

SAGA OF THE DEAD MEN WALKING

INSANITY'S RESPITE

A MIND IS A
TERRIBLE THING

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*The Battles of Coldstone's Summit did not come without cost.
It was supposed to have been a simple haunting, a simple test.
What it became was a bloody battlefield rife with corpses;
the majority of which were still walking, albeit not breathing.*

*Akaran had been sent there to prove his mettle,
to show he could wear the mantle of an exorcist of the Order of Love,
simply to prove that he had learned his lessons and was ready to serve.*

*He proved that he knew how to bring the Will of the Goddess.
He proved that he knew how to survive.
He proved that he knew how to fight.
He proved that he knew how to banish the damned.
He proved he would do anything and all things,
sadly, without regard for the costs of his actions.*

That disregard came at a price.

*An act of contrition was imposed on him for his acts of disrespect to the Mount.
We had no idea what the true nature of it was, only that it
brought him suffering, and cruelly left him bereft of magic.*

*To heal his body and recover his magic, I sent him to Medias Manor.
A haven. A place of recovery and peace. A sanctuary.*

*Basion City had nothing of note for interest by any outside party.
No grand military plots were hatched there. No truly excessive industry.
No grand structures for the Queen. No risk of invasion.
The 'safest place in the Kingdom,'
minus one little storeroom owned by the Order of Love.*

*It was an inland haven, a day's ride away from the closest military outpost.
A simple city, yet one full of thousands of souls,
all of whom that wanted to live in peace.*

*I sent him there knowing there was no chance that he would
be embroiled in bloodshed, violence, suffering, or pain.*

I should have known better.

*~Sir Steelhom
Office of Oversight, New Civa*

PROLOGUE

Wundis, the 2nd of Greenbirth, 513 QR

Rain pounded against the window as two women curled up on a pillow-covered bench near each other. It was late, and the only light to be had came from a flickering fireplace in the corner. "It's cold out," the youngest of the two lamented, "and the wind it... it's blowing my hair everywhere. Making it... making it hard to see."

"But you aren't using your eyes, are you?" the other woman asked as she sipped tea from an old ceramic mug. The light from the fire made her gray eyes glimmer silver.

The younger woman shook her head, her white hair hanging limply down on her cotton robe. "No... yes, but no. What I see? What I hear and see are -"

"Tell me what you *can* see."

She took a nervous breath and tried to calm her shaking hands. She couldn't bring herself to look up at her friend, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop her fingers from twitching. "I... see a man. We're outside."

"Outside where?"

"The... it has a picture, a... a pig? It... engorged teats? It's... disgusting."

Her confidant made a show of slowly setting down her mug before picking up a feathered quill and a piece of parchment to make a note of the design. "You've never mentioned that before in our sessions. Is it new?"

"Yes. We... we haven't been there before."

"What else do you see?"

"Him," she replied, "and a man below us. His aura. Loud but refined. The... the ether around him? It's... orderly. Arranged. It's vibrating. Ready. Looking for more. But it's not swirling. It's not... not chaotic. He... has to be a Gran. Has to be. Too refined."

The other woman made a note of that, too. "A Granalchi? What does he look like? Can you tell?"

She squeezed her eyes shut tight and focused on the thought. "It's so high up here," she complained. "I can't... I can barely tell. He's... a brown cloak. I can... sometimes see his reflection. He... he has a white mustache."

"Okay, that's good. What more do you see? Do you hear anything?"

The wind is blowing her hair. There's more rain coming. Their prey feels it, too. She can feel his heartbeat pounding through the ether. He's rushing, and they follow him for a few short blocks until another man appears. He's wearing a round, flat-billed hat that's hiding his face from overhead. "That one. That one," she repeated, "dangerous. Aura is death. Not... not from here. He is... other."

Her metaphysician leaned in closer to listen to her whispers. "Do you know his name? Can you hear *him*?"

"Just... he wants in the vault. The... Miral. Miral's vault. He wants in there. He thinks that... thinks that the brown cloaked. He... can get him in there. The man in the hats wants in there."

"What about the Granalchi?"

"He... he doesn't. Wants the other man to leave him alone. He's... agitated. The aura around... the one in the hat. It's the opposite of his. Chaotic. Maddening. I can't stand... please, let me stop..."

The healer gently cupped the younger woman's shaking hands with one of hers. "No. You have to. You came to my room tonight. You know something is wrong. We've discussed this, Bistra. The way to wellness is through confronting the things that you can see."

Her patient looked up at her, her amber eyes brimming with tears. After a little snuffle, she bent her head back down and tried to focus again. "The bad man leaves. He was wrong. Not what we wanted."

"We?"

"The... the shadow. The one with me."

She made a little soft 'ah' sound in response.

Following him again. It's getting windier. His cloak billows about, and when it blows open, a bag falls out of it. He bends down to pick it up, and catches a glimpse of them in a puddle. His silver eyes flicker with light. The shadow realizes that it's been seen. It tenses up. They lunge through the air as he starts to turn. There's a scream. "That's... that's where it ended," she panted, swallowing air.

"Your dream ended?"

"Not a dream!" she shouted, eyes huge with tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oliana... I, I mean... Lady Oliana, it's not a dream. And... not. Not. Not ended. *He ended. Started ending.*"

"I've told you before, child, you may call me Livstra. Hardly anyone calls me by my first name," the other woman said with a smile.

A closed fist whips out and cuffs the man across the back of his skull. There's a scuffle, cursing. Rough hands slam his face into a wall. He's stunned, he's disoriented. He starts to utter an invocation. His hands move like lightning in the air. Then the shadow grabs them. Fingers snap like twigs. We shove him again. Send his head against a post. He's unconscious now. We're dragging him.

"Bistra, it's a dream..."

She was too lost in it to hear her voice, and her eyes grew cloudy as she saw the scene play out again in her head. *We stop dragging him. He's against the wall. Rain is falling now. Can't wait. Can't watch but can't wait. Know it's coming. It always does. Like this or not. It happens. Sound. Little whimpers. A groan.*

Clattering.

That sound. Know that sound. A short scream and a clatter. Little pebbles hitting the cobblestones. A glimpse of one of the stones, shiny and ivory, fresh from his mouth. Clattering on the stones.

"It's a dream. Focus on my voice, Bistra, it's a dream."

Another sound. Things dropping into puddles. Wet sounds. Wet things. Terrible sounds. Stomach is twisting hearing them. Body is screaming. His. Mine. Ours. Can feel it. Can hear it the noise in the ether is so loud. There's... a blob. A mass with bits of things attached to it. She looks down at it.

The eye in the gutter looks back up at her, and she screams.

When she came to, she realized that Livstra had her head in her hands. The healer's eyes are shut, and she's repeating the same words again and again as a faint pink hue radiated from between her palms. "*Ashadi fa Solina, ashadi; ashadi Solina, ashadi,*" she repeated. "Peace, peace from Solinal. Listen to the Peacebringer. Let Him help. It's a *dream*, we've been down this road before. It's a dream."

The spell made the broken woman sag down into a relaxed heap as the invocation took hold and snuffed her panicked hallucination. "Not dream," she sniffled. "It's him. The shadow. It follows. Follows free. Fangs. Fangs are here."

"No," Livstra stressed. "There are no fangs here. This place is safe. You know that. That's why you're here. It *has* to be a dream because those things don't happen here."

"Can't be. Can't be dream," she insisted.

"Why do you think that, hm? You know you don't leave the Manor at night. You almost never leave your room at all. Your window was open and some rain got in. That's why you're cold and wet; we'll move your bed tomorrow. No more nightmares after that."

Bistra sniffled again and shook her head slowly. "I'm wet because I was... I was... here, maybe now you'll believe me," she replied as she reached under her robe and pulled out a copper medallion.

It had been banged up, dented, and streaked with dried blood.

All of the color in Livstra's face drained away as her eyes went wide in shock and disbelief. "Where did you find that? How did you *get* it?! That belongs to Adept Odern! He's from the... the Granalchi Annex..."

"Shadows," she whimpered. "The *shadow*. The *fangs*. He gave it to me. Said... it was a gift."

And on the other side of town, a few blocks away from the *Sow's Teat*, passersby found a body nailed to a wall of a local tannery. There were screams of horror and shouts for help. Guards rushed down rainy, cobblestone streets. One of them slipped in something squishy and immediately fell into the bloody mud. On a nearby building that overlooked most of the city, an old sign creaked in the wind.

"*Welcome to Basion City,*" it read.

If the corpse could've laughed at the irony, it would've.

"*The safest place in the Kingdom.*"

I. THE SAFEST PLACE

Londis, the 3rd of Greenbirth, 513 QR

"First time to Basion City, exorcist?"

"First time," Akaran answered, looking up from the back of the creaky wooden cart he'd been stuck in the last four hours. "Don't know that much about it, honestly."

Truth be told, there wasn't much to see approaching it either. Basion City – the oft said 'Safest Place in the Kingdom' – sat in a crater in the back end of Yittl Canyon, and was a bit of a slog to reach. The mouth of the canyon was a bit less than a day's travel by foot from a port at the edge of the Alenic Ocean. From what his escort had said, there was only one feasible way into Basion from the ocean, and that was to trudge north through the length of the canyon and try not to get stuck in the muddy deposits left behind by the Orshia-Avagerona River that coursed right down its throat.

Of course, even with only one primary way *in*, the safest city needed a wall. And what would the point of a wall be if it didn't extend over the top of the canyon? It'd do the guards no good if someone decided to scale the cliffs and then just hop in over the edge (or get to the edge of the basin from the other direction and do the same).

At least, for right now, that was the only excuse he could think of to justify the massive stone edifice looming before them. It wasn't like it could've just been done to stroke the ego of the city planner, of course. The fact that you had to travel through one giant choke-point to even *make* it to the city or that the only way *into* the canyon was through a naval base that the entirety of the 2nd Naval Fleet called home?

Well, that alone should've done away with the need for a wall around the entrance. Yet, there was one. A very large one that towered over their heads as some grand symbol of the Crown's Might.

Or at least, the Crown's Wallet.

So, surely, there couldn't possibly be any other entrances into the city.

When he voiced as much, his escort referenced the book he *should* have been reading on the weeks-long trip here. Specialist-Major Badin looked back over his shoulder at him and rolled his eyes. "Weren't you supposed to read that travel guide that Evalia handed off to you?"

Handed was an interesting term for it. Toniki felt like it had been years ago, though really? It had just been a month. After escorting him off of the mountains and down back to Gonta, the Commander of the 13th had some choice phrases and suggestions while the so-called doctors in the equally so-called City of Mud worked to patch him up.

Not the least of which was to shove a letter in his face before saying, "I swear upon the Lady of Destruction and Reformation, if you *don't* study this I am going to have you jailed for idiocy ill-befitting an Agent of the Crown."

"I skimmed it."

"You know if she finds out..."

The priest sighed and pulled himself up on the cart with one hand as he looked towards the imposing gateway ahead. "...then I know you're the one that told her and I'll hit you in the face with my cane."

"Gotta be able to catch me first," the battlemage laughed back. He flashed his friend a smile through a face full of graying stubble. "How's your knee feeling?"

Akaran ran his left hand down over his leg and cursed. "Like I'm never going to walk again."

"It can't be that bad? They cut you open how many times?" he asked as he wiped a few errant raindrops off of his cheek.

Behind him, the exorcist clutched at his thigh with a grimace and a shudder at the thought. "Twice. Without magic to numb me, too."

"Still don't get it," Badin replied after thinking about it for a few minutes. "You took a hit from that monster in the tower, and suddenly you can't use magic anymore? And magic doesn't work on you?"

As he gave his leg another squeeze, the exorcist shook his head. "It's a lot more complicated than that. Can we not talk about it? I'm going to have to explain this when we get to wherever it is they told you to take me."

"Fair enough. Gotta admit after that mess? I think I picked a shoddy time to give up drinking."

"You gave up drinking because that old bat Hirshma told you your stomach was gonna end up permanently hanging outside your mouth if you kept it up."

Badin just laughed. "Gonna miss you, you know that, right? Soon as I get you delivered, it's back to the mountains. Gonna try to stick around for a few days first, see if I can't get a rest before trekking back."

"Yeah, because it was such a hard trip for you."

"We've been traveling for three weeks. Two of which was on a boat. I don't like traveling by boat," he whined.

"I don't like traveling tied to a cot," Akaran grumbled back. The cart crested a small hill and the glory that was Basion City's stone wall was spread open to them – and for a moment, the exorcist let himself enjoy the sight.

The mage quit laughing and sighed in vague frustration. "Okay, so someone's gonna give you the grand tour later, I don't doubt – so let me hit you with the highlights."

"The buildings look like the ones on the grounds of the Queen's Capitol."

"Should," the battlemage retorted. "Some of the Second Queen's architects worked on it. Or so I heard."

Akaran glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "You hear a lot about building construction?"

"I'm a drunk. I hear a lot about a lot of things."

"Fair enough."

They pulled up to a slow halt in front of the semi-imposing barbican as a pair of chainmail-covered guards flagged them down. "You two. Didn't know there were any transports scheduled up from Cableture."

Badin pulled a writ of passage from the inside of his coat and passed it over. "We're technically not from Cableture."

The soldier looked at the wax seal and arched an eyebrow. "This says you're from there."

"Well, yes," he quickly corrected. "But we're not *from* Cableture. Just had to pass through it to get here."

"So then answer the question," came the quick and gruff snap back.

Akaran cleared his throat and pulled a silver coin out from his coat and held it in front of the guardsman so he could see it. "Medical transport. Order of Love."

"Oo-lo. You the medic?"

"The transport."

With a grunt, the guard opened the seal and scanned over the letter as a misty drizzle started from the miserably cloudy skies overhead. "Manor or Repository?"

"What repository?" the exorcist asked.

"The Oo-lo one. Are you going to it or the Manor?"

Badin shrugged at him. "He goes wherever he chooses. That signet says as much. Trust me, spend some time with the man. You'll figure out how that works in a hurry..."

Akaran tilted his head slightly and looked his friend in the eyes. "Thank you...?"

"...and I go where I choose," the mage added.

The guard looked over at his partner, who wasn't doing anything other than holding the city wall up with his shoulder. With a roll of his eyes, he shot them both down. "Not today. Nobody gets past the gate without bein' 'honest an' forthright' about their business in the city. Orders from up high."

"What? It's *Basion City*," the battlemage stressed with a whine, "the quote unquote 'safest place in the Kingdom.' What's got the Overseer pissed off?"

"Orders didn't come from the Overseer. He's out-ranked."

"By *who*?"

"Paverilak Tyreening," he answered with a shrug as he handed the writ back.

Akaran finally cut through it with a wave of his hand as he shifted around in the cart to stare the guard square in the eye with enough intensity that it made the underpaid footman flinch back. "I don't live here. I don't know local politics. I don't know what's going on. I am tired, I am in pain, and I am hungry. I am an exorcist with the Order of Love, *he* is a Specialist-Major with the 13th, and we have papers. Are you going to let us in or not?"

The guard sighed and shifted uncomfortably in his boots. "Look, sirs. Are you two going to the Manor or other? I gotta make a note of everyone that comes through the gate on my shift, or the Captain will have me feeding Paverilak's pigs. I *don't* want to get on the bad side of the Captain and I *don't* want to get stuck tending after the Betrothed's livestock."

Before Akaran could offer suggestions on other things he could do to the livestock, the battlemage interjected a question. "That Paverilak fellow is the regional...?"

"Yeap. Maiden Esterveen's Betrothed. He's in the city for the damn wedding celebrations starting next month, curse every single cock-suckin' royal that's come to town. Makin' absolutely all our lives a livin' pisser," he grouched as he gestured back behind him into the city proper. "So, please. The Manor or the Repository? You're Oo-lo. Whatever you do once you're in the walls is your own business, I just gotta fiskin' know *where* and *how long* you're staying."

The travelers looked at each other for a long moment before finally giving him an answer. "Medias Manor. I'm being sent to the Manor. I don't know for how long."

"I'm just here long enough to get a drink," Badin added.

Flummoxed, Akaran turned back to him. "You just told me you were going to quit drinking."

"But there's a wedding. Have to drink for weddings."

"He just said it's next month!"

The guard spit something decidedly green and foul on the ground and corrected the priest before he could continue. "Said the *celebrations* start in a month. Weddin' ain't for at least three."

Smiling, the battlemage patted his friend on his shoulder. "I can stick around. I didn't promise Evalia I'd get my ass back anytime quick."

"You forgot that I've met the woman," Akaran protested. "She will have your ass *hauled* back if you don't."

Finally at his limit with the two of them, the guard straightened up and put his hand on his sword. The move immediately made Akaran reach for his until his escort squeezed his arm as tight as he could. "Dammit, how long are you two chucklefisks staying?"

"He's staying until they fix him," Badin answered, "And I'm staying until I have to go back. Kinda upset the Commander and she said to keep this boy company until I was satisfied he was taken care of."

"Fine," he growled. "Undetermined, and one week. You stay any longer than that, it ain't my fault. An' since you decided to be so damn roundabout, you can tell me where exactly you came from, an' if you say Cableture, you can go back to it."

Akaran dropped his face into his hands and winced as he felt a familiar pull in his injured arm. "Goddess what did I..." he started before he composed himself. "I got hurt in a frozen little pisspot of a town called Toniki, in Weschali Province. From there, they sent me down to Gonta; same province. Gonta couldn't help, so after they stitched my knee and arm back together, they sent me here. Came by boat to Cableture and from Cableture I got stuck here with *you*. Now you are going to let my tired ass inside or so help me, I will use what rank I have left to make sure that you don't *feed* the damn pigs, you're *fed* to the damn pigs."

"Well you don't have to be so nasty about it, do you? That's all I bloody needed to know."

"ME nasty? I will show you what nasty is the second I--"

Badin coughed loudly and interrupted the priest before he could finish the thought. "*Thank you*, guardsman. We'll be on our way."

"No you won't," the soldier quickly interjected. "He's Oo-lo? Needs to check in first."

"I just did?" Akaran asked with a frown.

"You just got through the gate," he corrected with a snuffle. "Standing orders from one of the Maidens. You gotta register at the waystation if you aren't going to the Repo first thing. That's the rule."

The battlemage raised his hand and spoke up. "Excuse me, did you say *Maidens*? As in, more than one?" When the guard nodded, he adjusted the dangling pewter sun hanging off of his neck and looked back to Akaran. "Who did you piss off to get stuck in a city with a plurality of *Maidens*?"

All the exorcist could do was wordlessly shrug and sputter out a, "Damned if I know?" before turning back to the guard. "What waystation?"

"I dunno. Some Oo-lo thing. Not far from here. Go two blocks. Take a right. Can't miss it. Go there first," and added, "and no you *don't* have a choice," when Akaran started to protest the order.

Badin had the cart moving before the exorcist could utter a retort. After they passed under the portcullis and were well-past the gatehouse, Akaran made a rude gesture at the guardsman's back. "Soon as I can walk again..."

Now that they were *inside* the city, he was sad to say that the architectural theme matched the dull-gray and depressingly imposing wall outside. Or at least, the *construction* did. Every building within eyeshot had been built out of the same utilitarian stonework and perfectly matching drab masonry work. The only thing that made the buildings look less like a pinnacle of army planning and fashion were the occasional second and/or third-story walkways that connected some of the structures to each other.

That started to change about two blocks in, albeit briefly. While Badin looked around and commented on the surprising military presence out and out, all Akaran did was just sit and try to figure out why in the world there would be two Provincial Maidens in one city. As it turned out, there wasn't. Not exactly, at least.

The waystation was a little more formal than it had sounded at the gate, though not by much. It was an otherwise nondescript building that looked as drab as the others they'd seen so far. That was except for the copper bust on a dirty marble pedestal just outside the front door, and the sign etched into the stone above it. "*Eldot... ta iah...*," the battlemage tried to read before giving up and looking back at his companion.

Akaran looked up from the back of the cart and frowned. "*Eldot ta iah hass ma hassers*," he recited. "'Love for Those Whom Harm Harmers.' This is the place, alright."

Badin pulled open his cloak and very carefully set a gloved hand on a straight steel knife at his belt. Despite his rank in the army, he hadn't bothered to wear his uniform – so instead of traveling in a chain tunic and the rest befitting his station,

all he wore was a thick wool tunic and a brown leather vest. If it wasn't for the sun-shaped sigil dangling from his neck (or the red wool cloak over his shoulders), you'd be forgiven for not realizing he was army. "You... you're in the Order of *Love*, right?"

"I am, why?"

"That doesn't sound loving."

The younger man shrugged under the bewildered gaze from the grizzled veteran. "Do you enjoy killing people?"

He blinked his slightly-jaundiced eyes in surprise. "No, of course not. We do what we do when we must."

"Same," Akaran grouched as he started to pull himself out of the cart before giving up halfway through the effort, "but nobody is gonna assume that an army barracks is full of daisies and apples, are they? They're going to see swords and maces and shit in the cabinets?"

"Probably, yes, but -"

"My job is to punch things that need punched and I do it because the Goddess tells me to. Or tells people that tell me so. Or tells people that tell their people to tell me to go hit something," he added as he pointed up at the sign. "I promise, you walk in there, you will be greeted with honor and respect and if you need help, they'll give it because if you follow Her, you are tasked to love all and defend those that seek aid."

Badin rubbed at his coal-black stubble and narrowed his eyes slightly. "I'm sensing a 'but' in there."

"But don't look in the cabinets," Akaran warned, "because they'll have worse things in there than swords."

The battlemage started to reply when an oddly creepy person in a pale white cotton robe stuck their head out of the door. "The drawers are what I must warn you away from; the cabinets mostly have mildewing vestments," the caretaker suggested with a voice that was so universally bland that it was impossible to tell if it was a man or woman, or even how old they were. "Though neither are filled with things to be discussed on the street." With the heavy hood obscuring their face, neither priest or mage could see the face it belonged to, so wisely, they decided to be as respectful as possible.

Just in case.

"Apologies...?" the priest replied, leaving the question open to fish for a name.

"Templar," they answered – and didn't offer anything else to go with the title. "Exorcist? Why have you not yet showed the respect due to the Lady?" they asked with an accusatory gesture towards the bust by the doorway.

"With respect, Templar, it's not because I don't want to," he admitted in reply. "I'm hurt."

"We all hurt, child. That is no excuse for showing dishonor."

Badin cleared his throat and interjected himself before things could turn for what felt like a quick way to worse. "Templar, a moment."

"Yes?"

"He really is hurt. His knee's just about been destroyed, and magic ain't helping him. We just arrived and we're on the way to the Manor, where he was told to find help."

The figure shifted around in their robes and peered into the cart from the doorway. "Ah. And I suppose the fools at the gate instructed you here...?"

"Yeap," Akaran grunted.

"Ah," the templar sighed again before vanishing back into the station without a word. The priest and Badin exchanged bewildered looks and shrugs as they wordlessly tried to make sense of anything that had just happened. A few moments later, and the caretaker stepped back outside with a quill and a piece of parchment.

"There's no slight to the Lady intended, Templar, I promise, I simply -"

"You are an exorcist with wounds that cannot be healed. The Goddess does not judge the broken for things that they cannot do within reason, and as such, nor shall I. But I do need to register your arrival for Order records, of course."

That request turned into a quick back-and-forth from both the exorcist and the battlemage. Most of it was the same information they'd offered at the gate, but a few more questions were asked that Badin had never heard before. "Five-one-one, six-three-nine," was the answer to a question the templar asked about 'numbers' and, "Upper left arm, scalp, rear neck," for a question about where his 'words are written.'

Seemingly satisfied, the caretaker stuffed the scroll back into their white cloak and started to address Akaran like Badin wasn't even there. "The Order welcomes you to Basion, Brother Priest, but I have to warn, this is not an ideal time for a new arrival – although at the same time, it is most fortuitous. I have a small job for you."

"Respectfully, Caretaker...?"

"I am a Templar, child. Speak accordingly."

Badin cringed for him at the tone in their voice.

"Templar, respectfully, I'm not up for any tasks..."

"You will be for this one. A further explanation will be offered when it isn't pissing the rain, but please, in short: while you stay at the manor, please be mindful of the other guests. It would be nice to have a resident of that place be able to

tell us how our fellows are healing.”

Akaran wrinkled his nose and wiped some of the rain off of his face. “You’re not getting reports now?”

“We are,” the templar clarified, “though they come from staff. Well-meaning staff, of course, but staff the same. Voices in other levels often provide a broader picture.”

“Oh look. You’re getting your knee fixed *and* turning into a spy,” Badin dryly interrupted.

“Love is Love, wherever She goes,” the caretaker chided, “though Love does not always see clearly.”

The youngest of the three flinched and stopped himself from covering up his eyepatch with his left hand. “Of course. I’ll do as asked. Who do I report to?”

“In all likelihood, Maiden-Templar Prostil,” the templar replied.

“Prostil?” Badin interrupted, “I thought that Maiden Esterveen was the Provincial...?”

The templar turned their head and even without being able to see their face, you could *feel* the disdain they had to even have to *look* at the other man. “Maiden Sanlian Esterveen *is* the Provincial Maiden of Kettering Province, yes.”

“But you just said her name was Prostil...?” the mage asked, slightly bewildered.

“Maiden-Templar Catherine Prostil, yes. She oversees the Repository of Miral, in the eastern corner of the city. It is an outpost for the Order. You’ll have to head there once you are ambulatory.”

Akaran sat there and slowly mulled the information over in his head. “So there are two Maidens in the city right now. Who has rank?”

“One *Provincial* Maiden,” their host clarified. “Sanlian’s Betrothed, Paverilak Tyreening, is currently in the city acting in her stead – though Sanlian herself is not. The only responsibility that Prostil has is with the Repository and claims no Betrothed of her own. You should have no reason to be bothered *or* to bother any of Sanlian’s interests. Do not concern yourself with reporting to her staff.”

“Just Prostil’s?” he asked.

The templar nodded firmly. “Just Prostil’s.”

The priest was quick to agree to that with a short, sharp nod. “Spy on the manor, avoid the Provincial’s interests. I can do that.”

“The suggestion that we want you to spy is untrue. Simply expect to be asked about how you feel that the staff is treating the other residents when you eventually arrive at the Repository,” the templar retorted indignantly. “Or, that is to say, if he is capable enough. Mage? Are his wounds worse than a broken leg and the breath of an addict?”

“An addict?!” Akaran protested. “Excuse me but -”

The person in white hushed him with a wave of their hand. “I smell the cocasa on your breath from the doorway. For the odor to be that pungent you must have ingested a sizable amount. Thus, you are addicted, or you are foolish, or you are both. It is to treat pain, I presume – but that is neither here nor there. Battlemage? Is he capable of interaction or has his mind been assaulted?”

He looked at the exorcist and sized the boy up slowly, and let the question hang in the air for several long moments until Akaran growled out, just under his breath, “Badin...”

“Yeah, he’s fine. Cranky, but fine.”

“Well, we are the Order of Love,” their inquisitor replied, “not the Order of Sunshine and Happiness.” After saying that, Akaran was handed the scroll and quill. A few moments and a poor signature later, and the Order representative sent them on their way.

“That... that was strange,” the battlemage muttered after they were safely out of earshot.

“Would expect that if we were closer to the border,” Akaran mused, “not this far towards the Kingdom center.”

“Guess we arrived at an ideal time,” Badin replied as they worked their way through the streets. It only took them another block before the tone of their surroundings changed measurably. Gone were the drab, militaristic buildings. Gone were the ramparts and loopholes decorating the sides of random shops and stores. Instead, the houses and shops were much friendlier and even painted in soft colors here and there (although not uniformly, and most of the places that were, weren’t done well).

“What do you mean?”

“Get a chance to rub noses with royalty from all over the province, apparently,” he answered. “Can’t imagine what a big deal it must be if the Provincial is sending down her right-hand man to handle it.”

“Do not know, do not care,” the exorcist retorted as he stared at the multitude of banners draped from doorways and walkways and archways. It wasn’t just that – people scurried back and forth, shouting instructions at each other to hang bows and wreaths and trim bushes and trees and arrange flowers down the main street from the gate. “Maidens defend their Provinces with the full backing of the army. Their Betrotheds handle governorship and local laws. We give them a wide berth, they give us one. Only gets to be a headache when the Maiden in question is in the Order itself.”

“Like that Prostil woman he mentioned?”

Akaran nodded and watched a happy couple singing and dancing through the drizzling mist falling on everything. "Just like. Sure, we take orders from them, just like anyone else, but our permissions in the Kingdom let us work outside of their influence. Mostly."

The buildings may have been dull, but the trimmings were garish to the point of over-compensation. "Some free advice?" Badin offered.

"What?"

"When Maidens start moving their Consorts around, keep your eyes open. If it ain't for money, it's for blood."

"I don't have any money. And I've only got one eye."

"But you've still got blood. For now."

Akaran ignored *that* particular comment and the thoughts spreading from it. "They said this mess is for a wedding.?"

"Which *guarantees* it's money *and* blood."

The exorcist couldn't dispute that by any stretch, so he just stayed silent for a few minutes as the cart rattled along the cobblestone streets. "So what's so damn magical about this city? The safest one in the Kingdom? Bit of an egotistical title for a town in a pit."

Badin chewed on his lip and waved at a gaggle of children that stopped to beg for coins as they passed by. "I can't say that I know all that much, to be frank. Read the regional guide when you get some free time. 'Till then: Basion is so named because way back when at the dawn of time or some shit, one of the Gods got all pissy and put a holier-than-thou fist into the ground. Punched a crater and a half in the dirt."

"Which one?"

"Which what?"

"Which God got pissy and decked the countryside?"

He shrugged and turned down a side street without slowing down. Every bump he hit made the priest grit his teeth and clench at his leg. "Oh, who knows. You're the priest."

Akaran's reply wasn't worth repeating.

"Anyway: some other idiots not as long ago decided that it'd be a good place to build a village. Whole place is surrounded by a cliff with only a couple of easy openings into the basin. Saved on building walls, I guess."

"Except for that giant wall."

Badin shrugged at him. "I did say the Second Queen had her architects involved."

"So there are some other ways in and we took the one that made us get covered in mud. We couldn't have gone through one of those?"

The battlemage shook his head. "No, and if you quit grouching, I'll get to the why."

"Fair enough. But... wait. How do they keep it from flooding? Big pit in the middle of the ground? Feels like it should be a lake more than a bustling center of commerce."

He didn't see Badin's smile. "Finally, a good question. The Orshia-Avagerona River winds down into this province from somewhere up in Lowmarsh, and spits down over the northern lip of the basin. It circles around the edges of the walls on both sides and drains out along the south-eastern quarter. There's a bridge ahead; once we're over it, we're over the river and into the city proper. Right now we're just passing through the barracks and around some of the local merc postings."

"Oh. That explains the fortress feeling."

"Now for the bad news," he cautioned.

His shoulders tensed up so hard it made the ache in his arm absolutely throb. "There's bad news?"

"You won't be staying *in* Basion City," he clarified.

"Then what am I doing here?"

Badin pointed up in the sky and off somewhere past the throng of buildings ahead. "Well, my orders were to get you up to Medias Manor. *That* delightful little place is all the way on the other side of Basion and then up the wall on the western side."

There was a very long pause from the exorcist before he spoke up again. "If we don't *have* to go through the city, why, again, did you make us go through all that mud and now through a town I'm not even staying in...?"

"Because I'm hungry. And I don't feel like hacking my way through the trees. Didn't you notice the woods around us?"

"I'm in a cart. All I notice is the shit back here that I'm trying to keep from bouncing out whenever you hit a bump."

His friend didn't even try to hold back a chuckle. "Alright, listen. It ain't just the basin that keeps the city safe. The Fel'achir Forest stretches from about a week's ride east all the way through this entire province and halfway into Mulvette."

"I suppose now is when I tell you I'm garbage with directions, right?"

"Aren't you supposed to be a traveling priest?"

Akaran flung up his left arm with an exasperated shout. "I travel with a map!"

"Then I suggest you read one," the battlemage scolded. "It's in the guide-planner. That thing you're supposed to have read by now."

There was another grumbled bout of profanity from the back of the cart that Badin didn't give much effort to making sense of. An elderly woman passing by, however, slammed her hands over her ears and hobbled away from them as fast as she could. "And when I'm done doing *that*, then I'll read the damn thing," he continued to grouse.

"At any rate," Badin continued, "while the Fel'achir is thicker in some places than others, along the edges of Basion, it's damn-near impenetrable. So, going *through* the city is easier than going *around* the city."

"So what you're ultimately telling me is that you're dropping me off in some fisking medic's hut that sits on the edge of a basin surrounded by trees that are so thick that you can't climb through them?"

"More or less."

After another long pause, Akaran spoke up with a bit less bravado in his voice. "I really am being punished, aren't I?"

Badin turned his head to look at the somber, sad stare in the exorcist's eye. "That I don't know."

"Well, wonderful," he sighed. A few moments later, he shifted around until he could face the front and see where they were headed. "So, any idea what the Repository is that guard was going on about?"

His friend thought about it for a minute and gave an answer that almost satisfied his curiosity. "Not much of a clue. I know that your Order has a fortress here of some kind. Been here as long as I can remember. Don't know anything about it, really. He seemed to think you would."

"My Order owns a lot of things. Just because I don't know what it is doesn't mean anything."

"Well. Surely someone will tell you."

"Speaking of telling you," Akaran said as he changed the topic, "you know she really will have your ass if you don't get back to Toniki."

"Who, Evalia?"

"That's the her I was thinking."

"No, she won't," he replied with a half-sigh. "I guess I didn't tell you, did I? We had a bit of a... falling out."

The priest passed forward a flask of something that wasn't entirely water from the inside of his cloak. "I had heard. When you, her, and Mariah went after the fracture at Usaic's cabin?"

"Yeah. Things didn't go well."

"Want to talk about it?"

Badin took a swig of the not-water and blanched at the taste of... stale awfulness. "Not... really. The long and short of it is that I'm on leave from the 13th as long as I want. Gonna make sure you're safe here and then I'm gonna find somewhere else to head to. Maybe Mulvette for a while, if I can find an open posting." He swallowed hard and looked down at his bottle. "Belian-berries? These spoil a week after harvesting..."

He took the flask back and nailed a swig of it himself before putting it away. "You're the fan of fermentation. How'd you manage to get the time off?"

"You mean aside from the two of us nearly killing each other when that... when the mana started to seep through and...?" he asked in return, letting it trail off.

Akaran nodded knowingly. "You got exposed to something you shouldn't have been exposed to. I can relate."

"Yeah. Yeah, bet you can. So I didn't tell you, I guess?"

"Tell me what?"

The cart rolled to a halt at a busy intersection while a squad of soldiers marched by, the red and orange Dawnfire flag on full display as the misty drizzle made their chainmail clink sharply with every heavy stomp down the wet street. "After you did the deed in Toniki and got kicked to Gonta, Maiden Piata and her consort rolled in. Took over operations."

"That was fairly expected, wasn't it?"

"But not welcome."

"Considering her title, I'm not surprised."

Badin grunted in half-amusement/half-misery. "Once the Madwoman got a handle for what was going on – Gods above, I am so glad I wasn't in charge of that mess – she reassigned the 13th. Sent half of us back to Gonta, the other half marching off towards Anthor's Pass."

"She did what? Evalia isn't in Toniki anymore?"

He shook his head. "No, she is. Promoted. Working with the Maiden directly now, until she has her kid. After, maybe, too. Rest of us that survived that nightmare were given the choice of remaining, taking a year personal leave with half-pay, or permanent reassignment."

"And I'm gonna guess that after you and Evalia..."

"I love the 13th. I have a lot of friends there. Lost a few to that damned thing you killed off. Don't want to leave them. Just don't..."

"I get it," he answered with a sound that was almost like a sigh, but more of a quiet sob for a single tear.

Badin stopped the cart suddenly (much to the chagrin of the people around them) and turned to look the exorcist head-on. "How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Deal with... it. I saw inside that portal. That... what'd you call it? A breach? I saw..."

"Things you shouldn't've?" he asked knowingly.

His escort nodded and wiped some rain off of his face. "I mean, I get it. I throw lightning bolts at people, for the sake of all fisk. I know it comes from somewhere, not just inside my drunk ass, not just from the air around us. I know there's places but..."

"But there's knowing, and then there's *knowing*."

"That's it. How... how do you deal? All I know is that I picked the wrong time to quit drinking." He pointed at the flask still in Akaran's hand. "That doesn't count."

The exorcist just looked down at his leg and couldn't meet Badin's gaze. "I don't know."

"How do you not know?" he questioned as someone shouted slurs and assorted other colorful words at him for blocking the street with the cart.

"I can't sleep at night. I hear that wraith in my ears half the time. I'm the wrong guy to ask because I'm *not* dealing. All I want to do is hop out of this wagon and go beat someone up that deserves it and all I *can* do is sit here and chew on cocasa and pray that I can get past this."

That wasn't good enough for the battlemage – not that he could blame him. "How about the things before Toniki? I know you're new to the job but you stopped other things, right? Surely you had training against liv... well, can't call them living, I suppose."

"Well.. yeah."

"Then how do you manage it? *Knowing* what's there?"

He took a deep breath and looked up at the miserable sky. "All I can say, I guess, is that I know *it's* there, the Abyss knows *I'm* here. I know that when I kill them they go someplace bad and that I know, at least, that a good place exists and if I don't fisk up that I might get to go when I get dead."

The mage blanched like he'd just been hit with a dead fish across the face. "So you cope by knowing there's a place that *might* let you in if you keep them happy? That doesn't give a lot for the rest of us to work on."

"Who said anything about that helping me through it? It's a big *might*. I don't understand it, don't really know how it works, and I sure as piss don't know what the Goddess has in mind for me. I just know that She wanted me to stand in front of that shit and punch it in the face. So I go punch shit and hope that it helps."

"Coping by stabbing things, huh?"

"Until I get told to quit. Then I'll do something else."

Badin's eyes started to twinkle just a little, with a slight bit of hope in his voice. "Drink?"

"No," he half-lied, "though it's not like I don't make enough bad decisions sober for it to count against me."

The soldier just snorted and went back to navigating them through the streets. "Fair enough. Well, if that's how you deal, maybe I'll look into that. I can't say I *like* knowing what's out there."

"Nobody does," he honestly answered. "You either face it or you run from it."

Badin didn't say anything for another five minutes at least. "Suppose so. Can't really ignore it."

"No. Really can't. Not once you *know*. Having belief is one thing, but *knowing* is..."

Silence reigned between them for a little longer as the military-styled structures gave way to more pleasant buildings with fewer hard edges and more windows. "I think I understand you a bit better now. So, either way. I'll be staying here in Basion for a while. Grew up near here. Father would drag me down here on occasion. No, doesn't mean I know anything about that Repository," he quickly added, "because... well, let's just say that dad? He didn't exactly look at you people in a friendly light. And honestly? I got a feeling that until you feel up to punching things again, you might need a friend."

More windows, more smiling faces, and more gaudy trim. Somewhere in this city, a horticulturalist was making a killing – he just knew it. "Thank you, Badin. I mean that."

"Don't doubt that at all. In the meantime – food?"

"Yeah. Food. Thank you, my friend. I mean that. Both parts."

Badin finally joined the ranks of the smiling as he waved someone down to ask for directions to the closest tavern or bakery that wouldn't kill them both. "After what you did in Toniki? Playing bodyguard is the least I can do."

Yeah. After what I did in Toniki, he sighed to himself before he tried to keep smiling as they went deeper into the city.

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Akaran's story continues in the sequel to the Snowflakes Trilogy!

Welcome to Basion City, the oft-avowed "Safest place in the Kingdom." With a broken knee and his ability to use magic stolen from him, Exorcist Akaran DeHawk has been sent to recover at Medias Manor. It's a sanctuary for those with injuries both physical and not.

He thinks he's found a safe haven, but not even his mind offers peace.

His nights are plagued by visions of places he's been and things he's slain. The wall of the city are dripping with it. As a wedding celebration between nations ramps up, the city is being pushed to the brink of an open riot. To make matters worse, a prominent Granalchi Adept has been murdered in a manner so grisly, so brutal, and so violent that it could only be the work of a madman.

The question is who... or maybe, a better question is what. Akaran is going to have to fight the demons in his mind while trying to unravel a mystery that very few people have an interest in having solved. Otherwise, a dead mage is going to be the start of a celebration that only the dead will remember.

The safest place in the Kingdom, to be sure...

...but insanity knows no respite.

***Thanks again for picking up the first chapter & prologue of Insanity's Respite.
Heck, thank you for -reading- the first chapter and prologue of Insanity's Respite.***

I am excited to bring you the full book in June. If June has already come and gone and you're just now reading this, thank you for that, too. I can't do what I do without my loyal, loving, and otherwise awesome fans. YOU make what I do possible, and for that I say once more:

THANK YOU!

**~Joshua E. B. Smith
Author, Saga of the Dead Men Walking
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