

BOOK III OF THE AURAMANCER'S EXORCISM  
SAGA OF THE DEAD MEN WALKING

# INSANITY'S RECKONING

BEG FOR MERCY.  
PRAY FOR PAIN.

JOSHUA E. B. SMITH

# Saga of the Dead Men Walking

## Insanity's Reckoning

Book III of the Auramancer's Exorcism

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# Insanity's Reckoning

## PROLOGUE

*I suppose, in hindsight, disaster was a given.  
Hindsight, of course, gives suggestion  
that any sight was had at all.  
How can I say that there was?*

*Basion City had grown complacent.  
Who would dare strike the Kingdom  
in a city that was neigh-on impenetrable?*

*Port Cableture had grown complacent.  
What man would strike at the seat  
of the Navy's second-largest fleet?*

*Lady Ridora Medias had grown complacent.  
Who would seek to harass the mad,  
when they are bereft of use even unto themselves?*

*Maiden-Templar Prostil had grown complacent.  
Who would dare raid the vaults  
when none knew the secrets buried within?*

*It was the dead.*

*The dead care not for walls.  
Not for fleets. Not for the mad.  
Not for secrets.*

*No living man would dare.*

*It took a man destined to die, and die, and die again,  
to see how the damned would rise.*

*Sir Steelhom  
Office of Oversight  
New Civa*

***The Month of Deepfrost, 512 QR***

The Q. R. W. *Hullbreaker*. A *legata* class cruiser, she had a crew component of forty-two men, eight less than the maximum of a ship her size. Used mostly for shuttling small military envoys or for hunting smaller pirate ships off the coast, they had a reputation for being the backbone of the Queen's Navy. Today, however, the *Hullbreaker* was accomplishing none of those typical tasks – and of the crew, half of them were laying below-deck with fevers, chills, and worse.

“Captain, we *have* to go ashore,” the quartermaster argued for the third time in the last hour, “and we have to do it now. We can get word to one of the temples as soon as we land or to a garrison or *something*. This isn't the typical sea-rot!”

Captain Taes, for what it's worth, didn't disagree. In what may have been a first time in his forty-year life, he didn't have a sneer on his face a cocky comeback on his lips. What he had were orders and a horrible feeling in his stomach. “We can't,” he lamented between coughing spasms. “Our orders are to -”

“Our orders don't make sense,” the gray-haired officer snapped back. “When we left port, you said they were for us to haul a shipment of sylverine to the capital for inspection. Then when we got underway, I looked. They loaded us with *coal*.”

“I told you -”

“Respectfully, I don't *care* what you told me, Captain. What *exactly* are we doing out in the middle of the Alenic? We are *days* away from the coastline *at best* and right now we aren't at our best!”

Captain Taes turned away from the window in his cabin and wiped his sweaty face dry. “One month, that was our orders. Stay out, one month, and then head to the capital.”

“But *why*?”

The captain sagged against the wall. “Queen's Intelligence. Said that they had heard whispers of a Civan spy,” he answered with a tired wheeze. “Wanted to have a big shipment of sylverine get hijacked; embarrass the Crown.”

“So, bait we are? Adrift on the high seas, waiting for an attack? And you didn't see fit to let us know?” the other man accused.

“My orders were to sail us out at a distance and keep my mouth shut. From Gonta to the Island Port of Bonchin, then straight to the



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Naval Yard at the Capital. The hope," he said before he was interrupted with a hacking cough, "was to get them on us. We've got some boys at Bonchin that are... were... gonna go back the way we came. The *Queen's Cut*. You know her. That big *Crownship* behemoth. Put the privateers the Civ's hired... put them down. Sink 'em."

"But why not tell the crew?"

"Her Majesty's agent warned that there may be a defector on board who might signal them away if they knew the truth."

The older sailor narrowed his eyes and drummed his fingers on the doorframe. "This have anything to do with the *Orboria* getting sunk in Gonta?"

"Don't know, Kespín." Taes admitted, "but there... was a warning right before we left."

"The battlemage that you had thrown off the deck? One of the midshipmen said he was spouting something crazy."

Taes nodded. "Said that someone planned on poisoning the crew. That's why I had you throw the provisions off; why we stopped at Oldek for fresh. Against orders, but felt the safest."

Kespín pursed his lips and looked at the flagon sitting proudly on the captain's table. "Except for your personal stores."

"It was a gift. I know the man that gave it to me. He courted my daughter once."

"And you've been letting the crew rot since," the quartermaster accused. "Why not say something? Why are we still out here?"

"Couldn't know if it was part of the plan."

The quartermaster clenched his fists. "You mean you planned to sacrifice the men. There's hardly a soul on this ship able to fight! We'd be dead."

Wordlessly, the captain picked up the flagon from his table and slowly poured the contents onto his desk. What should've been ale – what Kespín *expected* to be ale – landed on the wood with a disgusting plop. The gelatinous substance quivered and emitted a foul smell that hit the quartermaster like a punch to the gut. "We've no choice."

"For the love of Melia," Kespín choked out as he covered his mouth with his hand, "what kind of abomination is that?"

"The kind we can't take ashore, and the kind that my rations have reduced themselves to," the captain answered with a tired sigh. "Let the Civans come and take us. I will not compound the curse on the souls of our men by allowing them to spread this to the Queen's

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people.”

“Captain, I insist. We can get to Alrediah in less than a week of -” Taes shook his head and silently pulled his tunic up. The words died in the quartermaster’s throat as he stared, aghast, at his captain’s chest. “Goddess...”

Taes pulled his shirt back down and looked at the rotten oily mass on his table. “That mage? Claimed that it was demon blood and corpse ash. I should’ve listened. Should’ve thrown it all off. Shouldn’t have trusted that bastard Ralafon.”

The silvery-haired sailor turned and looked out at the remaining crewmen and watched as one fell to his knees, clutching at his chest. Two men rushed over to help him; the rest made holy gestures in the air and moved as far away as they could. “But why didn’t you take us back to port when it first started...? I’m no priest, but captain, surely...?”

“Was only a day after this started,” Taes said as he waved at his stomach, “that Deltin was sick. And before night, three more.”

“You thought it was too late. What did you think would happen, that it would pass?”

“Was my prayer,” the captain agreed with another cough. “Didn’t get answered. This is the only choice I have. For the good of the Kingdom. The only choice.”

Kespin shook his head quickly. “No, it’s not,” he charged. “We sail to Alrediah, or we turn and rush back to Bonchin. We get these men the help they need.”

“The wind is against us.”

“The wind doesn’t matter. We set the rest of the men to the oars and we push ourselves there by force if we must!”

The captain dipped a corner of one of his maps against a small candle and then placed the burning paper against the oily gunk on his desk. The pile of goo hissed as if it was in pain and the quartermaster went pale as it started to crawl away. “This plague dies here,” the captain intoned tiredly. “We’re already too late to get to safety. We just... have to hope we... we take the Civs with us. That’s... that’s all. Or if... if this gets much worse this week... I’ll put the boys on their way.”

The quartermaster’s objections melted on his tongue. “Set them on their way? You don’t mean...”

“It dies *here*. The Graveyard calls for my sailin’ soul already,

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Kespin. I'll not drag my men with me to it. Not knowin' the what, not knowin' the how? *Can't* risk it getting on dry land. Civs get it?" he asked with a throaty chuckle, "they won't make it to coast either. We win either way."

"*Nobody* is gonna win with this, Captain! What if you don't make it 'till they get here?"

"Then I'm countin' on you to do it for me," Taes replied solemnly. "I need your word to it, Kesp. We're a ghost ship. Just the men don't know it yet."

The older sailor looked at his captain – no, his *friend* – and watched as he pulled his tunic up again. The black mass was roiling under his skin, and for a moment, he would've sworn he saw a face peek at him. "It's that bad? For truth?"

"For truth," Taes answered. "Be honest with you? I'm cold. So cold. I just want *warmth*."

### ***The Month of Hearthbreak, 513 QR***

Months from now, in a far away land, in a city in a basin, a wraith of fire and blistered flesh would show a priest of love what he had missed. What he hadn't seen. How his fear that a toxic, malignant, infection wraith might spread through the Kingdom had come true.

Just not where he expected it.

She'd show him as the demonic abomination that had tormented him for so long had found a way to survive. To thrive. To spread. How it had taken over the *Hullbreaker*. How it had managed to exist even though he was certain he had sent the beast screaming into the World Between the Worlds – and beyond.

She forced him to watch as the crew fought to save their lives, lost they already were. She forced him to bear witness to the way the wraith ripped their bodies to shreds. How it tore down the mast. How it harvested the bodies that had fallen into the water.

How it claimed what it could. He would cry broken tears.

Tears that were echoed in the past as Captain Taes died.

Tears that changed to screams when he rose from death.

### ***Lithdis, the 18th of Riverswell, 513 QR***

Silence had reigned for weeks. Birds had tried, at first, to come near her upper deck. They had been attracted by the stench of rotting carrion and festering gore. An errant seagull had made an



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attempt to land, and as if its fate had been seen by the entire ocean, nothing else in the sky had come close ever since. The seagull had died in vain, too, because with its core fractured, the wraith aboard the *Hullbreaker* couldn't muster the energy to reanimate it properly. It simply flopped around on the deck for a few days before the *arimgoliath* gave up trying to animate it.

It liked animals. A holdover from the mind of the original core. Except now, it didn't remember why. It raged at itself when it couldn't take the gull and move into it. It liked animals. It wanted to be one with them.

It had better luck with a few of the sailors. Yet as the days passed and the power that had been released when their souls were crushed and absorbed into the writhing nightmare slowly dissipated, they too began to slow. As the sun above beat down on the dead, they lost their strength. Eventually, they shambled into the darkness below.

A merchant's boat approached it once. The barrelman atop her crow's nest warned her captain of the blood and wrecked weapons laying about haphazardly once they were close. The captain decided to do the wise thing – he had them turn sail to a different direction. A fishing trawler saw it among the waves a few days later, though neither the *Hullbreaker* nor the trawler came close to each other.

The wraith felt them. It felt the delicious warmth so close, yet so far. It felt their souls quivering, felt their energies, felt their ripples in the ether. They were what it needed. Not what it wanted. Needed.

It wanted what it couldn't have.

It remembered.

It remembered the man that had hurt it. The one it had swallowed. The one that had set it on fire on the inside. The one that had sent blistering pain through its tendrils. The one that had silenced so many of the voices it had in its core.

It *remembered* and it *wanted* because it *needed*.

That man had taken its core. He had taken its heart. He taken it and made it go away. It could still feel the pull of the voices that used to be inside. Felt the ones calling for the rest of the spirit to ascend to the heavens where some of it belonged. Felt the pull of others calling for help, calling for revenge, calling for damnation. Felt them pull and tug it to the below.

But it couldn't go. Wouldn't go. Didn't want to go. The souls within were too entangled to go their own ways. So it waited. It

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formed a new core, directionless, angry, lost. It didn't have the focus it used to. It had too many voices. Too many names. It was still Daringol. The *Hullbreaker's* captain tried to find a voice.

But he was just one voice of many. He couldn't control it. It thrashed and screamed in the ether. It felt screams and thrashes from two more pieces of itself. They were far away. They weren't in the water. They were elsewhere. Close, but not close enough.

One piece was weak. It was overwhelmed. It had a hold on a soul that was as stained and dark as the wraith itself. The willpower possessed by the soul? It was charged. Strong. Violent. It kept the wraith at bay. It refused to submit. It refused to listen to the calls and the cries. So the wraith reacted. It burned him. It cut at him from the inside. It tried to weaken him.

It must have worked. It must have. The man left where he was. He traveled. He traveled towards the other piece. The *stronger* piece. Stronger but muted. Stronger but trapped in a prison of ice.

The wraith hated ice. *Hated* ice. It was so cold. So painful. It wanted warmth. It needed warmth. It needed the warmth hidden in the ice. It needed the warmth in *that* ice because *that* warmth was the man it remembered and it *wanted*.

But it couldn't get to him.

It couldn't go to him.

It couldn't move. The waves moved it. The waves would continue to move it. Storms would, though the wraith had little memory of what those were. It knew, in a space of quiet buried in the cacophonous voices screaming over and over again, it knew that one day – maybe soon, maybe not – that the waves would wash over the top of the ship.

It knew that there was a watery grave waiting for it. It knew that in time, that another soul would come and claim it. Take it. Enslave it. It knew, because that was the fate of souls lost at sea. One of the newest voices in it kept screaming that. Shouting that.

*"The Admiral comes! The Graveyard awaits!"* was the scream it repeated. Again, and again, and again. It went unheeded.

It went unheeded until a man arrived.

The voice thought it was the Admiral. The one that claimed the souls of the lost in the waves. The one with a fleet of otherworldly ships that traveled the seas between the realms of those alive and dead. The one rumored as myth, the one rumored as legend.

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It wasn't. It wasn't a myth. It wasn't the Admiral.

It was another man. One that trafficked in souls. One that traded the damned as much as one of his minions traded in secrets. One that had a name, though few knew it. One that had a cloak of red and a cane of onyx.

The man heard it screaming. The man silenced those cries with a wave of his hand. The ether was stilled, except for a steady throb beneath the decks. He preferred the quiet. The quiet was peaceful. The quiet allowed for plans to work without interruption.

Yet that's what he needed: an interruption. The wraith would do, he decided. It was a simple choice; bend it to his will or sink the *Hullbreaker* to the Abyss. Either would be easy enough. Both would rid the world of it – the abomination wasn't of this world, it didn't deserve this world, and it shouldn't be in this world.

One way or another, it had to be removed.

But he could put it to use before it was.

Enslaving the wraith was a matter of a few spoken words and a gestured spell. Except it wasn't true slavery. The wraith was given a choice. It could suffer, or it go get what it wanted. He could tell where it wanted to go. It was easy enough to send it on its way.

Except a ship needed a captain – and maybe a crew. A few broken shells to man the oars. A figurehead to warn away the interested. So, he worked. The shattered husks inside the belly of the boat gave him no concern. Bones lasted longer than flesh, soggy as some were. There was little else to salvage; the meat had gone rancid. Nothing to save.

He gave passing interest to the coal in her hold, and decided it had one purpose. The wraith watched with a multitude of eyes as he placed a pair of glowing gems in the center of the pile and smiled. "Resist, and this burns. If it burns, you do as well."

It wanted warmth. Warmth, but not fire.

A few hours later, and he had his crew. Seven men with more rot than muscle stood slumped, held up only by the force of will behind the wraith – and the force of necrosia the Man in Red gifted the misbegotten cretins. Seven men; six to man the oars, and one to steer the wheel. So crudely was his stitch-work completed that you couldn't tell who was who, or who had been what in life.

It didn't matter.



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He gave it another gift, too. He taught it how to grow again – with constraints. The growth would have to stay near the hull. It couldn't seek out creatures or creations away from the path he had chosen for it. That, the wraith decided, was okay.

Then he reminded it how to like animals again.

A kindness, of a sort.

### ***Lithdis, the 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow, 513 QR***

She came to them at night. It felt her pass between the worlds each night and day, until five days ago. As a storm battered the sides of the hull, she quit. The *arin* felt the link between them sever. It felt the piece of itself locked behind the prison of ice be forced out. Felt it destroyed.

Heard another voice silenced. Silenced by the man that had hurt it so much, so bad, so often. When it felt her, *saw* her watching, it was shocked – as much as it could feel such a feeling.

She saw it for what it was for the first time. She saw it with eyes not blinded by suffering, eyes not strengthened by thoughts of control and domination. She saw it for the twisted, devastated mound of souls it was. She realized in that one instant, that there had never been any hope in controlling it for herself.

And the soul of a spy long lost saw the terror that the Man in Red had unleashed upon the waves. She had been sent on a mission of mercy; a step on her path of penitence. An instruction from a woman who represented the Goddess of the realm of Dusk to Dawn. Her task had been simple: find the ship, if it still sailed, and aid the passage of those few souls aboard to the next realm, if she could.

Upon her arrival, Rmaci knew that she couldn't.

She knew the ship would travel unbidden. She knew that it would arrive sooner than anyone would wish. She knew that the people that would believe her story were numbered less than the fingers on one of her maimed hands.

The spy-turned-wraith-turned-spy retreated as quickly as she could. There wasn't anything to be done for that ship of the damned. Not by her, at least. Of the five that would believe her, there was only one that could stop it. If he believed her. If he could make others believe him.

And as she returned to her new Mistress, that man was busy.

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Busy spitting up blood, at that.

## I. A MURDEROUS SAVIOR

*Staddis, the 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow, 513 QR*

Blood splashed against the cobblestone streets as Akaran went down – hard – for the second time in as many minutes. The fight was going on longer than his assailant wanted, and to be fair, longer than what the blonde-haired priest wanted to suffer through too. Still, despite a grievous gash on his right leg that *still* hadn't healed, he was giving as good as he got.

He had to. The cargo he carried depended on it.

It wasn't one of the special packages that Celestine 'Cel' Navarshi – owner of the *Drunken Imperial* and councilwoman of the Basion City Fleetfinger's Guild had enticed him to carry in recent days. Nor was it the promised shipment of cocasa he had been counting on to dull the pain in his leg. Instead, it was something both a bit more important and a bit worse, depending on who you talked to.

As an axe with a sinew-wrapped wooden handle descended on his face, the discussion about it popped into mind.

### *Late Evening, Lithdis, 2<sup>nd</sup> of Firstgrow*

"I believe I found a way to restore your magic, should you be interested still," Telburn had told him. He looked younger (a lot younger) than he was (by a distressing amount), which made it easier to think less of him. That was a perk that the mage appreciated, and one he capitalized on with disturbing frequency. It was one of many personal attributes that made dealing with the Headmaster-Adept of the Basion City Granalchi Annex a headache, at best.



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Still, some headaches found ways to be worth their while. Telburn was one of them. Even from his sickbed, Akaran had to admit that much. Even if it wasn't his own bed. "I want. What do I have to do?"

The mage looked around the simple, yet nice, dwelling and pondered its contents a little more intently than the owner of the abode would like – even as she served him a piping hot cup of tea. "He wants. What does he have to do so I can get him out of here?" a very disheveled, very tired, very *irritated* young woman added.

"I decided to research not just the fragment of the stone you gave me," he said, referencing the *other* bane of the young priest's existence, "though the coldstone shard is so remarkable that it is a shame that... what was it you said his name was? Yoizc? ...that he had to die to create it."

"He didn't die creating it," Akaran muttered as he swung his feet off of the edge of the hay-stuffed mattress and winced as a jolt of pain shot up his leg and into his thigh. "He died after. His name is Usaic, and presumably, he's roasting in the pit – so save your apologies for the man. I met him."

"You met him?" Telburn asked. "How?"

The priest gave him a withering look and simply gestured at himself in response. The Headmaster cringed as the younger man cut him off. "What do I have to do?"

"I'm getting to that, oh Priest of Impatience," the other scolded. "As I said, I began to research more than just the stone. You claimed that the creature that severed your connection to all things magical was an *episturine*, if I remember the name correctly?"

"Yes, then one of your men – Lolron? – said that it was more that my magic was... bottled up? That I absorbed too much of it that isn't from *here* and it can't filter out naturally, or... something," he answered. "I don't understand it very well."

"Well, I would daresay that you have had ample time to learn," the Adept scolded as he took a drink from his tea. He grimaced and then very quietly whispered a spell that made the edge of the cup frost over. "Either way, yes, that is a succinct enough description of the problem. Your aura has been filled with magic not native to this plane of existence. As such, magic that would interact with your essence in a normal fashion cannot even gain hold of you, and you cannot correctly expel what is within."

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Seline glanced at the frozen cup and growled in the back of her throat. Akaran thought he heard her mutter a promise to cut his scalp off if the clay so much as cracked. "Didn't you describe it like a jar filled with oil thrown into a lake? The bad magic is oil, the world is the lake and..."

"...and I'm the jar?" he finished. "That's right."

"An interesting way to describe it, and one quite right," Telburn agreed. "In order for such a thing to have occurred, four distinct things must have happened: one, you must have established a connection to another plane."

"I did that when I was taken to Tundrala," the priest interrupted. "Don't recommend the trip, do recommend the location," he said as he remembered the fields of flowing snow, the mountains seemingly taller than the world, and the glaciers flying through the sky – impossibly dancing and singing, but dancing and singing nonetheless.

The Headmaster blanched. "That part remains under investigation, you must understand, though I am willing to suspend disbelief to a certain extent. But, that was only step one. The second step would require that you were somehow completely drained of all of the mana in your aura; to be true, that alone should have killed you. All life, no, all *things* in this world are steeped with ether of this world. To be without it is a death sentence in very short order. When you feel drained from exerting yourself from spellwork, you are drained because you have used up a significant amount of your personal store; while it can and does regenerate over time... well."

"Overuse will kill you, yeah, I know," Akaran agreed. "What's your point?"

"The point is that once you were drained, you then had to be filled. Forcefully, I would wager, as the fact that you were unable to *discharge* the ether in your aura must mean that you are unable to *absorb* the ether through merely being exposed to it."

"You can't just throw a jar in a barrel of oil and expect it to fill up, you gotta uncork it first," the blonde-haired healer replied. "That about right?"

"Yes it is! Very good, Missus Valdin," Telburn returned. "Daresay, have you ever had your aptitude tested in the Academy? You catch on quickly. Faster than some I know."

Akaran ducked the insult and frowned. "What's the fourth? End the exposure?"

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The mage nodded in agreement. “Yes. The entire experience is effectively a closed series of systematic of events, though I don’t expect you to understand that meaning. A start, an action, an end, and no other outside or undue influence upon you.”

“So the ether I’m supposed to have was pushed out and the magic I’m *not* was shoved up my ass with so much force I can’t get rid of it.”

“Crude, but... yes,” Telburn finally agreed after a few more drinks of a now comfortably-chilled tea. “I realize that doesn’t grant you a lot of hope to explain it as such, but the delight of such a closed series of systematic events is that if done correctly, it can be replicated.”

The younger man pulled at the bloody bandage around his leg and hissed in pain. “Tell me, exactly, why you think that’s a good thing? Is the Academy trying to learn how to mute former members so they can’t cause this kind of shit again? Do they really want to turn this city into the land of the deaf and dumb?”

“Oh, no,” he demurred, “we already have methods for that. I believe you’ve missed the point – if you’ve been voided then stuffed with ether *once*, we can do it again,” he said as he pulled a glistening turquoise stone from his garish rainbow-colored robes.

Seline crossed her arms and stared down at both of them. “If I remember correctly, Lolron tried that already. The stone he used cost Ridora a pretty penny to replace.”

“And nearly set my hair on fire,” Akaran grouched as he reached back and straightened out his ponytail.

“Ah, but that was then, and this is not a stone of absorption.”

“What is it?” the priest asked.

“A cure.”

### ***Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Lastgrow, 513 QR***

The axe missed, barely. Chunks of stone bounced off of the street and sliced at his stubble-covered cheek. The son of a bitch had cut his cane in half in the first few minutes of the fight, though enough of it remained to let him use it as a blunted wooden sword. Akaran countered with a jab from below that forced his assailant to take a few steps back.

There wasn’t a lot he could do from the ground. In the Order, the rule was – if you fall, use magic until you can get back up. There wasn’t much training offered to account for falling and *not* using magic until you could get back up. That, he decided, deserved a sternly written letter sent their way later.

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If (and that was a big if) he survived the next few minutes. From the look on the dusky face of his assailant, and the wisps of dark energy appearing around his left fist, *later* wasn't a guarantee.

### *Late Evening, Lithdis, 2<sup>nd</sup> of Firstgrow*

"I can't say you'll particularly like the method," Telburn warned.

"But will it work?"

"If I didn't believe so, I wouldn't be here."

Seline's shoulders sagged in relief. "That's wonderful. How fast can we get it done?"

Akaran glanced over at her and raised an eyebrow. "Didn't know you were so keen on letting me be able to cast spells again."

She crossed her arms and glared in his general direction. "You're reckless, impulsive, irresponsible, and curse like you belong with the navy, so no, I don't think you should be rushed into being able to do all of that with magic," she shot back. "I also think I'd like to be able to sleep in my own bed again."

"It's only been three days!"

"All of which I've had to deal with your snoring, incessant whimpering, and the smell of your —"

Telburn coughed into his hand. "Ah yes, I remember these days. All of which aside, yes, it should work. It will take some effort, I should warn."

"You understand the absolute *last* thing I want to do is go on some long quest to slay a dragon or ride a unicorn or anything like that, right? I know the type of stories men like you tell little children and I don't want to be the next tale some bard sings about."

"Oh, nothing of the sort," the mage assured him.

"Thank the Goddess," Akaran breathed with a sigh of relief. When the healer gave him a bemused glance out of the corner of her sweet-brown eyes, he shrugged his shoulders. "What? Unicorns are bloody scary."

"Although," Telburn cautioned, "you are going to have to enlist the aid of a few gentlemen, and they may take some convincing."

Akaran looked at the mage and considered, for a very long and drawn-out minute, if he could smother him to death in his flamboyant robe or not. "Dammit, I just said —"

"I can make arrangements to obtain the physical items we'll need," the Adept interrupted, and I'll ensure that I have all of the assistants that the invocation will require. Though, there are two people you

have to speak to yourself. One, I think you'll get along with very well. The other..."

"What about the other?" the priest asked.

### ***Late Evening, Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow***

Errant torchlight finally gave Akaran a glimpse of his attacker. It wasn't anyone he recognized, but that didn't mean much. He was a Sycian, a little shorter than the priest and a bit lighter. Then again, after several months of hardly any physical training at all, the exorcist had put on a few pounds more than he wanted to admit.

None of which mattered when his attacker manifested a dart of magic with swirling royal-purple eddies fluctuating in the air around it. The spell drew the shadows away from his face, and revealed angular cheekbones and gray-green eyes that had been otherwise hidden under his hooded brown cloak. The assassin stepped back until he was concealed by the shadows along the street again, though the dart of magic stayed aimed at the priest's face.

The exorcist flung his broken stick at his attacker and was rewarded with a clean miss and the sound of broken glass when it shattered a nearby window. The crash drew the attention of whatever poor sod was trying to sleep on the other side of the wall – and earned a few choice words shouted from within. "You finking shits!"

Which did anything to distract the man with murder on his mind.

Either of them.

### ***Pridis, 3<sup>rd</sup> of Firstgrow***

"Lord Obermesc?" Akaran asked as he approached the old, slovenly, and wool-wrapped man as he approached the city's Shrine of the Under on the northern wall of the city. The shrine was carved into the rock-face, nearly an hour's walk east of Orshia's Fall (and longer when you had to approach it with a damnable limp). Everything around it was carved from stone in one way or another, with amazingly beautiful amethysts and sapphires glistening on every corner and raised pillar. The good news was that he was outside, and not sitting in his chambers much deeper into the mountain.

The bad news was that he still had guardsmen, and they didn't care that the man interrupting Obermesc's homage to the God of the Undertunnels had a cane or not. All they saw was someone accosting their leader – and a moment later, all the exorcist saw were two spears

## Insanity's Reckoning

leveled at his face as two other bodyguards defended the Oldstone with a pair of overlapping tower shields. The reception might have been a little less chilly if he'd been wearing his silver-coin sigil of rank.

Sadly, Maiden-Templar Prostil had yet felt inclined to give it back.

Lord Obermesc muttered something under his breath that enticed his soldiers to thrust the glistening steel tips of their spears even closer to Akaran's throat, and for one brief fleeting minute, he debated trying to bluff his way through. Telburn had advised against it, so he did all he could, even if not all he should.

He shifted his weight to his left foot, grabbed the closest spear with his left hand, and used his cane to batter the other one away. The guard on the right recoiled in surprise, while the one on the left stumbled forward as he lost his balance. The exorcist pulled even harder, and staggered enough in the process to put the first guard between his chest and the second's spear. "Oldstone! I'm not here to fight!"

"Then you're failing," the old man spat, "because that's not how a man of peace acts."

"I'm not a man of peace," Akaran countered, "I just said I wasn't here to fight."

Lord Altund Obermesc, the Oldstone of Basion City, the speaker for the Order of the Unders, and one of the biggest bigots in the city where it came to matters of the Order of Love, pushed the two huge shields aside and projected *distaste* so fiercely that the exorcist could almost smell it. "You aren't a man at all," he spat. Then, to the guard Akaran had use as a makeshift shield, he added a blunt: "You've been compromised by a cripple. Leave my service and leave the city at once."

He tried to protest, and for a heartbeat, the younger priest felt a moment's pity. A very short heartbeat, and a very small amount of pity. "You need better men."

"I need to be left alone. We have no business," he shot back as he brushed his men away and started to make headway into the shrine.

"No, we do," Akaran interrupted as he pushed himself away from Obermesc's bodyguard. "I... I need your help."

The Oldstone stopped walking and turned back around to face him. "A Lover? Asking for help from the Unders? Now that's an absurdity I haven't heard in a long time."

"How'd you know I'm from the Order...?"

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The old man snorted. “You’re the Cripple-Priest of the Harlot, aren’t you? The boy with his magical balls cut off? Please. You’d have sooner luck not being known if you cloaked yourself in the sun and ran naked down the streets.”

“Okay, ouch,” he muttered under his breath. “Yeah, that’s me. Though I object to the ‘balls’ remark.”

“Object as much as you want, magic-less gelding. Doesn’t change what you are.”

Akaran cringed and tried to salvage his dignity. “What I am is in pain, and what I need is help, and I need it from you. I have an offer, if you’ll hear me out.”

Altund’s lip curled. “Did they take your brain when they cut your sack, boy? I know who you are, I know where you’re from, and I know your Lady *isn’t* giving Her permission for you to come to me. In fact, I bet that the cunt that beds down in the Repository would love to know you came here to pester an old man.”

“That *cunt*, as you call her, could kill every one of us without breaking into a sweat,” the exorcist shot back, “not that she needs to know that I’m here.”

“Bargaining for silence and bargaining for help in the same breath. Aren’t you just a cocksure twat yourself,” the Oldstone scoffed. “Out with it then, less you plan to embarrass my men further.”

With a vaguely-cautious glance at the remaining guardsmen – who, despite the earlier exchange, didn’t look like the gaggles of fools he first thought they were – Akaran stepped back and leaned against a nearby wall to catch his breath. “I need a blessing of Stilamatheric,” he replied. “Specifically, I need to have grounds consecrated in His name.”

The priest of the Stonehewn didn’t laugh, didn’t snarl, and didn’t give any of the responses that his guards expected (or hoped for). He bit his tongue and then strummed his fingers on his hip as he sized the Lover up a second time. “They only took your *magic* balls, I see.”

“With respect, Oldstone, the ones I have left are still magical.”

His retort caught the older priest off-guard and it resulted in a short little laugh and a lecherous sneer. “It’s not happening. Now leave.”

Akaran took a couple of quick steps closer before an errant spear thrust out in front of his chest to hold him back. “Oldstone, please. The Order of Love has worked with the Order of the Unders in the

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past. Stilamatheric doesn't like it when things that get buried get up and walk again and neither do we."

"Oh, that's right. And what has that gotten us? Gotten us here?" Altund charged. "A hole in the ground, filled with all manner of rot and *wrong* that festers in the mountainside."

"Filling graves sometimes means re-burying what emptied from them," the exorcist retorted. "There's plenty of *awful* that the Unders have claimed in their time. The Dwarves, the Damians, what's left of the orc tribes, the goblins of the midlands and –"

The slovenly, almost obscenely-sized man with jowls so deep you could get lost in them shook his head. "The Unders claimed awful, there's no lie to be said there. But we give unto the Stonehewn what *belongs* to the Stonehewn. What your Harlot does is shove things that belong to neither realm into the dirt and leaves it there to poison the ground!"

"It's a testament to the Stonehewn's power that She feels safe to entomb the dark in His embrace. The ground deserves to have what should stay in the ground."

"You only care about what lurks over top of the world. Your kind has *never* cared about what is beneath. It's only when threats are made against *your* holdings that you care about *ours*," Altund snapped. "You've wasted enough of my time. See yourself gone."

Akaran pushed back on the spear and called out for him to stop. "*Wait*, Oldstone. I have something you might want," he said, "and maybe even that you *do* want buried."

"Are you daft, boy? I made it perfectly damn clear that whatever you have that you want in the ground can stay over it."

The exorcist stopped struggling against the guards and pushed his hand down into his pocket. "Heard you might know a man named Donta," he replied smugly, "and that you gave him a blessing, too."

That name made Altund come to a complete stop and he turned back around once more to give the younger priest a sly look out of his amber eyes. "Blessings don't get traded like a whore at a bar, boy. There are only so many to go around, you know."

"So you know him?"

"I know many people. He is not one I think highly of."

"I'd say not," Akaran agreed, "nor does he think much of you. Neither does his boss, from what I hear."



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The glare from the Oldstone was ill-befitting of a man of his stature. “Both can go find a dragon’s cock to suck. If you have dealings with either, I may have my men enhance the nature of your title, *cripple*.”

The chainmail-clad guard adjusted his spear and angled it higher up and aimed the tip back at Akaran’s throat. “You misunderstand, Oldstone. I’m dealing with them, that’s true. Likely at the end of a noose,” he replied, with a quiet thought of, *Not that I expect one to work*, before he added, “and they won’t be the only ones. Consorting with the dead is a crime, after all.”

“Consorting...? What are you getting at?”

“You know what I am, and you know what men like me do. I know that Anais made a deal with you and you were promptly screwed out of it when the Aquallan refugees flooded the city looking for places to stay. The Overseer reneged on his part of the arrangement that she worked up, right? But her mercenary made you hold up your end of the deal?”

Altund chewed on his lip. “What would a boy like you care about deals of rock and gold, hm? Some things are a matter of public record, but not the names of the deal-makers. Why do you care? What do you want? I grow weary.”

The exorcist placed his hand on the shaft of the spear and pushed it down as torchlight reflected off of the cool, copper-colored walls of the shrine. “Told you what I want, but I care because consortng with the dead is a crime, Oldstone. You got played. I don’t know why you cared about her offer, or what you thought you were getting from it, but you dealt with a woman with a walking corpse for a minion. I’m trying to untangle it, but I need help to do it. I need yours.”

He pushed past his guards and lumbered closer to the exorcist to speak in hushed, angry tones. “Are you suggesting that I worked with... a necromancer? Are you suggesting that I knowingly aided someone with a dead man for a pet?”

Akaran shook his head quickly. “No, nothing of the sort. You have a reputation in some circles, but nothing like that. To tell the truth, if I thought that *half* the people that had dealings with her knew what kind of power she seems to wield, Henderschott would have to build three extra gallows. Though if you didn’t notice, they’ve made a mockery of you twice over.”

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“Made a... why are you confronting me? Eager to have your other leg shattered?”

“This isn't a confrontation,” the younger priest argued, “this is information. One given out of respect. You're a holy man, and your reputation speaks volumes about what you feel is *right* and *wrong*. I *am* dealing with them and I *do* have help, but I need more than what I have to sort out their bullshit,” Akaran admitted. “And to deal with another problem.”

“So. You think you can bribe me with promises of revenge over a simple deal? Is that what this is? Do you think me so feeble-minded that I would bend over for such an offer?”

The exorcist reached back and tightened the strap around his ponytail before he gave the Oldstone an understanding smile. “Feeble, no; bend over? Really hope you don't. But,” he added with a bit of a smirk, “I hear that Donta knocked you on your ass. Thought you'd like to help me do something about that.”

Altund glared at him for the longest time, but he slowly started to rub his hands together. “If he is as you say, he does need to be consigned back to the ground.”

“He is. And he does.”

More silence reigned for a few long moments before the Oldstone extended a hand in Akaran's direction. “To a burial, then. Is the ground you need consecrated for his disposal or other...?”

### ***Late Evening, Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow***

The dart of magic hovered over Akaran's prone body for another heartbeat, and then suddenly sped for his face. At the very last second, he rolled over to his side and screamed as the move wrenched his bloody knee. The spell exploded against the stones and a cold rush of wicked flames scoured the back of his shoulders and set a length of his hair aflame.

The assassin growled from the dark and sent another dart at him before Akaran could dodge. The impact hit him square in the chest and promptly put the exorcist's curse to the test. Instead of blasting his chest to pieces, the spell detonated, and burnt clear through his tunic. The blast of void-fire elicited a scream from him as the heat scorched flesh and incinerated hair and clothes alike – but the etheric ice hovering over his flesh kept the blast from going any deeper.

For the first time in the fight, his attacker let up as his pale-pink eyes widened. “What... what are you?” he whispered.

Akaran patted the black fires away with a series of profane curses Raw, seething *anger* welled up in him as an unfortunately familiar cold *chill* blossomed in his empty eye. It was soon followed by a pale blue glow that radiated from around his eyepatch as frozen crystals started to appear on his hand. “I’m the wrong man to try to mug, you Sycian asshole,” he spat as he forced himself to a kneeling position on the street.

### ***Early Afternoon of Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow***

Tracking down Tidesinger Quinchecco was a task that was easier said than done. You wouldn’t think that in a city surrounded on all sides by stone cliffs that there would be that many places that the high priest of Aqualla would wander off to. You – and Akaran – would be wrong.

Touring the city hunting for him took the exorcist on a trip to all the major waterfronts, plus a couple he didn’t know existed. The first leg of his trip took him north to Avagerona’s Rest at the base of the Orshia-Avagerona Falls since it was closest to Seline’s house in Upper Naradol. When the only thing he found there were a bunch of fishermen and a gaggle of Aquallan followers at the Lord of Ocean’s edifice, he followed their recommendation and headed south along the southern split of the two rivers.

The trip along the Avagerona’s shoreline was quiet, pleasant, and a bit more enjoyable than the last time he’d been close to it. The shore offered an uninterrupted view of the Everburning Pyre and the hill where he’d operated on his leg. It also gave him a few glimpses at a handful of happy maidens frolicking around some of the shallower waters. It made for a wonderful spot to sit down and chew on a bit of cocasa as he watched less-happy maidens work and wash linen sheets and worse in the clear waters under the warm spring sun.

What wasn’t so wonderful were the reminders of what he’d been through. The local fishermen had a *thing*, apparently, for a type of saltwater squid that absolutely *infested* the waters past Cableture. They called them ‘yeshal,’ and they swore it’s meat had the best flavor to be found outside of the Fel’achir Forest – and that it was better than any of the crab down in Lower Naradol, too.

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Every time he saw someone peddling one or waving a flag with squid all over it? He kept flashing back to the damn arin-goliath and Rmaci's warning that it wasn't done with him yet. Every *single* time he saw it, he remembered when that beast wrapped its tentacles around him, and the way it cheered in ecstatic glee as it tried to swallow him whole.

Which brought him to another problem on his mind – as if he had time to worry about a ship of the damned that *might* be floating off-shore somewhere. Granted, he had even less time to ogle the local “ladies” along the shore, but. You had to pick your priorities in life carefully.

Pleasant sights excluded, it didn't turn up the former leader of the Hall of Sea's Song in Vahail. *Or the leader of the former Hall*, he mused, *depending on how you looked at it*. It did turn up an opportunity to overhear an argument between a war-maiden of Odinal and some sell-sword from Akkador East over who had the bigger blade.

That discussion promptly ended when she proved her point.

In more ways than one.

Even still. The brief skirmish (and ensuing cries for a healer) didn't provide more than a brief, amusing distraction. He did, however, take the time to send a measure of thanks to the God of Luck about the time he followed the river to the Hannock Bridge. The stone edifice arced over the Avagerona and served as the last line of defense for the city to stop anyone that made it through the other imposing and entirely unnecessary lines-of-defense that stood between the mouth of Yittl Canyon (which was a day's walk to the south) and the giant portcullis that guarded the main gate.

It was also named after the Overseers family, which he was *sure* was some kind of *coincidence* more than it was the Overseer stroking his cock for anyone entering the city. Which, thankfully, was not what he caught the Tidesinger doing. Instead, the priest was busy offering blessings to a group of refugees loaded in a caravan making their way out of Basion.

Tonhas Quincheco was known to be a kind, benevolent man at his worst. What Akaran wasn't ready for, or expecting, was that the man was a hugger. He barely managed to get a greeting past his lips before the Tidesinger had wrapped him in a tight hug followed by a kiss on top of the exorcist's forehead. “Ah! Hello there, good sirrah,” he

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shouted with a booming voice more at home at a battlefield than a bustling bridge.

Once the immediate shock wore off, Akaran managed to get out a stunned, “Uh, yeah, hi. Tidesinger, I am sorry if you are busy but –”

“Nonsense!” he boomed. “There is no man who should ever be so busy on a city street to give alms to those that need,” he said with a smile across his bright pink lips that lit up his rosy red cheeks, “even if the man that needs alms is not one accustomed to giving them.”

“I mean I agree, but...”

“...but it is not what you do, yes. I know of you. How may I serve, oh child of Love?”

Akaran checked his surprise and looked over at the caravan of formerly-flooded souls as they began their journey to parts unknown, and parts he could honestly care less about. “I need help, Tidesinger. There’s a foulness in this city and I’m trying to uproot it. I’ve got an idea how to get rid of it, but I need a few things first.”

Like damn-near everyone else he’d met, Quinchecco was a hair shorter than him – although he lacked the frame of a fighter. What he did have, and what kept wagging whenever he spoke, were his oddly pointed ears. “There’s worse than foulness in the city, good man. There’s foulness in the water.”

“Shit. It’s close enough to feel?”

“Feel? No, not feel. Hear, yes,” he corrected. “Come. There are words to be had that are best not had where all can listen.”

The exorcist gave him a quick nod in agreement, and the pair quickly (or as quickly as Akaran could) worked their way off of the bridge – and then under it. The stairs that trailed down were rough chunks of granite and covered in moss that absolutely didn’t care for his cane. By the time he made it down, his leg was screaming and his head was pounding from the effort. “I really am sorry to bother you, Tidesinger –”

“It’s no bother, I assure you. In truth, it is a grace of the waves that there are those on land that seek to wash corruption, rather than ignore it,” Quinchecco replied.

“Not a fan of the Guard either, I see.”

He smiled from ear to pointy ear. “Nor the others that profess an interest in the void yet do little to cleanse. I daresay that may be a

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curse of age – we are not too far apart that I do not remember the desire to change the unchangeable.”

“Funny you’d mention the unchangeable,” Akaran. “I’ve got a problem caused by a group of people that think they’re eternal.”

“In my travels in this world, short as they may be, I have encountered many that think they are – but few whom have lived long enough to attain to the title,” the priest remarked as he adjusted his dark green tunic. The color matched his leggings, but they had been sewn from some kind of odd reed-like material the exorcist didn’t recognize.

The Lover snorted. “I’ve been getting that feeling as of late,” he agreed with a grunt. “No, but in truth – I ran afoul of the Order of Ice. I’m trying to *un-foul* my... okay, I’d be lying if I said I thought I made a mistake, but...”

“I would assume they do not find your transgressions to be without fault?”

“Do you want the long explanation or the short one?”

“Neither,” the Tidesinger replied. “The fact that you sought me out at all is proof of your honesty. Except, as you said, there is a darkness rising. And, a darkness floating.”

Akaran nodded tiredly and looked down into the muddy river and watched a duck float by, oblivious to the discussion. “That’s right. I don’t know how far it is but I –”

“Close,” Quincecco interrupted. “Quite close.”

“Dammit. Then I need your help *faster*.”

The priest answered with a nod and reached back to stroke one of his pointed ears. “Tell me first – why is it you ask me? If you need aid with the dark, surely your own Order would be where one would turn. I wouldn’t ask followers of Aqualla to seek out aid from, say, the Oldstone.”

The remark set the other priest back a hair. “Desperate times, desperate measures. I’ve run afoul of more than Ice.”

“How do I know you won’t run afoul of me?”

That wasn’t the question he was expecting, and he lingered for a minute as he tried to figure out a good answer. “You don’t,” he finally admitted. “Just... I don’t usually intend to offend. Sometimes it just happens that way.”

“A retort as honest as a man with as much blood on his hands as in his veins,” Quincecco replied. “I am intrigued; though I will

admit, I will need to know what was done to anger the frozen. The realm of Istalla and that of the Lord of the Ocean of Souls are grander kin than few others things in all the worlds combined. They are... well, as you said. They fancy Themselves immortal, but they are merely a state of being, as are we all.”

Akaran bit his lip and looked down at the river again. “You believe that water washes away sins, right?”

“I do,” the Tidesinger answered. “Water can do many an amazing thing. It can wash, it can cleanse; it can extinguish flame and care for the parched. It can harm, too, as we have seen as of late.”

“And it’s said that the waves serve to claim the ills of man, isn’t it?”

Quinchecco shook his head. “No; that is a folly of men. The water claims trespassers that do not belong, that is true. Many a soul have thought to conquer the crests of Aqualla’s waves, yet paid no heed and no honor to the beast they claim to tame. The depths merely return the favor.”

“But what about corruption? Water washes and cleanses, and takes it away.”

“A bog is full of rot, and shallows may find themselves full of detritus,” the priest replied, “even slag – though I believe you know as much yourself, don’t you?” Before Akaran could reply, he continued by adding, “It is easy enough to assume that water claims the foul and controls it in the depths. It merely aids it to disperse, and slowly yet surely, reduces it to a form that is too weak to harm.”

“No offense, good man, but I think I like our way better. We take it out of the water and simply get rid of it.”

“Yet it still moves elsewhere, you see. Out of sight, out of way, out of hazard, perhaps, but the corruption still remains. I am not surprised – yet you haven’t answered my question, which implies that I may not enjoy the response.”

Chastised, the exorcist felt his shoulders slump. “My experience with Ice is that it keeps what it covers. I needed something kept. The ice didn’t want it but it was too dangerous to let loose.”

Quinchecco’s eyes narrowed. “So you mean to suggest that you bent the Frozen to your will, and used It against Its own consent.”

“I had consent,” he hastily pointed out, “just not... Istalla’s.”

“You are aware that gaining consent from a princess to piss on the royal carpet is not a promise that the Queen won’t be annoyed with

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you, yes? There are some actions that require a confirmation from those in the highest seat of power before they are undertaken.”

“I was in a really big hurry.”

“But did you even ask?”

Akaran cringed and shook his head sheepishly. “I’m going to assume this means that you won’t help me.”

The Tidesinger gave him a faint little smile, and then gestured at the river with a swirl of his fingers. At his beckoning, a small waterspout lifted up from the stream and began to spin errantly about. “I didn’t say that I wouldn’t. I only asked if you yourself *had* asked, and now that I know you didn’t, I recognize that now must be a different time. You need, yet instead of doing, you come to plead – not threaten or attempt to force me act on against my own wishes.”

“I don’t think I can force you to do much of anything you don’t want to do,” the exorcist pointed out, “or specifically, what I want you to do.”

“Oh, you could. Men are just men. They can be forced, given the right application of water – or the withholding of it. I do sense that if you felt you had no choice but to convert me to your cause by the blade, you would, just as much as I sense that the end of my help will result in you taking up steel against another. Am I wrong?”

He shifted back and forth on his heels while using the cane to keep his balance, tenuous as it was. “For what it’s worth, the steel will be used on people that deserve it.”

Quinchecco raised his eyebrows at the Lover and tilted his head. “Ah, you claim it is a form of divine punishment then, do you? Have you been instructed by the Gods to meet out such a task, or is it merely a man deciding the fate of other men?”

“I’m not going to decide the fate of men at all,” Akaran retorted, “just going to try to save a few.”

“Save a few by killing another.”

“I’m not killing men.”

The Tidesinger pursed his lips as his waterspout pranced back into the river. “Then what are you hunting, praytell? Is the darkness on the waves not man-made? Is the culling of souls in this city not done by human hands?”

Akaran shook his head and sighed. “Foulness. And no, and another no, and you won’t believe me until I can prove it.”



“A man of faith asking for a man of faith to act on faith,” the Aquallan replied after a moment’s pause. “Yet you’ve given me no reason to think that your faith is worth following in this case. How am I not to know that the ill I sense is not ill of your making?”

“Do I look like someone capable of making ill?” he shot back.

“Yes,” Quinchecco replied without hesitation, “though not one to knowingly or intentionally do ill against the Light, given knowledge enough of what your actions may result in. You are insistent that the need is great, even if the trust you ask is as fragile as a reflection?”

“I am,” the priest replied earnestly. “When I drag it into the light, I promise, you won’t regret this.”

With a haunting little smile, the Tidesinger bowed his head. “Water knows no regrets; it merely flows. What happens, happens, and may happen again, yet never in ways the same,” he answered slowly, “though at times the waves may be choppiest than others. What is it you ask of me?” As Akaran told him, the priest’s ears began to twitch. When he finished, a true rarity happened:

The singer lost his voice.

### *Late Evening, Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow*

A jagged gauntlet of ice materialized around his left hand before the assassin could get off a third dart. Each shot came with a matching glow from some kind of amulet dangling from his neck, which was both helpful – and utterly pointless – for the exorcist to care about right now.

What was more important was finding a way to get the asshole to stop kicking. Every time the priest started to stand up (a trying, difficult process at best), the bastard would deliver another kick at his head or hands. The third kick in half as many heartbeats split his lip and sent another wad of blood onto the stone street.

It was the last kick he managed to deliver. Akaran’s assailant swung his axe down in a hard over-handed swing that would’ve done the head of the Woodmason’s Guild proud, and it almost caved in the exorcist’s skull. He managed to catch it at the last instant with his frost-covered fist before it could do any damage – but that wasn’t to say there wasn’t damage done.

The blade cracked the ice around his fist, but the power of the coldstone shard buried in his face pulsed through Akaran’s body. The magic of the stone mixed with the foreign magic in his aura, and the

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ice around his hand mixed with the steel on the blade. The result was just as the Headmaster-Adept had warned.

### *Late Evening, Lithdis, 2<sup>nd</sup> of Firstgrow*

“Now, there is some bad news,” Telburn warned. As the words left his mouth, you could see the dismay blossom in Seline’s eyes, but she kept her mouth shut. “I know you have taken a distinct distaste for all things cold, yes?”

The priest grunted and rolled his neck. “That’s not a strong enough word.”

“It will have to do,” the Adept said dismissively. “The truth of the matter is that until you die and the ether of the world claims or rejects you and the energies around you do whatever it is that energies around you will do, you’re going to be tainted with this other ether.”

“I thought you said you were going to purge it from me?”

“I did, and I will,” the mage replied. “But much the same as someone used madder-root to dye her dress pink,” he said as he gestured at the plain, but pretty, thin cotton dress Seline was wearing, “the energies of the other have forever dyed your aura. I daresay that your possession of the coldstone shard may only make it worse.”

“What... what are you saying, Telburn?” Akaran asked as he leaned forward on the bed and held his head in his hands. “I’ll be able to use magic again but I’m going to be pissing snowflakes?”

The Headmaster cracked a smile and stifled a laugh. “No, no, nothing of the sort. Or at least, I would hope not. If you do...” he began to reply before a miserable glare from the priest cut him off. “As it stands now – or, before the now, I should say – those that draw upon the magic and spells of the Divine do so with the permission and strength of the God or Goddess you choose to serve. In reality, it’s a bit more complex than that but that is the extent that most of the colleges of Divine studies tell you, yes?”

“More or less. A lot less, but I know that.”

“Yes, well. What you may not know is that the magic you receive is filtered through your own aura and your own aptitude. It’s how you’ll never find a priest of flame using magic of water; the two aren’t simply opposed to each other, there is a question of attunement.”

Akaran’s face went pale as he jumped ahead a few ideas and had an ugly one stare him in the face. “Please don’t tell me you expect me

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to swear allegiance to Istalla from this point forward. What I do doesn't work that way. I can't –"

"Actually, it does," Telburn deftly pointed out. "We both know that members of your Order can cast spells and call upon the other Gods. I've seen some of the magic that your compatriots use, and they call upon Lumina, Pristi, and Isamiaeal alike."

"Ridora routinely calls upon Solinal to aid in calming minds," Seline added. "She gave up on his."

The exorcist ignored her barb and sighed in frustration. "So, what? I get that not everyone is able to channel magic. I also understand that there are people who wish they could channel Love but can't. The Order is full of them – people that claim allegiance to Her but couldn't cast a ward if their lives depended on it. You call it 'attunement,' the Brothers call it being 'touched,' or 'chosen.' That's just the way it is."

"Well, religions always find ways to make themselves sound superior to the layfolk," the mage remarked dismissively, "but the point still remains. Ponder the question that those that try to channel Love cannot, maybe they have aptitude with channeling another. Or the elemental aspect of what God represents what."

"The 'Gods aren't real, people only claim they are to represent forces of the physical world,' argument? Now? Really?"

"Not making the argument – merely pointing out the likely change in your personal condition. When this works, that is."

"You still haven't explained what that's going to be."

Telburn blinked and looked bewildered for a moment. "I didn't? I thought that was clear by now."

"No, you haven't," Seline sighed. "And please be quick. I promised Ridora I would be in an hour ago. She's already very suspicious about all the time I've been spending at home lately and being later than I am is not going to help that."

"Oh, then I apologize," the Headmaster offered honestly. "Then let me be succinct."

Akaran glanced up and snorted. "That'd be a first."

The mage let the jab slide and cleared his throat. "I don't claim to understand what relationship you have with your Goddess, or the forces you claim that She manifests, as I've never seen them in action. However, I would assume that from this point forward, you may find things a touch... colder."

## Insanity's Reckoning

"A touch colder?"

"Your aura – soul, ether, energy, your personal jar that you store oil in, however you wish to consider it – will likely be *adjusted* to exhibit instances of elemental ice when you attempt to channel magic." Akaran's jaw dropped in slow horror as he realized what Telburn was trying to say. "I'd also wager that the longer you stay in contact with the coldstone shard, the easier you'll be able to call upon frozen magic as well. Didn't you tell me you were able to clad your fist in ice once already?"

He thought back to the fight with Annix several days back and how his hand had turned into a block of jagged ice. "Yeah but I thought was just the stone... I don't know... doing... stone things?"

Telburn nodded in agreement. "It was. As much as we are having problems with magic of this plane interacting with your aura, you are positively filled to the brim of ether that stone was made from. You may be able to use magic even before we attempt to purge – if you can learn to use the right kind."

"Tel... Headmaster. I've seen what elemental ice can do if it's not controlled. I don't want that. I don't want that power," he replied seriously as he felt his hands start to shake. "I'm... I think I'm good at what I do but I'm... I'm not the right person for that."

"As a man of faith, I would think that you – of all people – would understand that sometimes we are not granted a choice. Sometimes it is luck, sometimes it is fate, sometimes it is fluke. You are talented; I can feel it brimming. You wouldn't need the skill to be returned if you weren't."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The Headmaster smiled and reached over to shake Akaran's good knee. "A painter with no ink will find a way to make some if he truly needs, or will change his medium. A bard with no instrument will use his voice – or one with no voice will use an instrument. Arts, talent, ability; they find a way to manifest. You've been pushing back against anyone that's told you no; it's not just youth being cocky, it's talent looking for an excuse."

"And here I thought he was a bored ox trying to find a pottery shop," Seline muttered under her breath as she rummaged through a chest in the back of the room.

"I should warn, of course, that until you undergo proper training, you're little more than an instabilisist with quite literally *unnatural*

potential. I would avoid using it until you have a few months with us at the Annex.”

Akaran’s face fell like a rock. “I... me. At... at the Annex?”

Telburn smiled from ear to ear. “Well, it isn’t something we have to worry about right this moment, of course. We have to fix you first.”

The exorcist ignored that particular criticism. “So what now? I’ll go talk to the others and try to win them over. What happens after I get them?”

“Well,” Telburn began, “it won’t take long to gather what I need to do the work. There *is* a matter of being compensated, though this experience alone will cover the more material costs.”

“Excuse me?”

“You didn’t think this was for *free*, did you?”

### ***Late Evening, Staddis, 4<sup>th</sup> of Firstgrow***

The ice around his hand swirled like a maelstrom. The blade never broke through his gauntlet, and the axe froze in his grip. The mugger only barely managed to let go before the entire weapon froze over. Akaran clenched down and the glow behind his eyepatch flared even brighter.

The axe shattered.

Explosively.

Shards peppered his face, but the blast pushed the exorcist’s attacker back. Akaran whipped his hand around and a jagged arc of ice ripped off of his hand and sliced through the air. The crescent slice cut through the air and struck his assassin square in the chest. When it hit, it didn’t just draw blood; it shattered the amulet dangling from his neck.

A bolt of purple mana hanging in the air vanished the second the amulet cracked into pieces. The Sycian grabbed his chest and screamed in pain. That scream was matched by the exorcist – when the ice flung off his hand, it did more than just cut the mugger. It ripped his glove, his sleeve, and chunks of skin off with it.

His attacker kicked at him again, and even though the priest blocked it, it did enough damage to Akaran’s already bloodied arm to cause the exorcist to roll over to protect it. A shout from down the street stopped his attacker from doing anything else, and the mugger ran off before the new arrivals could do anything to stop him.

## Insanity's Reckoning

Not that one of the new arrivals didn't have a lot to say. Or at least, a lot to accuse. "My understanding was that you were simply sent to go collect the aid of one of those unstable Aquallans," he scolded, "not to pick a fight with random gutter trash."

Akaran bit back a curse as he surveyed the somewhat extensive damage to his left hand and bit back fresh tears. "Wasn't... wasn't my fault."

"Many things in this city do not seem to be your fault," his savior scolded, "yet I hear you often end up in the middle of most of them."

"Coming from you that's a compliment."

Lord Riorik Dallidon, Guildboss of the Fleetfinger's Guild from Gonta (and newly apparent heir of the same title in Basion City), just looked down and smiled. "One professional admiring the work of another," he said as he gestured to the walking wall of muscle beside him to help the battered priest stand up.

"How'd you manage to find me?" he groaned.

Another voice chimed out of the shadows. As she appeared, Austilin – Riorik's hired muscle – warded himself with a (worthless) gesture and stepped away. "*Because I'm still bound to you, you jackass,*" the half-burnt/half-frozen woman retorted as she stepped into view. Horrific as ever, the wraith crossed a blistered arm and one covered in scabs and crystals over her equally-wrecked chest. "*And this thief is still touched by the wraith, almost as deeply as you were. Quite pissed I missed it. You're lucky we were so close.*"

Akaran cradled his ruined arm and bit back a groan of pain. "Lucky. Right."

### ***Late Evening, Lithdis, 2<sup>nd</sup> of Firstgrow***

"I mean I had hoped it was free," the exorcist muttered.

"As a *certain woman* expressed to me recently, *hope* is a sad thing, and is only fun when you see it dashed," Telburn replied. "Though I have a feeling I should be grateful that I cannot put a face to that voice – I've found that those that spend so much effort to hide in the shadows have reason."

Akaran grunted in annoyance. "Cracked voice or sultry one?"

"Cracked."

"She has a good reason and yeah, you should be," he agreed. "I don't have anything to give you. You know that, right? Did you come

here to taunt me with solutions then walk out with them in hand or...?”

The mage blanched and gave him a look like he'd been offered spoiled milk. “My dear boy, what kind of people have you been cavorting with as of late? Do you really think I would do that?”

Seline looked up from rummaging around in her closet and gave the Headmaster a roll of her eyes. “Yes. He does. And yes, he's been around people that would. My house has turned into a thoroughfare of unwashed and unwanted.”

“Riorik would be offended by that,” Akaran grunted.

“Riorik can be offended by anything he damn well pleases,” she snapped, “but it doesn't change the truth.”

“I keep forgetting what your profession has you do...” Telburn muttered under his breath. “That aside: you do have one thing I need. Two, actually.”

He put his hand up over his eyepatch defensively. “The coldstone shard stays with me. You had your chance to play with it.”

“I did,” he agreed, “and got what I needed from it. How versed are you in the arrangements of the Academy and the Hunter's Guild?”

“Other than you're married to the local Huntsmatron? Not very.”

“If but all of us were,” Telburn sighed in annoyance. “It should go without saying that at times, the Academy needs... shall we say... assistance... in either traveling to and from places of etheric significance or in requisitioning harder-to-find objects that exist in nature.”

Seline settled down with a piece of charcoal and an old piece of parchment. “Everyone knows that mages need bodyguards. What of it?”

The mage shifted in his seat. “Well. These dalliances are not often cheap. Worse, the Guild has recently begun to realize that and their costs have been growing... excessive. It would, to put it kindly, be useful to have someone on retainer, as it were, to aid with a few projects that I hear that the Archmage-Adept plans to involve the Academy in.”

“Are you asking me to come work for the Academy?” the priest asked, utterly flabbergasted by the suggestion. “We're not even sure this will save my ass!”

## Insanity's Reckoning

"I am confident that it will be an unpleasant experience. I am equally confident that by the time that we finish, you will have some measure of ability back. Either way, should you not be able to cast spells, you have training and insight into extra-planar events that may prove useful, given the correct situation."

"He's asking you to go work for them," the healer interjected.

"Not on a permanent basis," Telburn hastily added before the priest could offer up a complaint. "Simply that you sign a waiver that the Academy can refer tasks to you that might otherwise prove difficult without."

Akaran bit back a curse. "I already owe favors to the Fleetfinger's Guild. Now you want me to owe favors to the Granalchi?"

The Headmaster nodded in agreement. "Succinctly, yes. Three, to be precise. Or, we can negotiate a price in crowns – though the services may be both more exciting and more affordable."

"How many?"

"Three."

"How many crowns?"

"Five diandra."

Seline dropped her stack of papers with a curse as Akaran nearly choked on his own tongue. "*FIVE THOUSAND CROWNS?! Are you fisking mad? I don't get that kind of stipend! I'll never get that kind of stipend!*"

"I imagine you certainly won't if you don't regain the ability to channel the nature of your Goddess, correct?" Telburn pointed out.

"This is extortion."

"But it *is* funny," Seline chortled. "You have to admit that."

"No, I don't," the priest snapped as he gave her a foul glare. "Since when did you become so spiteful?"

She flicked her blonde trusses back over her shoulder. "Since you started sleeping in my bed, since you started using my kitchen as a meeting place for all manner of horrible people – no offense, Headmaster – and since your poor choices have required me to bandage you up more times than I want to remember," she shot back. "*That's* since when."

Properly scolded, the exorcist sighed and tried to figure out a way around this new mess. "I... I don't like not having choices."

"Few people do," the mage agreed.

"Two services owed, with the caveats: if I am on Order business, then I am unavailable *and* I will not run counter to my duties to the Goddess," he countered. "If your people call me and I run into some shit that needs to



be excised, I'm excising it, regardless of if you're using it as a research subject."

"I wouldn't expect less than the second, given your attitude. The first? Would depend on the need. We will, of course, negotiate a temporary leave with your superiors, should the need arise."

"What makes you confident enough that they'll grant it?"

The Headmaster gave him what was supposed to be a reassuring smile. It wasn't. "The Academy and the Lovers occasionally share assets. One of my Adepts is a liaison to the Repository, even now, for example. This type of arrangement isn't too uncommon, though it has been a while since the last one. That said – this is a *personal* arrangement, and you will be held and bound to it under Queen's Law of Contract."

"You may as well accept it," Seline chimed in. "Nobody else has figured out what to do with you. It's either this or keep working as a courier for Cel."

Before Akaran could decide, Telburn cut him off. "There is one more thing – if we do this, you *will* take some time with us to understand how you will respond to magic, going forward. This is not just my request, it –"

"– it's a matter of Queen's Law, I know," the exorcist sighed. "She doesn't like people running around using magic they don't understand."

"Exactly. Given the Kingdom's history of magically-inspired historical events, can you blame her?"

"I know, I know," Akaran sighed for a second time. "Two?"

Telburn pursed his lips. "Two, with your considerations understood, given one more request. A personal one. It won't enter the contract; it'll only be matched by your word."

"What is it?"

"Adept Odern was a dear friend of mine," the Headmaster replied. "I am not one for violence, yet I know the fate to befall murderers. I am at war with myself to request any other than my wife to take the task of hunting him down, but, the city feels more dangerous by the day. Danger, sadly, is a blade that oft cuts both ways – those that suffer the effect and those that create cause are both at risk."

Akaran nodded in understanding. "Headmaster, I promise. If you restore my magic, I'm going to execute the bastard that killed him. I swear upon my soul."

## Insanity's Reckoning

The mage flinched at the ferocity behind his voice. "I want to see him brought to justice. If the law demands his or her head, then I won't speak otherwise. Justice, not vengeance."

"I serve the Queen and the Goddess," the younger man replied, "which means I offer both. It also means I get to pick."

While Telburn tried to digest that statement, Seline started to snicker. "One moment? You're shocked that he is eager to kill the cretins that have taken over our city?"

"Taken over is a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?"

"No," they both replied.

"Oh," the mage replied with a defeated sigh. "Then I implore you: justice over vengeance. Please. I recognize that the Lovers have a reputation for being forceful when the time comes to express it, but I'd prefer it if you not burn the city down behind you."

Akaran smirked. "I won't," he promised. "From what you said, I'll freeze it."

The healer stood back and gave a thoughtful stare at both of them before she broke down into a fit of giggles. "Oh. Oh my goodness. This is... this is utterly hilarious!"

"Funny...?" Akaran growled. "What possible part of this is funny?"

"Well, I mean," the blonde-haired healer tried to explain through another fit of giggles, "you're an exorcist of Love. But you... now you've got a heart of ice," she said with a snicker.

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