

THE DREADBOUND ODE BOOK I

THE  
SKALD'S  
BLACK VERSE

JORDAN LOYAL SHORT

## ***Prologue***

*“The mischief of the Mara and the malice of the Raag are small misfortunes next to the horror of witnessing your people conquered, the proud made to grovel, the beautiful raped, and the wise buried to the dirge of laughter.”*

*-Bjorn Gurdsten, The Slave’s Lament*

Anders Nilstrom stood at his own front door as if it were the threshold of hell. He knew he was stalling, fumbling to muster the iron in his belly to do what must be done. But the deal was struck long ago. He tugged his hood down against the hail and stole a look over his shoulder, eyes darting from the well house to the tree line to the gravestones out by the road. There was no reason it would come tonight.

Just an old worry.

The Hidden was little more than a dream now. A shadow in the fog, receding into the abyss year by cursed year. Only the fear was too raw, even at the remove of decades.

And now the price was due.

If it watched him from somewhere out in the dark, what would it see? A man aged beyond his prime years. The stoop appearing in his shoulders, gray in his beard. Too many lean winters that had left him thin, scarred, and bitter, clinging to the grim hope that it would hold up its end of the bargain.

A scream within the cottage jolted Anders from his black thoughts. His shoulders crumpled, and he let out the breath he’d been holding. He whispered a prayer to the Ten

Fathers, though he knew it would go unanswered. Damnation waited inside. But it was the only way to be free. Let the Fathers judge when it was done.

He opened the cabin door, the wooden hinges shrieking, a bucket of well water sloshing in his hand. The fire had dwindled to a bank of embers before which his daughter Elsa shivered under a pile of coarse blankets. Anders set down the bucket he'd fetched and knelt beside her, his knees protesting.

"What took you so long?" she asked, her voice weak.

His precious Flower. *Fjorel*, he called her, from the old tongue. She'd grown to such a beautiful girl. He couldn't tell her he'd been steeling his courage, so instead he lied. "I heard Cinder whinnying. He got out of the stall, so I had to chase him down and take him back to the barn." Anders plucked a log from the cradle by the hearth. He set the wood atop the dying fire and turned back to his daughter.

"How far apart are the pains, *Fjorel*?" he asked.

"Not long." She propped herself up, one hand on the dusty floorboard, the other on her belly. "I'm dizzy. Where is Breylin?"

Anders turned his palms up helplessly. Another lie. He had never sent for the midwife. "Let's have a look. We can manage without her."

He drew back the woolen blanket, and the pair froze, the fresh log crackling in the fireplace. A pool of darkness spread between her legs, soaking the white blankets he'd lain beneath her. They regarded this blot in shared horror, as if they'd discovered the corpse of a friend on the roadside.

Elsa wept.

He wringed his hands, groping for the words to comfort her fear. But what could he say? It was too much blood. Instead, he set his mind to the task ahead, his stomach knotting as his unease grew. His Flower cried out again, a short, sharp bark like a seal pup.

"It's all right, *Fjorel*," his finger combed the sweaty hair from her face. "Lie back."

Anders reached up to one of the rawhide chairs by the hearth and grabbed a rag and a vial of ointment. He tucked his long blonde hair into the collar of his shirt. Then, he lifted the hem of his daughter's dress and bent down to have a look. "The ring is open, Elsa. It's time to push."

He held out his hand, and she took it, squeezed it as she bore down, pushing, breathing like the midwife had taught her. Another contraction came, another scream. Anders dabbed ointment on the rag and wiped blood and mucus from between her legs, the cloth soon black in the firelight.

"Keep pushing, *Fjorel*."

"I'm trying," Elsa said. "I'm so tired. I just want to sleep."

Over and over, she pushed, and she screamed. Her grip on his hand weakened, her voice grew fainter. Her head lulled.

Anders gently slapped his Flower's cheek, rousing her. "You're almost done, Elsa. If you want the child to live, you have to keep fighting. You don't have long."

He saw his words tear the veil from her eyes, a flicker of sadness dashed by a wave of intensity.

Elsa tightened her grip on his hand, fighting with the grim determination of the doomed, a rage born of indignation that the world would dare to rob her baby of its precious, unspoiled life.

Anders whispered to the Fathers, begging for forgiveness that would not come. He would have given anything to speed her journey, but the birth drew on. Her shrieking echoed in the night, the quiet afterwards filled by ragged breaths and hail drumming on the thatch above.

At last the child's head crowned, the end of Elsa's suffering in sight. Anders mopped his Flower's brow and held her hand, spurring her when her efforts flagged. He knelt between her legs, his fingers probing for purchase to

guide the baby safely. With waning strength, she heaved the child out to the shoulders. Anders hooked his fingers into its armpits and dragged it into the world.

Elsa lay back, panting. Her eyes closed.

Anders inspected the child. Its withered form a shame—and a blessing, considering his pact. One of its arms had wilted and its brow grew out of proportion to its tiny face. In the old days they would've left it in the forest. The child reached out and grabbed his thumb, its eyes crusted shut. It never cried.

It was a boy. A luckless, misshapen boy. His grandson. But doomed, he reminded himself. Doomed.

Anders turned away from his daughter, using his body to hide his crime.

"Father," Elsa asked. "Are you crying?"

Anders looped the umbilical cord around the child's neck, shielding the murder from his daughter's eyes, masking it in the form of grief.

"What's wrong?" she asked. "Why are you crying?"

When it was done, he turned to her, without meeting her eyes, and offered up its strangled corpse. "The cord was wrapped around its neck," he said.

Elsa cradled its little body, her tear-streaked eyes falling shut and snapping open. "Olek," she called him.

He could not have borne it if this were the end. But the Hidden's words had been confirmed by the midwife, and Elsa's hand went to her belly, her eyes rekindled by the movement within. A forlorn smile crept across her face.

"Breylin was right," she said.

Anders took the firstborn from her and set him by the fire. He covered the child with a clean rag, its shrouded form lurking in the corner of his eye. "Almost there, *Fjorel*. You're so strong." Anders patted Elsa on the knee. He bent down. "I can see the head already. It won't be long." He looked up, hoping for relief in her eyes, but her head fell to the side and her eyelids fluttered. Anders grabbed her wrist and jerked on it. "Elsa! Stay awake."

"I'm here," she muttered. "Still here."

"Then push, girl." He reached between her legs. "Push!"

Elsa clutched the blood-soaked blanket beneath her and cried out, the fingernails of her other hand raking the floorboards. She panted, her lips pursed, breathing, seizing a moment of tranquility before the next contraction hit.

"Good," her father said. "Again."

She labored on, at times losing consciousness only to awaken as pain cut through the darkness. At last, Anders wrested the child from its mother's womb. A big, black haired boy, plump and healthy. Anders blanched at the hair, the ochre skin, but he had known the boy would be a *shade*. Another legacy of the invasion, of its father's people. Yet the child had his mother's startling blue eyes. So Anders slapped him on the backside, evoking a shrill cry.

The proud grandfather held up his prize for Elsa to see. Joy lit his face. But his joy was fleeting. His Flower lay with her head turned toward the fire, its light dancing in her open eyes.

Good bye, sweet *Fjorel*.

He lay down with his head resting in the crook of her arm and wept. Anders wanted to stay there forever. He deserved no better. But the child's cries awoke him from his grief. The price was paid, but the work still undone.

Anders drew his belt knife. He picked up the baby, cradling it in one arm. With his free hand he cut the umbilical cord. "Brohr," he told the child. "That is what I'll call you."

Anders cut the cord of the other child too, his eyes averted.

He listened to little Brohr scream, the boy no doubt frightened by this strange new world, by his brother's absence. The pummeling hail gave way to pattering rain. Anders' heart galloped. He closed his eyes and began to hum, finding the rhythm of these things. His heart slowed to match the tempo. His voice rose, an otherworldly timbre, deep, grating, growing louder as he embraced the song that

had cost him his soul. He twined the umbilical cords together, hands slick with gore, singing his bleak verse all the while.

Anders bound the boys with the braid, looping it around their waists, and wrapped them in a clean blanket. His head swayed, violence dancing in his mind's eye. Anders drew his knife again and cut his scarred hand, letting blood drizzle onto the twins. His song ended on a determined note, bled of joy and innocence. His Flower had gone where she could not return. His fated grandsons—one spirit, one flesh—wailed a cursed duet.

The Hidden had promised, he told himself. At no mean price. The invaders would pay. Every one. They'd pay a ransom of horror and defeat and pain, these pigs who'd rutted on his precious Flower.

## Chapter 1

*"I dreamt, as a boy, of retaking our village with song and sword. Now, as a man, my nightmares are of my brother and his family, who have found peace in the bosom of our conquerors. To what length would I stoop, I wonder, were the horns of freedom to sound again?"*

*-Sorin Grafstrom, Letters from the Grisben Jail*

Her song drifted from the hills, lent the haunting air of a lullaby as it journeyed through the forest. Birgit's little game brought a smile to Brohr's lips. He was drawn to the echoes like a man following the lure of a Mara's voice to his doom. He quickened his step, sweating under his homespun cloak despite the chill.

Brohr's breath steamed in the morning air, though the snow had stayed in the high hills. The woods smelled of pine needles and wet soil. Finches trilled from the bare branches of the ancient, gnarled oak that marked the eastern edge of his grandfather's land. Brohr's old wolf hound, Grendie, raced beside him, a mountain of a dog with a brindle coat and muddy feet. She scouted ahead, spinning in gleeful circles as she waited for her master to catch up.

Brohr carried a goatskin knapsack stuffed with bread, blankets, and dry clothes for their trek to Pederskald. By nightfall he hoped to be far away from the judging eyes of the townsfolk and his grandfather's relentless anger. Brohr wore a hatchet and dagger tucked into his belt, and a leather pouch dangled from it, jingling with a few silver federalers he'd earned chopping wood for the widows in Skolja.

As they ascended, he hummed along to Birgit's tune, straining to make out the words. The trail dwindled into nothing, a track amongst the ferns and stumps that only his dog's unerring nose could follow. When they emerged from the wood, Grendie let out a playful bark and darted ahead. He spied Birgit atop a boulder, sitting in her patchwork frock, stitched with bluebirds around the collar. Behind her rose the distant, snowcapped peaks of the the Jotunspar Mountains, framed by billowing clouds, and trimmed in golden sunlight. Brohr paused, his eyes drawn to the horizon, the hair prickling on the back of his neck.

Birgit tucked a blonde lock behind her ear and smiled when she saw Brohr and Grendie.

"Brohr Nilstrom, you're late, you oaf!" Birgit jumped down to welcome Grendie.

"*Skel*," Brohr greeted her in old Norn before switching to the conquerors' tongue. "Sorry," he said. "I got in a fight with my grandfather."

"What's new?" Birgit stood on her toes and pecked him on the lips. "And what happened to your eye? Did he do that too?"



"No." Brohr cracked his knuckles. "Just a couple of drunks trying to take their troubles out on the half-caste. It's fine. The soldiers didn't even lift a finger to help. They thought it was funny." She reached up to touch the bruise under his eye, but he brushed her hand away. "I said it's fine. You should see what they looked like when I was done with them."

Birgit frowned. "Did you bring a tin penny?"

"Yes." Brohr rolled his eyes and a smile found its way to his lips. "And I had to give Axl a silver federal for it."

"It's good luck, Brohr. You can't start a journey without a tin penny in your pocket."

"Something tells me they came up with that before the pigs invaded. Tin pennies are rarer than gold. Plus half the town probably knows we're running off after I asked everyone and their brother for it," he said. "Where are your things?"

Birgit's smile faltered. She reached atop the boulder to something wrapped in a handkerchief. "I brought you a treat."

Brohr had a sinking feeling in his stomach, but he accepted the little bundle. He unwrapped it, staring down at the strudel dusted with sugar and crushed almonds. She wasn't telling him something. Was this a way to soften the blow before she backed out? Brohr tore off a chunk of the pastry and stuffed it in his mouth, forcing a smile onto his face as he waited for the bad news.

Grendie sniffed the air and rested a paw on his knee to remind Brohr she was there. Her antics broke the tension. The couple laughed and Brohr fed Grendie a piece of the pastry.

"Well?" Brohr asked. "Let's hear it."

Birgit kicked a pebble down the hill. "They hadn't left for town yet. I couldn't take anything out with me. We'll have to go back."

Brohr groaned. "Is that all? You had me worried."

Birgit grasped his hand and held it in both of her own. "Are you sure this is the right thing to do? I can't stop worrying about my father."

Brohr clenched his jaw, looking down into Birgit's imploring blue eyes. "It's his fault we have to do this." He ran his hand self-consciously through his cropped black hair. "He's not going to change his mind about me. I'm getting out of this town—no matter what."

"I know." She laid her head on his arm. "I just wish there was another way."

"Are you kidding? Your father hates me. Everyone here hates me. I'm not Norn and I'm not Tyrianite. Your dad looks at me and sees one of them. Do you know what it's like to have people look at you like that? Like they want to knock your teeth out for smiling or spit in your face for all the things the pigs ever did to them?"

"It's not my father's fault that—"

"It is!" Brohr ground his teeth. "It is his fault. I never did anything to him. Everyone in this town looks at me like I'm one of them. And *they* look at me like I'm a stray dog. I'm nothing. I can't be anything here. Even my grandfather...well, sometimes he tries to hide it. Sometimes not. I can't stay here anymore. I can't live in that house another day. You think your father is bad? You think he looks at me unfairly? My grandfather hates me twice as much. To him I'm just a reminder of his precious *Fjorel*, and the ones who raped her. If we're serious about making a life together, you know it can't be here."

"I know."

Brohr stared off at the mountains for a minute before he sighed and bent down to feed his dog the rest of the strudel. "Sit," he said. "There's no sense in you making a racket when you see their dogs. Lie down." Again, she obeyed. "Stay." Brohr backed away. "Stay."

With one last look back at Grendie, Birgit tugged on his hand. "Come on." She led him down the hill in the opposite direction from which he'd come.

Brohr looked up at the sun, fretting about how late in the morning it was already. A woodpecker tapped at a nearby tree trunk, and just ahead a stream bubbled through the undergrowth.

Birgit gasped, grabbing Brohr by the forearm, her fingers fair against his tawny skin. "Look," she whispered.

Before them, a pair of fawns lapped from the stream. One, whose antlers had just begun to bud from its crown, raised its head, and looked right at Birgit. It poised its foreleg as if to bolt, studied the couple for a moment, then planted its hoof again and stooped back to drink once more. Birgit squeezed his arm. "It's good luck, you know." She pulled Brohr down to her so she could kiss him.

They circled around the deer and pressed on to Birgit's farm. It wasn't long before they reached the clearing. A low stone wall ringed the homestead. The Gelstroms' log farmhouse, with its thatched roof, stood in the center of a reaped field beside the barn.

"Good," said Birgit. "They've gone."

She took his hand and led him into the clearing toward her house. A pair of hounds barked and ran up with tails wagging. Brohr scoped around for any sign of her father, but the wagon was gone, so he followed her into the open.

"I feel a little guilty," she admitted.

"Why?"

"Well, I just don't want them to worry."

"I talked to Vili," said Brohr. "He'll tell them tonight."

Her pace faltered when Brohr mentioned his best friend.

"What?" He asked.

"Nothing."

When they reached the front door, a round-topped portal with a brass knocker, Birgit looked over her shoulder and blew a kiss at Brohr. He smiled at her and squeezed her hand. The latch clicked, and the joy vanished from her face as the door opened from within.

Arni Gelstrom folded his arms, bare to the elbow beneath his tunic and tattooed with fading blackbirds. He was tall, and blonde, and wore a long beard that couldn't mask his anger.

"My own daughter. About to run off with a damned half-blood." He spat at her feet. "We'll have no shades in my line."

Brohr squirmed as Arni's eyes tallied the hints of his Tyrianite side: Brohr's black hair, his darker skin. A wisp of a smile crossed Arni's lips as he took in Brohr's aquiline nose, broken by his grandfather years ago and never set properly. Birgit's father noticed they were holding hands.

"Get your filthy hand off my daughter. *Svik!*" Arni cursed him in the old tongue. "Pig!"

"Master Gelstrom—"

"Quiet!" Arni roared. He took a step towards them, backing the couple away from the house. "Just going to run off, were you? Off to Pederskald to live like a whore with this lout?"

"Father, I'm sorry." She held up her hands in surrender. "Please, you're not being fair to Brohr."

"Fair?" The farmer shook his fist in his child's face. "Was it fair when a horde of these murderers dropped out of the sky and burned everything to the ground? Fair? They killed your grandparents! All four of them! They killed two of your uncles. And now you're all cozy with this—"

"I was born right down the way." Brohr pointed back toward his farm. "Skolja is my home. I didn't come from anywhere but here."

"You shut up, pig." He stormed Brohr as if to tackle him, but Brohr stood his ground and Arni pulled up short at the last second, face-to-face with his daughter's suitor. A nasty smile crept onto Arni's lips.

"It's a good thing," said Arni Gelstrom, "that your friend came to warn me. Come out here, boy." Brohr ground his teeth, shaking his head. His best friend, Vili Olsten, appeared in the doorway, head hung, golden curls veiling

his face, hands clasped before him. "Come on out, boy," said Arni. "I owe you my thanks."

Vili took a few steps out of the doorway. He looked up at Birgit with pleading eyes. Arni kept gloating, close enough that Brohr could smell the onions on his breath, but the man's words were lost to the roar of Brohr's blood in his ears. He felt that other presence, angry, full of childish rage.

Vili looked up with shame in his—

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Brohr's fist cracked Vili's jaw.

"Stop!" Birgit wailed. "No more."

He threw her aside, bending over Vili, snatching the knife from his belt. Vili looked up through his good eye, the other a mess, a mass of bruise and blood.

"No," Birgit pled.

Brohr hesitated, dizzy, disoriented. He wiped drool from the corner of his mouth. He stood by the big oak tree on the west side of the clearing. He had been... over there. Brohr looked back at the house across the field. His ire retreated, that familiar, frightening presence receding, turning over into slumber.

That anger had always been with him, always clawing toward the surface. Railing against his grandfather's unfairness, the taunts of a few bullies. But nothing like this. It had never broken free. Never taken over. Until now.

"Son," Arni sounded wary. "That's enough."

Birgit's father stood twenty paces away. He ran his finger down his cheek from the corner of his eye, a ward against evil spirits. Blood dripped from his torn earlobe into his beard.

Brohr stood up, dropped his friend and backed away, sheathing his knife. Birgit rushed over to Vili, cradling his head.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

Vili mumbled something unintelligible.

Birgit flinched as Brohr reached out to her. "Stay back," she said. "What was that?"

"I," Brohr hesitated. "Sometimes..." He couldn't explain. How could he put words to a curse, a mystery that lurked in the dim corners of his life?

"Go." She kept her eyes on the ground. "Please. Just go."

He looked from Birgit to Vili to her father. Brohr backed away. "I'm sorry. It was an accident."

She picked up a rock and threw it at him. "Just go!"

A final plea died on Brohr's lips. He hung his head, turned on his heel, and started the long walk home.

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Prefect Brasca Quoll stood looking out the porthole as their ship flew over the hamlet of Skolja. Short and umber-skinned, a whisper-thin mustache on his upper lip, the prefect spied a sleepy seaside village below, a backwater of log and thatch and muddy streets. North of town, a crude fort dominated a large plateau—his new command. To the east, another hill dotted with a large house and a statue of the local saint at the top. Beyond that, the choppy waters of the Selvig Sea stretched toward the horizon.

What a disgrace, to find oneself here at the edge of civilization, lording over a den of pale savages. He'd only left Tyria a week ago, but the homeworld seemed a distant memory, a half-dream. Once, he had hoped to be raised to the Electorate, even to be anointed a Judge. But that was all ashes now. He supposed he was lucky; if his father wasn't an Elector, he'd probably have been burned at the stake, or at the very least excommunicated. The idea did little to cheer him. He was marooned here on Heimir, this insignificant planet, so far removed from the real seat of power, a victim of his own conscience, his own stupidity.

Brasca grabbed the rail behind him and gripped it tight as the ship circled around to land. Its ancient engines screeched, the vessel lurched, and the arcane machinery geared down, settling into a hum. They touched down beside the fort, the iron hull groaning from the strain.

He choked down the acid rising in the back of his throat and quelled the revolt in his stomach. Void travel had always unnerved him. Not just the discomfort—the cold, the weightlessness—but the very idea of it. Something about the age of most ships, relics of the bright era, patched together with suppositions and salvage by the lesser binders of today.

He stood on a grated catwalk, overlooking the cargo bay, which comprised the interior of the cylindrical transport ship. To his left, the three pilots of the void craft awoke from their trance, removed their elaborate helms, and unbuckled themselves from their seats. The devices allowed them to communicate with other helms across the vast emptiness above, to receive orders from Trond, the provincial capital on the other side of the mountains, and to navigate the ship through the cold and merciless abyss. Below, the crewmen raced about, preparing to unload.

The captain, a wisp of a man with thinning black hair and ashy skin, strode over to him and threw up his right arm, hailing his superior officer. Brasca gave him a slight nod.

“Prefect,” said the captain. “We have reached Skolja.”

This was obvious, but he saw no reason to scold the man. Instead, he donned his tricorn hat, which he had laid on his seat while looking out the window. “Very good, Captain. Once your men have unloaded the supplies, you can be on your way.”

The captain hailed him again and began issuing orders to the crew. The eldritch engines ceased their hum, the silence filled by boots on metal and then the whirring motor of the bay door opening.

Brasca strapped on his short sword and descended the stairway to the cargo bay, waiting at the rear of the ship

as the ramp unfolded. A delegation of two men stood at the foot of the ramp, their breath steamy in the morning chill. The first was an officer of the federal legion: in his thirties, muscular, with the brown skin, straight black hair, and the shorter stature of a Tyrianite. He too wore a tricorn hat, an etched breastplate, and an ornately stitched leather skirt with woolen leggings for the cold. The other man was a provincial—a Norn—the locals called themselves. Old and pale and portly. He wore a leather suit trimmed in fur and green felt, and eyeglasses, quite an extravagance. The pair couldn't have been more different.

The Tyrianite officer doffed his hat and hailed Brasca as he approached. "Welcome, Prefect. It's an honor to have you here."

Prefect Brasca Quoll returned his subordinate's salute. "Thank you, Ordinal." He turned next to the older man. "And you are?"

"Olen Torvald, Mayor of Skolja, at your service." The provincial forced a smile. "But please, call me Olen." He hailed him as a soldier might, and Brasca frowned at him, turning back to the officer.

"It's Carthalo, right?"

"Yes, sir."

Brasca waved off the provincial and said, "Thank you. Ordinal Carthalo and I have much to discuss. That will be all for now, Mayor Torvald." The man didn't seem to realize he'd been dismissed at first. "Goodbye," Brasca added.

"Of course," said the Mayor, muttering something else as he walked away.

An honor guard of Federal legionaries bearing round wooden shields ringed them, beyond which many of the locals had turned out to watch the ship's arrival. The Tyrianites were all clean-shaven, wearing leather skirts, black-iron breastplates, and conical helmets while the Norn locals favored drab woolen cloaks, leather breeches, and unkempt beards.



“Perhaps,” said Ordinal Carthalo, “you would like a tour of the fort or the town. We could even inspect the mine if you are up for another journey so soon.”

“That can wait, for now,” said Brasca. “I’d like to talk about the nature of my mission.”

Carthalo looked away.

“I see you’ve heard the rumors,” said the prefect.

Ordinal Carthalo nodded. “Yes, about your lapse. After your son, well, it’s understandable you balked at putting the torch to Crassa.”

Brasca shouldn’t have been surprised that his embarrassment had reached the Ordinal’s ears. His father was an Elector of the synod after all. “That is only half of the reason I’m here,” he said.

Carthalo looked far off toward the hills. “Every man has doubts, sir. There is of course the matter of the rite of command. Will that be... a problem for you?”

Brasca started walking toward the nearby fort, a rude palisade of tarred logs. “There is no need for any awkwardness, Ordinal. This is a temporary command. The rite is unnecessary. Though I would like you to step in at offerings.”

A pair of Tyrianite legionaries carried a crate of cold iron bars up the ramp and onto the transport ship. Overhead, a trio of gulls wheeled on the sea breeze, keening at the new arrivals.

Carthalo nodded. “The men will notice, of course.”

Brasca knew he was shirking his responsibility. Every Tyrianite officer, from the lowliest Ordinal to the deified Pontiff himself, was a link in the holy chain of command. The rites were as much a part of his duties as the soldiering. Even if it was all a hill of dung.

“I really don’t care,” said Brasca. “If they didn’t burn me at home, it doesn’t matter what the men whisper out here.”

“Permission to speak frankly, sir?”

The prefect stopped and turned to face his subordinate. "Very well."

"Things are not as, shall we say, *liberal*, here. This isn't Trond or Tyria. This sort of...unorthodoxy... will not sit well with the men."

Brasca smiled. "Spoken like a true believer. Don't worry, Carthalo; this exile won't last long. As I said, the nature of my mission is temporary. In the meantime, you fret about the men's souls, and I'll worry about the rest. Just see that they follow orders."

"Yes, sir."

"Good." The prefect resumed his course to the fort. "I'm told you've been in command here for six months. Any trouble I should know about?"

"A few outlaws in the back country now and then. Nothing major. Drunken brawls, locals speaking their old tongue once in a while. We put them in the stocks or give them a beating. A few repeat offenders we've sent up to the mines. As long as the tithes flow and the mine runs smoothly, I don't push too hard."

"What happened to the last prefect?" Brasca asked.

"A pox, sir. He died early this spring. They haven't bothered to send anyone to replace him."

"Well, I'm told you kept the mine running smoothly, kept the prisoners there in check. The cold iron met quota every month. Most ordinals would've been content just avoiding a rebellion, but you've done well, a credit to your command. And there is no binder stationed here?"

"No, sir," said Carthalo. "But the Mayor—the man you just met—and his son are both binders."

"Really," Brasca marveled. "I've never even heard of provincials teaching themselves proper magic. It seems...inappropriate."

Carthalo nodded. "Will you have a legion binder transferred here?"

Brasca shook his head. "We likely won't be here much longer. I'm to prepare for a possible evacuation."

Carthalo stopped. "Sir?"

"A situation has arisen in Trond, which may require these troops in the provincial capital. We're to make ready and await orders." Brasca clasped his hands behind his back. "I want a report on the disposition of our men and the state of our supplies in one hour. Understood?"

Ordinal Carthalo shot out his arm in salute. "Yes, sir."

"Good," said the prefect. "One last thing. I want you to draw me up a list of potential troublemakers."