

Rampant

Torec pulled hard on his horse's reigns to a rearing stop before the city's northern gatehouse. He swung himself sideways off the saddle in a dangerous maneuverer. Ignoring his vexed steed's snorts, he strode towards the city guards stationed outside.

One of the guards held up a hand. 'My lord, what brings you here?'

Torec didn't break stride. 'I have business with the Gate Captain.'

The guard moved to block his path; a gauntleted hand pressed firmly against Torec's chest. His two fellow guards closed ranks at the archway entrance into the courtyard beyond. 'The hour is late. I'm sorry, but you'll have to come back tomorrow on the morning.'

Torec straightened to his full height. 'You're holding an Atlantan priest who arrived earlier today. I want you to release him.'

The guard gave him a confused look and glanced at his fellows. 'I - don't know what you mean. We've never taken priests of any kind into custody here. The Church informs us if they're expecting -.'

Torec folded his arms and glared. 'Do not take me for a fool.' The clattering of metal shod hooves on cobblestone drew his attention. He turned to see Penelope, his advisor, leading a half-dozen riders wearing surcoats dyed with his town colours.

'Please wait here, my Lord. I will speak to my superiors.' The guard gave a quick bow and walked off.

'And be quick about it,' said Torec.

'My lord - you shouldn't - antagonise them - if you want - their cooperation,' wheezed Penelope.

'No need to dismount. Stay there and catch your breath, grandma. I thought you said my brother had declined.'

Penelope sagged in the saddle, swaying slightly. 'It's what I was told. He must have changed his mind.'

Torec shook his head. 'He's not the type to be so whimsical.'

'Perhaps he wanted to surprise you? And speaking of surprises -.' Penelope wagged a finger at him. '- I'm not a sprightly young lad like you. Don't expect me if you do something like this again.'

'Yes, yes. We're a bunch of unruly ruffian misfits from the Midlands, which is precisely why I have you.' Torec grinned and gently patted Penelope's arm. He appreciated her effort given her age.

Penelope shrugged him off and smoothed the folds on her sleeves. 'Obviously, I still have a lot of work to do.'

'Indeed, you do.' Torec's grin faded and lowered his voice. 'If he had said yes, that would have been surprise enough.'

Penelope raised an eyebrow at him. 'When was the last time you saw him?'

'More than eight years ago.'

The ground rumbled beneath his feet. Their horses neighed and shifted their weight nervously. Torec approached a guard. ‘What was that just now?’

The young guard shrugged. ‘I honestly don’t know, sir.’

Torec stepped closer and loomed over him. ‘Then how about you go find out what that is and then come back.’

‘Torec!’ one of his militiamen called and pointed upwards. ‘There’s smoke coming from inside!’

Torec took several steps back and saw a dark haze rising from the wooden sections of the gatehouse. A tongue of orange licked through a window billowing smoke. *Fire. There’s fire inside?* A dozen guards ran out from the courtyard towards them.

‘RAMPAAANT!’

‘RUUUN!’

The droopy eyelids of the two guards in front of Torec shot wide open. They dropped their spears and ran down the streets shouting at the top of their lungs. ‘RAMPANT! RUN FOR YOUR LIFE!’

Their fellow guards were hot on their heels as they all scattered. Torec tried to grab one by the arm as he passed but the man’s fear was stronger than Torec’s grip. ‘Utterly useless,’ he muttered. One of his men didn’t bother to hide a chuckle while another rolled his eyes. An alarm bell sounded as the smoke took on an orange hue. ‘Alright, not *all* of them are useless.’

The left side of the gatehouse appeared to glow in the night as pin pricks of light found their way through the gaps in the wooden structure. Hot red coals bored through the planking. Torec mounted his horse. ‘Penelope, alert the Atlantan temple and send them to the manor. The rest of you evacuate these buildings.’

‘Where are *you* going?’ asked Penelope.

Torec pointed for her to go and sprinted for the courtyard. As he cleared the archway, the smoking building exploded outwards. Torec was knocked off his feet. His hands flew to his chest to rip out a burning splinter from his jerkin. He smothered the red ring it left behind as more burning timber and debris rained around him.

A figure rolled out of the smoke with a loud hacking cough. The stranger’s tattered azure blue robes were ripped down the front from collar to waist. A wave of blazing hot air and embers washed over Torec, driving him back. A torrent of flames swirled around the man as another tendril of fire whipped through the air like an enraged snake.

‘Torec?’ the man coughed, wiping soot from his eyes.

Torec squinted, his eyelids fluttering against the heat. ‘Ari?’

They stared at each other. Torec tried to keep calm by breathing through his nose. It didn’t stop his heart falling into the deep pit within his stomach. *This cannot be happening. How are we getting out of this mess?*

An arrow clattered off the pavement between them, snapping Torec to attention. Archers above the shut city gates signalled their fellows along the city walls with short horn blasts. *No escape that way.* Several arrows flew wide off their mark. The fletching burned brightly as

they neared, throwing their trajectory off. Torec was thankful they lacked the proper ammunition. 'Follow me!'

Torec ran back the way he came, feeling the night chill on his face and what felt like a smithy's furnace behind him. The heat was too much for his horse who took off down the street as his brother approached. It was too much for Torec as well, as he waved his brother to stay thirty feet back. 'Can you run?' he shouted, having to shield his face behind a raised arm.

'Do I have a choice?' Ari called back.

Torec heard the frantic tolls of a bell deeper within the city. Wasting no more time, he waved Ari to follow him and led him deeper into the city. He waved his men to get off the streets as they passed, leaving a wake of flames as cloth and wooden fixtures began to catch fire. Annoyed and weary eyes citizens looked out their homes to see what had caused the city's bells to ring at this ungodly hour. Torec yelled at them to get back inside in a voice that could carry across valleys. He never looked back to check if Ari was able to keep up. He could tell by the heat on his back.

Even though his manor wasn't in the city core like other nobles, Torec prayed that the trail of destruction in their wake didn't spread and that no one was harmed. He shouted for the militiaman on night duty to open the gate. Compared to other minor nobles, his estate was small. So much so, that they often made it a point to refer to it as a villa. 'Wake everyone up and draw water!' cried Torec.

The militiaman's eyes widened as he saw what followed Torec and did as he was bid. Torec motioned Ari to follow him around the side of the manor and into the yard at the rear. A small chapel situated itself beside a large tree. Torec shoulder charged the door open and got out of the way. Once Ari was inside, Torec held a hand outside the chapel's open door. The heat had subsided substantially to that of a large campfire. 'Are you alright?' asked Torec, peering in.

Ari was panting, his hands around the small font. 'My robes are holding up which is good. This chapel's only dampening it, but I think I can hold it. The Holy Water seems to help.' Ari let out a nervous chuckle.

'Sit tight and keep calm. I'll see what I can do,' Torec said. He knew Ari was doing his best to put on a brave face for *his* sake. Likewise, Ari would know Torec was doing his best to lighten the severity of their situation.

'Lord Torec,' a voice hissed quietly behind him. Torec turned in surprise. A militiawoman stopped beside him, keeping her voice low. 'There's a lady who wishes to speak with you down at the servant's gate.'

There was only one person it could be.

Torec pointed at the nearby smouldering tree and plants. 'Get help to put that out. Have everyone ready up for trouble. And get me more Holy Water, I don't care how.' He shuffled down a nearby flight of narrow steps. A cloaked figure with their hood up was waiting on the other side of the iron gate. He could tell who it was from her silhouette alone. The way she folded her hands when she was nervous, the way she raised her chin defiantly in the air when

she had something important to say, down to the way traced circles with a foot when impatient.

Elaine threaded her hands between the bars. 'When they come,' she said, as Torec gave them a light kiss. 'Do what they say and don't fight them on it.'

He folded his hands over hers. Her skin was cool to the touch and trembling. 'Elaine, you *can't* be here.'

'*Please,*' Elaine said. 'If you cooperate, they may grant you leniency.'

'And my brother?'

'There's nothing you can do for him.'

'He's all the family I have left. I can't turn my back on him - not now - not *ever*.'

'I don't like it any more than you do but that's how things are. Don't throw yourself into a fight you can't win.'

'Is that the man you want to marry? Someone who turns their back on family and only takes fights he knows he can win?'

Elaine pursed her lips and kept what was on her mind to herself. She lowered her eyes and withdrew her hands from his. She pulled the engagement ring off her slender finger and held it out to him. 'So be it. You should have this back.'

Torec stared at the silver ring in the palm of her hand. 'Do you remember what I said after you said yes?'

'Now I have to convince your father,' Elaine whispered.

Torec wished he could erase the pain in her eyes. 'He was never going to let it happen.' He plucked the ring from her palm. It was for the best - if only his heart could believe it. 'Now, run along.' It was the hardest about turn in Torec's life. It took every fibre in his body to take the first step on the stair when Elaine sobbed. He had not realised he had been holding his breath until he reached the top. As he exhaled, he felt like his soul had escaped his body. A wave of lethargy washed over him. With the chapel in view, he took a moment to bury his emotions for another time.

He found Ari kneeling on the floor with his eyes closed, his face calm. Torec took several steps forward but raised a hand to block the intense heat radiating from Ari. 'Not how I imagined today,' Ari said. There was a hiss of steam and the heat subsided enough for Torec to stand beside the last row of pews; the polished wood charring. Torec lowered his arm and saw Ari lower a pitcher. His damp hair and robes emanated steam like a censer.

From the last time they had met, Ari's cheeks were fuller, his hair worn in the same manner as the Atlantean priests, but he still maintained the youthful vigour in his green eyes. Even on consecrated ground and Holy Water, Torec couldn't even get close enough to hug him.

Ari raised his hands. 'I know, but best you keep your distance. I don't think your betrothed would appreciate a burnt face on your wedding day - not that you had any good looks to begin with,' he said with a grin. Torec tried to return the grin. It must not have translated to his face very well. 'What happened?' said Ari. There was no hint of mirth.

Torec held up the silver ring.

Ari stared. 'When?'

Torec cleared his throat. 'Just now.'

'I'm so sorry. I should never have come. I've messed things up royally for you.'

'Not your fault,' Torec said. 'I was played for a fool from the start.'

Ari gave him a quizzical look. 'What are you talking about?'

'I never knew you were coming at all until tonight,' replied Torec.

'But I gave the courier my reply on the spot months ago.'

'And I don't doubt that,' said Torec. 'It was sent through Elaine's family courier. Her father knew all this time.' All that time spent courting Elaine, enduring the snubs and snide remarks from her parents and their social circles - all of it for nothing. They must be laughing at him this very moment, sampling their fine wines like the obnoxious silver-spooned high-borns that they were. Torec wracked his brains. How had they known that Ari had been marked by the Betrayer? It was for that reason their parents had Ari stay at the Atlantan monastery.

Ari remained silent. Under more amicable circumstances, Torec would have thought he was enjoying a majestic sun rise. 'You're wondering if it really was an accident that killed them. Don't. It'll do you no good.'

'Should I not? Our family has had a target on our backs from both sides since father agreed to swear fealty. We're either kneeling traitors or upstart commoner scum who need to be shown their place.' It felt good to vent his anger. He would have continued if it weren't for the trumpet blasts.

'Let them have me and salvage what you can. This isn't doing good for anyone. The Midlands still need you.' Ari poured the remaining water from the pitcher over himself. 'Let me go, Torec. It was good to see you one last time.'

'I am *not* handing you over to the Inquisitors. You better be here when I come back,' Torec said and walked out. At the front gates, his militia was facing off against a troop of twenty heavily armed men led by a black robed Inquisitor on horseback. Torec walked past his troops and up to the metal gate that divided them.

'Lord Torec,' the Inquisitor said in a clear voice. 'Surrender the sorcerer currently on your premises, and we may overlook your transgressions.' Torec met the man's beady eyes and kept silent. 'Harbouring a sorcerer, especially one that has already been confirmed to be Rampant, is a crime punishable by death.' The Inquisitor looked down his nose at him. 'Your privileges, *my Lord*, doesn't grant you immunity from impeding Church justice. Best you let us through before the Rampancy enters its final stages and spiral out of control to its inevitable conclusion.'

'Says *you*,' Torec said.

'Says the *Church*,' the Inquisitor replied, gritting his teeth. 'And any other misguided notion is *heresy*. The Inquisition has noted that these heretical thoughts arise in Godless lands and must be purged root and stem when found. Now, let us do our work.'

The Inquisitors threat was clear. Torec didn't doubt that the Inquisitors would establish themselves in his town like an insidious weed. The smug look on the Inquisitor's face was enough for Torec to wish that he could rip him down from his high horse.

And why not?

He had never considered it as an option before. He glanced behind both his shoulders to meet the eyes of each of his militia carefully. They knew what was at stake. All of them gave a solemn nod, the tips of their spear lowered ever so slightly.

'No,' Torec replied.

The Inquisitor leaned forward. 'I don't think you understand. I wasn't asking.' He grinned. It was the same grin that nobles wore when they conversed with Torec.

Torec grinned back. 'I understand well enough. I believe it is you who doesn't understand.'

The grin fell from the Inquisitors face and turned to a grimace. 'Lesser men should know when they are beat. Choose your next words carefully.'

'My answer is no,' Torec said slowly and drew his sword. His men lowered their spears forward. 'And we are not lesser men.'

The Inquisitor's eyes were dangerous. 'You are the lowest denominator of nobles. You have no support from other nobles or the crown. You barely have ties with the merchants or the guilds. Your relations with the army are amicable at best. The peasantry will certainly want you hanged for leading a Rampant through their homes. None of the Churches will stand with you. Your *attempt* at defiance is but an hallow gesture.'

A loud boom, not unlike the sound of violent tides crashing into cliffs, drowned out all noise. A wave of intense heat washing over them as night turned today. Torec turned to see fire raging through the rear half of his manor. A thousand bright lights rode the wind, landing on the rooves and grounds of his neighbours.

'Like I said, it is inevitable.' The Inquisitor regarded him with a smirk and departed.

Torec darted through flames towards the chapel.

There was nothing left.

Ari.

A metallic glint caught his eye. He picked up the short, stocky arrow made entirely of metal. Special arrows made to better withstand the effects of magics to fly true. It was covered in a charred crimson substance. Torec slammed it against the wall, the arrowhead slicing deep into his palm, releasing a trickle of bright red droplets. He had not given up everything for nothing. This had to be for *something*.