

## Chapter I

Lightning sparked in the air as the rider traveled down the path. It had been three days since setting off on his goal, only stopping for his horse to rest. As he approached a small inn with torches still flickering, he knew he should gather his strength before his task was to begin. He hitched his horse to the post and walked in.

“Oh, hello! I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting anyone coming this late... Can I get you anything?”

The rider looked at the woman who had spoken. She was young but there was no mistake that she was the innkeeper.

“Some chicken, bread and mead is all,” he said, walking towards the fire. The innkeeper nodded and began gathering the meal. As she walked to the rider, she asked “what has you out this late tonight? Not many people would want to be traveling with this rain.”

“I seek the graveyard.”

Her face became ashen upon hearing that. “No one has been there for some time, there are sayings that it’s been cursed. Why would you want to go there?”

“I want to see if that is true.”

She looked at the rider; he had a dark cloak obscuring most of his face, the only thing she could see was his eyes. They shined a deep cerulean, hypnotizing in their color and adding to the intense look he gave her. For whatever reason, she knew that he would not be deterred.

“It’s not that much farther from here, an hour more north at most. I insist that you stay here though and wait until morn-”

“My work must be done tonight. It’s been too long already,” he said.

“Oh, I see... I hope you’re successful in whatever it is you have to do,” she said. The silence was thick in the air after she said that, the only sounds being the crackling of the fire.

After finishing the meal, he paid the gold and started off, his clothes still dripping from the rain outside. After unhitching his horse, the rider sped off into the thundering night. His destination coming ever closer, only one thought was on the rider’s mind.

*I will find the answers I seek tonight.*

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The rider slowed his horse to a trot. The lightning that had lit the night sky had shown the cemetery, his destination. On any other day, the cemetery would not have caught the attention of the average person. This night showed differently; there was a murder of the crows in the trees in the cemetery, their cawing louder than the thundering clouds in the night.

At last, he had found what he sought. It was inconspicuous, a shallow grave with moss and weeds covering most of the earth around it. The gravestone was only a small rock showing the name of the person who laid there.

“David, son of David... I have found you at last,” the rider muttered.

He dug into the ground, moving the dirt aside until he found the skeleton of the man he once called his friend. The memories of the two came flooding into the rider’s mind, filling him both with sadness and determination. There were many journeys that the two had shared in their youth and to see his friend like this...

Suddenly, his heart grew cold and shivers ran down his spine. He had practiced this over 700 times before, why should this time be any different than the rest? He knelt down over the skeleton and looked up to the pitch-black sky,

“I ask the Almighty and the Lords of Light, hear my pleas! Re-animate this skeleton of the man I called friend so that I may speak to him, to hear his counsel in my times of need!”

For what seemed like minutes, nothing happened but the cawing of the crows and the rainfall. Suddenly, a deafening bolt of lightning lit the air and the bones on the ground began to rattle. As the rider began to stand up, the skeleton did as well until they were both on their feet and looking at each other.

“David, it’s been too long... I had no idea where you were laid until just recently...” the rider said, the tears running down his face mixing with the rain.

The skeleton looked at the rider, the holes where his eyes would have been showing nothing.

“David, I have to know; Will I live to see the king off of the throne? Will there be an end to the madness that plagues this land?”

A voice pierced into the rider's mind. It was the voice of his old friend but the jaws of the skeleton did not move.

*The Hated King will fall not to you alone but to the many.*

“There are others who want to see an end to this?”

*For too long he has reigned, many have seen the signs of crumbling.*

“But why now? Why not earlier if there truly are others?” the rider yelled.

*Forces are at work that signal an end to his reign.*

“I dare not hope that, how do you know?”

*I do not ask you to hope, I can only tell that I know the end is coming.*

The rider stared at David. Could what he had wanted for so long not only happen but there were others who had wanted the same?

Suddenly, the crows flew off from the tree, scattering into many directions. The cawing finally stopped after a few moments as they flew to their unknown destinations.

*Many will see this as an omen of misfortune but the others I speak of will know this as the sign they had dared not speak of.*

The rider looked at the skeleton one last time and embraced him. “I want you to come with me, to see this finished. To see what we had both worked for, the seeds of what we worked for finally fully grown.”

David looked at his friend, his jaw twisting into a demented grin.

*One last adventure.*

They both walked out of the cemetery and into the darkness of the night, to rally with allies they had never met but shared the same goal.

## Chapter II

As the cold morning sun rose, a lone man sat fumbling through parchments that lay on the table before him. His brown eyes scanned them for answers that he knew he would not find, thoughts flashing as fast as he read.

*There has to be more that can be done. More farming of the crops, mining in the caves, buildings and improvements to be made, lands to take and make our own...*

“If every man paid as much attention to words on paper as you do Vera, there’d be no time for living.”

Vera looked up at who had spoken.

“And if everyone had your ego Swa, there would be no need to have a council because of their own self-assuredness.”

“Better to take action at all than do nothing but think,” laughed Swa, moving to look over Vera’s shoulder. “I hate to interrupt you being lost in thought but it’s time to talk with the rest of us on the happenings within our fine kingdom.”

Vera took notice as the rest of the council came into the room. There was Mora, an eccentric collector of items from times-past. Cashom was right behind them, dressed in only the most modern of clothing to flaunt his wealth to all around him. After him, entered the most mysterious of all the council members; no physical features could be seen, the only thing shown to them was the mask of mouse. They talked amongst themselves for a few moments until the doors to the chamber opened and a trumpeter came in, reading off the scroll he carried.

“All rise for King Philip the First, Last of the Burn Ell line, Slayer of Machima, the Innovator of Theatrics and Friend of All Animals,” the trumpeter cried out, as the king walked in. He was still dressed in his evening wear but wore his crown and robe.

The king looked at his council and spread his arms wide as he walked to his seat at the head of the table. “What good news do you have to share with me? I expect nothing but positivity to come from you all.”

Mora was the first one to speak, saying “More progress has been made on restoring some of the older portraits in the gallery, sire. I expect it should take only a few more days at this rate and they will be added to the Sunspot Gallery soon. True works of art, each and every one of them.”

“After a GENEROUS contribution from myself, the gladiators will be able to fight again for your amusement, sire. I can assure you that they will put on a more exciting show than the last group we had,” said Cashom, grinning smugly knowing he had secured even more favor of the king.

The mouse-masked individual said nothing but scribbled on a piece of parchment and slid it to Philip. He took it and after looking at it for a few minutes, crumpled it up and tossed it behind him.

“Good to hear that the whales are returning to shores. Our navy has always relied on getting resources from them and I do miss hearing their calls from the sea. Well Vera, that only leaves you. What news do you have to share,” asked Philip, stroking his goatee and his thoughts already on more immediately pleasurable activities.

Vera coughed and began to speak.

“My king, I think there are hard times coming for us. It would be wise to surplus the resources we do have and use what we can to prepare for the coming harshness. If we do not start now, I fear the worst not only for us but for our people.”

Philip laughed but stopped as he saw the serious look in Vera’s eyes.

“We’ve lived in good times for years now, why would that change? Surely you don’t believe people would try to rise up against me...”

“You are the *LOVED* king, my liege. Everyone loves you and what you do for the kingdom. There have been the few naysayers that have been caught speaking slander against you though. Something about the end of the king’s reign, all nonsense quite assuredly.”

Philip looked at Vera, squinting at him and asked in a hushed voice.

“Do you question the love of the people? Do you question MY authority, MY reign, Vera?”

“My king, I do not. However, the banks of the realm are beginning to demand their loans back. They’ve lent us almost 500,000 gold and there’s nothing to show for that. How are we to repay them?”

“Is entertainment not the most important thing for a king’s people? Do good food and wine cost too much to feed the king? These luxuries have been hard-won and I won’t give them up, tell these banks they will have their money in time.”

Vera started to speak to argue but said nothing. He knew what had happened to the last council before him, how they had tried to usurp their rightful king. Their attempt had ended with them executed, their names dragged through the mud and families ostracized. He didn’t want to end with a similar fate as theirs.

“Now, if that is all, I will take my leave. I need to start armoring the colts in the purest gold to prepare for the celebrations soon. After all, it IS the start of my birth month,” said the king, adjusting the crown that laid on his slicked back hair.

As the other council members departed from the chamber, Vera sat lost in thought. Outside, a crow flew by the castle towards the home of a young noblewoman...

### Chapter III

The thick smell of paint lingered in the air of the small room. A young woman carefully brushed the canvas in small, precise strokes. Each stroke was a new breath of life into the picture and could potentially be the last breath the scene took. She wanted to be lost in the world she had created, to learn more of how things were different than the world she lived in now.

“Vesper?”

She looked away from the canvas she had been painting on, the paing setting in. Her father looked at her smiling and gave a small bow to her.

“Still working on submitting something to the Sunspot Gallery?”

“This is something personal, father. What I have for the Gallery will be even more beautiful than this.”

Her father took a long look at the painting behind her.

“Beautiful is an... interesting word to use. Maybe not the one I would use personally.”

“And what word would that be?”

“Provocative? Introspective? Either one would be more appropriate.”

Vesper looked at the canvas again. It had seemingly transformed from what she had originally planned as if the paintbrushes had taken a mind of their own. It showed two people with a dark, snowy landscape behind them, the pale white contrasting with the dark blues and blacks. A man and woman were playing games but facing away from each other, in their own separate worlds. The woman had long, light red hair, a depressed demeanor on her face. A single ruby-red tear ran down her cheek and fell onto the chess board she was playing on. The man had a furious temper, his face looking more like a fairytale monster than a man. His board was being flipped over, the pieces thrown about in a fit of rage.

Vesper looked again at her father, saying “I still find it beautiful in its own way.”

“That kind of beauty doesn’t make people feel good though. It might make them think but they’ll stop that immediately when those thoughts go negative. Please, make something that the people WANT to see, this gallery is important for the both of us.”

Vesper became quiet after hearing that. She knew that not only her reputation was at stake but also her father's. He had served on one of the king's courts but had been removed during one of the king's most recent purges of those who had spoken negatively about him. There was more than one thing at risk with this exhibition.

"I will, father. I'll make something that the people will love for the times to come."

"I know you will, love. You'll use your god-given talents and smarts to make something that extraordinary," said her father, taking his leave.

As the door closed, Vesper sat in silence. She had too many ideas and not enough at the same time, bits and pieces bobbing in weaving in her head. She was still lost in thought when the crow landed on her windowsill and cawed.

Vesper looked intently at the crow and moved the closer. The crow didn't move, only looking at her with a look that seemed to know what she was thinking. She looked deeper into the crow's eyes, looking for the inspiration she needed. The crow cawed once and flew out of the window, leaving Vesper alone. As the silence grew, she walked over to the door and locked it, getting ready for the long night ahead of her. The fire inside her had grown and would only be put out by pouring the truth of what she thought into her art.

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The gallery was abuzz with life, people crowding to see the new artwork to be preserved. Every piece hanging in the gallery had been hand-selected by a group of the king's artistic experts and routinely updated by Mora to maintain the highest stands of cultural achievement. The paintings, drawings and portraits that were removed were used as kindling.

Vesper looked around looking at some of the pieces that had inspired her, feeling a mixture of exhilaration and unease. Soon, her future would change forever. She walked onto the wooden stage at the back of the gallery, set down a small box and looked at the judges in front of her.

Vesper took a long look at them and said "thank you for giving me this opportunity. For my submission to the gallery, I wanted to do something from the heart. I present to you, the king as how I see him. I hope you can see the resemblance."

She took a small figure out of the box and revealed her masterpiece to the captive crowd. It was a small puppet and it looked like the king but in a cruel mockery. His face was twisted into an expression of pitiful begging and animal ferocity. He had the snout of a pig instead of a nose and the antennas of a cockroach protruding from his forehead. His goatee was uneven and patchy, his



eyes were pits of darkness. He was on his hands and knees, praying to the gods above him for salvation.

As the crowds looked at the grotesque figure in horror, Vesper ran out through the gallery's doors and kept running through the city until her legs burned and would not move anymore. She knew the king would hear of this and demand her to come to him. She couldn't go home, the only thing to do was to leave the city.

*I have chosen my destiny, there's no going back from this now. I can only hope that my father understands why I have done what I've done.*

She ran to the gate's entrance and used some of the gold she had on her to pay for a carriage to the next town over. She felt the tightness in her chest relax as the carriage began moving and sighed of relief as the trees covered them.

## Chapter IV

The cold mist of the new morning lay still across the forest ground. A lone deer walked through the trees, its small footsteps being the first signs of life.

A slight rustle in the bushes caused the deer to freeze. For a brief moment, everything was frozen. Without warning, a brown blur jumped out into the clearing in front of the deer. It was a brown dog, its teeth bared and a low growl breaking the silence of the forest. Before the deer could make a run for it, it was tackled from the side. An orange fox had jumped out, its teeth sinking into the neck of the deer. The dog jumped onto the deer as well and the kicking legs of the deer soon became small jerks until finally stopping, dark red blood spilling out onto the ground.

“Good hunt, Rocky and Mighty.”

The dog and the fox looked up and went to the voice, their tails wagging. A man with shoulder-length blonde hair was kneeling, his arms out-stretched. He scratched behind the ears of both the dog and fox, both nuzzling into his callused hands.

The man stood up, walking towards the deer’s corpse and taking note of the size of it. There was plenty of meat on the deer, it would be a hearty meal for all of them and the fur would make a good coat for the colder times. A couple of bones for Rocky and Mighty to chew on, to help make sure their teeth would be good for the hunts. He took out his knife from his side and began skinning, the sharp blade cutting easily through the fur and muscle.

When the work was done, the man began walking back towards his home in the forest with Rocky and Mighty walking ahead of him. He thought of how the brilliant green of the forest contrasted from the gray, dirty city he had grown up in. The change of setting was a much needed one.

Suddenly, Rocky and Mighty charged off into the distance, barking and yipping. The man crouched down, taking his knife out and waiting. The sounds of both of them got quieter as they ran off but were still audible. Suddenly, they both stopped as quickly as they had started. The man started running and eventually broke through the forest to his home.

There stood another person right by the small home, petting both Rocky and Mighty. He was dressed in a brown robe, a hood covering the top-half of his face. He turned around, a small smile visible on his face.

“You’re a hard man to find, Byll.”

Byll looked at the hooded man.

“How do you know my name? I’ve never met you before.”

“It’s hard to forget the name of the feared trainer of the king’s war-dogs. Not a job most men would want to take.”

“That was in the past, I’ve long since put that behind me,” said Byll, looking away from the hooded man.

“There’s no need to be ashamed of your past. It happened, you can only learn from it or keep reminiscing on things you can’t change.”

“You talk as if you’ve had a similar experience.”

“You’re more right than you think.”

The stranger pulled off his hood and looked directly at Byll. He looked as if he could have been a twin of the king but had a more radiant look about him; the eyes sharper, the skin more fairer and a look of kindness in his eyes rather than of scorn.

“I know you might not remember me but I served as a priest of the Lords of Light. I know you had come to us to seek repentance for your past but that was not for us to give. You were sent away to find your own path and it seems you’ve found that. Now the time for change has come and I know you’ll have a role to play in the events to come.”

“How do you know change will come, priest? Plenty of people have said the same and you know where they ended up? Either dead or exiled.”

“Let’s just say a little bird told me.”

The priest held out his arm just as a crow flew by. The crow landed on the priest’s arm and nibbled some of the bread the priest had in his other hand. The crow looked at Byll and cawed once before flying off again.

“Your faith was misplaced once, I know. It’s time for you to believe again, it’s time to help spark the flames of retribution that are to come.”

“Are we to do this alone?”

“No, you are but one piece of the puzzle. Others are coming, their own destinies intertwined with yours. Win back your pride from the king who has his grip on it ever so tightly.”

Byll looked at his small home that had kept him warm and dry from the rains that fell. He looked at the dense forest that had fed him and his animal companions. He didn't know if he was ready to leave the small bit of stability that he had worked so hard to achieve. Suddenly, a warm feeling of comfort washed over him and a voice echoed in his head.

*Believe this faithful servant of mine, he will not lead you astray. There will be trials ahead but know that the path you walk is righteous.*

Byll looked at his surroundings once more and then back at the priest.

“My fate seems to lie with you. I accept that and will go with you.”

“As do the others. Now, we set off tomorrow at dawn. Dark forces are already plotting in the shadows, any more time wasted will only benefit them.”

“Now that we're working together, can I get a name out of you?”

“Where are my manners? Unfortunately, I forget my birth name; we give those up when we agree to serve the Lords of Light. However, you can call me Paul,” the priest said laughing, extending his arm out for a shake.

Byll shook his arm and called for Rocky and Mighty. All of them went into the home for one last meal before they were to ride off at sun's rise.

## Chapter V

The sea air hit Vera as he made his way down the castle's steps to the beach. The waves were rough and dark, almost looking black in the early morning sun. Even the navy's hardest ships were having trouble navigating the sea, some had not returned back at all. Vera hoped some of the men on the ships had survived or at least died quickly.

King Philip was at the shore, looking out towards the horizon. His face looked more sunken, his eyes distant with an angry scowl on his face. He was still in his nightwear but his crown still proudly on top of his head. The cold sea waves splashed onto Philip but he stood his ground. His gaze at the ocean didn't break even when Vera walked up next to him.

"My lord?"

"I am your king, Vera. Remember that."

"I apologize, my king. What is it you're doing out here at this time?"

"I like to hear the whales but I haven't heard them in so long... Where did they go?"

"I do not know my king, they should return soon though."

"Like with the love of my people? I know what happened at the gallery."

Vera's blood ran cold. He was not surprised that Philip had heard about the events at the gallery, the gossip had spread like a disease amongst the populace. The guards stationed there quickly grabbed the puppet and threw it into a pyre but the damage had already been done.

"Where is the artist behind it, Vera?"

"I do not know, the guards have been looking for her since. It's entirely possible she found a way out of the city."

"I see. Well, we might have a lead," Philip said as he looked to the side and nodded his head. Vera did not even see the guards approaching with a man in shackles. The guards threw the man before Philip's feet and stood at attention.

"Where is your daughter?"

"I do not know, I haven't seen her since the day of the gallery exhibition."

“Did you tell her to make that... mockery of me?”

“I did not, I only wanted her to make something beautiful with her talents.”

“Do you call that THING beautiful!? It’s an abomination, a desecration, a hideous wooden toy not worth anything in this world,” yelled Philip as he grabbed the man’s collar and began shaking him. His eyes had a wild and dangerous look in them as if he had been possessed by a dark spirit. It wasn’t until the crown on Philip’s head fell onto the wet sand that the king was snapped out of his rage.

“Since your daughter cannot be found to stand trial for crimes against the king, you will stand in her place. I find you guilty and for your punishment to be carried out post-haste. Guards, carry it out not,” Philip said calmly, as he picked up the fallen crown, wiped off the sand and placed it back atop his head. The guards nodded and took hold of the shackled man and began walking out to sea.

“You cannot do this! You are a false king, a worthless man put on the throne as a cruel joke by the gods! You may kill me but you will not stop the future that is coming for you! I curse you, damn you, damn you, damn yo-” the man shouted, trying to wrestle his way out of the guards’ grip. He was cut short as the guards held his head under the sea water. His legs were furiously kicking and then became feeble twitches until they finally stopped moving. The guards let him go in the water and stood at attention at the king.

“Perhaps that was all that was needed to bring back the whales, a sacrifice... Guards, continue looking for the girl. I want to stay a little longer.”

As the guards walked back to the castle, Vera looked at Philip and hoped that he would not be next to be used as a sacrifice.

“My king, was that really the best course of action?”

“A king has to make the hard choices, Vera. He will serve as an example to the rest of the people that think they can get away with things like that. Besides, you heard what he said after he was sentenced; his true feelings came out when faced with death. You can always find out a man’s true intentions that way.”

“I understand, my king. Shall I continue to parley with the banks?”

“No, I think not. Let them come themselves if they so desire. I do not want to keep reading their honeyed words, I would rather hear them in-person if they want my riches so bad.”

“I understand, I will keep working on other projects then,” Vera said as he began to walk up the castle’s steps. He took one more look at the king on the beach. Philip was still staring out at the sea as the waves took the dead man’s body. He didn’t react even as the body was being bashed on the rocks and stained them red with blood.

## Chapter VI

It was dusk as the rider arrived at the outskirts of a small town by the river, the smell of rotten fish heavy in the air. It had been another long trek through the backwood trails to get here but he had finally arrived.

*I don't see why I couldn't have ridden with you.*

“I don't think most people would react well to seeing a man riding alongside a skeleton,” said the rider, looking down at a small open sack on the horse's side. David's head was looking back straight at the rider with his black, empty eye sockets.

*I could have had my own horse.*

“The horse would have been more spooked than the townspeople.”

*Who said it had to be a living horse?*

“A skeleton horse? Most people would think we would be bringing the end times upon them rather than trying to save them from it. Trust me, you didn't need your whole body anyway.”

*I've never been more humiliated in life or death than right now.*

“We all have to make sacrifices for the greater good. Trust me, carrying a skull in my knapsack and talking aloud to it makes me feel just as uncomfortable.”

*At least you get to keep your arms and legs... Why did we stop here anyway? This isn't the capital.*

“I know, it's close. I didn't plan on just going through the gate and announcing my presence to the king. We have to take a more discreet entrance.”

The rider looked east; on the horizon, the capital city peeked out from the trees, tall towers of stone sticking out from the forest it bordered. The city had stood there for hundreds of years as a symbol of strength but since the reign of Philip had shown a slow process of decay. The mighty towers had turned ashen from neglect, the river more swamp-like and the proud banners of the house sigil had been replaced with corpses of perceived enemies against the state. A city of hope had been transformed in only a few years time.



The rider shook his head to rid himself of thoughts from the past. He had once studied at the schools there, he had read as many books on history as he had magic. That was where he had found the prophecy that spoke of a mad king and an end to his reign, where he had decided to run and find David in the first place.

The rider dismounted his black horse and made his way towards a small shop in the middle of town. A small sign on the shop read ‘Mr. Huth’s Stuff’ on it, hastily scribbled on in red paint. The rider walked in and saw that there were indeed many such stuff inside. Items and objects from around the kingdom and from beyond were here in various states of repair. A lone shopkeep was inside, organizing a small collection of playing cards with various images of the king’s face on them.

“Can I help you with anything, sir? If it’s something specific, I’m sure we have it,” the shopkeep said, looking up to the rider.

“I seek the man who knows everything and nothing.”

“I see, I think we have one of those.”

The shopkeep went to a small wooden door to her side and undid several locks of varying complexity. When the door was finally open, she looked at the rider and motioned inside. The rider went through the door as the door was quickly shut behind him.

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The rider went down the stairs into the shop’s basement. There was a fire roaring in the corner with a man behind a desk, hunched over and scribbling madly on parchment.

“Mr. Huth, I presume?”

“Why yes, that is me...” the silhouette said, not looking up from his writings. It wasn’t another couple of moments that he put the quill down and looked up.

“What do I owe the pleasure of meeting such a distinguished gentleman as yourself?”

“I need entry into the king’s city, discreetly.”

“Why couldn’t it have been something easier like information? Now that I can do easily. Still, I can’t have gotten to where I am now if I only took the easy jobs. Getting into the city has become more difficult as of late. Something’s seemed to stir up the king and a lot of my usual

routes are more patrolled than usual. You wouldn't happen to know what has the king so worked up, would you?"

"This is news to me, I had been riding towards the city myself and saw no one on the roads."

Huth twiddled with his dark mustache, deep in thought.

"Well, I'm sure no other ferryman could do it even if they wanted to... and I'm sure that with more men on the main roads, that means the more obscure passages have had their guard reduced. I'll do it."

"You have my thanks."

"I don't want your thanks, gold speaks more than words."

The rider tossed a small satchel on the table. Huth opened it up, took a look inside and smiled up to the rider.

"Everything seems to be in order... and what do I call my new friend?"

"You can call me... Outsyder."

"Not very original but is anything really these days? To our new partnership and our health!"

The outsider took Huth's hand and shook it firmly. An alliance had been made for a final, decisive strike against the king.

## Chapter VII

The sudden stop of the wagon caused Vesper to awaken violently. She didn't even remember falling asleep, the adrenaline keeping her awake during the ride towards the south. It was dusk with the sun setting slowly below the trees.

"Where are we," she asked the wagoner, rubbing sleep from her eyes.

"This is the town of Janez, the last stop of this route."

Vesper got off the wagon and paid the man with the small bit of gold she still had on her, looking around her surroundings. Janez was a close-knit community; a few wooden homes with a town center and market where the wagon had stopped. Small fields of wheat and corn were close by with some of the villagers still working them now. The one landmark of the town was a stone castle not too far from the homes, a sword and sheath banner flapping in the wind.

Vesper took a moment to collect her thoughts. There was finally some time where she didn't have to worry and could plan ahead. She could take refuge in the castle, try to pass off as one of the handmaidens until things had settled down and proceed from there. Thoughts of her father came to her but she pushed those away; she could only hope he had managed to get away before the king had sent guards to question him.

Suddenly, a scream pierced the calm air.

"The Hound! The Hound is here!"

A man on a dark horse stood on top of the hill. His pitch-black armor was heavy and thick, the chest plate beaten and bruised from numerous clashes. His helmet looked like a snarling wolf and obscured most of his face. He held a longsword in one hand, the blade and grip stained red with dried blood; the other hand holding a bright, crackling torch. His horse had similar thick armor, brilliant bronze falcon wings decorating the sides of the helmet and legs

The Hound threw the torch in the air, landing on the hay roof of one of the villager homes. Just as the fire was spreading on the roof, the Hound had ridden down and impaled one of the villagers with his sword, the blade piercing straight through the man's flesh and coating it in a fresh layer of blood. Some of the villagers tried to fight off the man and his horse with their hoes they had but they fell quickly to the well-worn sword of the Hound.

Vesper had heard stories of the Hound before but had not imagined she would see him in the flesh, let alone be a possible target of his wrath. She would only be an open target if she ran on

the road and the nearby forest wasn't thick enough for the horse to be slowed down. The only path lay behind her to the castle. She turned around and began running as fast as she could. The only sound she could hear over her own breathing was the sound of screaming behind her.

The castle seemed to get further and further the more she ran towards it; she had not eaten since the gallery event, saving the little coin she had to pay for the ride here. The rising gate of the castle began to blur and get darker as her breathing turned to hyper-ventilation. The last thing she remembered seeing was a man running towards her and the cool grass on her face as she fainted to the ground.

## Chapter VIII

Although thunder roared through the sky, King Philip was already wide awake. Even in the most comfortable bed with the finest silk sheets, sleep continued to evade him. With his eyes open, thoughts came into his mind and left just as quickly as they came in. Even when he thought he had finally managed to fall into slumber, a sharp static rang throughout his head until he was jolted back into consciousness. These nights had become so common, it had replaced whatever normal routine he had before.

*Even though I'm constantly surrounded by advisors and fools, I never feel more alone. The nights are when it feels worst.*

Philip glanced at an elegant mirror standing in the corner of his bedroom. Although Philip had loved it at first for its extravagant nature, he had come to loathe it. He threw the covers off and walked over to see his reflection. He saw something that didn't even look human, a cruel mockery of what a person should actually look like. Philip wondered whether he was truly seeing what the mirror showed him or if that was what he had looked like this whole time to everyone around him. He wanted to shatter the mirror into hundreds of pieces, to make this beautiful work of art into a broken piece of garbage.

*The darkness is swallowing me whole in this room, I shouldn't stay here. The Reaper is there, hiding in the shadows.*

He left his room and began making his way towards another room on the other side of the hall. Hesitating, he quickly knocked a few times on the thick wooden door. For a few seconds, nothing happened but then the door slowly opened.

“Philip? It's quite late, what are you still doing up?”

The young woman who had opened the door was Katherine, his queen. They had just been married the year before, a political marriage advised to him.

“I'm sorry, my love. I've just... had a lot on my mind. I thought I would come to you...” said Philip, moving to take her hand in his. As soon as he held it, he felt her tense up as she quickly took it back from him.

Philip looked at Katherine and felt two strong, conflicting emotions. One half of him wanted to grab her soft body while kissing her, to throw her onto the bed and to finally feel like the king that he was. The other half wanted to smack her across the mouth, to make her hurt as much as

he was feeling now, to physically feel the ugliness he felt inside. Both emotions combated each other so forcefully that it left him numb and just looking into her green eyes.

“Philip, you look distressed. I’ve been told that wine usually helps sleep... Here, I just poured myself another glass, you have some.”

Philip took the glass and nodded thankfully at Katherine. He began to take a sip, thinking the cool wine would be just what he needed.

*The wine tastes like blood.*

Philip spat out the wine still in his mouth and threw the glass away from him. The cup shattered behind Katherine, glass and wine mixed together on the bedroom carpet. As Philip started to apologize, Katherine gave Philip an icy glare and firmly closed the door, locking it after it was shut. Even though the thunder clapped outside, he thought he could hear her crying. After a moment of standing there, he wandered aimlessly around his estate until he found himself in the main hall.

He looked at the large axe proudly displayed on the wall closest to the fireplace. It had a brilliant shine to it in the fire’s light as if it had never seen battle before. A weapon purely for showing off the decadence of the family than to actually protect it. Philip thought if he were to actually try and use it, it may break and cause more damage to himself than the intended target. He took it off the hooks it rested on and felt the coolness of the handle, feeling the weight of it in his hands.

*Son... Remember our words...*

Philip spun around, the axe still in his hands. There was no one there but the empty darkness of the hall. Philip knew he had heard a voice and more importantly, who it belonged to.

“Father?”

The dark shadows of the hall began to take form.

*Son... Our family words...*

“Mother?”

The shadows came closer.

*SON... OUR WORDS...*

Philip heard the screaming, the rantings of the past. He had learned the words of his family's oath that had been passed down through the generations. The words "we can always do more," they were meant to be a promise to make the land better than it was before them, to put in hard work for a better tomorrow.

*SON.*

The darkness was consuming him, eating him alive.

"There's... There's nothing I can do..."

He blinked and the room was once again still, the low rumblings of thunder breaking the silence. His vision blurr, Philip wiped his eyes and realized that tears had been running down his face. Slowly looking around the hall, he began to make his way back to his room.

Once safely back, he closed the door and fastened the multiple locks of his room; multiple deadbolts and chains almost to the floor. He went over to the window and opened it, looking out towards the sea. He closed his eyes, imagining the call of the whales; for a brief moment, he had found peace through this dark night.

## Chapter IX

Although the morning sun had barely begun to rise, Byll already had everything prepared and ready to go. Paul had told him they were not much farther from their destination and he was anxious to get there. Rocky and Mighty were nuzzled close and sleeping peacefully under a tree, their ears twitching every moment or so. Byll didn't want to wake them just yet. He turned back to the sun, feelings of anticipation and dread in his heart.

“Couldn't sleep?”

Byll broke his gaze from the sun to see Paul behind him, looking just as ready as he was. Although the past few days had been long with traveling in the forest, Byll had never seen the look of purpose waver from Paul's eyes for an instant.

“Not really. I just want to see where you've been leading us these past few days. Any time I try and ask more, you talk in riddles. Being straight-forward would help make this prophecy a lot easier.”

“It's not like I want to; I'm working with as much information as you are”

“You mean you don't know how this is going to end?”

“I know how it ends, it's getting there with everything and everyone playing their parts that's the hard part.”

Byll looked back to the sun, those words still in his head as he thought them over.

“Beautiful sunrise isn't it, Byll?”

“It is but it's the quiet moments like this that make me the most uneasy.”

Both men looked as the sun continued to rise, each in their own thoughts. Soon, they woke both Rocky and Mighty up and began traveling.

As they went over the hill, Byll could see a small castle but it was what was before the castle that horrified him. A few corpses were in the fields, blood mixing with the light rain into the soil. The town center and a few small homes around it had been completely burned to the ground, only the ash and soot remaining. An ominous silence hung in the air as they passed through; even Rocky and Mighty could sense it, their tails between their legs as they picked up the pace. As



they made their way to the gate, it slowly opened up and a man in polished silver armor approached angrily.

“The king and a lackey, here!?”

“I’m a friend of the lord here, I must speak with him immediately,” Paul said, his smile and manner helping to ease the armored man.

“You look just like the king but you aren’t... Are you his brother?”

“Sadly, I’m not. My name is Paul, who do I have the pleasure of talking to?”

“I’m Ludwig, captain of the guard here.”

“I wish we could have met under happier circumstances, Ludwig. As I said, time is essential here and I must speak with the lord immediately.”

“He’s in the main hall now, writing a notice to the king. I can lead you to him,” Ludwig said, as he made a signal to the top of the gate. A moment later, the doors began to open. Ludwig led Byll and Paul through the courtyard of the castle, Rocky and Mighty right at their heels. Byll looked at the activity around the yard, the few people there were working quickly for whatever unknown plan they had for the future to rebuild.

Finally, all three arrived at the doors to the main hall. Ludwig opened the doors for them and they went through into an ornate dining hall. The lord at the head of the table, scribbling furiously on a piece of parchment. He looked up from his letter and stood up.

“Paul!” He exclaimed, standing up and walked to Paul, giving him a large embrace.

“It’s good to see you too Kozatof, it’s been too long,” Paul said, smiling.

“I’ll say, I haven’t seen you since you joined up with that church of yours.

“Actually, that’s what I want to talk to you about.”

Kozatof’s eyes narrowed and became serious. He went over to an open bottle of wine by his seat and poured three glasses. After passing them out, he sat down in his chair and sighed.

“This attack happened suddenly and ended just as quickly before we could do any sort of counter. I’m writing a STRONGLY worded message to the King for allowing this to happen and for any assistance he can send for rebuilding. All of what you saw was done by just one man.”

“Can you describe him?”

“I couldn’t, most of my soldiers, weapons and armor were sent to the King; the few that I still have were inside the courtyard when the attack happened. Only one girl barely managed to make it to the gates, any of the other villagers have either scattered or are dead. She described the attacker as having armor as dark as the night and with an even darker sword.”

This time, it was Byll who talked first before Paul could say anything.

“The Hound? The Hound attacked here?”

“You know him?”

“I do. I was once part of the King’s army before I left the city, I trained the war dogs. I knew him when he first joined, he used to be part of the coliseum fights that the King hosted. He became one of the favorites and was made a knight of the court. Why would he attack one of the King’s towns like this...”

“I don’t give a damn for any reason he might have; I intend to make the King answer for this but mean words on a paper won’t give the justice I seek. I bet he won’t even read it, it might not even make it to any of his advisors.”

Paul took a sip of wine and looked at Kozatof.

“The king only hears the words of his advisors, no one else. If you intend to send a message, it will have to be with force.

“Are you mad!? The king would have us all killed for even suggesting such a thing! Even if we march, we don’t have the men or supplies to fight off his army.”

“He isn’t safe because he’s loved, he’s safe because no one wants to make the first move against him. If you show resistance to him and a show of strength as we march to the capital, I know that we will succeed. No man will fight us in honor of a king they despise.”

Kozatof looked at Paul for a few seconds, both staring into each other’s souls. Without breaking eye contact, Kozatof spoke to Ludwig.

“Prepare the men and gather anything that can be used as a weapon; we march to the capital tomorrow.”

“At once, my lord.”

“I intend to have both of you march with us to the capital,” said Kozatof as Ludwig left.

“Of course, we didn’t travel all this way to just be messengers,” said Paul.

Kozatof took the bottle and poured more into their glasses, finishing the bottle.

“A toast then; may the Lords bless us on our march and our hopeful victory.”

## Chapter X

The pale full moon was barely visible through the thick night clouds as Vera walked through the city. He always liked to take these walks at night; less people to interrupt his thinking but a change of scenery from the council chambers he spent most of his days in. His thoughts were always on the problems ailing the kingdom and possible solutions, plans and back-up plans for every instance of possible action the king could take.

He had always loved this city even as a child growing up. The love of all the exciting events grew into a love for what it stood for; order, stability and justice. Even though he may not have agreed with every decision that his king had made, his faith in him had been staunch the moment he took the throne. The king had always listened to him, it always felt like he had to fight the other advisors on the council to see the truth of matters.

The banks had not taken kindly to Philip's words and had cut off all aid they had promised. Vera got a small sense of satisfaction knowing that this hurt Cashom more than anything; he took out many personal loans to pay for the extravagant events the king liked. While this would definitely cause problems, this should only be a temporary setback with a couple of words to the right people. Vera knew the real crisis was a different problem; news of an army marching towards the city had reached the ears of the citizens. There were rumblings of discontent among them, some even advocating to join them and to take the castle. Vera knew that as long as the walls and gates stood, the king and the council would be fine.

As Vera began walking back towards the castle, he felt the eyes of people on him and whisperings between them. His walk became faster as he reached the bridge. He saw a man in all black sitting on the edge of the bridge, whittling a piece of wood with his knife.

"Sir, you're not allowed to be here at this time."

"If you value your life and the lives of others in this kingdom, you'll convince the king to surrender peacefully" said the man, not looking up from his work.

"Why would I do that? A king yielding to a revolt shows weakness; you're basically asking me to sign my own execution if I were to ask him that."

"Because I am going to open the gates to the city and castle for the approaching army coming here."

Vera's face paled.

“You won’t, I’ll alert the guards and have you thrown into the dungeon.”

“Who says that they’ll be loyal to you?”

“I’ll offer them gold to stay loyal.”

“They know the gold has stopped coming in from the banks. You’re backed into a corner and it’s the fault of the king you continue to help bring this land into ruin.”

Vera stood there, a feeling of powerlessness hitting him for the first time. He had always thought him to be prepared for anything and here was this man telling him that he wasn’t.

“I’ve left you a present in your room to help make convincing him easier.”

“How did yo-“

“Just do it” said the man as he stood up and started to walk away. Vera tried to look at the man’s face but it was obscured by darkness; the only thing visible were the man’s cerulean eyes. Vera tried to call out for the man, the guards, for anyone or to run after him but he stood frozen in place. He suddenly broke from his paralysis and sprinted towards the gate and after getting through, to his room.

He looked around and quickly found what the stranger was referring to; a dagger lay on his pillow. Vera picked it up carefully and looked it over, mesmerized by the shine it had in the candlelight. He put it carefully under his pillow and got ready for bed. As he put his head on the pillow and closed his eyes, he didn’t even feel it but knew sleep would not come this night.

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The bright morning sun was beating, one of the hottest days so far for the kingdom. Vera was sweating as he explored the castle trying to find the king. Most was from the heat but some was from the terror of what he would attempt to do. The coolness of the knife in the morning had become a dull warmth in his hand as he kept twirling it behind his back.

The man in black had kept his word; the small group of men led by Lord Kozatof had walked through the city as if they were heroes. Even the city guard and some of the army had abandoned their posts and had joined the march to the castle. Kozatof had made his demands clear; to open the castle doors by dusk or there would be blood. They were all camped out by the bridge now, the sounds of celebrations from the crowd around them being heard by everyone in the castle.

The king was nowhere to be found in the usual spots; the throne room, the dining hall, the council chambers. Vera thought the only place he could still be was his room, unusual for this time of the day. As Vera approached the king's room, he saw the other advisors already huddled about the door. Swa, Cashom, Mora and the Mouse were whispering amongst themselves and only looked up when they heard Vera approach.

“What’s going on here?”

“Oh, hello Vera! We, uh, need to talk with the king immediately. We’ve looked everywhere for him but couldn’t find him, this is the last place he could be” said Swa.

“We think he’s here but we’re trying to... decide on who would talk with him. Since you’re the most senior member, it makes the most sense that you should talk to him,” said Mora, coughing.

Vera noticed that they were holding something behind their backs.

“I see. I guess it does fall on me to talk with the king; I’d like to have you all with me to support my position.”

“Yes, of course! Of course... that makes the most sense,” said Cashom, a look of relief on his face knowing that he would not have to take the first action.

Vera knocked on the door. There was no answer. He knocked harder and faster this time, still no response. He tried to open the door and to his surprise, it opened. Everyone walked into the room but found that it was empty. Vera walked to the open window and saw that there was a rope leading down to the ground below.

“Wha- what do we do now” asked Swa to no one in particular. The rest of the group had no answer, they only looked to Vera.

Vera sighed and looked at the other advisors in the eyes.

“We open the gates. The king has fled and if we want to keep our lives, we do what the army outside the gates ask. You all go down to the hall, I’ll join you shortly.”

As everyone left the room, Vera looked outside again. This would be a new experience for him, he hoped he would come out with his head still attached to his body.

## Epilogue

Vesper looked around the small painting room she had worked in for years, the memories of her and her father heavy in her heart. She had talked with one of the advisors at the castle and had heard what the King had done to him. Managing to keep herself composed until she had made it home, only then did she let the tears flow.

She had only wanted to grab some of her things and go but she still stood in that room. It was hard for her to leave all this behind but the memories would be too painful to bear. She grabbed her supplies and walked back towards the castle. As she approached the entrance, one of the guards approached her.

“Kozatof has been asking for you.”

“Has he?”

“He has a proposition for you; He wants you to apprentice his nephew as an artist. He has talent now but the right teacher can truly make him shine, maybe even famous. His name’s Theodore.”

“I... I’m flattered.”

“He’s seen your previous works, he thinks you’d be best for him.”

“I accept... Thank you.”

She made it back to her room in the castle, the excitement of her new future evident. She hoped she could live up to the expectations of not only everyone around her but herself,

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Paul and Kozatof were talking in hushed voices in the throne room, one of the King’s finest bottles of wine being shared between the two.

“So the prophecy has been seen to completion, is that all there is to it?” asked Kozatof.

“This is certainly an end but I can’t say for sure that this is the definitive one,” said Paul, slowly twirling his wine glass.

“Should I stay here? I wasn’t planning on occupying here but I would if you need me.”

“I appreciate the concern my friend but things should be stable here. The advisors shouldn’t be a threat and I can turn the hate of the people around.”

“What of the men who supposedly convinced the council members to open the gates? They haven’t been seen since.”

“I managed to meet with them before they left. They honestly thought I was the king for a second before I convinced them I wasn’t. They’re valuable sources of information of the city’s underbelly. They’ll keep me updated on the unseen things going.”

“Then I will head out tomorrow,”

“I appreciate all the help you’ve given my friend, I can’t ask more of you.”

The two embraced and parted ways, Kozatof heading towards the entrance and Paul towards the tower to the council chamber.

Paul walked into the chamber room where the advisors were waiting nervously. He sat down at the seat of the table and smiled warmly.

“Gentlemen, I think it’s time to begin our work.”

---

Ludwig looked out to the city from the castle. He had never been a fan of large cities, preferring the quiet town life he had for himself but there was something magical about seeing it from this high up in the sky. He didn’t even hear Byll walk up beside, looking out to the city as well. Both men stood looking as Ludwig spoke.

“We’re lucky to have taken this castle without any bloodshed. I didn’t want to throw away the lives of more good men.”

“I agree but it’s odd that the King would just abandon his crown like that. What kind of man just abandons everything to flee?”

“He didn’t know what would happen so he ran to keep his own neck, everything else be damned. He’s used to dealing with people on his own terms where he has all the advantages.”

“Kozatof said you wanted to ask me something?”



“I know you used to be part of the King’s army; our men don’t have the best of training, I want you to join me in making our army strong.”

Byll turned from the city and looked at Ludwig.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. I talked with Paul about it and he vouched for you. If Kozatof trusts him, I trust him too.”

“So what’s my first task?”

“You and I are going to hunt down a rabid dog.”

---

The Hound stood over a seaside cliff, looking out towards the ocean. He stood at attention, his sword at his side.

Everything will burn by his hand.

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In the mountains far to the north, a man in all-fur clothing marched forward. He had been walking these ranges since the King had banished him months ago.

He spotted an icy rock and took a seat to catch his breath. His body had gotten used to the cold numbness of this frozen place. Without warning, a small baby crow crashed on his lap, weak from the cold and having flown this far north.

He patted the crow on his lap gently and got up slowly. He wrapped the crow in one of his scarves as best he could and marched forward, now with renown purpose. The fire inside him was stronger than the cold around him. Vidar Elvigen would return home.

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Philip looked into the water, not even recognizing his reflection. He had roughly cut his hair and goatee short with a dull knife he had in one of his drawers back at the castle.

He wondered how Katherine was, if she managed to get out of the castle before it had fallen to his enemies. He quickly pushed these thoughts out of his mind as he began putting on white paint on his face. He had seen a flyer for a traveling theatre outside the city’s walls looking for a new member; it would be the perfect cover to put distance between him and the city.

He walked over to the wagon and began dressing up, the show would be starting soon. As he put on the smiling clown mask, he began to feel . He left the wagon and hurried to the stage, standing behind the curtain and getting ready for the show.

The curtains were drawn open and Philip danced on the stage for the children in the audience. He felt a few tears running down his face, mixing with the make-up on his face. Whether they were tears of despair or joy, he wasn't sure.

\*A Fallen King Arc completed\*