

## *Chapter 1: The Weave of Fate*

Cassock of Cael stood at the precipice of a hill. To his left, a worn tower stretched fifty feet into the cool night air. The tower consisted of nothing but a spiraling staircase that crept upward to an open platform. The wooden platform had been devoured by time. Still stretching across the open gap, a few braces lent contrast to the rusting bell of the tower. Both Enoch and Styg's early evening rays caressed each mud-red fleck of rust adorning the warning bell <1>.

Cassock had shifted through the rubble although the post had been uninhabited for years if not decades. A paltry handful of coins and a few vials of holy water were the only scraps he found. Confident that his search had produced all to be found, the priest moved outside to glare downward at the bustling town.

Flickering fires danced through the open windows of the tiny cottages. The tiny lights would not have shown normal eyes the detail revealed to Cassock. Cael's Blessing had already proved its usefulness <2>. Cassock saw at least twenty individuals milling about an open field in the center of the town. They all moved slowly, stirring or searching the ground at their feet. A fine mist clung to the feet of the mob, clambering upward whenever given a chance.

Two distinct natural sensations arose within Cassock at that moment. The first was a fine red glow emanating from the ground beneath the crowd. The second, a scent of charred flesh brought to his notice by the chill kulyc wind. The cleric winced in realization. The field that the townsfolk shifted through was no field; it had been more homes, burnt to the ground.

"I see you have sent me to where I am needed, My Lord! My path becomes clearer." The priest stood and descended toward the town.

---

Cassock slid from shadow to shadow into the town, passing like a ghost amongst the living. His crimson and black chain mail was silent as if in respect granted toward the lost souls.

In the center of the village, the small crowd was shifting through ashes. Burnt remains of wood still held the glowing warmth of dying flames. The crackling wood erupted upward at odd angles from a sea of useless roofing. Next to these cinders, lied the remains of the dead. Their faces were contorted in ashen visages of horror. Lips melted together with gums, teeth cleansed pearly white by the fire. The teeth were beacons to the searchers and with each new body discovered another round of sobbing and wails pierced the air.

Most of the crowd continued with the hopeless search, unknowing of the new presence. One man did spot the priest. He moved warily toward the armored visitor, bastard sword weighing heavily in his left hand. The guard's armor was only worn leather with scraps dangling uselessly. Despite his middle age, the man looked ancient and gaunt.

A few steps behind the guard, a group of townsfolk dumped a wooden pail of water upon some smoldering embers. A soft hiss and gout of smoke plumed upward. Nine corpses lie under gray death shrouds beside the group. The rescuers dragged three rigid cadavers from the embers they had quieted. A father, mother and small child were pulled

toward the sheeted bodies; all of their faces frozen in agony. Caged within the child's arms, a small pet rested eternally.

"Hail there! What happened here?"

The guard stopped only a few paces from the cleric. Soot and dirt did nothing to hide the anger and sorrow etched into the creases of the man's brow. Neither did the grime conceal the wary glances at Cassock's armor and weaponry. Meticulously, the guard seemed to inventory all of the gear, piece by piece. Once finished measuring the priest, the guard pulls out a flask and takes a long swig. The sweet odor of a dark rum mixes with the heavy scent of rot from the guard's mouth.

"They came for the Mayor's half-breed!" he spits out. "But were 'ey content wit' jus' that?" The guard swallowed another draught. "Nah. Burned 'ese other homes, killin' dose inside." With the last grunt, the guard clumsily waves a hand toward the crisp cadavers behind.

The sentry slipped the flask back into a pouch on his belt as he bent to lift an iron rod from the wreckage. His slightly intoxicated hand rotated the three-foot pole in the air. "Wedge 'ese in e' doors. Bastards! Trapped 'em to roast alive. I can still 'ere the screams!" The rod vibrated as it hit the ground. The flask instantly replaced the iron.

"Damn Mayor! Damn pointers! Damn Orphan! If'n the Mayor 'ad jus' killed the bitch, good peoples 'ud not be dead! Ara'Kull is punishing us!" The guard turns to leave, stumbling over one of the many corpses. The townspeople pulled him from the ash and soot.

A group of plainly clad females were bent over the dead. Dutifully, they pulled the shrouds back and bathed the singed flesh of the dead with clean cloths and water. The crowd's talking had diminished, replaced only by a few whispers. Cassock stared downward, trying to pick out the important bits of information. A few of the words did stand out, not because of unfamiliarity but due to their constant repetition: Male Half-Elf, Female Halfling, Keep, and Royal Guard all caught his ear. The Priest of Cael turned to find the keep but is stopped suddenly in his tracks.

The crowd parted as an elderly gentleman approaches the dead. He slowly approached; the majority of his weight supported by a twisted staff. A plain white cloak hung over the slim frame increasing his apparent size. Drawn around his face, a white hood with a black, ornately stitched hem hid his features. Long, gray beard hair spilt down the front of the cloak in a haphazard fashion. A metal symbol had snatched Cassock's attention. It was a simple silver amulet depicting a broken bastard sword: the symbol of Ara'Kull's clergy.

The cleric bent down over each body, intoning a brief prayer. With withered hands, he drew their charred eyelids down. As the cleric moved from one cadaver to the next, Cassock nearly leapt out of his skin. Each body jerked upward, a white nimbus of light pouring from the corpse. The light quickly fouled though, becoming pitch-black in hue. Out of the bodies the darkness flowed, vaguely humanoid. Cassock could distinguish facial expressions, still twisted in agony as they reached toward him with their ethereal hands. Before the ghostly fingers could brush the priest, the black souls jerked upward into the black sky. Cassock shuddered, suddenly feeling very frigid.

The Priest of Ara'Kull turned to Cassock as the rites of passage were complete. He raised his head enough to let the dying embers reflect from his eyes. Without saying one word, the cleric vanished into the crowd.

Cassock shivered yet again. His mind tried to piece together the unnatural occurrence he witnessed <3>. What he had seen was not just unnatural but inherently wrong in some unspeakable way. But, there were no logical words to describe the agitation. Worried, the Priest of Cael moved toward the bodies of the dead.

"Help me," he begged the drunken soldier. Cassock lifted a handful of soot and moved in between the once-blessed corpses. Quickly, he drew Cael's mark on their brows reciting the proper burial words. Once each body had been marked he stepped backward to finish the rites. "*Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria* <4>." The priest knelt briefly to sketch the Death God's symbol into the soot as well. "I only hope I wasn't too late to save their souls," he murmured. "What is going on here? What was that atrocity? Damnation. Am I to be your justicar, Cael?"

"Eh," the guard butted in, "what er ye babblin' about?"

Cassock glared at the ignorance of the soldier as his mind returned to the present. "Make sure these people get proper burials. And make sure they're buried in whatever fashion suited their religion...not the religion of that Heretic." Cassock throws a glare toward the other priest's last position. A confused expression spread across the guard's face.

"And I need to see the half-elf and halfling that were captured earlier today. Take me there immediately."

"I cannae. I'm jus' a conscript. But if yeh really wanna see those," the soldier spit onto the ground, "bastards in the keep, yeh need tah find Mayor Rowen. An' you'll find that **HERETIC** in keep." The man's sneer deepened.

"Very well, I will find the mayor. Stay with the bodies and do as I instructed you." Cassock tossed a handful of silvers at the guard as he ran toward the keep. After Cassock departed, the guard turned toward the ladies in white. He had stuffed the silvers into his purse greedily and was finishing the last draught from his flask.

"Take the bodies to Tobus to be buried," the conscript commanded.

"What of the man's requests?" questioned a lady.

"Fuck that dumb foreigner. 'E don't know our customs nor our peoples."

<1> Enoch and Styg are the two moons that circle Norum da Salaex.

<2> Clerics have been slightly modified from the standard cleric in that each God gifts their worthy priests with special abilities. One of Cael's Blessings is darkvision (or an increase if you are of a race that already has the ability).

<3> This **IS** most definitely an unnatural occurrence...not just because Cassock can see the departing souls but for other reasons as well.

<4> "*Trasumanar significar per verba non si poria*" is Latin and it translates to: "**The passage beyond humanity cannot be set forth in words.**" I felt it was wholly appropriate to the situation.

Cassock spun toward the keep. Steps, heavy with distress over the shadowed soul, pulled him toward the castle and further into the weave of fate.

Not one hundred yards from the double gates, something brushes against the priest's

armor. He barely noticed the motion until a small voice pleaded, "Wait! Wait!" The cleric stopped and turned.

A small half-orc girl, dressed in naught but filthy rags, clenched tightly to his chain maille. Tiny, yellowed tusks broke the jagged surface of her oversized lips. "Please, wait."

Cassock knelt and stared at the child. "And what I can I do for you child?"

"I..." she stammered. "I knew Ariel. She was nice. She was eleven." A big twisted grin spread across her craggy lips. The girl leaned in closer and whispered, "We was friends. She did'n care that I was," her eyes darted toward the ground awkwardly. "Ugly." The word was harsh; full of pain. She raised her sloping brow and stared the priest down. Small beads of pain filled her eyes; one or two silently darted down her face and to the earth. "I liked her pointy ears. Please, sir. Bring her back." Before Cassock could even respond, the half-breed twirled into the shadows of a building and disappeared. Cassock of Cael resumed his march into the keep.

---

As the distance between the priest and the keep disappeared, so to the mass of townsfolk faded in the night. Those without homes moved toward the old tavern for an emotion-numbing drink. Those full of exhaustion moved to the keep, following the priest. An order had been issued immediately following the attack. All townsfolk were to reside within the walls of the keep until such a time as their protection could be assured outside the walls.

Cassock eagerly devoured the details of the stone fortress. The layout would probably serve useful in the future. The towering walls, crafted of heavy stone, climbed nearly fifty feet into the air, odd for a town so small in number. The only entrance to the residences and taverns was a gigantic set of solid oak doors. The portcullis was only half lowered. Gleaming, black iron reinforced by steel had been shaped into that protective exoskeleton. Not a sign of dirt or mud rested on its limbs. This fortress was quite new.

Along the inner walls, stone buildings grew like jungle vines amongst tree branches. These buildings were squat and gray with few windows for lighting. Not even one of the buildings stretched more than thirty feet from the wall, allowing an open courtyard of near one hundred and forty feet. It was in this courtyard that masses of the townsfolk huddled near small campfires. A heavy scent of alcohol and roasted venison filled the courtyard.

Another wall split the massive courtyard in twain, leaving it in sections of two hundred foot length. This wall seemed at least as thick as the exterior walls, twenty to thirty feet of stone. There was another oversized doorway arcing above the path and into the second half of the courtyard.

Cassock noted a pair of heavily armed militiamen standing against the wall and headed forward for further direction to the mayor. Before Cassock made it to the guards, a man in shining plate maille stomped into the courtyard. Strapped to his side, an oversized sword nearly dug a channel in the earth. The sword, like the mail, was extraordinarily polished to a perfect mirror surface. Around the soldier's neck dangled a black emblem, that of the Captain of the Guard.

"**LOOK**, old man! I don't like it anymore than you! But the law is the law. Now people have died. The Royal army needs to be notified of these events." The Captain's

arms folded condescendingly across the front of his blinding armor.

“Boy, I will not have the Royal Inquisitors stirring up trouble in my town.” An elderly gentleman followed the Captain into the yard. The man’s deep brown hair had grayed and thinned with age. His skin was nearly taut, pulled across his wiry and tall frame. “**YOU** don’t know what it is you are suggesting. I was a youth the last time they came. And you weren’t even a twinkle in your father’s eye. And if he were still among us, he would know better! Have you forgotten the histories? I thought I educated you better.” The gentleman sighed, straightening the ruffled noble cloth that draped from his body. Patches littered the canvas of cloth, leaving the minor noble looking unkempt and exhausted.

The Captain spun at the mayor. “Aye, I remember the tales; Stories to frighten children; Stories that sow discordant seeds between the people and our rightful ruler. **Stories and nothing more!**”

Cassock stepped diplomatically in between the two men, eliciting glares from each. With a quiet voice, the elder murmured, “Strange night for so many visitors.”

“Good sirs, mayhaps I can be of some service to you. I will need some details, but...”

The Captain cut the cleric off with a dismissing wave of his hand, “And how exactly do you think you can help?”

Cassock cleared his throat, subduing the anger brewing within. “Inquisitors here would be a terrible move for either of you. If the Royal Army had to be summoned, it could spread rumors of your inability to control your keep and your own lands. I suggest a small group go in search of the child. And I volunteer openly for the task. But, I will require some details as well as access to the prisoners.”

“Ah,” the Captain sighed. “Just another man interested in seeing the freaks.”

Cassock turned his cool glare toward the Captain. “You, good sir, should listen to your elders when they speak. Their wisdom will save you more than your own blade. But you’re right the law is that the Royals should be requested. Within the letter of the law though it does not state a period of time within which this contact should be established. Gather a group, send them for information and then at least you will know what the Royals will have to face. Do **NOT** waste the King’s money by summoning trained soldiers before all the facts are held.

“You would also do well to remember Captain that they may be stories. But they are also history. They are told so that the children will not forget the past. The children must not make the same mistakes. How many people in this town died with the last arrival of the Inquisition? Thirty? Forty? One hundred? You would risk the lives of your people for a cause you know nothing about?” Cassock clenched his jaw firmly, strangling the remaining bitter words into silence. The Captain’s face flushed as he turned and stormed from the courtyard.

Cassock pivoted toward the Mayor and takes one step backward. “Full of ignorance that one.”

“Captain Leiban has a good heart, stranger. I’m just not sure he recognizes that facet anymore.” The Mayor measured the visitor, watching the light reflect off the alternating black and red mail. “I am Gabe Rowen, the Mayor of this small town. If you wouldn’t mind, join me for a drink and we can discuss your opinions.” The Mayor waved toward the doorway the guards were positioned near and allowed the cleric to follow him indoors.

Leiban Malabrandt, the Captain of the Guard, stormed out the western gates of the keep. His men had tried to grab his attention, but feeling his seething rage about to explode, the Captain ignored them. In the back of his awareness he heard the clank of the portcullis shutting. The guards were still positioned at that gate in the event of any more travelers.

The Capitan walked westward. The early fall breeze whistled through the wheat, soothing his hatred. He stretched his arms outward, letting the dancing plants tickle his palms. Upward his vision stretched, counting and naming the stars he had forever known in this town, his home.

A snapping twig brought him back to consciousness. His sword flashed outward toward the noise, a robed hand blocked the blade.

*"Careful, young Master. You still have use for me and my talents."* The voice was nothing more than a whisper, but Leiban knew it well. He sheathed the blade.

"What are you doing out here?"

*"I could ask the same of you, but I think I know. The Mayor has chosen, once again in his infinite wisdom, to disregard the law. This has angered you."* The cloaked figure stalked around the Captain. He pulled directly up to the front of the youth. *"I know you well Leiban. I know the Mayor well."*

"You're right. You're always right..."

*"Shhh."* The man raised a hand to his hidden lips. *"Do not speak my name out here please, just in case. I believe we have a visitor, do we not?"*

"Yes. Some fool traveler broke into my discussion with the Mayor. Arrogant bastard."

*"He is. But he is more than that. This man follows the Old Faith. He follows an untrue God. And now if the Mayor assists this man..."*

"It is further reason for the mayor to be deposed." Leiban finished. His anger had all but vanished.

*"Exactly. I take it you fulfilled my request?"* The cloaked man slipped past the Capitan.

"Yes. The messenger was dispatched some time ago with your letter."

*"Good. That is what I like to hear. I will be meeting with T. later tonight. Keep your eyes on the traveler if you can. One way or another, I think I'll have to take care of him."*

"Of course." Leiban turned to his friend, but found nothing but the softly shifting blades of wheat.

Fifteen more minutes of peace passed outside the gates of the town before Leiban was again drawn from his reverie. The steady plodding of hooves drifted toward him. He drew his blade again as a lone traveler rode over the crest of the western hill.

A billowing cloak streamed from behind the traveler as it began the descent down the hill. Leiban waved his sword above his head, reflecting the torchlight into the distance. Surprisingly, the horse slowed its progress and brought its rider slowly toward the Captain.

"Halt. Who approaches?!" Leiban stuck his jaw outward. His body prepared for the

worst, inflating itself to intimidate.

“Come now, Leiban.” A soft, melodic voice drifted from the hooded traveler. “Surely, after all these years you have not forgotten me.” The hood was thrown back, revealing a mass of wavy, deep brown hair. From behind the sensual locks, two bright brown eyes stared at the Capitan.

“Lady Rowen.” The Captain moved to his knees and bowed his head in respect. Then he stood and extended a hand, helping the lady dismount.

“Please, Leiban. You know I never enjoyed being addressed in that fashion.” She allowed Malabrandt to assist in her dismount.

“Of course, Lady Anastrianna...I mean Ana.” Leiban smiled awkwardly.

“I see you have taken over as the Captain of the Guard. How is your father?” Ana unlatched her belongings from the steed.

“He passed away last year. The fever took him in the winter months.” A touch of sadness echoed in Leiban’s words.

“I am sorry to hear about your loss, dear Leiban. What of this?” Ana threw her hand haphazardly toward the keep.

“Ah. Mayor Rowen decided the town needed better defenses. He commissioned the building of this fortress. It has been some time since you were here, Ana. Would you like me to show you around? Much has changed in the last several years.”

“No Leiban that won’t be necessary. I do need to see my father, though. Could you take me to him?” Ana smiled, her expression further enhancing the beauty of her face.

“Of course. Follow me, Lady.” Leiban turned a similar grin spreading over his own face. Soon, the Captain would be Mayor. On top of that delicious fact, the unrequited love of his youth just happened to return. This week just can’t get any better, the Captain thought as he ordered the portcullis to be raised.

Note:

Ok, not sure if I mentioned this before. The suffix “-iban” is attached to males that share the same name as their father. The suffix “-anda” is attached to females that share the same name as their mother. So, Leiban is the son of Leo Malabrandt.

Gabrielle huddled in the corner of the damp cell she occupied. Outside the barred door, her gear lay unceremoniously next to Aramil’s, along with her clothing. Fresh welts stung painfully, allowing the past hours of torture to be unforgotten. Blood had long congealed along her wounds. She was sure she’d die from some infectious disease.

Thankfully, the violators-dressed-as-guards had unbound her from the heavy wooden barrel after their...administrations. She shuddered uncontrollably. A feeling of nausea swept through her body and she clutched herself closely. Anything to keep warm, she thought as she groped tighter.

Gabrielle had never known such pain. She had been warned. Her protector, the only father she had ever known, had warned her of men. Hargos had rescued Gabrielle from

her halfling birthright. Born secretly in a pen somewhere in the orc-blasted territory to the northwest, Gabrielle was shuttled away into the forest by the woodsman. Hargos himself was only half-human, just like Aramil. And Hargos had taken to surviving in the forest alone except for a lute and the accompanying sound of his own voice.

Hargos had been her father. At least he was, until a band of human soldiers came along and ruined her life.

Gabrielle could almost remember that day perfectly despite or maybe because of her current pain. She had awoken to the beautiful sounds of birds chirping happily in the woods. Hargos was supposed to give her another lesson with the lute. But the birds erupted from the trees, leaving an eerie silence. The half-elf left Gabrielle in the hut to investigate.

The sound of the birds was soon replaced with the sound of steel carrying soldiers. Gabrielle did as Hargos had instructed her, grabbing all her gear and fleeing. She had taken Hargos' lute as well, so she could continue the lessons when they met again. That day never came.

After waiting for more than a month for Hargos, Gabrielle left broken-hearted to head toward the free state of Aedil. "It was the only place she would ever be safe," Hargos had claimed. So Gabrielle fled.

It was a long journey for a long time. The harshness of reality had left the halfling struggling for food and shelter, until she had met Aramil. Then life had been easier again. She could practice on the lute when Aramil wasn't grumpy. And she could tell him wonderful tales about Hargos, although more often than not they both avoided speaking of their pasts. Now, they were both trapped in an unrelenting hell of abuse.

Captain Lockhart, she thought was his name, had argued with the other guards about their mistreatment. The other guards wouldn't listen though. Even the mayor had ordered the pair's clothes given back and abuse ceased. But once he was gone, the guards resumed their fun.

*Men are evil.*

A resounding thud echoed from the cell next to Gabrielle's. Aramil was still moaning in pain. She knew that moan well after a day in this hell. His mouth had been gagged, much as her own. She was pretty sure he had his own barrel, his own bonds. Thankfully a thin wall separated the cells so she would not have to relive her own experiences.

*If only I could reach the lute, she thought. Its not that far...and I could soothe Aramil's and my own pain. Or maybe a weapon. Aramil's blade isn't so far. I should be able to reach it,* solidifying her own confidence, the halfling moved toward the edge of her cell. She pressed her face against the cold, iron bars and glanced down the hallway. Still there was only one guard in the dungeon. And he was preoccupied. Gabrielle stretched her arm out.

Another sharp crack split the air. Before Gabrielle could react, the guard stepped out of the adjoining cell and spied the halfling's arm reaching toward the blade. He grunted, shifting his slimy bulk toward her. He stopped adjusting his belt and uniform.

Gabrielle retracted her arm in a flash and slid backward from the door. The guard grunted again, while slamming Aramil's cell door. One final half-conscious moan escaped before a painful silence settled in the dungeon.

The evil man fumbled with his keys momentarily. He glanced upward, a malicious gleam in his eyes. "Want som'in hard to hold, do ye? I got som'in for you. Som'in your



freak beau coul'nt handle." The key shifted metallicly in the lock until a tiny click signaled the opening of a mechanism.

Gabrielle prayed to every god and goddess she had ever heard named for courage; the door swung open.

The halfling prayed to Hargos for speed; the guard stepped in and reached to close the door.

Gabrielle made one last fleeting prayer to Phoebe, the mother of all the gods, for strength. She charged the iniquitous fiend.

The cell door slammed shut as the man raised one booted foot to Gabrielle's face. Gabrielle stumbled backward from the impact, crashing into the solid barrier behind. Warm vitae spilled down the bard's face, from her shattered teeth.

"I likes 'em frisky. Jus' like yer boyfriend." The voice was distant. Unconsciousness stretched reality. Before the halfling entered its cool embrace completely, she felt one fat, grubby hand slide up her nude torso.

---

"Thank you for the drink," Cassock said as he set the mug of ale down. The frothy fluid swirled within the wooden cup as a light scent of cinnamon and some exquisite, roasted bean overpowered the typically rank odor of alcohol. Cassock glanced about the Mayor's modest room.

A single wooden table with three rickety chairs stood alone in the cramped room. Bearing down upon the furniture, the gray walls stood quiet in judgment, disapproving. Three sketches attempted to brighten the unbending nature of the walls. Each portrait was of a different female, all three beautiful. Slightly pointed ears pierced the shaded hair of the youngest female sketch; angled features emphasized the difference between this portrait and the other two. A definite family resemblance linked the first two canvases.

Cassock's eyes glanced downward, silently examining the worn fur coverings upon the floor. He lifted the delicious ale to his lips, letting its warmth couple with the rugs and nearly making the coolness bearable.

"I must apologize again for your Captain," the cleric began. "We young folks can be a bit anxious. I'm sure the Captain only meant the best."

"You need not apologize for my Captain of the Guard. I knew his personality well when I had him replace his father at the post. Leiban's a bit quick to rouse. But he is a good man, and a better soldier. With a little more time, hopefully, he'll become a little wiser to the ways of the world." Mayor Rowen finished his own mug and returned to the kitchen.

"I think you may want to allow the Captain to make his report though," Cassock added when the Mayor disappeared behind a wall.

"Oh? Why's that?"

"Ultimately, it is your decision to forward the report along. If you allow Leiban to, at the very least, create this report, then his ego, pride and honor should be satisfied."

A chuckle preceded the reemergence of the Mayor. "Too bad you weren't available last year when Leiban's father passed. You would've made a good Captain, possibly even a better mayor than I." Rowen sat quickly, setting his refilled mug down and sliding Cassock a fresh mug. "Now, if you don't mind the abrupt segue, why have you come to my town?" The old man's hazel eyes noiselessly interrogated the seeming warrior.

“Ah. Well, that is quite a long story.” Cassock sipped from the new mug, forcing a respite. “But I would have to ask first, can I trust you?”

Rowen smiled almost knowingly. “If you’re a bandit, then I might have to ask you enjoy the humble furnishings of our cells. At least, until you leave. But fear not, it would be rent free.”

Cassock chuckled. “I’m nothing quite so dastardly, at least in spirit and intent. I am a priest of Cael.” His medallion slid easily from behind the armor.

“Hmmm, a priest of the God of Death and Darkness. I have townsfolk who believe you should be sleeping in the dungeon.”

“What they don’t know will not hurt them. I’m not here to disturb the peace. Rather, I believe Cael has sent me here to help in your current predicament. You have a young woman in need of rescue. I’m here to do the rescuing.” The last of the new mug of ale was quickly drained. This brew consisted of a sweet flavoring, not unlike a candy Cassock had enjoyed as a child. The priest stood and moved toward the kitchen to refill his own mug. “Of course, I’ll need more information to complete my task. That is, if you’re not going to throw me into the prison.”

The mayor laughed. “No. Religion has no place in politics, in my humble opinion. You are welcome to stay here. You may not want to openly display your religion however. Others may not be so tolerant.” Cassock brought to full mugs back to the table. “How much information do you need?”

“Well, I take it no ransom has been asked for.” The mayor shook his head. “Then, what was special about this girl? There must be some reason why she was kidnapped. If not for money then why take her? I need more knowledge about her background.

“Also, I’d like a description of those that attacked the town. I need to know how many and what they looked like so I know what to expect. Give me a full account of the events of today. Did anyone note the direction the attack came from, or the direction the attackers fled?”

Taking but a quick breath, the priest continued, “I’d like to know why the prisoners in the dungeon are suspected. If they’re not a part of the kidnapping, then they should be released. Perhaps they can help me track down the true kidnappers, if only to clear their own names.” Cassock lifted the ale, signaling a completion to his requests.

All was quiet for a moment while the mayor collected his own thoughts before beginning. “Ariel was my adopted daughter. That is her face,” he motioned to the portrait of the youngest upon the wall.

“I found her five years ago when she was four. I was out for a walk when I stumbled across a nearly unconscious man in the fields. He was curled oddly upon the ground. I bent down to offer my help and bind any wounds he may have had. He was, after all, resting in a pool of blood.

“But when I touched him, he kicked at me. I fell beside him, but not before seeing the child he was trying to protect. He was elven. It took a lot of convincing for him to allow me to even look at his wounds. The wounds were not deep. The arrows had barely pierced his flesh. Once I removed them, however, I knew the man would not last much longer. The arrows were poisonous, I could tell by the Church’s insignia. The elf had been hunted and wounded.

“He knew his own death was fast approaching. Because of my kindness, he entrusted the child to my care. Her name was Ariel and she was a half-blood. I couldn’t deny him

his last wish.” Rowen wiped a rough hand across his eyes seemingly due to tiredness. “So I brought Ariel back to the town. The elf died in the fields and I buried him in an unmarked grave. I’ve raised the child since.”

“What about the other two portraits?” questioned the priest.

“The portrait on the top is...was my wife. She passed away almost ten years ago. The portrait below is Ana, my daughter. She left after her mother’s death.

With a quick clearing of his throat, the mayor continued, “The band that attacked the town was about twenty-strong. All except one wore a mask. The leader, supposedly, was an elven ranger. Varying accounts portray the other members of varying heights. Some were of average height, but others were dwarfish in stature.

“This is what led to the imprisonment of the other two travelers. One is a half-elf, the other a halfling. It is assumed that they fell behind the raiding party. They’re now resting in the dungeon. I don’t believe they have anything to do with the murders and the kidnapping. They were found to the west of the village. The raiding party headed east however. But, until they’re questioned in public, the townsfolk will demand retribution. The tolerance I’ve worked so hard for my entire life has all but fallen apart in the last twenty-four hours.” Weariness spread its fallow claws through Mayor Rowen.

“You said the brigands wore masks,” Cassock interjected. “What did the masks look like?”

“Oh. They were solid brown except for a black leaf embroidered upon the forehead.”

“And was anything taken aside from the girl?”

“No. She was taken then the brigands set fire to several homes in the area.”

“Mayor Rowen, I don’t think the elves would have taken the girl back by force. They’re not as villainous as the Church’s myths paint them. It could be a rogue elf, however. Also, I don’t think the prisoners had anything to do with the murders. However, I won’t be sure unless I can question them. Could you produce a writ giving me access to the prisoners? Maybe allow me to remove them from the prison? They would be easier to question if not in an uncomfortable setting.”

Gabe Rowen stared at the priest for a moment. “They would probably be in better hands with you. Some of the guards had abused them upon their arrival. I have no problem issuing a writ.” He walked into another room and grabbed a sheet of parchment, jotting instructions quickly with a quill.

As the mayor signed his name, the door to his home swung open. Stepping in, a young woman slid the door closed again. The mayor turned his attention to the intruder and fell backward into his seat, one hand clutching his chest.

“Hi father, I’m home.” Ana smiled.

“Ana...” the words were whispered and pained as they escaped the Mayor’s mouth. He attempted to stand, but only managed to feebly wobble while spilling his ale over the rugs.

“Who is your guest, father?”

Cassock grasped the woman’s hand and brought it to his lips as he bowed. A brief and proper kiss leapt from mouth to hand. While still bowing, the priest spoke. “My lady, I am Cassock of Cael. I am just a priest of an old religion.”

Ana nearly backtracked as Cassock’s medallion reflected light. Instantly, she recognized the symbol as one of those carved into the adamantine box she now owned. She shifted her pack awkwardly and smiled.

“I am Anastrianna Rowen, daughter of the Mayor. It is a pleasure, Cassock. I hope I wasn’t interrupting?” She stared at her father. The old man had barely changed in the near ten years. As thin as ever, with only a slight loss of hair, the rogue noted. Gabe stumbled about the room, placing another mug of ale onto the table and pulling out the third chair.

“Please, sit daughter.” He motioned her over with a wave, but before she could sit, the mayor lunged. His arms wrapped tightly around her in an unbreakable embrace. The tears, which had been wiped away before, now fled freely down the Mayor’s face. “My gods, the fates take one daughter away and return another lost all within a day.” Cassock turned slightly away in respect.

Ana pulled free of the embrace and carefully slid into the chair. “What do you mean by that? And what the hell happened to the town? And where did this keep come from?”

“All long stories, dear...”

“Do not fear, lady.” Cassock interrupted. “I am going to retrieve your adopted sister.”

“You have been hired then by my father? What qualifications do you have?”

“Not hired, Lady. I am not a sellsword. I have volunteered because my God has set me upon this path.”

Ana smirked slightly. “I hope for your sake then it is a good path. The divine only seems to lead people astray anymore.”

Cassock bowed stiffly. “I’m sure it is the right path. If you will excuse me, Mayor and Lady Ana, I have some prisoners to collect.” The priest swiped the writ from the table and, bowing once more, exited the room.

“What other daughter?” Ana turned, now curious, toward her father. Gabe Rowen took his seat next to his child and began the tale.

---

Cassock slid quietly between the commoners. With controlled effort, he silenced his armor, as much as possible. The background was filled with a din of noise; barely controlled terror and anger rippling like a stream upon the voices. He kept moving, forbidding the private discussions access to his mind. His task lay before him. All else was merely distraction.

Two conscripts stood wearily beside the iron door into the dungeon. With eyelids drooping, both appeared exhausted. Cassock moved for the door and the guards snapped to attention. They moved to block the door, shields guarding their torsos and longswords at the ready.

“Wha’ ye doin,” grunted the older and hopefully wiser of the men.

“I’m here to collect the prisoners.” Cassock slowly lifted the parchment.

The guard snatched the paper and unfolded it. “The Cap’n said those whelps don’t leave.”

“That may be. However, I’m sure the word of the mayor overrules your Captain’s orders.” Cassock smiled smugly. The guard was attempting to read the parchment upside down.

The second, younger guard leaned in to look at the parchment. Noticing the position of the writ, he flipped the paper. Quickly he glanced down the orders.

*I hereby authorize the removal of the prisoners by the man presenting this writ. The prisoners will be transferred to his custody, and will now be his burden at least until the day of their public judgment. Furthermore, any crimes that may be committed by the prisoners during the course of their temporary release shall be this man's responsibility.*

**Authorized on this day in 576 A.E.**

*~Mayor Gabriel X. Rowen*

The guard grumbled and fumbled for his keys. He shot worried glances to his companion but opened the heavy door anyway.

"Thank you." Cassock grabbed the writ as he passed. However, the guard grabbed his shoulder.

"You'll need a guide."

"No I won't. I'll be fine."

"Eh...well, you'll need a torch at least."

Cassock pivoted a bit, and brought his stare in closely to the conscript. His black iris-less pupils bore into the man's own eyes.

"No. I won't." Cassock slipped into the chamber and pulled the door closed behind, preventing further interruptions.

Quiet murmurs from filled holding cells followed the priest down the hallway. With his gifted vision, he could see prisoners huddled in the cells. They blindly looked for the noise that would give their intruder's position away. The darkness was too deep. Cassock did not stop for these others. His task waited at the end, near the flickering torchlight.

A gruff, spiteful laugh echoed along the corridor. The last ten holding cells were empty. *A buffer between the common vagabonds and the 'murderers'*, Cassock realized. The laugh sounded again but was accompanied by jingling and a voice.

"At's right, you lil' fuckers. I'ma piss on yer graves 'omorrow morn. Right after 'e hangin'!" An obese man strolled out of the farthest cell and into the light. Cassock stopped his approach, staying within the shadows. The watchman struggled to adjust his belt forcing the ring of keys to chirp metallically. Once the belt was tightened and somehow managed not to snap in half, the corpulent man stepped up to the nearer of two cells.

"Fuckin' half-breeds!" A blob of discolored phlegm erupted from his mouth and flew into the cell. The sound of bare feet pressing lightly against stone preceded a half-elf slamming into wrought iron bars. His arms had extended to grasp the overweight fiend. Stepping back, the watchman eluded the grasp. He smiled maliciously as the prisoner crumpled against the floor. Rasping breath was quickly overcome by a female sob in the furthest cell.

Cassock grimaced. With one hand on his warmace and the other on the writ, he stalked out of the darkness like a spectre.

The faint torchlight reflected off the red and black links of Cassock's mail as he pulled to a stop mere inches from the watchman's face. Cassock had to look down at the short, obese bully. The light flickered as well off the whites of Cassock's eyes while the pitch-black pupils devoured the rays.

**"Guard!** Control yourself. You will not be desecrating any graves on the morrow. **AND** you'll be releasing the prisoners into my custody." The priest shoved the writ into the man's plump hands along with a hearty shove. Shifting backward, the watchman stumbled slightly barely remaining on his feet.

"Oo' the 'ell you think you are, peasant!? They're prisoners! 'Ere my prisoners, an' **I'll treats 'em 'ow I want!**" The watchman slipped his hand onto his sap, curling his fat fingers around the blood and flesh permanently joined to the rough leather.

"It's all in the writ." The watchman grumbled and released his sap, proceeding to read the letter. His face fell in either horror or shock, Cassock knew not which. Quickly, a bright red hue flooded the cheeks of the guard as he returned the writ. Mumbling, the watchman reached cautiously for his keys.

The guard skulked toward the cells and quickly unlocked both. The heavy doors swung open, easily and silently. Cassock peered at the prisoners. Both were unclothed, although with a quick glance no one would have noticed. Thick purple and black bruises spread over their entire bodies, crisscrossing muscles and joints. With the dried blood, the prisoners almost seemed to be fully dressed. The halfling was curled in a corner, hands covering her naked torso. When the watchman approached, she shrunk back to near nonexistence.

"Did you do this to them, guard?" Cassock's voice was cold, hardened steel. He could feel the anger energizing his limbs.

The watchman stifled another malicious laugh. "Course not. They was like this when they came into my charge." A wholly unbelievable grin crossed his face.

**"Liar!!!"** The halfling threw propriety to the four winds as she leapt from her position and attacked the watchman. Her nails couldn't puncture the hardening layer of lard, or the guard's armor, however. The sudden weight caused the guard to step backward; he grasped for his sap again and raised it in an attack.

As his arm swung, a hollow whirl split the air. Cassock's war-mace collided with the watchman's hand. The guard shrieked as his fingers snapped unnaturally backward, bones splintering through the flesh. The sap landed impotently against the dividing wall, covered as always in blood.

"You will not lay one hand on my prisoners. I think its time you learned some manners. I will be giving Mayor Rowen a full report of your behavior and activities. Also, I will take these prisoners directly to the mayor, so he can decide on a proper punishment for your mistreatment." Cassock slid the war-mace quickly back into its leather loop. He stooped downward, picking up the keys and with his other hand ushered the halfling out of the cell.

"Until the mayor has had a chance to decide your punishment, feel free to enjoy your stay in the cell." Cassock kicked the door close, hearing the lock snap into place. "Grab

your gear, child. And tell me if anything is missing.” Cassock moved to the next cell and leaned over the half-elf. With a quick prayer, healing energy flowed through Cassock and into the prisoner. The halfling brought Aramil’s clothing over and both dressed quickly, slightly embarrassed by the priest’s presence.

“Is everything there?”

“Yes. All our gear is here,” the halfling responded.

“Good. Oh, and watchman, next time, be careful who you address as ‘peasant’. If any of their wounds are permanent, I shall see you before the next inquisition.” Abruptly turning on his heel, Cassock led the pair of prisoners into the darkness.

---

Cassock reached into his sack and withdrew a coin. With a quick word, divine energy fled through his fingertips. The coin erupted into light. He handed the coin to his two companions as they headed toward the heavy door.

Groups of vagabonds, most dressed in rags, hissed and stared at the trio as they passed. Cassock held his head high, not bothering to even give the criminals a glance. The halfling however, couldn’t seem to remove her eyes. The light cast shadows upon the faces, twisting their likenesses into hollow mockeries of humanity. Those that still had teeth did not appear as horrific. Those without teeth laughed and spit at the travelers. Insanity spread from their hollow mouths, threatening to drag the trio into the oblivion of madness.

Cassock broke the silence, the madness and gathered their attentions with his words. “You both will stay with me tonight. Tomorrow, you will help me to track down the true criminals. I believe you have been wrongfully accused. Do not prove me wrong.”

“We’ll help. Anything, to get us out of here,” the halfling’s words rushed out. Her eyes strode downward, memorizing the rhythm of the priest’s gait. “Why did you help us?”

“Why do I help, you ask? This is a challenge given by my God. I have chosen to walk this path and in so doing, have found you in need. The true criminals were led by an elf, which is why you were falsely imprisoned. Racism is, unfortunately, a staple of the Church of Ara’kull.

“Now, I hope you will accompany me to find the true killers, if only to clear your own names. It would be for the best. Of course, if you wish to go your own way, then I will free you. But you won’t have many opportunities of friendship in this world.

“So, what are your names?”

“I’m Gabrielle!” The halfling did a quick curtsy before resuming her pace.

“Pleased to meet you Gabrielle, I am Cassock of Cael. And?” The priest turned toward the silent half-elf. The young man glanced up, holding Cassock’s eyes for but a moment.

“I...I usually go by my father’s name. It is...or...was Thomas. But you may call me by my elven name, Aramil.”

“I am pleased to meet you as well, Aramil. Now, we should go to see the mayor.”