a

fascinating and lively place, and you will soon make friends. Have you given any thought as to what you will do?" Mercia gave her head a vigorous, earnest shake. "Not truly. All I know is healing. I imagine I will have to offer my services to some physician or apothecary."

"Would you like to carry on to the city of Crar?" Grimm asked. "There is a very gentle, kind old man there, by the name of Querl. He is the physician for the whole city, and he works very hard. I'm sure he would be very grateful for the services of a young and talented healer like you."

"Do you think so?" Mercia's face still



bore the lines of worry, but they seemed shallower now.

"I'm certain of it," the mage said. "I'll arrange a meeting as soon as we get there; I promise."

"Thank you, Questor..."

The remainder of Mercia's words were drowned by the clatter of horses' hooves and the rumble of the wagon as it rolled into the Priory courtyard.

"I just hope I can convince General Q that this is a good idea," Grimm shouted.

"I do not think you will have to worry about that," the nun called back. "He ...

he seems to like me." The wagon drew to a halt ten feet away from Grimm, and the General leapt off it, wearing a broad smile on his face.

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## **Chapter 31: Arguments**

Loras heard a now-familiar clanking announcing the opening of the cell door, which swung aside to reveal Questor Olaf. The former mage sat up on his bed, feeling a rush of relief when Olaf addressed him.

"The Conclave awaits you, Master Loras."

Now, Loras vowed, he would have his say, no matter what the members of the Guild court might do to restrain him. He stood to allow Olaf to unfasten his chains from the stud in the centre of the cell floor, trying not to smile.

If they want to quote laws and regulations at me, they will find that I can play their little game, too, he thought.

His former friend stood up, clapping a hand to the small of his back and wincing as he did so.

"Even a Seventh Rank Questor cannot avoid the depredations of age, eh, Lord Mage?"

"Nonsense," Olaf grumbled. "I am only eighty-seven years old. I must have sat too long by an open door, or some such."

Loras raised an eyebrow, but he said nothing. He knew Olaf was at least ten years older than that. Mages might on average live far longer than Seculars, but they were by no means immune to the passage of time.

"Good luck, Questor Loras," Magemaster Crohn called from the opposite bed, and he was echoed by Magemaster Kargan and Questor Dalquist. Loras acknowledged them with a courteous nod and a ghost of a smile.

"You're not to accord the prisoner that

title!" Olaf snapped, rounding on Crohn.

"Did I just hear you utter a vulgar, Secular contraction, Questor Olaf?" Kargan asked, sitting up, his face contorted in mock-horror. "Surely not!"

Crohn and Dalquist smiled, and Olaf's cheeks reddened.

"You must be hard of hearing, Mentalist Kargan. This often accompanies enhanced age." Kargan burst into a deep guffaw, and Olaf rose to his full height.

"Be silent, prisoner! Have you forgotten that you are on trial for your lives? This is a serious matter, and I will not have it treated with juvenile jocularity!

Remember that your every word here is heard and recorded."

Both Crohn and Kargan stiffened, and their smiles fell from their faces. Loras, too, realised he had almost forgotten the gravity of the charges levelled against him and his fellow prisoners. He had begun to think of his trial as a contest between him and his accusers; a game of skill and cunning. I have heard of 'prison madness', he thought, when men succumb to the pressures of long confinement and lose their hold on reason. I think I have just seen its spectre; I was looking forward to baiting and berating the Conclave, without a thought as to the possible consequences for all of us.

"My humblest apologies, Lord Mage," he said, his voice little more than a whisper. "Please forgive our puerile foolishness. It will not recur, I assure you."

"I apologise with all my heart, Questor Olaf," Crohn said, rubbing his left temple. "Our asinine behaviour was unforgivable."

Kargan and Dalquist did not speak, but their abject expressions spoke for them.

"This Conclave will be treated with due respect," Olaf growled. "I will tolerate no more buffoonery." With that, he tugged Loras' chains. "Come with me, prisoner. We must not keep the Conclave

waiting." As the smith stumbled behind his warder, he began to rehearse his speech to the court. Outright confrontation would, he now realised, be treated as contempt; a more circumspect approach seemed eminently desirable.

\* \* \* \*

"Enter!"

Loras, freed of his fetters, stepped into the hall, feeling his heart beating faster and the hairs standing to attention on his arms, legs and back. He knew he might have only one chance to get his point across; one chance to have his voice heard. He did not want to waste it.



He heard a soft click as the door closed behind him.

"The Conclave admits the prisoner, Loras Afelnor, of the village of Lower Frunstock," Rithel intoned; the officious, hectoring Voice who had so badgered him two days before.

Bang-bang!

"The Conclave is in session, by order of the Lord Dominie of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges," Rithel declared, unseen in the shroud of darkness that hid Loras' accusers from him. "I request permission to read from the closing records of the Conclave's

last session with the prisoner, Lord Dominie."

Loras knew his chance might be slipping away from him; as he remembered it, the Conclave had ended his last session with a concerted call for the death sentence. He opened his mouth to speak, but Lord Horin's voice forestalled his incipient protest.

"The Chairman begs the Conclave's indulgence. After diligent reading of the moments of the previous session, I believe that certain Guild Laws of conduct may have been overlooked in the Conclave's desire for swift justice. The prisoner will be allowed to speak freely in his own defence, as required by

Guild Law 1.6.12."

Loras felt as if his pounding heart would leap from his chest, to jump around the floor like an angry, red frog. He felt sure that the hateful Rithel would spout some formal reason for why such a motion might be disallowed, but the Prosecutor held his tongue.

For some reason, Lord Horin seems to be on my side, thought Loras, hardly daring to breathe. They will not go against his wishes ... will they?

"Is there any counter-argument?"

A long moment passed, seeming like an age, before the unseen gavel rang out

again.

"So stipulated," Horin said. "The Conclave offers the prisoner the right to offer a defence for the charges laid against him, if any. Speak, prisoner."

Loras took a deep breath; so deep that he began to see bright sparkles behind his closed eyelids.

"The prisoner begs the honourable Conclave's indulgence," he said, opening his eyes. "As has been stipulated, Law 1.6.12 of our ... of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges may have been unwittingly overlooked. The prisoner respectfully

suggests that Guild Laws 28.1.19 and 1.6.14 also pertain."

Almost before the former Questor had finished speaking, Lord Horin said, "The Chairman moves that the prisoner's statement be entered into the record as fact. The Chairman also moves that the prisoner be allowed further freedom to continue in his defence, before unwitting transgressions of the Law are discussed."

"So moved," another, unseen Inquisitor grunted. Rithel held his counsel. Horin banged his gavel. "Prosecutor Rithel?"

Loras heard Rithel curse a little under his breath.

"So stipulated, Lord Chairman." The Prosecutor's words sounded as if they had been ripped from his mouth, and Loras suppressed a smile. Of course; the Conclave might pretend to be a democratic assemblage, but only a foolhardy mage, or one devoid of ambition, would go against the Dominie's wishes.

"Go ahead, prisoner ... if you must take up more of the Conclave's valuable time," the Prosecutor muttered.

"Thank you, Honoured Justice," Loras said.

He cleared his throat. "Before I begin, gentlemen, I wish to know in full the

charges against me, so that I can offer a pertinent defence. I have already been tried and convicted for the attempted murder of a Guild Prelate, but I have a right under Guild Law to hear the new charges against me."

"You were stripped of Guild membership, prisoner, as you well know," Rithel snapped. "You have no right—"

"Then why am I being tried according to Guild Law?" Loras demanded, clenching his fists. "This court has no powers over the affairs of Seculars!"

After a brief silence, the former Questor heard a sudden, frantic confusion of

mutters and whispers from behind the curtain of darkness. The only words he heard were "...damned House-lawyer..."; "...a mage or a Secular..."; and "...need a stipulation one way or the other..." As the hubbub came to an abrupt halt, Loras heard Dominie Horin's familiar drawl: "It is moved that the prisoner be granted temporary but full Guild status for the duration of this Conclave, and that that the trial be conducted in accordance with Guild Law. If found 'Not Guilty' on all charges, prior and present, this status will be confirmed. Should the prisoner be found 'Guilty', penalties will be assessed according to the dictates and severity of the Laws of the Guild."



"So moved."

"Prosecutor?"

"Stipulated, Lord Chairman," Rithel said, with a deep, theatrical sigh. Loras heard the rustle of a scroll being opened, and the Prosecutor said, in a dull monotone, "Charge One: that the prisoner did wilfully breach the conditions of his prior sentence on entering Guild demesnes—to wit, the grounds of Arnor House. Charge Two: that the—"

"I wish to offer a defence for the first charge, before others are discussed, Lord Chairman," Loras interrupted.

"This is intolerable!" Rithel mumbled, but he nonetheless confirmed the Dominie's seconded motion to allow this request.

"Speak, prisoner."

"Questor Loras," the smith said, suppressing a smile.

"What?"

"The Conclave has granted me full Guild status, Prosecutor," Loras said. "I should be addressed as either Questor Loras or as 'Firelord'."

"Your pardon, Questor Loras," Rithel growled, sounding as if he were

suffering from severe dyspepsia.

“Please offer your defence, if any, to the first charge.”

"Thank you, Honoured Justice," Loras said, in a courteous voice, emboldened by this minor but significant victory. "My defence is simple; in confirming that I held no Guild status from the time of my prior conviction, the Conclave has determined that I could not be held accountable for any breach of Guild Law."

Rithel's response was immediate and fiery; "It was a condition of your prior conviction, delivered before you were stripped of your Guild membership, pris

... Questor Loras!"

"It was not, Prosecutor Rithel," Loras shot back, his voice as smooth as the scarlet silk he wore. "The very first condition of my sentence was that I was hitherto stripped of all rights and status within the Guild. Feel free to consult the Arnor House records, if you doubt me. Only after that pronouncement, after I had been deprived of my Guild Ring, were subsidiary conditions pronounced. Since they were delivered only under Guild Law, I was no longer bound by them. I move that I be declared 'Not Guilty'

of this charge."

"You cannot 'move' anything," Rithel's disembodied voice intoned. "You are not a member of this Conclave!"

"I apologise, Brother Mage," Loras said. "I suggest that I be declared 'Not Guilty' in regard of this charge."

"Your defence is noted, Questor Loras," Lord Horin said. "What is the next charge, Prosecutor Rithel?"

"Charge Two: that Questor Loras did, with malice aforethought—"

"My apologies, Lord Chairman, gentlemen of this Conclave," Loras said in a firm, loud voice. "I respectfully wish to decline that any further charges

be heard until the question of my Guild status and, therefore, my culpability at the time of the alleged offences, is defined. This may be of primary importance to my defence."

"Really, Lord Chairman!" Prosecutor Rithel expostulated. "This is becoming a bear garden! First, the accused claims Guild rights, and then he throws Guild responsibilities back in our faces! I move that a decision be made as to the general approach of this defence. If approved, this defence puts all the charges levied against this man at nought!"

"So moved," another voice growled.

"So stipulated," Horin said, his voice calm and almost bored. "Point of personal privilege: I declare Questor Loras' request, and all defences based upon it, in order. Having noted the charge sheet, I move that the prisoner, Loras Afelnor, be declared 'Not Guilty' on the first charge. The evidence is clear; since Questor Loras was not a member of the Guild at the time of the alleged offence, he cannot be convicted by this Conclave."

Loras' heart soared. He had expected a hard struggle, with every statement debated and every declaration attacked. What he had not expected was total exoneration by the Chairman of the

Conclave. However, he did not dwell too long on this victory—he would not allow his fellow defendants to shoulder all the blame.

"Lord Chairman!" Rithel exploded. "Surely, you are not going to exculpate this ... this damned, bloody traitor? He tried to kill a Guild Prelate, in the person of Lord Geral, by his own admission!"

"I have already been sentenced for that offence, Prosecutor Rithel!" Loras shouted. "Under Guild Law, having admitted my guilt, I cannot be tried for the same transgression again, unless new evidence comes to light."



"You admitted your guilt to this Conclave, in your own words!"

"I admitted it at my first Conclave, too, Prosecutor." Loras fought his rising anger. "It is not new evidence; no further liability pertains. What is new evidence is that I now disavow culpability in that admitted act, and I wish to call witnesses in my defence: witnesses who may be able to prove my assertions. I call upon the Conclave to consider evidence that may overturn my previous conviction."

"You and the other defendants attacked Lord Thorn, Prelate of Arnor House, and you sought to depose him, Questor Loras! Do you deny this?"

"I do not, Prosecutor Rithel. I wish to show that my erstwhile friend, Lord Thorn, was intimately involved in my former disgrace, and, therefore, guilty of a greater crime. My fellow defendants will present evidence attesting to this. It was for this reason—"

Bang-bang-bang!

"You may not speculate on the evidence of any other prisoner at this time," Horin declared, "or of the defences that they may or may not offer, Questor Loras. Is that clear?" Loras nodded and bowed. "That is quite clear, Lord Chairman. I apologise for my reckless words. However, I wish to state that I believe

these men blameless of the crimes for which they are held." Scratch-scratch...

"Your statement is noted," Horin drawled. "May we hear the next charge, please, Prosecutor Rithel?"

"Thank you, Lord Chairman. Charge Two: that Loras Afelnor did, with malice aforethought, scheme and conspire to bring about the overthrow of the lawful Prelate of Arnor House; to wit, Thorn Virias, called

'The Iron-willed'. This is an act of mutiny. How plead you to this charge, Questor Loras?" The former mage knew he could offer once more the blanket defence that he was not a Guild man at

the time of the alleged act. However, he knew that doing so would throw full blame onto Kargan, Crohn and Dalquist. And yet, to plead guilty would annul his defence to the first charge. What to do? he wondered, his thoughts racing.

"I beg the Conclave's indulgence," he said, choosing his words with care. "Is it in order to request clarification on a point of law?"

After an interlude of muted muttering between the members of the court, Horin said, "It is, Questor Loras. Ask your question. As arbiter of this Conclave, I will answer you as best I can." Loras shuffled his feet and cudgelled his brain. "Thank you, Lord Chairman. Is it

permitted to introduce a counter-claim against another defendant? In other words: may an accusation of mutiny be overturned by evidence that the act was justified? Or is a Guild Prelate immune to any charge levied by a lesser mage?" He knew this might be a contentious issue; the Guild authorities would not wish to start a precedent to allow rank-and-file mages to depose their seniors. Nonetheless, the fury of the discussion between the members of the Conclave surprised him.

"Point of Order, Lord Chairman!"

"The presumptuous upstart!"

"Really, Lord Chairman!"

"This could provoke anarchy!"

The banging of Horin's gavel brought the frenzied arguments to an end in a moment.

"Such a defence would depend on many factors, Questor Loras." The Dominie's voice was calm and measured. "The main factor would be the severity of the counter-charge. The defendant would need to prove beyond all reasonable doubt that the said Prelate had demonstrated either severe mental disturbance, so that he was incapable of fulfilling his duties; or that he had committed, or conspired in, acts of treason endangering the security and integrity of the Guild. What is your

counter-charge?" Loras hesitated. He knew Thorn was already being held on some charge or other, but he suspected that it would be little more than one of failing to maintain order in Arnor House. The penalty, he suspected, would be light. He drew a deep breath.

"I accuse Lord Thorn Virias, Prelate of Arnor House, of High Treason," he said, to the accompaniment of a chorus of gasps and shouts.

The die is cast, thought Loras. Let us see how it lands.

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## **Chapter 32: Accusations**

Bang-bang!

"The Conclave shall come to order!" Horin shouted. "Can you substantiate this extraordinary charge, Questor Loras?"

"Lord Thorn colluded with one not of this Guild, to overthrow you, Lord Horin," Loras said. "In addition to this, he cavilled with this person to use Geomancy against a fellow mage, to bring about his unjust dismissal from the Guild."

After a moment of stunned silence, Rithel demanded, "Do you have the least scrap of evidence to support such ludicrous charges?"



"Not by myself, Prosecutor Rithel," Loras admitted. "However, I formally request that my fellow defendants be brought here to testify in our joint defence. Without this indulgence, justice may not be served.

"Lord Dominie, you stated during my prior session here that you had some knowledge of the witch in question. Did you know—"

Bang-bang-bang!

"Silence, prisoner!" Horin shouted. "Gentlemen of the Conclave, on a Point of Personal Privilege, I request your indulgence to hear this defendant's testimony in camera. The evidence may

be prejudicial to Guild security, and I feel that only I am competent to judge it. May I prevail upon you all to adjourn to the antechamber?"

The Conclave erupted in furor. Some members argued that Loras should be required to testify in iron chains, at least, but Horin was obdurate.

"I am not defenceless," he said. "This room is surrounded by a ward against the use of any but the most passive of Minor Magics. That is why the defendants are allowed to stand here unfettered, and it should suffice even against the most powerful Questor magic. I am armed with my Mage Staff, and the prisoner cannot summon his

own. Kindly leave the room at once."

Despite a few final, grumbling words of dissent, Loras heard the fading rustle of robes and the decisive slam of a heavy door.

"We are alone, Questor Loras. Tell me what you know about Prioress Lizaveta." Loras squinted into the darkness. "Lord Chairman, I would feel more at ease talking to you if I could see you. Unless my memory is playing tricks on me, I believe Guild Law permits an accused mage to face his accusers."

Horin chuckled. "You are facing me, Questor Loras, even though you cannot see me. However, if you wish..."

Loras heard a few muttered syllables, and the green mage globes disappeared in the blink of an eye. After another brief spell-chant, the blackness fell like a heavy curtain released from its rail, to reveal a splendid, wood-panelled chamber, with no windows, and only two sets of doors. The centrepiece of the room was a large table in the shape of a horseshoe, with the ends closest to him. Behind the centre of the arc sat a calm-faced, ancient-looking man amidst a wild profusion of scrolls and papers, many of which had spilled onto the floor around him.

The former Questor felt surprised at Lord Horin's apparent age; of course,

most mages were old men by the time they reached the Seventh Rank, but Horin looked ancient. His forehead was deeply grooved, and the skin of his lower face hung in heavy jowls. Where most magic-users resorted to magic to hide the signs of advancing age, it seemed that the Dominie did not bother with spells of vanity. Remembering protocol, Loras executed a deep bow, and he was pleased to find that his long-ago lessons in Courtly Graces had not deserted him.

"I do you honour, Lord Dominie," he said, as he straightened up.

"Yes, yes, yes," Horin said, waving his hands and donning a fussy pair of gold-

rimmed, half-moon spectacles. "I think we can do away with the formalities for now, Questor Loras. Come, approach me; I want to see the fabled Oathbreaker, and my eyesight is not what it once was." Loras stepped towards the older man with a measured pace, his eyes fixed on the black marble floor. He stopped a few steps away from the Dominie.

"No, Questor Loras; please come around to this side of the table." The smith complied, feeling a hot flush of self-consciousness at the Dominie's frank, appraising stare, but he locked his eyes on Horin's in any case. It would be the height of disgrace for a Questor to be

stared down by a mere Specialist, regardless of his status.

"You do not look like a monster to me, Brother Mage," the Dominie drawled, at last. "Please sit down. We have much to discuss."

Loras obeyed Horin, sinking into a comfortable, leather chair with some gratitude.

"Do you like wine, Questor Loras?" Horin asked, lifting a half-full bottle of a pale liquid from the table.

"It is Amber Pellurian; a very good year, too, I might add."

Loras shook his head. "In case you had forgotten, Lord Dominie, I am on trial for my life. My mind is on things other than alcohol."

Horin filled the goblet in front of him, raised it up and took an appreciative sip before replacing it.

"Of course, Brother Mage; a pity."

The Dominie cleared his throat.

"I have suspected for some time that your earlier conviction might be unreliable. Your prior record speaks against it, and I have recently experienced Prioress Lizaveta's powers at first hand—I was scarcely able to



resist them.

"Your grandson, Questor Grimm, was of great aid in ejecting the Prioress and her cohorts from High Lodge. I rewarded him with his seventh ring in recognition of this." Loras' heart surged. "Lord Dominie, how is Grimm? I have not seen him for two years."

"Questor Grimm is undertaking a special Quest for me, Questor Loras. I gave him the mandate to eliminate this woman's pernicious Order's influence in its entirety, by whatever means he deems fit.

"The only information I have received from my Secular agent in Rendale is that

the Priory lies in ruins; I therefore expect Questor Grimm's triumphant return very soon."

Loras yearned to see Grimm again, dressed in his Questor finery, his staff adorned with the seven prestigious gold rings. He daydreamed of greeting his grandson at the entrance of High Lodge in his own silken robes, a full mage once more.

"Now, to business," Horin said, calling Loras' attention back to the real world. "I wish to see you exonerated, Questor Loras. However, Guild Law constrains even me, even if I have the leeway to bend it a little to my own advantage.

"The essential thread of your argument seems to revolve around Prioress Lizaveta's former influence on you. However, you and your comrades can only prevail if we can link her influence to Prelate Thorn; otherwise, the charge of mutiny will be difficult to overturn."

Loras took a deep breath. "She is Thorn's mother," he said. "She ordered him to orchestrate my disgrace and subsequent dismissal from the Guild. He protested, but he seemed unable to resist her influence. Ever since that day, he has been dancing to her tune, so that one day he may become Dominie at her behest."

Horin's rheumy, blue eyes widened. "You speak as if you know this as a fact,

Questor Loras. Can you prove any of it?"

Loras shrugged. "That may be up to you to discover, Lord Dominie. Until very recently, I believed in my guilt and culpability with all my heart, and I considered Thorn my staunchest friend. However, Mentalist Kargan invoked a spell he called 'Bledel Soulmaster's Temporal Divinatory Conjunct'. He actually showed me—"

"I have heard of this spell," Horin declared, interrupting him. "It is a Schedule Nine spell, forbidden to mages without prior written permission from the Presidium. Several High Lodge Mentalists have attempted the spell; all

failed. I rather doubt a mere House Mentalist could manage it. I consider it more likely that you were shown a simple Illusion. Is that not possible?" The smith cocked his head on one side, considering the Dominie's question in detail before shaking his head. "No, Lord Dominie; it is not. Mentalist Kargan's spell dislocated my soul from my body; I am still mage enough to recognise such a dislocation, and a naked soul cannot be gulled by Illusions or Glamours. What I saw was real.

"If you summon Mentalist Kargan to this chamber and persuade him to repeat the spell, a competent Scholar armed with a suitable grimoire could surely attest to

the spell's accuracy and authenticity. I saw the truth of my betrayal, without doubt."

Horin rubbed his chin and leaned back in his chair. "It is not as simple as that, Questor Loras. If Mentalist Kargan has indeed cast a Schedule Nine spell, he has broken Guild Law. I could not ignore that, and the Presidium would be unlikely to agree to a demonstration.

"The word of an accused man alone bears little weight here; it would not be accepted as proof. As for Lizaveta being Thorn's mother, that means little enough on its own." Horin took another sip of wine from his goblet, his expression distant and troubled.

"We need something better," he mumbled.

Loras almost gasped as blazing awareness came to him: Lizaveta almost trapped him! I would wager any odds that only Grimm's skills saved him, and he dare not admit that! He would lose face in the eyes of the Presidium, leaving him open to any ambitious mage's challenge. He does not want the truth; he wants a political excuse for condemning Thorn.

The former Questor had not engaged in the darker side of Guild politics for several decades, but he had not forgotten the most important rules: deniability,

distance and misdirection. Literal truth did not matter.

"Lord Horin," Loras said, causing the Dominie to snap out of his reverie and meet his intense gaze. "Is it a necessary condition of this trial that Lord Thorn be exonerated?" Horin shook his head. "I believe Thorn is as guilty as you said, Questor Loras. Were it up to me, you and your fellow defendants would be freed in a heartbeat. However, I must not appear capricious, and I dare not declare many more Points of Personal Privilege.

"I need something concrete, not mere hearsay."



Loras almost smiled. The truth was unimportant; what mattered was the semblance of truth; something that would ring true.

This was a game he knew well.

"Have you seen Lord Thorn's ... personal Questor, Lord Horin?" Horin shuddered. "I have. The poor lad is confined in an iron-walled cell. He is too dangerous to allow him to run about at will. He is powerful and maniacal."

"Is he charged with anything?"

"Yes," Horin replied. "Thaumaturgic assault against seven High Lodge officials. Three are in a critical

condition, and one is not expected to survive."

Loras nodded and bowed his head for a moment. "I pray for them all, Lord Dominie. I have faced the boy in Questor combat, and I know well his power. I tried to reason with him, but his only response was

'I serve only Lord Thorn'."

"The boy is plainly insane," Horin agreed, rubbing his chin. "However, that is a poor argument to condemn a member of the Presidium."

"It is part of a pattern, Lord Dominie," Loras insisted. "As I understand it from

Magemaster Kargan, a Neophyte Questor in Arnor Lodge became insane after three months of training, and he killed the Senior Magemaster."

"Ah, yes; poor Urel." Horin sighed. "Alas, in his zeal, he pushed a neurotic Neophyte too far. The Ordeal is severe, but necessarily so, of course, you, as a Questor, must acknowledge that. It seems that Senior Magemaster Urel misjudged his Neophyte's stability."

Loras shook his head. "After three months of my Ordeal, Lord Dominie, my tutor, Magemaster Karas, criticised my handwriting, the condition of my robes, my tardiness; irksome, yes, but not yet enough to enrage me. Every charity

Student often faces worse treatment.

"If angry words were enough to unhinge this boy, surely Magemaster Urel would have noticed long before. I knew Urel as a gentle and understanding soul when he was a Neophyte." Horin cleared his throat and shrugged. "Questor Loras, High Lodge has no Scholasticate and no Questors. Although a few Presidium members are Questors, every member of this Conclave comes from a wealthy family.

"Your argument will not sway them one iota. You and they are separated by an immeasurable gulf." Loras frowned. "I believe Magemasters Crohn and Kargan,

and Questor Dalquist, will swear that Lord Thorn has perverted the Questor Ordeal, so as to produce Questors at a greater rate, regardless of the risk," he said. "This is so that Arnor House and he, as its representative, can gain greater status within High Lodge.

"Thorn is planning to supplant you, man!"

Horin scowled and picked up his gavel and, for a moment, Loras thought the Dominie would throw it at him. However, the older man drew a deep, shuddering breath and replaced it on the table.

"I am surrounded by people looking for

the least sign of weakness in my decisions or actions,” he said.

“Few men ascend to the Presidium without such ambitions. Some are hand-picked by me for their devotion to the Guild, but these are few and far between. Much of my time is spent in discovering the intrigues against me, Questor Loras.

"Of course I know Thorn is plotting to overthrow me. The main reason I prefer to act against him now is that he has only now shown his hand.

"I believe what you say, Brother Mage. However, you need to convince the Conclave members, too. Proving that a

few pauper Neophytes were maltreated will not do, I promise you." Loras groaned, closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair, massaging the back of his neck. I felt so sure I understood Guild politics, he thought, but I forgot the low regard in which charity mages are held; even those of the Seventh Rank. I was foolish to consider Horin as an ally; he seeks to enhance his popularity by destroying a House Prelate—who, after all, is only a damned pauper—and freeing a pair of valuable, wealthy Specialists. How better to show his power and boost his reputation within the Presidium?

I am just a pawn in his game; if it comes

to a crisis, I will just be surrendered to 'justice', as will Questor Dalquist.

Nonetheless, Horin seems to need me to help him. He wants to dethrone Thorn; I must play on that need. It is time to increase the stakes.

He clasped his hands together, opened his eyes and sat up straight in his chair, looking the Dominie straight in the eyes.

"I understand, Lord Dominie; I am just a worthless beggar to the Presidium, and I cannot change that. Why do you not just convict me now, and save time? The Conclave members will surely applaud your decision."



Horin's eyes narrowed, and his mouth tightened into a thin slit, his lips whitening. For a few moments, Loras felt as if his very life were being weighed in an invisible balance. Horin sighed. "You try my patience, Questor Loras. I thought, perhaps foolishly, that you had a more potent argument than maltreatment of Neophyte Questors. If this is your sole testimony, it is worthless." Loras nodded. "I am in your hands, Lord Dominie."

Now is the time, he thought, crossing his arms over his chest as the senior mage raised his gavel. If Lord Dominie Horin wants 'politics', perhaps it is best to give him some.

"Did you enjoy your amorous interlude with the sweet Prioress, Horin?" he asked, smiling. The gavel wavered in the air.

"What in the Names do you mean, Loras?" Horin demanded, his eyes hooded. "The witch tried to work her wiles on me, and I defeated her. That is all there is to the matter. There was no 'amorous interlude', as you choose to put it."

Nonetheless, the gavel did not yet fall.

He is wondering what I have against him, thought Loras, and he worries what the other Conclave members may think of him.

"Let us not play games, Horin," he said. "I, too, suffered Lizaveta's attentions, when I was much younger and she was still comely. I remember the little touches; the breathless sighs; the fluttering lashes ... I needed all my Questor power to resist her. I am sure you know all about that.

"Nonetheless, I would feel forced to relate my own lurid struggles with Lizaveta, were I pressed for evidence. Of course, we Questors, peasants as we are, are renowned for our indomitable internal strength and destructiveness, if for little else. Perhaps you would like to amuse the Conclave by telling them how you defeated Lizaveta. I feel sure your

persuasive words as Dominie will sway them far more than my lurid, detailed revelations as a mere Seventh Level Questor would ever do.

"After all, I am only a worthless pauper, am I not?"

Horin placed the gavel back on its little bowl, his eyes hooded

Now I have the Dominie's interest at last, Loras thought, and he began to marshal his thoughts.

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## **Chapter 33: An Indifferent Vintage**

"Is this blackmail, Questor Loras?"

Loras shrugged. "If you wish to use such an emotive phrase, Lord Dominie, who am I to argue? Were my fellow defendants and I exonerated, of course..."

Horin lay back in his leather-bound chair, regarding the former Questor with a new wariness. He raised his wineglass to his lips but put it back down, untested.

"Even a little mud sticks, Lord Dominie," Loras continued, still fixing Horin's gaze and shrugging again.

"Even if I am condemned, I have the right to a brief last statement ... and I

will insist on it, Brother Mage."

He hesitated for just the right amount of time.

"On the other hand, my dear Lord Horin, you could always call on a few favours and Points of Personal Privilege to assure Lord Thorn's condemnation; nonetheless, I will not be a part of it. As a mere beggar-boy, my word is worthless in the sight of your good friends, is it not?

"However, people are wont to talk, are they not?"

Horin's face turned the colour of parchment, and his eyes bulged.

After a brief pause to allow his words to sink in, Loras continued. "However, perhaps we can come to an agreement more amenable to both of us, Lord Dominie."

Horin cocked his head on one side, his top lip wrinkled in an expression of distaste. "How ... how much do you want, Questor?" he said, curling his top lip.

Loras laughed. "Why do people see money as the answer to all problems?" he asked rhetorically, with a wry shake of the head. "I am sorry, Lord Dominie. I have never been for sale, and I never shall be. No; I want the stain on my name expunged, and I want Lord Thorn to be

seen for what he is: a traitor to his House and to the Guild.

"You have been honest enough to show your opinion of Questors. The same men who risk their lives to enforce your decrees: the soulless weapons with which you threaten and chastise those you see as enemies; regrettable, brutish necessities; tools to be used at will.

"Is not Lord Thorn such a man? Why is it so difficult for you to convince the Conclave to take the word of two Questors and two Specialists against a single man—a Questor, as despised in his calling as the rest of us?"

Horin frowned and took a sip of wine.



"The matter is not so simple, Questor Loras. I spoke truth when I told you how Questors were regarded here, in general. However, many previous Dominies were once Questors, as you doubtless know; in fact, such mages outnumber Specialists in the office. That is not only because they are often seen as powerful leaders, but also because they have ascended to the rank of Prelate.

"Election to this rank frees a mage from any association with his former calling. Lord Thorn is no longer seen as a Mage Questor, or any other kind of mage; he is a House Prelate, elected by popular demand. The other members will not regard him as a Questor at all."

Loras sighed. "Even if he is a traitor?"

"Very well: you cannot accept evidence of his brutalisation of charity boys to bolster his case for accession to the Presidium. You will not allow Mentalist Kargan to enter evidence in the form of a forbidden spell that would prove Thorn's complicity in a grievous conspiracy.

"Why then did you so readily accept my defence regarding Prioress Lizaveta? Why did you not just dismiss it out of hand and be done with it? Was it because you feared others might guess the truth about you and she? You need not lie to me, Lord Dominie; I do not need Mage Sight to recognise the truth."

"Are you so keen to die, Questor Loras?" Horin demanded, scowling. "If that is what you wish, it can be arranged with ease!"

Loras shook his head, feeling his eyes moisten. "I wished that when I was arraigned; when I believed I had committed the foulest treason. When I was stripped of my powers and exiled from the Guild, I considered suicide. Only my marriage to Drima saved me from my growing, self-destructive urge. Now, I must think of my family. My life no longer belongs to me alone. I do not wish to die.

"I repeat my question: why have you

taken my side in this trial, if just to condemn me to death? I cannot believe it is just in the interest of justice: We have both played the game of Guild politics too long for me to believe that.

"I want to know everything, Lord Horin; if I am to die, I want to know why you have apparently fought so hard to keep me alive."

Horin leaned towards Loras, his former, angry expression softening. "I am an old man, Questor Loras. I have held this position for many years, and I want to hold on to it. Thorn represents a serious threat to me, and I believe he has betrayed his position. I also believe you were wrongly accused by him in your

youth; since you have been here, I have reviewed your prior record, as well as Thorn's, and I find your charges compelling.

"However, I must convince the other members of the Conclave. I cannot convict a House Prelate on Points of Personal Privilege; I would be seen as a weak man relying on his position. When you made your accusation, I thought you might have something I could use to depose Thorn. I have guided this trial as best I could to bring you to this stage and to silence Thorn, but what you have offered so far is useless."

Well, that is candid enough, thought

Loras, scratching the unaccustomed growth of hair on his head. Perhaps I am better off with blackmail, after all.

"As I told you, Lord Dominie, I knew the late Senior Magemaster Urel when he was a Neophyte," he said. The words, delivered in a dull monotone, came from his mouth without his conscious bidding.

"I seem to remember he was training as a Manipulant, or as some other Specialist, Lord Dominie. Urel was no pauper!"

Horin shrugged. "I met the man on a few occasions. As I recall it, he was a Mentalist," he said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"What difference would it make if I could show that Lord Thorn's reckless ambition caused Urel's death?

That Thorn then tried to cover up the Senior Magemaster's death by blaming him for the whole debacle?

That it was no tragic accident, but the result of Thorn's wilful, culpable negligence?" Horin sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, but he looked at least a little interested. That was a good sign.

"Such a charge might carry more weight," the head of the Guild admitted. "How would you prove it?" Loras threw his head back and drew a deep breath,

slowly exhaling before he met the Dominie's eyes again.

"It all depends, Lord Horin, on whether you are prepared to ... massage justice a little," he said.

"How much?" the senior mage demanded, his eyes like dark slits.

"As I said, a little, Lord Dominie; if you are willing to admit multiple testimonies, I am sure Magemasters Crohn and Kargan, both scions of wealthy families, will testify to the character of Urel. Magemaster Kargan told me of Senior Magemaster Crohn's doubts regarding Lord Thorn's innocence in this matter. Kargan, too, knew Urel



well; they were classmates."

Horin shook his head. "That is not enough, Questor Loras. It is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough to depose a House Prelate. I would like you to tell me just what your proposed 'massage of justice' involves."

Loras smiled without humour. "I suggest that you allow me to present my proposed defence concerning the maltreatment of Neophyte Questors, regardless of derision or contempt from the other Conclave members. It might aid you if you went along with them in this; to caution me as to the possible irrelevance of the testimony, but to admit it in the interests of pure, dispassionate

justice. In that way, you show yourself to be a strong, impartial leader."

Horin leaned a little closer. This time, Loras felt sure the Dominie's expression showed more than mild interest.

"Do continue, Questor Loras."

"I would quote Law ... whatever law it is that says an accused mage is allowed to summon others of the Guild to speak in his defence," Loras said.

"That is Law 1.6.13," Horin said, after consulting a compendious tome to his right.

"Thank you, Lord Dominie. Under Law

1.6.13, I will then call Magemasters Crohn and Kargan; you will apprise them of my testimony and allow them the same latitude you allowed me earlier. Introduce my testimony concerning the death of Urel as mere speculation and hearsay.

"If Magemaster Crohn does not react to this, I shall be very surprised." Horin drained his glass and licked his lips. "And if he does?"

Loras smiled. "I shall keep my evidence vague. I recommend that you press Magemaster Crohn for details as to the dates of the alleged events. I suggest that you adopt a very worried expression and hunt through your papers as you do so;

and then call an immediate recess." The Dominie slowly nodded his head. "I presume this is where the 'massaging' takes place," he said, his lips drawing back from his teeth in what might just have been an answering smile.

"Indeed, Lord Dominie," Loras replied. "You will then remember a long-forgotten letter from the poor man, warning you of Thorn's activities in this regard. Since it also covers other charges not covered by this trial, you would be quite justified in not revealing it in full to the Conclave."

"How can I justify the fact that I did not remember this letter at once?" Horin

asked. The Questor shrugged. "A man in your lofty position must receive many petitions and letters over the course of a year. You remember the fact that you received a letter from Magemaster Urel, but you forgot all about it when you heard the news of his tragic death, which, of course, arrived as you were about to open the letter.

"On the other hand, of course, you could have forgotten about the letter due to a powerful Geomantic spell..."

Horin smiled. "You missed your true vocation, Questor Loras. I believe you would have been more valuable to the Guild as a member of the Presidium than as a House Questor." Loras shook his

head. "I sailed on the murky waters of Guild politics for many years, Lord Dominie. I thank you for your confidence, but I have no desire to swim in them, or to drink from them. I was a Questor, and I was content with that. I would have accepted the post of Prelate, if I had ever been offered it. However, I never sought any higher rank."

Horin's brows rose, his eyes widening, as if he could not believe that a true Guild man would aspire to any lesser goal than the ultimate accolade.

"I understand, Questor," he said, but Loras could tell the Dominie was anything but convinced. Horin picked up

his glass and raised it to his lips before realising it was empty.

"Are you sure you will not partake of this splendid beverage, Brother Mage?" he asked, replacing the glass on the table and picking up the bottle. "It is vintage '57; the finest year for Pellurian Amber over the last century. I paid a pretty penny for it, I assure you. Of course, I would not expect you to appreciate the finer details of such an exclusive beverage..."

"I beg your pardon, Questor Loras. I intended no insult."

Despite the Dominie's belittling words, Loras now felt far more relaxed than he

had for some time, and he realised he felt rather thirsty.

"Thank you, Lord Dominie; I believe I would appreciate a glass." Horin stood up, walked over to a small, round table and selected a tall, fluted crystal glass. Returning to his seat, he poured a generous measure of the golden liquid and handed the glass to the Questor. Loras held it up to the light and rotated it before raising it to his nose, wafting delicate vapours towards his twitching nostrils.

He tilted the glass towards his pursed lips, allowing a small amount of the turbid liquid to enter his mouth and swirling it around his teeth before



swallowing.

Smacking his lips, he smiled.

"An excellent vintage, is it not, Brother Mage?" Horin said, his expression eager, almost pleading. "It cost me fifty gold pieces per bottle."

"You were robbed, Lord Dominie," Loras said, still smiling. "This, I regret to say, is not '57 Pellurian Amber. I believe I recognise it as the product of a small vineyard on the lower slopes of Mount Brindam, in Verisia. It is an indifferent wine at best, and this is not one of their better vintages ... it is either an '83

or an '87."

He took another sip and winced. "Definitely '83. You can tell from the sharp tang of tannin, followed by a distinct aftertaste of blackwort, which only grows in that region." Horin's expression fell; he looked aghast as he picked up the bottle and regarded the label.

"Another point, Lord Dominie," Loras said, "The serifs on the label are level; the serifs on a true Pellurian wine label have a slight downward cast to the left. I am afraid you have been deceived." Horin put the bottle back on the table, his expression dark and angry.

"I was told this was the finest Pellurian Amber," he growled. "I thank you for the services of your educated palate. I am indebted to you."

Loras tried to keep his expression neutral. "Please, do not mention it, Lord Dominie. I am glad to be of service."

"Perhaps it is time to call the Conclave back into the chamber and proceed as you suggested earlier,"

Horin said. "Is that amenable to you?"

Loras suppressed a yawn. "It is, Lord Dominie. I am sorry that I had to bring you such bad news about your wine purchase."

"You have done me a great service, Questor Loras. A reckoning is due, I promise you; on several counts. You have my support."

As the Dominie raised his gavel and pounded it on the small wooden bowl, Loras felt happier than he had in many years. He felt sure his innocence would at last be proved, and he knew that Grimm should be returning soon from his successful Quest. He would return to Lower Frunstock in glory, and he would deliver his beloved Drima from the hot squalor of the forge. The future seemed full of hope, after decades of misery.

He stood up and moved back to his appointed position facing the table. The

lights dimmed as the Conclave members began to file into the chamber, until he could no longer see his accusers. I may know nothing at all about fine vintages or wine labels, he thought, but I know vinegar when I taste it. Perhaps, after all this time, I will soon be able to taste something else. Bang-bang!

"The Conclave is called to order," Horin declared. "I have some details of the defendant's proposed accusation against Lord Prelate Thorn, and I declare it in order. However, I must advise the Conclave and the defendant that I see this approach as dubious at best, since it seems to rely heavily on hearsay and innuendo. It is

recommended that the defendant's testimony be treated with the utmost caution in this regard.

"Prosecutor Rithel; the floor is yours."

"Thank you, Lord Chairman," the Prosecutor said, in an oleaginous voice. "Questor Loras; you have made a most grievous and disturbing accusation against a valued member of the Guild Presidium. How can you possibly substantiate such a ridiculous charge against a respectable, selfless, hard-working Mage?"

Loras drew a deep breath; he would hold up his end of his bargain with the Dominie. It only remained to see if

Horin would do the same.

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## **Chapter 34: Horin's Ultimatum**

Thorn sat in a comfortable chair upholstered in lush, crimson velvet. He leafed through a copy of one of the oldest and most important works in the Guild library: 'Out of the Darkness', by Peltian Melluor, the founder and first Dominie of High Lodge, absorbed by its inspiring story. The book told of the early wars between rival Thaumaturgic Houses, Arnor House amongst them, and the rise to prominence of the first Questors. In those far-off days, such mages were used as weapons in the

strictest sense, and several nascent Houses were destroyed by Questors from more powerful establishments.

Thaumaturgy as a craft was splintered and disparate, without direction or guidance. Into the midst of this strife walked Peltian, a middle-aged Questor tired of his trade of death. An inspiring orator, he garnered support for his campaign of unification from several dissatisfied mages. Peltian founded his own House at Zhure, where now stood the imposing bastion of High Lodge; it had borne the name of 'Harmony House'.

At first, Harmony was too small to bother the larger, more warlike establishments, but the steady exodus of



unhappy mages to Peltian's side soon made it a force with which to be reckoned. By the time Peltian declared war on all other Houses in the region, it was too late; Harmony was the most powerful House of all, and when he invited the local Prelates to parley, they had little choice in the matter. Peltian's slogan had been "Unity or death." The other Houses, bled white from continual battles, soon accepted the first option as the only realistic choice. At that historic meeting, the formation of the Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges was announced.

What a man Peltian must have been, Thorn thought, putting down the book

and yawning. Not like that pallid mother's boy, Horin. One little bit of bluff, and he collapsed like a house of cards in a hurricane; I wonder he has lived as long as he has. How did our glorious Guild come to such a pass? How did High Lodge become so weak and pampered? Peltian had the services of eleven powerful proto-Questors at his command; Horin has none, except from the Houses.

Thorn had read his own, well-worn copy of Peltian's book many, many times in his life, and he always managed to find new sources of inspiration in it. The most important pearl of wisdom he had garnered was that the Dominie's position

was not safe; Peltian had survived five attempts on his life in his first year of tenure.

I am happy as a Prelate and a member of the Guild Presidium, he thought. I have the ear of a weak and persuadable Dominie, and that is all I want. There is no need to get involved with the cut and thrust of High Lodge politics. I have Horin just where I want him.

Smiling, Thorn picked up the book again and read on, devouring the details of the Guild founder's ruthless war against external and internal enemies and the building of High Lodge. He had just reached the point of the first formation of the Presidium, made up of elected

representatives from each House in the fledgling Guild, when he started at a peremptory knock on the cell door. It must be time for luncheon, he thought, licking his lips. Good; I am famished!

"Enter," he drawled in a casual monotone.

The man in the doorway bore a tray, but he was no servant. Thorn stood up to greet the Lord Dominie of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges.

"I bid you welcome, Lord Dominie," he said, executing a perfunctory bow. "I trust you bring interesting news."

Horin closed the door behind him and put the tray of sweetmeats and delicacies on Thorn's bed.

"I do indeed, Lord Prelate," he said, his lined face wearing a broad smile. "I think you will be surprised." I doubt it, the Prelate thought. After all, I paid for this verdict.

"I have consulted with the other members of the Conclave on the charges of cruelty levied against you,"

Horin said. "Of course, they found the charges ludicrous. If a few charity Students suffer a little ... well that is what the Questor Ordeal is about, is it not?"

"Exactly, Lord Horin," Thorn replied, returning the Dominie's smile in equal measure. "I suffered during my own Ordeal, and I never once complained. The youth of today have no respect or stamina; they expect everything to be given to them. I presume these ridiculous charges will be dropped?" Horin nodded and Thorn suppressed a chuckle.

"Indeed, Lord Thorn; put them from your mind. Loras Afelnor will also be exonerated from his earlier conviction for treason, as you requested. The latter charges, of course, will remain."

"Of course," the younger man said, making a show of inspecting his cuticles. "Justice will be done, eh?"

When may I expect to be set free? I am needed in Arnor; I need to procure the services of at least two Magemasters, and I have another charity boy to consider for the Ordeal. It would be a shame to lose three Seventh Rank men to the headsman's axe, but I must accept the Conclave's impartial decision." Horin's smile grew even wider, and his rheumy eyes seemed almost to sparkle.

"I regret that I cannot free you immediately," he said. "There is one more little legal matter to consider—a trivial one, of course!—before you can be liberated. Do not trouble yourself over it, Lord Prelate. It is nothing, I am

sure; just a traitor's last, desperate gambit. Think nothing of it." Thorn frowned. "What is this legal matter?" he demanded. "I cannot afford to be kept from my duties by lawyerly pettifoggery!"

Now, Horin took his time to examine his fingernails. "Oh, it is just a pair of wild, nonsensical counter-charges by the other prisoners. A last, hopeless throw of the dice, I presume."

"Lord Horin, what are these counter-charges?" Thorn demanded, trying to keep his composure. "I demand that you tell me!"

Horin indicated the meal-tray with an



immaculately-manicured, wrinkled index finger.

"Your repast is growing cold," he said in a mild voice.

"I am not hungry," Thorn said, his growing annoyance taking the edge off his appetite. "What are the charges?"

"Negligence, leading to the death of a senior House official, and conspiracy to pervert the passage of justice through the submission of false evidence," Horin said. "The penalty for the latter charge is severe—too severe, some might say—but you need not worry. The charges are, of course, groundless." Thorn's head whirled, and he sat back down. "What is

all this nonsense?" he blustered.

"The boy who committed suicide," Horin said, "taking Senior Magemaster Urel with him. The charges implicate you in this matter."

The Dominie's expression was no longer merry, and Thorn felt tendrils of worry play like a giant, palsied spider's legs on his stomach. He had thought the matter of Urel's death buried along with the mage.

"Of course, you need not worry, Lord Thorn," Horin said in a smooth, soothing voice. "A Great Spell of Divination will soon find the truth of the matter, and you may then be on your way." The fear-spider seemed to drive its mandibles

deep into the Prelate's vitals, and Thorn fought to conceal the sudden trembling in his hands.

"I told you everything in this regard, Lord Dominie," he said, his words all but drowned out by his pounding heartbeat. "Surely that will not be necessary? What is the word of a forsworn traitor against that of a House Prelate?"

"Two forsworn traitors," Horin said, his voice as slick as the finest silk. "Questors Loras and Dalquist know only inadmissible hearsay, but Magemasters Crohn and Kargan have declared themselves willing to swear on oath that you are guilty of this crime. As befits

their lower status, they will, naturally, undergo Divination first, so you need not worry. Their accusations will be revealed as lies, with unerring accuracy, so your testimony will surely not be required."

Thorn felt beads of sweat tickling the furrows in his forehead.

"They are wily dogs, Lord Dominie," he said, wiping his brow with the back of his right hand. "They have proven themselves traitorous by their attack on me; what further proof is needed?"

"This is only a minor legal issue, Lord Prelate," Horin said. "Both Crohn and Kargan are the scions of wealthy,

powerful families. You appreciate that we need to apply the law's full rigour, ridiculous as it may seem, before justice may be seen to be done. Do not worry; I am sure the whole, sorry affair will be finished within a day or two. You will then be free to return to your beloved House while we then assess the overwhelming condemnatory evidence against the other prisoners." Thorn wanted a stiff dose of potent liquor to steady his jangling nerves, but none was available to him.

"As a matter of casual interest," he said, his mouth dry as desert sand, "what are the penalties for such charges?"

"If I remember rightly," Horin replied,

“the first charge, if confirmed, would merit the penalty of dismissal from the Presidium and from the position of Prelate, for the rest of your life. The second charge, of the

‘perversion of justice’, carries the automatic penalty of death. In the case of a House Prelate being convicted of such an offence, the method of execution would be subject to a majority vote from the Conclave.

"If proved, of course, the method might be quite nasty."

Now, Thorn could say nothing. His mouth moved, but his dry throat made no sound other than a hoarse hiss.

Horin's brow wrinkled until the lines looked like undulating dunes. "Are you sick, Lord Thorn? Shall I call a Healer? You look quite unwell!

"Please, do not worry; the Divination spell cannot be deceived by a foolish liar. The truth will out!"

"You do not know them as I do," Thorn whispered. "They will say anything to save themselves!" His skin seemed to crawl over a crumbling framework of cold, fragile bones.

"They can say what they like, Lord Prelate. Fear not, for the spell can detect even the deepest-buried lie!

Are you sure you do not need the services of a Healer? We have fifteen of them here."

"Does it ... does it have to be death?" Thron asked.

Horin laughed. "So, you still feel loyalty towards your treacherous comrades!" he crowed. "A very meritorious sentiment. Yes: I am afraid their groundless charges will merit a slow and painful death for them, but that need not worry you."

Thorn licked his lips, trying to cudgel his mind into action, even though it felt like a mass of cold molasses.



"For me!" he croaked

Horin's eyes widened and his jaw dropped, revealing a flawless set of teeth. "What do you mean, Lord Prelate?"

"I have always felt ... a little guilty about poor Urel's death," he said through thick, nerveless lips. "This may show on my conscience."

Horin sat on the bed, his face a mask of concern. "Ah, but you have little concept of High Lodge Great Spells, Lord Thorn." His words fell like cold ashes into the Prelate's ears. "Only facts will emerge from the Divinatory spell. Feelings of guilt and worry are quite

immaterial.

"Are you sure there is nothing you wish to tell me?"

"I may, perhaps, have allowed the zeal for my duty to blind me to certain Guild procedures," he mumbled, looking at his feet. "It is often difficult..."

His voice failed him and he shook his head, not in negation but in helplessness.

"I see," Horin said, his expression bleak. "I am afraid the Laws are quite explicit about such matters; they know little of mitigating factors concerning a mage's position with the Guild."

"Are you admitting that there may be some truth in these accusations?" Thorn nodded. "A little, perhaps," he croaked, desperate for a strong drink. Horin sighed, running bony fingers through his hair. "I may be able to help you," he said. "However, you must answer my next questions with absolute truth if I am to have any chance of success. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Lord Horin." The Dominie's words had thrown Thorn a slender lifeline, and he seized it.

"Did you show negligence in ignoring Senior Magemaster Urel's concerns about the suitability of this boy, in your keenness to produce a new Questor?"

"Yes, Lord Dominie."

"Did this negligence lead directly to the death of the boy, and to that of the Magemaster?"

"It may have. I felt very confused..."

"Would you prefer Divination, Thorn?" Horin's tone was as cold, sharp and hard as an icicle. Thorn shook his head. "No, Lord Dominie. I confess that my ... negligence led directly to Magemaster Urel's death."

"That is better," Horin said, his bushy brows hanging like thunderclouds over his grey eyes. "There is now no 'but' or

'maybe'; only absolute, unqualified truth may save you. Now: did you wilfully and knowledgeably attempt to cover your folly and negligence by blaming Magemaster Urel for those deaths?

Lie to me, and I will leave this room, right now. I will no longer be able to help you. Do you understand me?"

Thorn sighed. "Yes," he muttered.

"My hearing is not what it was, Lord Prelate," Horin snapped. "Be so good as to speak up." Thorn raised his head. "Yes, Lord Dominie," he said, forcing himself to meet Horin's gaze. "I lied under oath, and I allowed Urel to take the blame. Is that what you wish to

hear?" Horin shook his head. "Indeed not. It displeases me to think that a House Prelate might do such a thing,"

he said. "It plays havoc with Guild discipline and prestige. This could be disastrous if not handled correctly."

The Prelate chewed his dry lips, trying to stimulate moisture to no effect. "What is 'correct handling'

Lord Dominie?"

Horin leaned forward, cradling his head in his hands and rocking back and forth. At last, the Dominie spoke.

"If—and only if—you plead guilty to

these counter-charges, without reservation," he said, "I may be able to plead Personal Privilege, to restrict your sentence to irrevocable banishment from Guild lands. Otherwise, the sentence will be slow, painful death. The matter will be out of my hands." Silence hung in the air, like an anvil suspended over Thorn's head by a single thread. At last, he said,

"What must I do?"

"Confession is your only hope," Horin replied. "You must write a full confession, exculpating the other prisoners of the charges against them, before the next meeting of the Conclave. The next interview is scheduled to be

with Magemaster Crohn, tomorrow morning. If there is no letter from you by then, the Great Spell will be called, and I will be helpless to aid you. I can offer the Conclave strong guidance, but I cannot use a Point of Personal Privilege to order the exclude of valid evidence. If the Spell found Magemaster Crohn innocent, I can assure you, the rest of the Conclave would seek your blood with a vengeance.

"Two of them, including Prosecutor Rithel, are ex-Arnor men who respected Senior Magemaster Urel." Thorn felt his teeth grinding, but he saw no way out of this bind.



"If I write such a statement," he croaked, "will you assure me that the Conclave will not impose the death sentence?"

"No," Horin admitted. "However, I assure you that the maximum sentence will be a quick, painless death. I will press for banishment, and the Conclave is likely to accept my recommendation.

"The choice is yours. Confess, and you may live. That is all I can offer you" Thorn had faced many problems since he had first helped to disgrace Loras Afelnor, but all had been solved by the cachet of his rank or the relative importance of Arnor House; or by blaming someone else. However, this problem seemed intractable; it was an

issue he had not foreseen. It seemed he had no choice, if he wanted to live.

"I'll write your damned confession, Horin," then, throwing etiquette to the winds, "and be damned to you and all the bloody Guild lawyers. You're all the same, valuing petty details over significance."

"I will return in an hour to collect your confession," Horin said, who seemed quite unfazed by Thorn's outburst. "You may have no outside contact during that time; if you try to attract the guard's attention, he will ignore you. Enjoy your meal, Prelate Thorn."

"Make sure it is not your last."

With that, Horin was gone, the cell door clanging with awful finality, and Thorn felt more alone than he had in his entire life.

Mother, help me, he thought before cursing himself for a fool. He could not contact Lizaveta from this iron box, and she might well be dead by now, assuming that Loras' whelp of a grandson had succeeded in his Quest. She was the only person who might have helped him out of his predicament, and she was lost to him.

All my dreams, all my hopes, ruined. A life-long career, washed away in a moment of imbecilic rashness. I should never have made an enemy of that vapid

idiot, Horin; that was a bad mistake. He knew that he had only a single ally in the world: his insane pseudo-Questor bodyguard, Chag Jura. That boy has so much power ... he almost brought Loras to his knees. If I could only free him, no group of superannuated, pampered High Lodge mages could hope to stand against the two of us. There has to be a way to reach him!

No, there are more important matters to handle now, Thorn. This damned letter will not wait. We will deal with Master Horin later.

Thorn took a sheet of fine vellum, a quill and a small bottle of ink from the small

cabinet beside his bed. He picked up Peltian's autobiography put it on his lap, laid the expensive page over it, dipped the quill in the ink and began to write, in a fluent, cursive hand:

'I, Thorn Virias, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Iron-willed, Prelate of Arnor House of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, do make the following statement of my own free will:'

He poised the quill above the page, hesitating a few moments before continuing.

'With full knowledge of the gravity of my

crime, I acknowledge complete culpability and negligence in the death of a House representative: to wit, Urel Shelit, Mage Illusionist of the Seventh Rank, called the Dreamweaver...'

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## **Chapter 35: Judgment**

For the first time since his incarceration in High Lodge, Loras Afelnor stood before the Conclave in the company of his fellow defendants, Crohn, Kargan and Dalquist. As he stood facing the wall of darkness, behind which sat his accusers, Loras felt a warm glow of companionship with the men he had come to regard as his friends.

Whatever happens here, gentlemen, thank you for your support, he thought, as the gavel banged and Prosecutor Rithel began his familiar, tedious opening speech.

On his previous appearance in court, Loras gave the testimony he had discussed with Lord Horin, but he knew Rithel had been unconvinced, and several other members of the Conclave had seemed far from swayed by his arguments. Doubtless, his reputation as the disgraced Oathbreaker must have spoken against him. He trusted Horin to be as good as his word and introduce the 'new evidence' he had 'discovered'.

"We are here today to pass judgment on these defendants concerning charges of unlawful mutiny and the attempted overthrow of a House Prelate: to wit, Lord Thorn Virias, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Iron-willed, honoured Prelate and Acclaimed Master of Arnor House of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges," the harsh-voiced Prosecutor intoned.

"Each charge carries a maximum sentence of death. How say you, Manipulator Crohn Bowe, called the Mindstealer? Address your plea to the Chairman."



Crohn cleared his throat, and Loras heard him take a deep breath. "Not Guilty, Lord Dominie, by reason of extenuating circumstances."

Loras breathed a sigh of relief. A 'Guilty' plea would have condemned all of them. Rithel made the same demand of each of the accused in turn, and he received the same answer from each. Loras was the last to speak, and he fought to keep his voice level. The Prosecutor grunted. "Gentlemen of the Conclave, it is my intention to demand the severest possible sentence for each of the accused. I therefore propose to present a full summary of the evidence against these men."

"Seconded."

"A moment, Prosecutor Rithel," Horin drawled, and Loras' heart felt as if it had vaulted into his throat. "I have here a piece of paper which casts new light on the case. I move that it be read to the Conclave." The motion was quickly seconded and passed.

"I, Thorn Virias, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank," Horin read, "called the Iron-willed, Prelate of Arnor House of the Ancient and Honourable Guild of Magic-users, Sorcerers and Thaumaturges, do make the following statement of my own free will: With full knowledge of the gravity of my crime, I acknowledge complete culpability and

negligence in the death of a House representative: to wit, one Urel Shelit, Mage Illusionist of the Seventh Rank, called the ‘Dream-weaver.’”

Loras’ eyes opened to their full extent, and his jaw dropped for a moment. This was not what he had expected to hear!

"In addition, I admit to conspiring against a brother mage: to wit, Loras Afelnor, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank, called the Firelord. I declare the said Questor Loras innocent of the attempted murder of Lord Prelate Geral Fursh, called the Tempest.

"Loras was beguiled and deceived by a powerful Geomantic spell cast by one

not of this Guild: to wit, my mother, Prioress Lizaveta, Superior of Rendale Priory. I was party to this deception, in full measure, dominated as I was by the overpowering will of my evil mother."

Loras had to lean on his staff in order to remain upright, his head whirling and giddy.

"Breathe, Questor Loras," Kargan whispered into the Questor's left ear, and Loras realised he had been holding his breath. With his heart pounding fit to break his ribs, he complied with the Magemaster's advice.

The remainder of the letter was a litany of self-accusation and admission, giving

details of Thorn's dealings with his mother and his various deceptions and acts of cruelty, culminating in the creation of the poor, mindless, insane Questor Chag, his personal bodyguard. It specifically exonerated the defendants, stating that they were justified in the actions they had taken.

"It is therefore with shame that I declare myself unfit to hold the post of House Prelate, and I throw myself on the Conclave's bounteous mercy," the Dominie read.

The silence in the chamber was heavy, cloying and oppressive, but Loras felt unable to speak.

"Gentlemen of the Conclave," Horin intoned, as the stillness became almost unbearable. "Prelate Thorn gave me this letter in person, and it bears his seal. He has agreed to testify before the Conclave, but he has asked that a mitigating plea of force majeure be entered on his behalf."

"Really, Lord Chairman..." Rithel began, but his voice was weak and dull, and it faltered to a halt before he had raised a formal objection.

"You all heard Questor Thorn's former testimony," Horin said. "Did he seem insane or unhinged at any time?"

No answer came.

"On the basis of this free and full confession, I move that the defendants' pleas of extenuating circumstances be accepted, and that they be set at liberty, with commendations for brave and resolute action against an insidious threat to our Craft and our Order. Under Guild Law, the motion must be passed unanimously. I therefore urge each member of the Conclave to examine his conscience before answering."

Coldness seemed to seep into Loras' very soul, and he felt as if the walls were closing in on him, threatening to crush him.

"Well, gentlemen?" Horin chided, his soft entreaty sounding like a thunderclap

to the Questor's sensitive ears. "Will you accept this new motion, or not?"

"Accepted, Lord Chairman!"

Loras could not identify the lone voice, but he sent silent thanks to the brave man who responded first. This initial declaration seemed to spur the other members, setting off an avalanche of acceptances, merging and blurring into a collage of sound:

"I agree."

"Not guilty!"

"I concur."



At last, the hubbub ended, and Horin said, "Your decision, Prosecutor Rithel?" After a long pause, Rithel spoke in a hesitant voice: "May I address the Conclave and the defendants directly, Lord Chairman?"

"You may."

The Prosecutor stepped forward from the shadows, and Loras saw him for the first time. Rithel was a tall, rail-thin man, his expression impenetrable and dark. Long, grey tendrils of hair swathed his deeply-lined face, and his robe was an unadorned, black tent, cinched at the waist by a simple length of cord.

"This has been a long and difficult

case,” Rithel declared, his eyes fixed on his feet. “It did not seem so at first; mutiny against an ordained Prelate is an abomination that cannot be tolerated, and the defendants’

guilt seemed beyond reasonable doubt ... indeed, beyond any doubt. Even after this new evidence, I still regard the defendants’ actions as reprehensible in the extreme. They should have brought any concerns to the attention of the Presidium, instead of taking matters into their own hands—”

"Prelate Thorn is a member of the Presidium—"Questor Dalquist interrupted, his face flushed and his mouth twisted.

Rithel banged his seven-ringed staff on the stone floor. "Silence!" he shouted. "I have not yet finished!"

"My apologies, Lord Chairman," the young Questor muttered.

Rithel grunted. "Nonetheless," he continued, "I acknowledge a measure of implausibility in the concept of a large group of respected mages deciding to rebel in such a public manner at the same time. I regarded Questor Loras' guilt as explicit, due to his prior conviction, but I am not now so sure. It is easier to believe in one mage's treachery than in that of four. However, I still cannot accept that it is right to take

matters into one's own hands—"

"Time is pressing," Horin chided. "Do you accept the motion or not? Your decision, please, Prosecutor Rithel."

After a long pause, Rithel said with evident reluctance, "I ... I accept the motion! I feel so betrayed and

... dirty at this revelation of Prelate Thorn's treachery. Yet another damned, low-born Questor—" Bang-bang-bang-bang!

"Thank you, Prosecutor Rithel; that will be quite enough! Your declaration suffices!" Horin cried.

"Gentlemen—Brother Mages—I declare you Not Guilty, and I offer the Conclave's apologies for the tribulations you have undergone. I declare you free men, and I honour your courage in overthrowing a cruel tyrant and a self-avowed apostate, who threatened our whole way of life. You have done well, and your meritorious acts will be recorded in the annals of the Guild.

"Questor Loras is declared innocent, and he is discharged without the least stain on his character for any former act. He regains his full status as a Questor of the Seventh Rank, his cognomen, 'Firelord', his former accolades in the Deeds of the Questors and his seniority. Is there any

dissension?

"No?"

Bang-bang.

"The defendants are excused."

The darkness fled away, and Loras saw the whole Conclave exposed in the glorious light of a new morning, its golden rays flooding through the wide bay windows of the chamber. Rithel shook his head in apparent disbelief, but he did not speak.

Kargan was the first one to react, throwing his arms around Loras' shoulders.

"We did it!" he crowed, slapping the astounded Questor on the back.

"The Chairman of the Conclave records a minor censure against Mentalist Kargan, for the unauthorised casting of a Schedule Nine spell," Horin droned, "and sentences the said mage to one month of close confinement and loss of seniority for the said period. Since the said mage has already undergone six weeks of imprisonment, this sentence is declared discharged."

"Thank you, Lord Dominie," Kargan whispered, still clinging onto the stunned Questor. I am free, Loras thought, shaking his head in disbelief.

He could no longer think; he could not look at anyone on the crowded room. He could not speak. He was full.

"Loras Firelord!" The Dominie's voice cracked like a whip, jerking the Questor out of his confused reverie. "I wish to address you in person. Please approach the bench." Loras was old by Secular standards, although still young for a Guild Mage; however, he felt feeble and ancient as Kargan released him with a whispered, "Welcome back, Firelord." He trudged towards the grim-faced Dominie as if his feet were encased in lead, his breathing swift and shallow.

"You are improperly dressed, Questor Loras!" Horin snapped, a half-smile



belying the censorious tone of his voice.  
“Where is your Guild Ring?”

Loras shrugged, incapable of speech. Grimm has it, may the Names bless him, he thought, but his mouth and tongue seemed to have turned to stone.

"This belonged to Lord Thorn," Horin said, extending his hand to reveal a small gold-blue ring. "He wants you to take it, and to bring honour to it, where he has brought only shame." The stoical smith, the impassionate and mighty Questor, the stern grandfather, broke down into hot, long-denied tears before his senior. It did not last long; no more than five tears trickled down his burning

cheeks before he shook them away, as if denying them.

I am a Questor! he reminded himself, glorying in the prestige of the title. He drew several tremulous breaths, and he extended his trembling right hand, its palm upwards. The small ring dropped into it, and Loras closed his fingers around his long-denied birthright. As the wide-eyed members of the Conclave looked on, Loras felt as if his supportive, former co-defendants' gazes were also burning into his back.

"Please, Brother Mage. A Guild Mage is naked without his ring. Put it on." The ring looked far too small to fit on any of his thick, calloused digits, but Loras

knew this would change. He offered it to the bare third finger on his left hand, and the ring convulsed and grew, sliding onto the digit as if had been made for him.

The magic, gold and blue annulus conformed to the dimensions of Loras' calloused, smithy-worn finger in an instant, suffusing him with a pride he had not felt since his staff had rebounded from the Breaking Stone at Arnor House, so many decades ago.

Loras stared at his hand, turning it so that the ring caught the sun's light and gleamed. He felt almost reborn, and he longed to take Drima, his devoted wife,

into his strong arms and share in her long, unshaken faith in him. Even in his darkest days, she had stood beside him, giving him the will to carry on through decades of self-condemnation, shame and regret. Now, it felt as if his life had been suspended all that time, and it had now begun anew.

He felt warm joy suffusing him. Now, I can show myself to the world as a true mage. I can greet Grimm as an equal, and we can toast each other's successes ... I do not have to be ashamed of my past any more.

"Thank you, Lord Dominie and gentlemen of the Conclave," he said, regaining his starchy, formal, Questor's

voice. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have given me my life back." He stepped back from the table and executed an immaculate bow, and a sallow, saturnine-faced member of the Conclave began to applaud. In a few moments, other mages joined in, and, at last, even Prosecutor Rithel contributed a few, half-hearted claps.

"Welcome back, Brother Mage," Horin said, as the reborn Questor turned and walked back towards his smiling comrades, his head spinning.

The Dominie's gavel banged once more, and the applause stuttered to a halt. "I declare this session of the Conclave

closed,” he said. “You are free men, and I extend the hospitality of High Lodge to you for as long as you wish to remain here.”

"Thank you, Lord Chairman," Crohn said in a stiff, stilted voice. "My Students' education suffers in my absence, and I wish to return to Arnor House as soon as possible."

"So do I," Kargan declared, his eyes misty. "We have been gone for too long. Anarchy may be breaking out in the Scholasticate even now."

Horin shook his head. "You are dedicated and honourable men, but you need not fear for your Students,

Neophytes and Adepts. Each of four teaching Houses has seconded a Magemaster to fulfil your invaluable roles. The Arnor Scholasticate is in good hands.

"Come, now, gentlemen. The last few weeks must have imposed considerable strain on you. I am sure a few days of relaxation will revitalise you for when you return to Arnor House. Your positions and seniorities within your Scholasticate are confirmed."

"Relaxation ... it seems such a frivolous concept," Crohn said, frowning. "However, I accept your offer with gratitude."

"I wish to wait for my grandson's arrival here," Loras declared, his chest puffed out with pride. After a few moments' silence, Kargan said, "I want a drink—very large, very cold and very potent." Loras laughed, long and loud. The sound was unfamiliar to his ears, and he revelled in the strange, comforting feeling it gave him.

Trust a Seventh Rank Mentalist to read my thoughts, he thought, shaking with long-suppressed humour.

"I ... I would not ... object," he gasped, trying to regain his stern demeanour.

"Nor I, Brother Mage," Dalquist said. "The last few months have been



difficult, and I, for one, wouldn't object to a little recuperation before I return to the rigours of a Questor's life. What do you say, Magemaster Crohn?"

"Oh, very well." Crohn sighed. "Perhaps my enthusiasm for my calling has waned a little of late; a modicum of alcohol and some good food might renew my zeal."

"Then that is decided," Horin said, his smile fading. "I would gladly join you, but the Conclave now has other pressing matters to discuss."

The Dominie stood and banged his staff on the floor three times, and the double doors to the chamber swung open to reveal an ashen-faced Olaf, bearing a

heavy load of iron shackles.

"The fetters will not be required, Questor Olaf," Horin said. "These men are Guild Mages. The Conclave thanks you for your inestimable and meritorious support during this difficult period. You fulfilled your onerous duties in accordance with the highest dictates of Guild protocol; you will receive a special mention in the Deeds of the Questors."

Olaf's jaw dropped, and the weighty, cumbersome chains clattered to the floor. Loras approached his old friend, smiling.

"Is it true, Loras?" he whispered.

"It is, Brother Mage," the younger Questor replied, showing the gleaming ring on his left hand. "I am no longer Loras the Smith, but Loras Firelord, Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank." Olaf's lips moved without sound for a few seconds, and then he lunged at Loras, throwing his arms around the smith's burly back, his hands hammering on Loras' shoulder blades.

"Well done, Brother Bile!" he crowed, having regained his full voice. "I expected ... I do not know what I expected, but this was no part of it."

"These reprobates have prevailed upon me to join them in the ingestion of a few beverages, Questor Olaf," Crohn

intoned, his expression suggesting that he had accepted only with the greatest regret.

“Would you care to accompany us?”

Blinking and wiping the back of his left hand over his eyes, Olaf nodded and released his hold on Loras. The five mages strode out of the chamber with their heads high, and the doors clicked shut behind them. Loras felt as if the sound marked the closing of one long, dark chapter in his life and the beginning of another, promising a new, exciting, glorious future.

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## **Chapter 36: Travellers**

Grimm sat next to General Quelgrum, holding on tight as the wagon shimmied and jounced on the rough road, the four horses pulling the vehicle at a considerable speed. Every bounce shot hot twinges of pain through his damaged body, but he tolerated them as best he could.

"Well, it's no ATV, or chopper, Lord Baron," Quelgrum said, raising his voice over the clamour of the wheels and hooves, "but it should get us to High Lodge in good time." The old soldier seemed in excellent spirits.

"I understood the part about High Lodge,

General, but not the rest," Grimm replied. "What are Aitivees and choppers? I presume they're Technological artefacts of some kind." Quelgrum nodded. "An ATV is an All-Terrain Vehicle: a machine with rolling tracks or large wheels that can handle swamps, deserts or rocky outcrops. We used one to bring you to our base by the hydroelectric dam at Glabra."

Grimm remembered the noisy, battered, chaotic-looking conveyance well. Quelgrum's name for the vehicle seemed a little extravagant, but the mage had to admit that it had handled the desert sand well, and at some speed.

"And a 'chopper' is..."

"A machine like the air vehicle Pilot Foster used to take you from Haven," the General explained, and Grimm remembered the whipping, chopping sound the machine's spinning wings had made as it traversed the sky.

"It's a good name," he declared. "Thank you, General. At least I know a little more about Technology now."

Grimm knew well how the ancient art of Technology was despised throughout the Guild, but, even as a mere Student, he had realised that the maligned, destructive discipline held wonders as well as horrors. When he returned to his home town of Crar, Grimm decided, he

would learn as much as he could about all the Technological marvels at Quelgrum's disposal.

The wagon bounced and skittered along for about half a mile more before Quelgrum spoke again.

"Did Sister Mercia say why she wanted to accompany us?"

Grimm shrugged. "Her home is in ruins," he said. "She has no friends or known relations, and she was scared to be left alone in the world. I said I'd speak to Physician Querl back at Crar. I'm sure he'd be grateful for her help."

"So that's what she said, is it, Lord



Baron? I understand,” Quelgrum said, and Grimm saw that the old soldier's mouth bore a strange half-smile.

\* \* \* \*

Drex sat in the back of the wagon, her eyes fixed on her feet. She felt confined by the press of bodies around her. To her left sat Sergeant Erik, the gangling fumbler, who was engaged in some inane conversation with Tordun, the oversized ogler...

Her thoughts began to snarl and tangle, and she bit her top lip. Whenever she called up the image of any of Questor Grimm's entourage, her mind lit up with a specific, unvarying phrase for each of

them ... except for Seneschal Shakkar.

She cast a fugitive glance at Shakkar, the one member of the group she felt she could trust. The demon sat at the very back of the vehicle, looking out of the opening in the canvas cover. He had pointed out this quirk to her: the foul rapist ... as Grimm had caused her considerable confusion over the same matter. Now she could no longer hear Prioress Lizaveta's blandishments and harangues, she felt increasingly bereft of direction and confidence as the rude vehicle carried her further away from Rendale.

"Are you ill, Sister?" a solicitous voice from her left asked.

Drex ignored Sister Mercia and tried to bring order to her mental processes.

"I may be able to help," the nun insisted, and Drex forced herself to keep her reply civil.

"It is of no importance, Sister," she said. "I ... I miss the familiar routine of the Order; that is all."

"So do I," Mercia admitted, and Drex wished she would just leave her alone. "Do you wish to discuss it?

It may help us both."

"I doubt it," Drex replied, shaking her

head. "I don't want to talk, and I don't need your healing skills. Please, be silent."

She looked across at Tordun, still deep in animated argument with Erik about the relative merits of popular pugilists. He did not spare her as much as a sly glance; he even seemed to be making an effort not to do so.

Would he do that if he was a lust-ridden voyeur?

Drex tried to will the traitorous thought away, but it remained, prickling and tickling a corner of her mind, like an irritating thistle lodged under a horse's saddle.

Am I losing my mind? she wondered. I know Grimm took advantage of me, and his companions are just as contemptible ... except for Shakkar.

What's happening to me? Why did I agree to go to this hotbed of Names-cursed, male magic-users?

The answer flew into her mind with pure, almost blinding light: Justice for Prioress Lizaveta; the chance to show these ruffians and despoilers in their true colours. What is your mere convenience compared to those laudable goals?

Drex knew this was no message from the Reverend Mother, but a reminder from within her own psyche. She wished

Prioress Lizaveta could still contact her, to fortify her resolve and strengthen her. Within the Priory, with its close, comforting links to Mother Earth, she had found true peace and contentment; a mission in life. Since leaving it, she had known only pain and confusion, and she had lost the power the Prioress had awoken within her.

The world is confusion, hatred and covetousness. The familiar, rote-learned phrase slotted into place, but it gave her little solace. She needed advice, not litany!

Nonetheless, she began to mutter, "Reverend Mother, show me the way. Reverend Mother, guide me. Reverend

Mother, correct my faults. Reverend Mother, show me the way..." She clenched her fists and her eyelids as she tried to find the inner peace she sought, but it did not come. It is them, she thought, as she continued to chant under her breath. Grimm, Tordun and the others; they are trying to destroy my faith.

"The real trial starts now, eh, Sister?"

Mercia's unwelcome words burst into her head like a thunderclap, and Drex's chant faltered to a halt.

"What did you say?" she snapped, spinning round to face Mercia.

"I said, 'the real trial starts now'," Mercia replied, her face blank. "I meant that life will be difficult and unfamiliar for us in the world. Pray, Sister, tell me what I did to offend you." Her tone was tremulous and pleading, but Drex did not feel charitable.

"Shut up, Sister," she said. "Why, you're chatt'rin' like a bloody hen-house when Mister Wolf come callin'!"

She slapped a hand over her mouth, as if she could somehow deny the words that had just burst from it.

"Please, Sister, what did I do?"

Drex ignored Mercia's plea, as the



phrase 'the real trial begins here,' reverberated and hammered through her mind, growing ever louder, drowning out the rumble of the cart and the noise of the warriors'

animated argument. Now, she put her hands over her ears, but she could not blot out the seemingly innocuous words.

Louder and louder, the phrase seemed to drive her soul inwards, compressing and crushing it into a point.

"Plenty, my darling girl, but we didn't want to rush you. We always ensured you had just enough free will to think you had the better of us. The whole process was designed to make you burst

from your shell, my dear, and it did just that. The real trial begins now. Once the genie has escaped from the bottle, it cannot be replaced."

Prioress Lizaveta had spoken those words an age before, and Drex had replied, "You haven't beaten me yet, bitch. I'll resist you with every fibre of my being, and I'll curse you with every breath. At the first chance I get, I'll kill myself. You won't have me."

Other forgotten words began to balloon into her soul, swelling it and strengthening it, although Drex tried her best to suppress them:

"Roast in Hell, bitch."

"At least she won't be able to use me against Grimm. I hope he rips her heart out!"

"I'll see you in Hell before I'll submit to you, bitch!"

"You'll have to do better than that, you old cow! I've been beaten by the best, and you aren't even close!"

Grimm will..."

Drex gasped in pain as the angry phrases battered into her bruised psyche. The voice was hers, but she could not, would not believe that she had ever spoken such words to her beloved teacher.

"Sister..." Mercia's voice was sharp, insistent.

"Shut up!" Drex cried, although the words came out as a hoarse bark that was almost smothered by the noise of the wagon's passage.

"Please, Sister, leave me in peace!"

She was not even sure if Mercia had heard this final, impassioned plea.

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## **Chapter 37: Realisation**

Grimm felt his eyelids growing heavy, and his head began to nod as the wagon's

metronomic rattle and the soft birdsong from the trees began to unwind the tense knots in his nerves and muscles. The sun's warm, morning rays seemed to fill his body with lassitude and long-denied, blessed acceptance. He was Grimm Dragonblaster, a Mage Questor of the Seventh Rank. He was Grimm Afelnor, the son and grandson of poor blacksmiths. He was the wealthy Baron Grimm of Crar. He was a Weapon of the Guild; a destroyer. He was a passionate young man and a would-be lover, from whom the Guild's misogynistic dictates and the Geomantic wiles of an evil, disembodied woman had stripped the solace he sought. He was a lonely man who longed to restore the good name of

his grandfather. I'm all these people, he thought, abandoning the effort to keep his eyes open. Why deny it? Why fight it?

My life may be one of conflict and struggle, but at least it isn't tedious or humdrum. The world provides me with more than enough conflict, without me adding to it by fighting myself. He thought of his staunchest friend and ally, Questor Dalquist, so earnest and dedicated. Dalquist had suffered, destroyed and struggled for longer than Grimm had, but he remained good-natured and even-tempered, at ease with himself.

Dalquist has come to terms with the contradictions in his life, he told

himself. He doesn't seem to agonise about every decision and every action the way I do. Being a Questor doesn't have to turn a man into an unfeeling monster, so why am I working to turn myself into one? Dalquist knows what I am, and he doesn't hate me, so why must I?

If I could only—

His eyes jerked open as the wagon lurched backwards and to the right, and his injured hip and ribs clamoured for his attention, drawing a sharp, agonised gasp from him. The vehicle emitted a groaning scream and heeled over to the right, and he saw General Quelgrum

struggle to bring the horses to a halt, soothing the whickering animals with a few soft words. He heard a series of startled cries from inside the vehicle as he rubbed his left hip and willed the pain to subside.

"No need to panic, friends," the General declared. "Something's broken." Grimm slid down from the side of the wagon, taking care to land on his right foot. Using Redeemer as a crutch, he hobbled around to the right side of the vehicle as the other travellers spilled out of it to inspect the damage.

"We've lost a wheel," Sergeant Erik said, pointing to the misshapen article. Grimm saw that at least two spokes had



splintered.

Mercia leaned over to inspect the shattered wheel. "Can we mend it?" she asked, her eyes wide.

"Not a chance, Sister," Erik replied, shaking his head. "We'd need a carpenter's lathe and a forge." Drex stood with her arms crossed over her chest, and Mercia looked upwards, as if the sky might give her help.

"How far is Anjar behind us?" Grimm asked, after a few moments of silence. "From what you said, Shakkar, they're decent people."

"I would guess Anjar lies about forty

miles from us, Lord Baron,” the grey demon rumbled. “I could fly there and back within a day—”

"With the greatest respect, Lord Seneschal," Erik said, "do you really think even you could bring back a carpenter with all his tools? Or a smith and his forge?"

"We don't need a forge," Grimm declared, shaking his head. "It will be easy to remove the tyre now. I can heat it enough to expand it so we can replace it. When it cools, it'll shrink back onto the repaired wheel and hold it tight. If you take an unbroken spoke back to Anjar, you should be able to find a carpenter to make replacements."

Quelgrum twisted around and said, “A small problem there, Lord Baron: we have no money left. The Anjarians are generous, but they can't afford to do everything for nothing. I spent all our remaining funds on the wagon, four horses, food, drink and the physician's fees for all the injured nuns—”

"You did that, General?" Drex cried, her voice a keening yelp. "You paid for the physician's services?"

"I did, Sister," the old soldier replied. "I found quite a lot of our money and our weapons lying on the ground around Merrydeath Road, but the zombies took a lot with them. I have no intention of

trying to get it back by digging around that Names-cursed hellhole."

"I can't argue with that, General," Erik said.

"We may have no choice," Mercia said and sighed.

"I may be able to help."

The voice from the back of the wagon was soft, and it took a few moments for Grimm to realise who had spoken, before Necromancer Numal hopped down from the vehicle's tailgate.

"You?"

Drex's voice was cool and scathing, but Numal just shrugged.

Grimm felt equally dubious about the hapless Necromancer's abilities, but he kept them to himself. If he's thinking about using Minor Magic to repair the spokes, he can forget about it, the Questor thought. Reintegration spells only work on inanimate minerals, and wood's a living substance. Still, I don't want to dishearten the man; it's good to see him volunteering to help. Perhaps a gentle reminder would be advisable, though, just to save him from embarrassment...

"Thank you so much, Necromancer Numal," he said. "Unfortunately, my

own powers don't work on living matter."

"Dead matter, Questor Grimm," the older mage said with a smile. "That is an important difference. I know dead things. There are a few hidden paths within the Minor Magic that only we Necromancers can follow."

Grimm nodded, answering Numal's toothy beam with one of his own.

I've been too used to thinking of Specialists as inferior to Questors, he thought. They're just ... different from us.

"What do you need, Brother Mage?" he asked

Numal rubbed his thin, grey beard. "We need to collect all the splinters and shards we can find," he declared. "The more of the original material we can assemble, the stronger the mend will be."

"They already look fairly complete to me," Erik said, holding up one of the broken, bottle-shaped spokes. "See? This one's cracked and splintered, but there doesn't seem to be any wood missing."

"We need to make the spokes look as near to their original condition as possible, Sergeant," Numal said.

"Think of it like straightening a broken

bone before splinting it."

"I can do that," Mercia declared. "I have set many broken bones in my time as a Healer."

"Grimm said, "Before we do that, we'll need to remove the wheel. Can we prop up the front of the wagon and hammer out the retaining spike?"

"You need no prop, Lord Baron," Shakkar said, with what might have been a disdainful sniff. "I can lift and hold this vehicle as easily as I can draw breath."

"I can hammer out the spike with a rock," Tordun offered.



The wheel was removed in less than a minute. Shakkar's biceps scarcely seemed to twitch as he hoisted up the front of the vehicle. Tordun struck three times with a grapefruit-sized rock he found at the side of the road, swinging the wheel free with only a soft grunt to show his exertion. In a few moments more, the metal rim was off, and the damaged spokes were pulled from the hub. On Grimm's advice, Tordun took care to pull only on the undamaged portions of the spokes, nearest to the hub. He bore off the freed booty to the waiting Mercia, who began to wrest the spokes into a semblance of their former shape with surprising strength. When she pronounced herself satisfied, Numal

took the damaged members from her and began to chant.

\* \* \* \*

Drex sat on a grassy bank at the side of the road, feeling numb and lonely. Not even her faithful, former protector, Shakkar, cast her so much as a glance as he regarded Numal's performance. She saw Grimm standing next to Mercia, leaning on his staff like an old, huddled man: he, too, seemed intent only on the Necromancer's actions. Sergeant Erik and General Quelgrum chatted idly about some insignificant, tedious, military matter, but she saw the older soldier's gaze fall often on the young Healer. Tordun sat under a large tree, protecting

his pale, sensitive skin from the sun's rays. Despite his damaged eyes, he looked at peace.

What about ME? Where's my happiness? she wanted to scream, but she knew that would be unseemly behaviour for a member of the Anointed Score.

She began to notice how the Necromancer's knotted, liver-spotted hands caressed the damaged wood in a soft, rhythmic motion as he crooned and muttered to it.

Just as Grimm once held me.

The unwelcome thought popped into her unwary mind, and she could not dismiss

it. She found her breathing becoming short and stuttering, no matter how she tried to retain her image of purity and aloofness. Something sensuous about the Necromancer's movements struck her, and she could not erase it from her mind.

His hands look just like Grimm's hands did on me...

Fugitive images flickered into reality and, just as swiftly, disappeared: the large bed in the white tower at Crar; Grimm leaning over her, his face flushed and sweaty, but peaceful; idyllic mornings, spent at her beloved's side.

What followed that blissful, guilt-free congress? Whips, chains and

imprecations! Endless hours of torment, of kneeling on sharp stones, of cleaning the dried blood from her white robes! The chants—the unending, droning paeans of submission, abjection and self-denial!

Drex saw Mercia lean close to Grimm and whisper something in his ear, smiling as she did so. Grimm smiled in return as he replied.

Something snapped inside her, shattering with a tumultuous crash within her mind.

"He's mine," she whispered, feeling a powerful surge of long-suppressed passion and possessiveness.

"He's MINE, you little bitch!" she cried, as she leapt to her feet. "Get away from Grimm!" Silence reigned; the birds in the trees and the insects in the grass stopped singing, and Drex saw every eye fixed on her. Numal continued to chant, but even he stared at her.

"He's ... he's mine," she whispered, as hot tears tickled at the margins of her eyes. Drex stayed them for as long as she could, but then gave rein to her dammed-up emotions. She began to sob, her shoulders shaking and her body heaving. She closed her eyes in an attempt to stem the sudden flood, but she could not do so. After a few moments, she felt a strong arm around her shoulder, drawing

her forwards. She tried to resist, but the arm was too strong for her.

"It's all right, my love," a soft, familiar voice said, with just a trace of tremulousness. "I'm here; I'll always be here, if you'll have me."

She buried her head in Grimm's chest, hearing his swift, shallow heartbeat echoing her own, and she clasped him tight in her arms.

"You didn't rape me, Grimm," she whispered, not knowing if he heard her or not, but she did not care.

"Never. Never!"

"I'm sorry, Grimm." Her voice grew louder, stronger. "I'm ... I'm yours, and I always will be."

"It'll be all right now, Drex."

Drexelica felt his voice rumble in his chest as she crushed her head into it, not daring to relinquish her hold on him.

\* \* \* \*

Drex's sobbing subsided to a gentle quiver as Grimm sat with her beside the road. He kept his arm around her, as if he could draw all the pain and anguish from her. He felt glad that the other travellers had the gentility to leave them alone. He felt quite at peace, at terms



with what and who he was. He was many men, but this particular man was the one he most wanted to be. This was the Drex he loved; not one of Lizaveta's facsimiles, even though he knew the Prioress' soul remained somewhere within her body.

"Will we be going back to Crar?" she asked, looking up at him with moist eyes.

"Eventually," he said, "one way or another."

"And just what be you meaning by 'one way or another', Grimm Afelnor?" she demanded, and the mage felt overjoyed at the brief resurgence of the unfussy

Grivense patois she had been at such pains to eradicate from her diction.

"I want to tell everyone about it: Lord Thorn; Lord Horin; everyone. I want to scream it from the rooftops: 'I love Drex!'" he said.

"So why can't you, Grimm?"

"I've broken Guild Law just by letting you into my life," he said, with an unhappy shrug. "You know that. I'll still owe the House for my tuition for many more years; that's why I've tried to keep our relationship a secret. I don't want to live with that any longer, but they do have a hold over me. Perhaps they'll accept money in lieu of my continued

service—I'm rich enough now—but they don't have to. And ... even if I can give up my service to the Guild, I'll also have to give up working to redeem my family name. That means so much to me."

"Then don't," she said, with stark finality, her mouth fixed in a firm, determined line. "I don't mind being your secret lover, as long as I'm your only lover. I'll be your docile housekeeper, or anything you want me to be, as long as I'm yours. As long as I don't have to hide, and as long as I can be me."

"I have a Quest to complete," he said, "and it involves you, too. We have to return to High Lodge, with your soul cargo intact."

"We have to, Drex, otherwise we'll never be free. If we just run away, they'll hunt us down, and I'll be just another damned Oathbreaker like Granfer."

"I hate the old witch, now I remember what she put me through," the girl whispered, with fierce intensity.

"How she tried to turn me against you, and how she made us both suffer. I'd give almost anything not to have to go through it. However, if I have to deliver the evil cow to your High bloody Lodge just so we can stay together, I'll do it."

Grimm rubbed his forehead. "I don't know what they'll do to find out the truth,

Drex,” he said. “I don't know what Lizaveta will say to them. The whole ... thing between us may come out. I don't know if I can stop it.”

“Then we'll face it together,” Drex said, her expression looking stern but loving. “They can't kill us ... can they?”

“They won't kill you,” Grimm said, shaking his head. “Don't worry about that. I'm pretty sure they won't kill me either—I'm too valuable to them as a Questor—but they could do something to make me a little more ... tractable.”

Just a few minutes ago, he had felt happy with his lot, but Drex's sudden change had thrown a new, difficult problem into

his life; however, this was a problem he knew he must not ignore, nor try to diminish. He did not want to.

Whatever happened, he knew there was only one answer.

"No matter what they do, Drex," he said, feeling his blood rising in determination. "I want to face it with you, and only with you.

"I won't love anyone else, ever. I only want to be with you, whatever happens!"

"That's all I want," she said, her lips curling into an almost beatific smile, and he felt his heart surge in response. "If you have to give me up, you have to: just

remember me always in your heart. All I  
—"

"I think they're as good as they're ever going to be," Numal cried, and Grimm returned to the real world.

"I'm sorry, Drex," he said, giving her a swift but passionate kiss, which she returned in full measure. "I'm needed."

"You certainly are," she said, as he rose to his feet with the help of Redeemer. "I know you'll do a good job of it—whatever you have to do."

Despite the nagging pains in his left leg and his ribs, Grimm walked towards the other travellers with a song in his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Sprit-Lizaveta gasped as she felt the last dregs of earth-power fade with Weranda's—Drexelica's—words.

The disembodied soul thrashed and screamed to no effect. Devoid of her intimate contact with the nourishing, empowering earth, she felt her strength wilting like a candle in the fierce heat of a forge. Guy ... listen to me. LISTEN, rot you! Answer me!

She tried to contact her host, but she could not do so; all she received in return was a package of anguish, self-doubt and suppressed guilt.



Somebody ... talk to me ... talk to me...

Lizaveta had faced many setbacks in her long life, and she had defeated them all by guile, cunning and native power. Now, she, the pre-eminent witch of her age, was a helpless prisoner in the body of a callow girl. For the first time in her life since she had been the violated vassal of a Temperan slave-trader, whom she had later killed with her nascent Geomantic skills, she felt utterly alone and powerless. It's all going wrong! Damn Afelnor and his bumbling grandson! Damn this worthless girl and the traitorous Score! Damn them all!

Labouring under the sick, heavy mantle of dread certainty, she realised that she

had failed to complete the spell she had begun to cast on her grandson. She knew Geomancy had little in common with its mechanistic, male equivalent, but the concept of an inescapable, ever-amplifying Resonance was well-known to practitioners of both arts.

She knew she had given Guy the first part of his mission: Go to High Lodge. The next part of the spell contained the message, Dominie Horin must be killed. Soon, I will identify the chosen assassin to you, and tell you your part in the deed. Wait for my signal. If you waver in your resolve, you will know my displeasure like this!

Guy must have received at least part of her spell, but Lizaveta did not know how much. If he only heard a small part of it ... oh, Names, this could be disastrous!

The corporeal Lizaveta would have sighed in dismay. As it was, the spirit-Prioress had to content herself with the fight to prevent her personality being submerged under her host's. Her former handmaiden, Drexelica, had forsaken her.

The stupid girl had succumbed again to Afelnor's blandishments and in so doing had deprived Lizaveta's wandering spirit of her last vestiges of power. The Prioress's spirit raged within her fleshy prison, but to no avail. Only one path

seemed available to her; she needed to find another, more controllable host—and soon!

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## **Chapter 38: Travels**

The road became narrow and rutted, and Grimm regretted his advice to General Quelgrum to give Yoren such a wide berth. The ill-sprung wagon jolted and jarred as if it were some living creature trying to escape its leash, and the young mage began to wonder how much longer he would be able to hold on to his last meal.

Only another two days, he told himself.

Then we'll be back in civilisation, with decent roads ahead of us. The thought did not enthuse him much: they had been bouncing on this dirt track for only four hours, and Grimm already felt nauseous.

Shakkar had abandoned the cart, preferring to take to the air on his leathery wings. Grimm had no intention of looking for the demon; only by focusing on the vehicle's relatively motionless interior could he retain any sense of equilibrium. The merest glimpse of the outside world sent his entrails into convulsions, and closing his eyes proved even worse.

In front of him sat Tordun, who seemed quite unaffected by this chaotic motion,

lost in some pleasant world of his own as he hummed softly to himself. Grimm envied the warrior's iron constitution, not for the first time.

He looked down at Drexelica, who sat in silence beside him, her head lolling on his left shoulder and her right hand resting lightly on the other. Her face looked a little paler than usual; indeed, he fancied her ashen complexion had taken on a faint tinge of green.

Grimm turned his head slowly to the right. Sister Mercia seemed in even worse straits: from time to time, her throat twitched, and she held a slender, trembling hand over her moisture-

beaded forehead. Her hair was matted and lank, and her breathing was shallow and fitful.

Refusing to surrender to his nauseous misery, the Questor drew Redeemer closer, hugging the staff as if it were some long-lost brother, drawing strength from it.

Redeemer! The bright thought flashed into his mind, and he thought of the very first spells he had first cast on the weapon: the Minor Magics of Stability and Inner Clarity. Magemaster Kargan had advised him to use these spells to combat the worst effects of inebriation.

Grimm drew hungrily upon the buried

spells, like a starving man falling on a banquet. In an instant, he felt a cool flood of calm running through his rebellious gut and his fevered head, steadying and soothing him. He was whole again, able to look around with abandon.

As long as he accessed the spells, he would be able to withstand the rigours of the journey, and the simple Minor Magics required little energy to maintain. Redeemer held more than enough stored power to fulfil this paltry function.

"Ladies," he yelled, his voice only just able to overcome the riotous din from the wagon's unsteady progress, "take



hold of Redeemer. As long as you keep hold, I think you'll be all right." Drex removed her trembling hand from his shoulder and reached out to grasp Redeemer. At once, he saw the colour returning to Drex's face, and her drooping eyelids shot wide open.

"That's wonderful, Grimm!" she cried. "I feel so much better!" Mercia laid her own hand on the staff, just below the lowest golden ring. She did not speak, but her broad, grateful smile was answer enough.

Well, at least I've done something useful today, he thought. Let's hope the rest of the journey is a little more cheerful.

Drex leaned her head back on his left shoulder, and Grimm felt her contentment and her love. He smiled and rested his head against hers.

\* \* \* \*

Prioress Lizaveta's soul could not suffer from motion sickness, but she felt as miserable as the love-struck mortals. She had hoped Drexelica might access her Geomantic powers at some point in the journey, perhaps allowing spirit-Lizaveta to regain full control over the girl's emotions and actions. However, she had not done so. Drexelica's rediscovered love for Grimm Afelnor was the last straw. Spirit-Lizaveta knew her last vestiges of command had been

obliterated by that blinding revelation. The intricate network of mental blocks, associations and aversions she had fostered were washed away like a spider's web in a flash-flood.

She knew now that nothing could stop her being delivered to the tender mercies of Lord Dominie Horin's interrogation at High Lodge. Having done her best to ensnare Horin, she had been thwarted by the same Questor Grimm who had contrived to kill her, and who now led her back to judgement. Horin will never show me clemency, she berated herself. His Guild will never tolerate a challenge to their masculine supremacy by a witch; they will surely expunge my

spirit.

It is my own fault: I underestimated Questor Grimm when I tried to control him, at the cost of my physical life. I assumed he would be a pale copy of his grandfather, Loras; but, if anything, he is Loras' superior in skill and power. I should never have attempted to dominate him.

Her plans to exert control over the Guild, so that her own Order would gain the respect and ascendancy she craved, lay in ashes. Thorn, her ungrateful oaf of a son, had betrayed her, despite all she had done for him. She had also failed in her attempt to exert her full will on her bastard grandson, Guy, when her power

was stripped from her in mid-spell by Questor Grimm.

It keeps coming back to Afelnor! He has frustrated and thwarted me at every turn. If I had an ounce of power left to me, I would not waste it in a foolish attempt to bedazzle him: I would destroy him!

Damn Thorn; he trained the boy too well!

Despite spirit-Lizaveta's pride in her inner powers, she knew now she would never dominate Questor Grimm, even by stealth. The youth was more determined and powerful than any male she had ever encountered, and she knew even she would never break down his defences.

Drexelica was another matter. Lizaveta had broken down the girl's strong defences after a concerted effort. Although regaining her earlier domination would be impossible with her current low reserves of power, perhaps gentle persuasion might work better.

If I can just persuade her to access her Geomantic powers...

She dismissed the thought in an instant.

It took days of torment to even begin to break her, and months of dedicated work to gain full control. My one lever was the absence of support and love from the world outside the Priory, and I can't

hope to repeat that with Afelnor at her side. The girl is strong, and he'll only add to her resolve.

\* \* \* \*

Grimm gazed into his lover's eyes with a feeling of the deepest contentment. The Dragonblaster wanted nothing more than to hold Drex—his Drex!—in his arms and dream of an idyllic future with her. Tomorrow might bring any number of problems, but the two lovers had each other, and they had today—and that was more than enough.

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**About the Author**

Alastair J. Archibald lives in south-east England and is employed as the quality manager of a local electronics company. Apart from writing, his interests include playing the guitar, singing, songwriting, pool, chess and, of course, reading. You are invited to visit Al's website at: [ajarchibald.wcpauthor.com/](http://ajarchibald.wcpauthor.com/)

The first four books in this series (A Mage in the Making, Weapon of the Guild, Questor and Truth and Deception) have all been Whiskey Creek Press #1 Bestsellers.

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