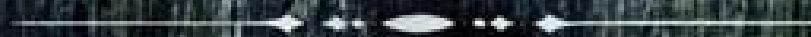


A PREQUEL TO THE MONCOLIAD



# SINNER



MARK TEPPA

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SINNER

A TALE OF FOREWORLD

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# SINNER

A TALE OF FOREWORLD

BY

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MARK TEPPA

47NORTH

*Many set themselves the aim of rescuing the indifferent and the lazy—and end up lost themselves. The flame within them gets dim with the passage of time. So, if you have the fire, run, since you never know when it may be doused, leaving you stranded in darkness.*

—John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (Step 3: On Exile)

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He had grown up in this forest. As a child, Otto had hunted rabbits along the band of white ash that grew along the track of the old river. He remembered the last time the wash filled with water, during the unseasonably wet spring in 1226. His uncle, Heinrich, had lost two dozen cattle in the deluge of water that had come pouring out of the trees. For weeks after, he and the other boys had found all manner of treasures buried in the dark silt carried down from the mountains by the floods: shards of earthen pottery, scraps of leather, bits of metal rounded by their long journey. Dierk, the largest of the boys, had found a piece of a broken blade, one of the old swords used by the Romans. They had even found a woman's arm, battered and torn, wedged among the tangled roots of an ancient oak that had been torn up by the waters. Dierk had thought it belonged to Elsa, a local girl who had vanished during the flood. Perhaps she had been out here, among the trees, with another boy that night when the water had come.

Or perhaps it had been something else. Something darker. Something evil.

Something like whatever was chasing him.

Otto fled through the woods, and it was as if the trees had moved since the last time he had been in the forest's embrace. The familiar paths—traveled so frequently they belonged to him as much as to the animals—were hidden from him tonight, even with the assistance of the full moon. It hung, snared, in the spindly and jagged branches of the trees, whose limbs strained and reached for the shining circle like eager children begging their mothers to lift them up. He saw no animals and heard nothing but the shuddering beat of his heart loud in his ears.

When he did hear an echo in the forest, it was the sound of pursuit. They had been chasing him since he stepped out of the inn to piss. At first he thought they were dogs that belonged to someone local, but then he caught sight of one of them, crossing the field opposite the inn. He wiped at his eyes sure he had had too much ale to drink, but the apparition didn't disappear. It came closer, prancing in the moonlight, and his bravery fled at the sight of the ash-whitened skin.

The next village was a half-day's journey upriver. Mainz was so far away that it might as well have been the Holy Land. He didn't know where he was going, and it didn't matter. As long as he ran away from *them*.

He didn't know how many were chasing him, nor did he want to stop and find out. As a boy, his uncle Heinrich had told him stories of the ghost hunt—the spirits of damned hunters unable to ascend to Heaven until they caught the Devil, but they had been hunting the cloven-hoofed one for so long that they had forgotten who they were, and they were nothing more than vengeful spirits who preyed on sinners. They could smell the Devil's taint, the corruption that took root in the soul when a man sinned against God.

He prayed to God when he could manage enough breath to spare for prayer. *What have I done, Lord? How have I offended you?*

A rock turned beneath his foot, and he sprawled on the ground. His elbow banged against the heavy root of a tree, and he curled into a ball on the ground, whimpering as pain lanced up his arm and into his shoulder.

Something dashed through the brush nearby and he froze, his whimper dying in his throat. There had been a flash of white moonlight reflecting off pale skin, and when the second one passed, he clapped his hand over his mouth to stifle his cry of terror at what he saw.

The third one did not run past like the first two. It crouched in the shadow of a nearby tree, and I could hear its ragged breathing. He stared at the dark shape, trying to pierce the darkness with his gaze while simultaneously praying that what he had seen was not true. The creature in the darkness made a guttural noise. His mind refused to accept that what he was hearing was laughter, and that it was coming from a human throat.

He scrambled backward, and the shadowy figure leaped forward, grabbing at his trailing leg with an outstretched hand. As soon as its grip latched onto his ankle, he started screaming and kicking. The figure laughed, fighting to snare both his legs, and his cries of terror brought the other two back. They loomed over him, faces that he knew but that were distorted and pale in the moonlight. There was blood and dirt on their faces, and their lips were white with ash.

“No!” Otto begged. “Do you not know me?”

The man holding his legs was a goatherd he knew by sight but not by name. The woman kneeling on his right arm worked in the inn; she had served him just the other night. But there was no recognition in her face now. Her eyes were wild and black.

He tried to shove her off, but the third one, a burly man with an old scar that twisted his lips, caught his flailing arm. He tried to pull free, but the broad-chested man gripped his wrist and slowly pried his fist open. As he watched, unable to believe what he was seeing, the man bit down on his index finger, right around the second knuckle. He screamed as teeth grated against bone, and the man shook his head violently. The other two shrieked with delight as the man wrenched his head back, taking a finger with him.

“Please,” Otto sobbed. “Please, God. Help me.” Blood squirted from the ravaged end of his finger, and the woman eagerly grabbed at his injured hand, licking and slurping at his bloody stump.

“God cannot hear you.” The voice came from the trees, and he recoiled at the sound of human speech. He struggled beneath the threesome, who crouched reverently at the voice while still maintaining their hold on their captive.

Moonlight fell across a robed figure as it approached. The figure wore a misshapen hood, complete with a leather mask and a crown of twisted vines. “God is afraid of the night,” the figure said, his voice a dry rattle in the darkness. “He is afraid of what lives in these woods. What has always lived in these woods. Your God has fled, and we are all that remain.”

As if these words were permission, the three fell on their captive. Their hands tearing; their teeth biting.



It was hard to tell who thought they were more important: the horse or its rider. The horse, a black destrier with a swath of white down its throat, walked with such a precise and high-stepping gait that was nearly prancing, though judging from the imperious lift of its head, it would never deign to do something as undignified as *prancing*. Its rider was a priest in a dun-colored robe beneath a dark blue cloak—which seemed to Andreas to be one layer too many. The man’s face was clean-shaven, and his tonsure was so white that he appeared to be crowned with a halo that slipped down across his skull. His eyes were blue, like the Northern seas, and they appeared to miss little. They locked onto Andreas as the not-quite prancing horse came abreast of the itinerant knight, and Andreas, always eager to practice his humility, dipped his head.

The horse snorted, shat (much to the dismay of the rider directly following), and continued on. Andreas stared at the steaming pile in the narrow lane and quietly counted the eight riders following the priest as they carefully avoided the freshly dropped equine offering. Andreas scratched his cheek absently after the party had passed, wishing once again that he hadn’t lost his own horse in a wager.

It had been a fine animal, though a bit temperamental when the weather turned. It had rained most of last week, and the beast had been feisty enough that he had, in a moment of weakness, offered it up in a wager with a pair of Frankish mercenaries. Andreas suspected the pair had cheated, but as the crowd had become overwhelmingly filled with friends of the Franks, he had thought it prudent to let the matter lie.

As luck would have it, the storm departed during the night and the last few days had been gloriously temperate. The walk along the Rhine had been pleasant and peaceful, unmarred by anything more strenuous than waving at the occasional boat that meandered past.

He had never been to Lorsch and had heard stories of its wondrous library; however, his visit had been unceremoniously cut short when he had been informed by the monks at the abbey that the library had been sealed.

And then there had been the matter with the Frankish mercenaries. All in all, a peaceful stroll along the river for a few days was probably the best recourse. It would give him time to fully expunge the annoyance still laboring in his breast. At least until he reached Mainz and sought an audience with the Archbishop there, specifically to inquire why His Excellency had ordered the closure of the library in Lorsch.

Andreas adjusted his pack on his shoulder, and whistling tunelessly through his teeth, he continued on his journey toward Mainz, following in the direction of the regal priest and his entourage. He gave little thought as to where the party was bound until he stumbled across them again not an hour later.

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The village was not unlike many of the villages that were scattered along the Rhine between Worms and Mainz, little more than a tiny green surrounded by an inn or two, a trading house, and a few other houses belonging to the local farmers who preferred to be known as owners of land rather than workers of the same. The rest of the residents lived in huts scattered among the fields that surrounded

the village. The inn, a more well-to-do building than the last few Andreas had seen, was on the north side of the green. Its broad porch was being used as a dais by the local magistrate and the regal priest to address the unruly crowd. On the western periphery of the crowd, eager participants were arguing over the distribution of freshly cut wood around a tall pole.

Andreas paused at the verge of the crowd as he realized what he was about to stumble into. He was taller than most of the villagers, and though he stood at the back, he was able to readily scan the crowd for the focus of the villagers' ire. Near the front, not far from the magistrate, was a cluster of men, holding someone between them. A woman, he surmised, as the sound of her shrieking voice carried over the general hubbub.

It pained him to walk away, but he knew this was not his fight. He knew nothing of the charges being levied against the woman or the mood of the villagers. By inserting himself in this situation, by revealing who he was, he could cause more strife than the village was already suffering. He did not care for the way the priest carried himself, but his dislike of the recent abuses attributed to *some* Dominicans in their zealous pursuit of heretics was not a complete condemnation of all priests.

He might be a Knight Initiate of the *Ordo Militum Vindicis Intactae*, the Holy Knights of the Virgin Defender, but he was one man, far away from home. A company of Shield-Brethren, as they were more regularly known in the Holy Roman Empire and the lands north, were known to strike terror in an opposing army simply by virtue of their appearance on the battlefield, but one Shield-Brother was more a curiosity than a cause for alarm.

Andreas caught sight of a man seated on a horse to his left. He wore a plain surcoat over mail with a longsword on his person and a shield attached to his saddle. His skin was darker than the rest of the villagers—a consequence of his birth, not the sun—and his hair and beard were neat and short, cut close to the shape of his head and face. His shield bore a familiar rose emblem, not unlike the brooch pinned to Andreas's cloak.

*One Shield-Brother might be a curiosity, he thought, but two?*

As the magistrate attempted to make himself heard over the crowd, Andreas worked his way around the crowd toward the man on the horse. The rider spotted him coming and regarded him coolly for a moment, assessing him, before returning his gaze to the spectacle unfolding on the green.

"That's a nice horse," Andreas opined as he reached the mounted knight. He was being polite. The animal was magnificent. Its withers were on equal height with his chest, and its coat was such a lustrous gray that it seemed more like Byzantine silk than hair. It wore very little tack, and Andreas assumed such a decision on the part of the rider was due to the animal's responsiveness to knee and hand. It had white markings on its front legs and face, and when it turned its head to look at him, he was startled to see a rounded bump among the white hair on its forehead—a tiny nub not unlike the sort of protrusion male deer exhibit as they start growing their horns.

"It is," the man said, and his accent reminded Andreas of the confusion of languages he had heard during his time in the Levant. "The Carthusian monks breed excellent stock."

Further conversation was precluded by the magistrate finally making himself heard over the crowd. The villagers shushed one another—a susurrations that ran from the front to the back of the mob—as the magistrate began to shout. "I know you are frightened, but we must not allow ourselves to be filled with fear. If the Devil walks among us, we must be strong in our faith so that we may cast him out. If we quarrel amongst ourselves, then we are divided. We have laws, given to us by God, that protect us, and as long as we uphold those laws, no harm will come to us.

"The widow"—and this word brought howls from the audience—"this...woman, Gerda, stands accused of witchcraft; of sacrificing her husband to the Devil in return—" The audience started shouting again, drowning out the magistrate's voice. Andreas could see him waving his arms, trying to get their attention, but the villagers were too stirred up.

The woman had stopped fighting her captors as soon as the magistrate had started speaking, and the accusations had not stirred her. She hung loosely in the grip of the three men, her face unmoved by the turmoil around her. It was the men holding her who were showing signs of distress, clearly worried that the mob's bloodthirst would extend to them.

The magistrate stepped back, raising his hands in frustration to the priest, who took his place at the edge of the platform. The priest raised his arms, palms out, and held still, waiting for the crowd to notice him. When he spoke, he spoke in a normal tone of voice, and such was his presence and his *expectation* of being listened to that the audience fell silent as wheat felled by the pass of a scythe.

"We are God's children," the priest said. "We are not animals. What has happened here in your village is a heinous crime against God, and I promise you that the malefactors will be found and punished. But the Church believes that each of us—no matter how far we have strayed—may confess our sins and receive absolution. We will hear this woman's confession, and should it be satisfactory, we will grant her the salvation her poor soul craves. If she is unrepentant in her testimony, we will purge her—and the taint of her sins—from this village.

"This matter belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. It is my sworn duty as an inquisitor to cleanse this evil from your midst so that it may not infect others. I am the Righteous Hand of God, and the woman is my responsibility. I will hear her testimony as well as the testimony of the witnesses who accuse her. But *not at this time.*"

The crowd jerked as one body, and Andreas could feel them winding up to a storm of noise again.

But the priest spoke first. His voice was still calm, but there was an underlying anger in his words. "The rules of God and the Church are plain in the matter of the Ordeal. Do you think you know better than God how to discern heresy? Do you think you know better than *I* the signs of the Devil's influence?"

The change in the audience was as dramatic as the sudden cessation of a summer storm. The tension in the crowd vanished in a heartbeat, draining away into a tiny stream of quiet muttering in the back of the crowd.

"It is your blessed fortune that I meant to take my midday meal at your inn, and I will still do so," the priest said. "As is my duty as an inquisitor of the Church, I will hear this woman's testimony and render a judgment, but I will do so in the morning, after a night of prayer for her soul. Until then she is to be left in my care."

He gestured to the trio holding the woman, and they dragged her up to the platform. The priest gazed at her slack face, an exaggerated air of fatherly concern in his features. He gestured again, and the magistrate hurried to open the door to the inn for the trio. The priest turned back to the crowd, raised his right hand, and rattled off a blessing in Latin, calling upon God to watch over the village and its residents until such time that he—God's instrument—could vanquish the evil assaulting these poor innocents.

The crowd milled about for a few minutes, pacified by the priest's benediction, before they slowly began to disperse.

"A bit dramatic, don't you think?" Andreas offered.

"But effective," the mounted knight replied.

"Do you know him?" Andreas asked.

"Konrad von Marburg," the knight replied. "He is as he says: an inquisitor of the Roman Catholic Church."

"I saw him earlier, on the road. I did not see you with him."

"I am not traveling with him."

"But you know of him."

The knight looked down at Andreas, his gaze resting for a moment on Andreas's cloak brooch.

“You ask many questions for a man who has not bothered to introduce himself. Some would see that as impertinent and more befitting a man of low character than a knight of a holy order.”

“Many of the order who do know my name would still say the same,” Andreas replied. He pulled back the right sleeve of his robe and offered his hand to the knight. The knight glanced down and, seeing the scar on Andreas’s forearm, tugged the sleeve of his mail back. The two men clasped forearms, and Andreas felt the roughened edges of an old scar on the knight’s forearm. Similar to his but slightly different. As they all were.

“I am Raphael, lately of...Cologne,” the knight said.

“Andreas,” Andreas replied. “Lately of Petraathen, but more recently—” He shrugged as if it wasn’t important. Ultimately they were all from the old citadel. That was where they took their vows and where they received their scars and their swords.

“Well met, Brother Andreas,” Raphael said, releasing Andreas’s arm. He nodded toward the closed door of the inn. “I had thought to ride farther today, but perhaps I will inquire as to suitable care for my horse. Do you think yonder establishment might be able to offer us sustenance and shelter should we need to tarry overnight?”

“It might,” Andreas smiled. “We could even offer to share a room.”

“Spoken like a true penitent,” Raphael said. “But you get the floor.”

Andreas bowed. “As long as you are paying, Brother Raphael.”

Raphael laughed.

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Gerda had woken that morning to the sound of her husband’s hound baying in fright. Her head fuzzy with sleep, she had dragged her recalcitrant body from beneath the woolen blankets and stumbled toward the door of the one-room hut she shared with Otto. The hound, an old herding dog that Otto had taken pity on several years ago when it had broken its leg chasing a frisky ewe across a gopher-hole-riddled field, lay crouched on the floor not far from the wooden door. Its paws between its snout and its body pointed toward the door, it growled and whimpered as if were both angered and frightened by something on the other side of the warped wooden panel.

Gerda had not yet noticed her husband was missing from the bed, and annoyed at the dog, she had pulled open the door to see what was causing the animal so much distress. As the door opened, the dog yipped in fear and leaped away, running toward the back corner of the room. She had turned toward it meaning to curse it for its cowardice, and in doing so, caught her first glimpse of what lay directly outside the hut out of the corner of her eye. She froze as the smell struck her. She had hunted with her father as a girl, and he had taught her how to dress the rabbits and squirrels he caught in his snares. She knew the smell of fresh blood.

Trembling, she had turned her head and started screaming when she recognized her Otto’s face staring up at her from the ground. Just his head, canted on one ear, lying in the center of a large smear of dark blood.

The first person who had come in response to her terror fled as soon as he identified the round shape. Others came and went after that, and she had no memory of their faces other than their wild eyes and gaping mouths—not unlike her dead husband’s. All that she could recall of the next few hours after being dragged out of the house was the forlorn expression permanently fixed on Otto’s dead face.

Her neighbors and friends—people whom she had traded bread and vegetables with, whom she had laughed and danced with at the last village feast—looked at her with hate-filled eyes. Some spat

on her; others made the sign of the warding eye, refusing to let the Devil leap from her sin-ridden body to their own. The magistrate, who had commented on the flowers in her hair only two days ago when he had encountered her near the communal bread oven, had very little control over the mob's rising panic. If the priest on the black horse had not appeared when he had, she would have been torn apart by the villagers.

He was an inquisitor of the Roman Catholic Church, and he was not the compassionate savior she had first imagined. When he lifted her chin and looked upon her tear-streaked face, she saw no pity in his sky-colored eyes.

Her trial was to be held in private, immediately after the priest took his meal, and she was forced to kneel before his table while he sated his prodigious appetite. She had tried to catch his eye, but he was intent on his meal as it was laid out before him: a bowl of steaming stew, the scent of which made her already shriveled stomach cramp even further; a loaf of warm bread; tankards of the ale brewed by her sister's husband's cousins; a chicken slow-cooked in hot coals so that the meat slid effortlessly off the bone when the inquisitor tore into the leg and wing with his hands and teeth.

After a while she could not bear to look upon the inquisitor, his hands and face shiny with grease and ale, and she sank to the floor, clutching her shackles to her belly. She lay still, her mind slowly fading away from the welter of confusion and despair that filled her body.





After parting with a few coins and ensuring that his horse would be well cared for, Raphael made his way back to the inn. The green was deserted but for a few malingerers loitering around the pyre, and they glared at Raphael as if daring him to accuse them of being eager to see the judgment of God meted out. Raphael ignored them; he had seen far worse behavior in men during the Fifth Crusade, and while he did not like to dwell on his lack of moral outrage at such fiendishness, he had come to terms with a certain amount of pragmatism in the years since his first blooding as an exuberant initiate of the *Ordo Militum Vindicis Intactae*. Righteousness dwelt within the heart of a man, not within his hand or his sword.

As he entered the inn, he was assaulted by the noise and the smell of many people clustered within the low-ceilinged room. A sullen fire crouched in a hearth on the opposite wall, and not all of the smoke from the wet wood was going up the chimney. A gray pall clung to the wooden beams of the ceiling. A large cauldron hung on an iron rod, and whatever stew bubbled within smelled delicious enough that Raphael's stomach did not care how long it had been boiling in that pot. Men shouted back and forth to one another, a minstrel struggled to make himself heard, and the beleaguered tavern staff were constantly summoned to every corner of the room by whistles and wordless grunts and shouts. Raphael surmised that the stairs at the back of the common room led to private chambers on the upper floor. Likewise, one if not both of the other doors out of the common room would lead to a more private dining area.

Andreas, the young Shield-Brother he had met earlier, was sitting on his right, embroiled in an elaborate tale that involved an earnest amount of arm waving and making faces. The young man caught sight of Raphael and his broad face lit up. He waved Raphael over, elbowing the man seated next to him to make room.

Raphael began to apologize to the man who had been so unceremoniously moved, but the lean villager, catching sight of the sword on Raphael's hip, shook his head and scooted ever farther away on the bench.

Andreas shoved a half-empty tankard in front of Raphael. "It is not a bad brew, my brother," he said. "And the stew is as hearty as it is bland to the tongue." He whistled shrilly, catching the attention of the nearest tavern maid. He pointed at himself and Raphael, and the young woman nodded before she vanished into the crowd.

Raphael sat and inspected the contents of the tankard. "You were telling a story before I arrived," he said. "Pray continue."

"I was just telling these attentive listeners tales of the Crusades," Andreas said.

Raphael glanced shrewdly at him, assessing his age. His face was still youthful beneath his blond beard, though he was beginning to collect lines beyond those engraved in his face by years of raucous laughter. *Which Crusade?* he wondered. *Surely he was not at Damietta?*

As Andreas continued his story, Raphael opted to not ask such an indelicate question. He raised the tankard of ale and drank. His eyes strayed to the far side of the room, and as he watched, one of the two doors opened and a bevy of servants filed out, their hands filled with empty serving trays. In the room beyond, he caught a glimpse of two men, seated at a table. The magistrate and the inquisitor, who was eating vigorously.

Raphael wondered if the inquisitor would remember him.

Gerda was stirred from her reverie by a loud belch from the inquisitor. His chair scraped on the floor as he pushed himself back from the table, and when she turned her head slightly, she saw his leather boots. A thin metal band wrapped around the heel of each, bound across the instep and sole of the boot with leather ties. As the inquisitor shifted in the chair, she spied a short spike jutting from the back of one of the bands.

“Tell me about this woman,” the inquisitor said, and Gerda flinched, curling more tightly about her bound hands.

From behind her, she heard the thin, raspy voice of the town magistrate reply. “I thought you wanted to wait until tomorrow before...”

The inquisitor waved the magistrate silent. “My inquiries are not a mummer’s play for the rabble. She will be judged by me and God. We do not require an audience for our work. Nor do I require anything more of you than to simply speak when I tell you to and to answer the questions I ask.” The inquisitor tapped his fingers on the table. “Or is there someone more *capable* in this bewitched town to whom I should be addressing my questions?”

“She is Gerda. Her husband is—was—” The magistrate cleared his throat nervously. “He was a woodsman named Otto, as was his father before him.”

“Otto? Am I to understand that his head was found on her doorstep?”

“Yes, Father, Your—Your Grace.”

“And the body?”

Gerda heard the magistrate gulp noisily. Her hands tightened into fists, her ragged nails digging into her palms. She had somehow convinced herself that Otto might still be alive, even though she could not imagine how his body might have survived being separated from its head.

“The body has not...we do not know where it is. Though we did find—” The magistrate sighed, gathering his courage.

“We found blood and...”

Unwanted, an image surfaced in Gerda’s mind—the vision of Otto’s headless body lying in the woods, ravaged by wild animals—and she whimpered as she banged her head against the floor in a vain effort to drive the image from her being.

“And?” the inquisitor prompted. “Come now. Is there more to tell, or do I need to drag you and the woman out to this spot in the woods? Was there more than blood?”

“No, Fa—Your Grace. I mean, yes, Your Grace.”

“Which is it?”

Gerda started when the inquisitor slapped his palm against the table, rattling the numerous dishes set before him.

“The Devil walks among your citizens, Magistrate. It is my duty to flush the insidious serpent out, to drive evil from the hearts of all good Christians. He wants you to be fearful of him and the actions of his agents because, when you are, you are more liable to forget your Christian duty to fear God.” The inquisitor slapped the table again.

“Fear me, for it is my judgment, *my duty*, to destroy this blight upon your community. *Wherever it may dwell.*”

The magistrate gulped again. When he spoke, his voice was breathless and he stuttered. “There were signs that he had been...cleaned.”

“Cleaned?”

“Like a rabbit.”

Gerda tried to hold back the terror that had been building inside her, but at the magistrate's words, she lost control. Her back arched and her mouth opened wide as her grief and fright tore out of her in a great wail. As her lungs emptied, her body began to shake uncontrollably.

"God help me," the magistrate cried. "She is possessed."

"Possessed by despair," the inquisitor snapped. "Hold her still, you fools."

As Gerda felt hands take hold of her legs and shoulders, she lashed out. She felt the wooden cuffs of her shackles connect with someone's head, and the impact emboldened her even more. She sat up, eyes wide open and staring, filled with a sudden, desperate resolve. There were four men standing over her, men she did not know and whom she knew to be in the service of the inquisitor. As they tried to restrain her, she fought back savagely.

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The woman's scream brought an immediate reaction to the men in the common room. The babble died in an instant, leaving the weak voice of the minstrel as he fumbled to the end of his verse. Both Raphael and Andreas were already on their feet, shoving their way through the crowd toward the door that led to the private room. Andreas reached the door first, yanking it open; Raphael crowded right behind him.

Inside, they found several of the inquisitor's men wrestling with a frenzied woman on the floor while the inquisitor and the magistrate looked on from behind a long table. The magistrate was leaning back, almost out of his chair, and as the Shield-Brethren entered the room, the inquisitor leaped to his feet.

"How dare you!" the inquisitor thundered, and because he had not clarified to whom he was speaking, everyone froze, thinking he was referring to them. Except for the woman, who continued to struggle. One of the inquisitor's men sat across her body, his broad hands pinning her manacled hands to her stomach.

"Pardon us, Father," Andreas said, bowing slightly to the inquisitor. His hand fell, not altogether accidentally, on the hilt of his sword. "We heard a scream and thought you might be in distress."

The inquisitor's face darkened at the suggestion in Andreas's words, but he managed to choke back his initial response. "This is a private tribunal of the Holy Roman Catholic Church in matters of heresy and witchcraft," he sputtered. "It does not concern men such as you."

"No?" Andreas countered. "My companion and I are members of the *Ordo Militum Vindicis Intactae*, a holy order that has been officially recognized by the Church in matters martial and judicial. Are you certain the sanctity of these proceedings would not benefit from the eyewitness accounts of two Knight Initiates?"

The inquisitor stared over Andreas's shoulder, his blue eyes blazing. "I know of your order," he said icily, regaining his composure, "and it has no authority over matters pertaining to the Inquisition."

Raphael's hand touched Andreas's elbow—a light grip, but firm nonetheless. "Our apologies, Father," Raphael said, his voice flat and emotionless. "It was not our intention to intrude upon your holy duties. We simply wished to offer our assistance."

"Which I do not require."

Andreas, still feeling Raphael's hand on his elbow, bowed again. "Very well, Father," he said, preparing to allow himself to be led from the room. "Anyone else?" he tried, unwilling to simply walk away. "Does anyone wish to call for our aid?"

The inquisitor's man sitting on the woman shifted his grip, putting his hand over her mouth and

pressing her head against the floor. Andreas stared at the man's back for a moment, his jaw working, and then he turned his gaze toward the magistrate. "No?" Andreas asked, and the magistrate would not meet his gaze as he shook his head.

The woman's eyes bulged in her head as she tried to get Andreas's attention by sheer force of will, and he met her gaze as Raphael opened the door behind them and gently pulled him away.

As soon as the door closed behind them and they were back in the common room, Andreas whirled on the older knight. "Explain yourself, Brother," he snapped, standing too close.

"He's right," Raphael said quietly, not stepping back.

"He is an inquisitor of the Church. His power is absolute, should he desire it to be so. We cannot interfere."

"I don't—"

The door bumped into him as it opened, and Andreas turned to stare at a pair of the inquisitor's men. His words turned into a snarl and he took a step toward the two men. They closed the door and one stayed, putting his back against the panel, and the other—offering a hostile glare at Andreas and Raphael—called for the innkeeper's attention as he strode off.

The remaining guard cleared his throat and rested his hands on the short hilt of the knife shoved into his belt.

Behind the Shield-Brethren, the innkeeper shouted to the room at large, "Drink up and go home. We're closed."

As the villagers took the hint and started a mass exodus toward the door of the inn, Andreas stalked past Raphael and sat down heavily at a table near the center of the room. He pulled his sword from its scabbard, causing a few of the nearby villagers to shove their way more quickly toward the door, and set it on the table.

"I'm staying," Andreas announced loudly. "I am holding a vigil for that poor woman's soul."

The guard at the door chewed on the inside of his lip for a moment and then shrugged as if it made no difference to him what Andreas did as long as he kept his distance.

"There is time, Brother," Andreas said, indicating the bench opposite him. "I would hear the explanation you were about to give."

Raphael sighed and signaled to the innkeeper that the two Shield-Brethren would appreciate being served, regardless of the man's insistence of the inn's closure.

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Gerda had tried so valiantly to get their attention, but the heavy brute sitting on her had covered her mouth. All she could do was try to communicate her desperate fear with her eyes, and when the blond haired one with the shaggy beard had asked if anyone needed aid, she had tried to bite the hand over her mouth—gnawing her way out of the man's grip if need be. But before she could get any purchase on his flesh, the two men had left. As the door latched behind them, she slumped to the floor. When the man removed his hand, all that came out of her mouth was a stream of weak sobs.

The inquisitor came around from behind the table and stood over Gerda. "There will be no more interruptions," he said sternly. He turned his attention to the cringing magistrate. "I will gain a confession from this woman or I will judge her an unrepentant heretic. One of the questions I will ask her is for her to name her companions, her coconspirators who also seek the Devil's favor. I will bring the full weight of my office and my holy duty upon those individuals as well."

"Yes, yes, Your Grace."

"Give me your belt."

“Your Grace?”

“Your ignorance tires me,” the inquisitor snapped. “I am not a bishop, nor a man so easily flattered by such honorifics.” He held out his hand. “Your belt.”

Gerda heard the magistrate fumble with his belt, the rattle of his sword as it bumped against the table and chair, and she twisted her head so as to better see. The magistrate pulled his sword from its hanger, laying it on the table, and handed over the long leather belt. The inquisitor folded the belt over itself until he had a strap as thick as his wrist and as long as his forearm. “Put your hand on the table,” the inquisitor said.

The magistrate acquiesced, and the inquisitor slapped the length of leather against the magistrate’s extended hand. He yelped in pain, and his voice hummed in his throat thereafter, but he made no other sound. The inquisitor looked down at Gerda. “My questions will be answered directly,” he said, “or there will be punishment.”

He knelt and forced his hand under her chin. “You may pray to God during your ordeal, but remember that he hears your thoughts as readily as your words. If you cry out again, I will take that as a sign that you are attempting to summon *demonic* aid. I take no pleasure in condemning heretics to death, but I will not suffer the Devil to walk amongst good Christians.” He stood again, his knees popping, and thrashed the magistrate’s hand one more time with his lash. “Do we understand each other?” His gaze roved from Gerda to the magistrate and back again.

She offered him the tiniest of nods.

“Good,” he said. “Turn her over,” he commanded his man. “Uncover her back so that my displeasure may be felt more readily by her unrepentant flesh.”

Gerda bit her tongue so hard blood flowed in her mouth as the inquisitor’s men roughly turned her over. Her hands were pulled over her head and her shift was yanked upward, bunching the material at the top of her shoulder blades. She struggled for a moment, until she felt the inquisitor’s booted foot press down on the small of her back. “Lie still,” he said, rocking his foot back until the sharp point of his spur pierced her flesh.

“Now,” he said when she stopped moving, “let us start again. This woman, Gerda, you say that she is known for leading men astray, yes?”

She kept her eyes closed, listening to the magistrate answer the inquisitor’s questions. The inquisitor was ignoring the death of her husband—it was as if he had never existed—and he was asking questions about her now. She did not understand why, and the magistrate’s answers were equally as unreal. None of his responses were true, but the presence of the inquisitor’s foot on her back was a constant reminder of what would happen if she dared to open her mouth and speak. She could not contradict what the magistrate was saying, but that did not lessen the gravity of his lies.

The inquisitor was correct in his assessment that the Devil lived in her village, but it was not her house in which the fallen angel had taken residence. It was not her ear in which the serpent had whispered.



“The horse you admired earlier?” Raphael began his explanation with a question, and when Andreas nodded, he continued. “It was a gift from Frederick the Second.”

Andreas nearly choked on a mouthful of ale. “The Holy Roman Emperor?”

“Aye. The Emperor and I enjoy a certain...friendship, I guess. I have, on occasion, been able to offer my services to him, and in no way have I ever expressed any desire for any recompense for such duties other than the pure pleasure of being useful to the Holy Roman Empire.”

“No,” Andreas coughed. “I can’t imagine anyone would have the audacity to think otherwise.”

Raphael offered the younger man a slight smile. “In this instance, I happened to be traveling in Italy when he was in the final months of assembling the *Liber Augustalis*.” On seeing Andreas’s blank gaze, he explained. “Frederick’s grandfather, Roger the Second, put together a code of laws known as the Assizes of Ariano that codified and laid out the rules of secular government for the Kingdom of Sicily. Frederick, in turn, has redrafted these laws twice—once in 1220 at Capua and more recently at Melfi.”

Raphael paused to wet his throat. “Mostly these accords affirm Frederick’s secular power of the lands he commands, but they also lay out a fair number of regulations concerning the welfare and safety of the individual citizens. As such, he wanted to be sure he had the opinion of a number of learned citizens in regards to this new constitution before he proclaimed it to be law.”

“And you happened to be one of these *learned* citizens?”

“The Emperor and I share five languages in common, more than most at his court. In fact, in any given conversation we enjoyed, he would switch between the five at his pleasure, mostly to maintain his fluency, but also—as he admitted to me at one point—to confuse his court. If they couldn’t understand what he was saying, they would think he was talking about them, and fearful of losing face they tended to behave themselves.

“The reason he gave me the horse was not just for my assistance in the *Liber Augustalis*, but because of a favor I had done him several years prior. I heard you telling stories of the Crusades earlier. Was that the Sixth?”

Andreas lowered his mug and stared at Raphael for a long moment. “Aye,” he said, dropping his gaze to the knife-marred wood of the tabletop.

“You are a very florid storyteller, Andreas,” Raphael said with a smile. “Though I was not in the Levant at that time, I do recall that it was possibly the least contentious of any crusade. Not that it matters. Crusading in the Holy Land changes a man; God affords such a survivor some leniency when telling others of his actions in the service of God and kingdom.”

Andreas nodded, and his shoulders sagged slightly—the only visible sign of his relief that Raphael was not going to chastise him further for his embellishments. “You were at Damietta?” he asked. “During the Fifth?”

“I was.”

“Once I would have given anything to have been a part of that host, to be in the thick of the fighting, but I have heard stories from men who returned from Damietta, and I lost all pleasure in seeking glory in that way.”

“And you are a better man for it, Andreas.”

Andreas shrugged as if he did not concern himself overmuch with such distinctions. He raised h



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