

# **Damnation**

**Igor Valec**

# Chapter One

Crown Prince Asuf followed the hoofprint trail in the dirt, tracking his prey.

Upon a saddle of white leather embroidered with golden leaves and vines, he rode Yaeger, his mighty war-steed white in coat and clad in iron. In one hand, Asuf clutched Yaeger's reins; in the other, a glowing lantern, whose flickering light broke the darkness in the azure underground jungle. The flaming skull emblazoned in gold upon Asuf's white breastplate glistened in the glow with his golden cape.

Through the eye-slits of his helm, a skull forged of white steel, Asuf glanced at the armored knight beside him, whose tabard bore a blue rose upon its orange hue. The knight's black mount licked her lips; grazed her tongue across her sharp teeth and wet nose. Asuf cringed at the thought of her barking and chasing some small critter without prompt. She and Yaeger were reitvulfs. Merciless beasts, born to rend their foes with tooth and hoof. Restraint was not in their nature.

“Valhelm.”

The knight turned to Asuf, his wide gray eyes showing through his pointed visor. “Yes, Crown Prince?”

“Have you fed Arika?”

Valhelm reached down to his mount's neck and scratched it. “Of course, Crown Prince. I wouldn't dream of taking her out to hunt on an empty stomach.”

“Good. I want my prize intact. I don't want her causing too much damage.”

Asuf drew his gaze down to the flat-nosed man on his other side, who donned a plain shirt of steel scales. The man's height was that of mundane men, dwarfed by those of the master race to which Valhelm and Asuf belonged. His mount was an immense beetle clad in dark green chitin. Three front-facing horns adorned it, one on the head and two on the thorax. On its back, it carried with its rider a load of hunting supplies.

"Slave," said Asuf.

The flat-nosed man turned his head up to Asuf and gave a bow. "I am at your command, master."

"Am I right to assume the esfohler is fit to carry game?"

"Yes, master."

"Good. The prey is nearby. Stay silent."

Asuf continued along the trail. He weaved through the jungle, eyeing the gaudy flora. Brightly hued bugs and reptiles darted through every bush and tree. The hollers of apes echoed from afar, joined by the songs of crickets. A violet snake hung from a nearby tree, hissing at

Asuf with its tail coiled around a thorny branch. In the air, a saccharine stench loomed, filling his gut with churning sickness.

The hoofprints grew sharp and deep in the moist ground below. Sweat trickled down Asuf's face as his helm filled with heat. He thought to lift his visor, but refused. Protection was more important than comfort.

A glint sparked in the distance. Asuf pulled on the reins, bringing Yaeger to a stop. When Asuf examined it more closely, he found a pond whose water rippled slightly from the other side. The hoofprint trail wound around it, to that shadowed point from which the ripples traveled. Asuf raised his right hand, letting the lantern hang down from his thumb. Within the darkness was surely his prey.

“Form a line behind me,” said Asuf. “Valhelm, guard the rear.”

Valhelm nodded. “Yes, Crown Prince.”

As the line formed behind him, Asuf fixed his sights on his target and slowly rode around the pond, concealed in thin layers of

foliage. As he awaited the white points of ivory tusks, the arms of trees brushed against his armor, their thorns failing to scratch the fine steel.

Yaeger halted.

Asuf raised an eyebrow, looking to his front. Yaeger had stopped at a spiky wall of thin branches between a pair of trees. A prospective home for all sorts of deadly vermin. Asuf leaned forward, peering into it for any creature that might be venomous. The search lasted for some time. It yielded nothing.

“Why did we stop, Crown Prince?” asked Valhelm.

“Minor inconvenience,” said Asuf. “Nothing I can’t handle.”

Asuf rested his lantern onto a hook on his saddle. He pulled a thin dagger from a sheath on his belt, near his sword and warhammer. With it, he cut away at the branches. The wickedly sharp edge sliced through the wood with the slightest push and draw. They fell by the handful, littering the dirt with brown and azure hues. Once he’d cleared the way, Asuf slid the dagger back in its sheath and tapped his heels against Yaeger’s sides. They continued onward.

Valhelm took a shaky breath. “Um, Crown Prince?”

“I told you to be silent.”

“Uh, I know, but I need to tell you something.”

Asuf blinked. “Fine. But be quick about it.”

“I’m a bit nervous. I’ve never hunted in this part of the caverns before.” Valhelm held silent for a moment. “I mean, I can only imagine what’s lurking here.” He shuddered. “I’ve heard the stories.”

Weakness. Unacceptable. Asuf tugged on Yaeger’s reins, stopping him in his tracks and turning him aside. With him stopped Valhelm and the slave, Asuf glanced around for signs of threat, then turned to Valhelm and shot a glare into his eyes.

“Who are you?” Asuf squeezed his reins. “Where are you from?”

Valhelm hesitated. “Your Royal Highness. I am Hirr Valhelm, of the Clan of Waertemborg.”

“So, you are a knight.”

“Yes, Crown Prince.”

Asuf tensed his brow. “Are you weak, Hurr Valhelm? Because I will not suffer the presence of a weak knight in my retinue.”

“Crown Prince, I am not weak!” His worried tone suggested otherwise.

“Then, stop whining,” said Asuf. “You are a knight. You hunt where the knights hunt.”

“B... but, Crown Prince. You need to understand. Father told me that fear is natural. I—.”

“Your father is a blithering moron, and should be put on trial for heresy.” Asuf paused. “This is what scripture tells us: ‘Oh chosen, purge from your minds the scourge of fear. Let not cowardice govern your words or actions, and let not dread nor pain sway your visage. For fear is the poison of the mind. The meat of weakness. Those consumed by fear shall be also consumed by hellfire.’ Would you argue against scripture, hurr knight?”

Valhelm shook his head violently. “N-never, Crown Prince! Scripture is always right! Always, always right!”

“Good. Now, have you any further concerns?”

“No.”

“No, what?”

Valhelm sighed. “No, Your Royal Highness.”

Asuf pointed a finger at Valhelm. “I could have you scourged for your insolence. But I won’t.”

“I humbly thank you for your generosity, Your Royal Highness.” Valhelm bowed his head.

With his friend’s lapse in discipline dealt with, Asuf pressed his heels against Yaeger’s sides and turned him to his previous path. Yaeger resumed his trek, with the other two mounts following close behind.

Some few paces away, Asuf caught the faint glimmer of ivory tusks. He was right. The creature that drank from the pond was his prey.

Loud ruffles reverberated from the trees above. The warthog squealed and scurried away. Something lurked in those trees. It was not friendly. Asuf halted Yaeger. He pulled his warhammer from a loop on his belt by its rough steel handle. The blunt end faced forward, away from the sharp hook.

“Draw your sword, Hurr Valhelm. It will taste blood soon. Prepare yourself.”

Valhelm did as he was told. “Vulfrum protect us.”

The ruffles grew louder, and leaves shook all around. Heartbeat quickened. Mind gained alertness. Danger was everywhere, and there was no escape.

A hulking gray gorilla leapt down to Asuf from above. Its booming holler echoed in the air. Asuf drove his warhammer’s pointed tip through the ape’s hairy chest. Blood poured from the wound. It weighed heavy on Asuf’s arm. He tossed it aside. Red splattered on a nearby tree.

More apes emerged from the branches on all sides. Yaeger barked at them, brandishing his cruelly sharp fangs. They charged at Asuf from the front and flanks. Yaeger dug his teeth into one's throat. He tore open its neck. It fell choking on its own blood.

Another beast on Asuf's right swung its fist between his eyes. His head flew back; his helm rang. He spent a moment in the dark. When he returned to the light with pain throbbing between his ears, he raised his warhammer and slammed it into that ape's head. Pink and red mush oozed from the crater on its scalp.

An ape to his left grabbed his leg by the knee. It tugged with its whole body. Asuf's leg-plates strained against the pull. He raised again his warhammer and bashed its hands. Bones crunched under each blow. The ape screamed in pain. Yaeger bucked another one behind him with a loud crack. He turned his head around and bit into the neck of the one Asuf had struck, and flailed it in the air in his jaws.

Asuf's heavy breaths filled his helm as he glanced around for more apes. He found one. It had his slave pinned to the ground as it smashed the slave's red face with a bloody fist. Valuable property

wasted. That beast was about to pay. Asuf patted Yaeger's head. Yaeger opened his jaws. His kill plopped onto the ground. Asuf pulled Yaeger's reins and kicked his sides. Yaeger barked and galloped. He rode towards his new target and raised his warhammer to strike.

Another ape leapt on his back from the trees. It pulled him down sideways. Its hairy arm squeezed his neck. His legs and waist strained to their limits to stay on his saddle. The effort left him winded. His every muscle weakened; his head went light; his vision blurred to a haze. He switched his grip on his warhammer and swung the hooked spike into the ape at his back. It pierced through hide and bone. The ape let out a shrill shriek. Its grip on Asuf's neck tightened. Asuf pulled his warhammer up to retrieve it. Driven in deep, it would not budge. With his hand now trembling, Asuf released his warhammer and fumbled for his dagger. Once he had a hold, he whipped the dagger out from its sheath. He clutched its handle in both hands. *Vulfrum guide my blade.* With the last of his strength, he thrust downward over his head. His blade cracked through the skull. The ape released Asuf's neck. Asuf released his dagger and let it fall to the ground.

Hearing no more commotion around him, Asuf ceased fighting. He took deep breaths, in and out, to recover. After some time, the haze subsided, and his muscles regained strength. When he looked in all directions, the only apes he could see were the limp and lifeless.

Asuf clasped his hands and bowed his head—a silent gesture of thanks to the Almighty. He picked his head back up and further examined his surroundings.

Behind him, the ape that had almost taken his life laid dead on its back. The full length of Asuf's blade impaled its head from its scalp. Solid hit. The handle of Asuf's warhammer stuck out from over the shoulder. Its hooked end held stuck in its back, propping it up on one side.

To Asuf's front, Valhelm stared down at another dead ape, his sword dripping with blood. Near it laid the corpse of Asuf's slave, its face so mangled and red that it hardly resembled a face at all. His mount, the esfohler, nibbled on the crimson mush without a care. It seemed this insect was quite the pragmatist.

“Are you injured?” asked Asuf.

Valhelm looked to Asuf. “N-no. Nothing major, Crown Prince. Just... just a bit shaken up, is all.” He glanced down at the slave. “I suppose the same can’t be said of him.”

“No, I suppose not.”

Valhelm wiped the blood off his sword with his tabard’s loose ends and slid it back into its sheath. “May we give him a burial?”

“No. We won’t waste our time with that. It would make us too vulnerable.” Asuf paused. “We will, however, recover his shirt of scales. His replacement will appreciate having it.”

Valhelm nodded. “Y-yes, Crown Prince.” He swung off Arika and walked toward the slave’s corpse. He knelt down next to it. “And are we to continue the hunt?”

“I see no need. We’ve already slain a pack of wild brutes.” Asuf unhooked his feet from his stirrups. “We will take the head of this pack as our prize.” He swung a leg to one side and slid off his saddle. His

heels touched the ground; his cape fell just above them. “But first, I need my weapons.”

Asuf walked to the ape that had choked him. He bent down and pulled his dagger from its head. On the ape’s hairy coat, Asuf wiped the blood off his blade and slid it back into its sheath. Asuf stuck his foot underneath the ape and flipped it on its belly. The warhammer held firm in its back, which bore a brilliant auburn hue atop the gray, stained red with blood. Asuf held the ape down with one heel on its back. He grabbed the warhammer in both hands and guided the hooked end out from the ape’s shoulder.

As he rubbed the weapon clean and returned it to the loop on his belt, Asuf looked to Valhelm, who folded the slave’s scale shirt over his knee. “I have found the head of the pack.”

“Is that so, Crown Prince?”

“Yes, it is.” Asuf looked back down to the ape with the back of auburn. “A worthy opponent, this one. It’s an honor to have him as my prize.”

Asuf squatted down at the ape's side. He slid his forearms underneath him and began to lift. His legs, already tired from the day's ordeals, strained to lift the massive beast. Yet, with effort, he stood upright, letting the ape's limbs dangle as he carried him to the esfohler and laid him belly-down on its back. After taking a deep breath, Asuf walked back to Yaeger and lifted himself back up on his saddle.

“Ready?”

Valhelm lifted himself on Arika's saddle. He held her reins in one hand, and in the other, the reins of the esfohler. “Yes, Crown Prince.”

“Then let us take our leave. Glory awaits.”

Asuf pressed his heels against Yaeger's sides and directed him to the exit of the cavern.

“Tsk-tsk. Come on, friend. We're going home.” Valhelm followed closely behind his prince.

## Chapter Two

In the midst of a sea of whispers, King Lortar slouched back in his throne. Its intricate white marble frame bore a sigil, the snarling head of an enraged reitvulf, above him in striking scarlet rubies. He stroked his long, white beard, which brushed against the glistening golden cloak draped over his white silk shirt and trousers. The crown atop his head, a masterwork of gold and gems with a skull forged atop the crest, sunk his neck down under its weight as he watched his subjects form a line along the royal blue carpet across the white marble floor, from the foot of his throne to the open marble double doors.

The subjects, donned in their best attire and practicing utmost courtesy, stood between the lines of armored guards who stared down at them from both the carpet's sides. These guards were knights of the Immaculate Order, whose uniform was a full suit of white plates with the same sigil as the one on Lortar's throne emblazoned in gold upon the breastplate, and whose armaments were a sword and dagger at the hip, and a poleaxe in both hands.

Staring down at them from above was yet another golden sigil, on the marble wall above the open doors—a menacing three-headed eagle whose talons clutched a bundle of rods fastened around an axe with twine, and whose wings stretched out to the heavens.

A bell's deep ring reverberated from the distance precisely ten times, followed by the slow close of the double doors. Once the exit was fully sealed, the Immaculate Order knight to Lortar's right took one step forward.

“Attention,” he spoke. “Attention, subjects. His Holy Majesty, Lortar the First of the Clan of Sodlur, by the Might of the Lord of Wrath, King of Stolthelm, High Priest of the Temple Imperial, Duke of

Stolthelm, and Earl of Stolthelm and Vulfrumen Zorn; will now, on this evening of the fifteenth day of Dread Month, in the nine-hundred-seventy-sixth year after the founding of the Eternal City, and in the eighth year after the dissolution of the Imperium; enact the arbitration of his justice upon those who have sought out his guidance, and have been chosen by the appropriate figures of His Holy Majesty's cabinet as worthy of subjecting directly to themselves His Holy Majesty's judgment. All decisions made by His Holy Majesty are, short only of divine intervention, final and without further recourse unless he so dictates. Any act of contempt or of disruption of His Holy Majesty's arbitration of justice will result in the termination of your case in the eyes of the royal cabinet, and in the appropriate sentence upon your person according to the laws of mighty Vulfrum, and of His Holy Majesty's realm.

“Once you have been called upon to receive His Holy Majesty's arbitration of justice, you will be given no more time to adjust your argument, gather your evidence, or perfect your appearance. You will, should His Holy Majesty grant the appropriate arbitration, be allowed

to do so between your departure from His Holy Majesty's royal palace, and the date of the next stage of justice regarding your case. Note that any argument or complaint against His Holy Majesty's arbitration will be considered an act of contempt, and will be responded to accordingly.

“Today's cases are as follows.” The knight pulled a roll of parchment out from a pocket on his white leather belt. He unraveled it and read, “The case of Hirr Krutz kon Waertemborg, who stands accused, by Earl Durek kon Huss, of committing rape against his daughter, Priestess Klowe kon Huss. The case of Guild Constable Gutfred, who stands accused, by Guildmaster Kunred of the Guild of Farmers, of embezzling approximately one tenth of the guild's gross monetary income over the past several months, in the direction of his own personal treasury. And, the case of Priestess Gartra kon Uegerstun, who stands accused, by District Priestess Uva kon Staatsborg, of conception and propagation of heresy.”

Lortar let out a groan. *Slow day today.*

The knight rolled the parchment back up and placed it back in his pocket. “Hirr Krutz kon Waertemborg and Earl Durek kon Huss, step forward.”

Two men walked up, stopping two paces from the foot the dais beneath Lortar’s throne, and standing beside one another with their feet together and their spines erect. The young man on the right wore an orange silk tunic that bore the image of a blue rose; the older man on the left wore a cloak of bear fur. They saluted Lortar with their open right hands first held across their chests, then extended outward at eye level.

“At ease,” said Lortar.

The two lowered their arms, holding both hands behind their backs and spreading their feet to shoulder width.

Lortar nodded. Their etiquette was good enough. “We will now hear the argument of the accuser.”

The man in the fur cloak stepped up a pace. “Your Holy Majesty, blessed be your name. The knight who stands before you had,

within the confines of her own bedchamber, forced himself upon my daughter, Priestess Klowe kon Huss, in the evening of the second day of Dread Month. I had witnessed the atrocity through an open window as I returned to my hold from a hunt. I had been informed of no prior interaction between the two, and the few interactions I have had with Hirr Krutz have given me an impression of foul character on his part. Neither that which I witnessed, nor any information I had accrued after the fact, lends any sort of credence to the idea that the act was consensual on the part of my daughter; and even if they did, the act would not have been sanctioned by marital bonds, as they are not wed, and Hirr Krutz is already married to another woman.”

Lortar stroked his beard. “So, then, the charges you place upon Hirr Krutz are rape and adultery, for which the punishment would surely be execution by the cross. Would you agree with this, Earl Durek?”

Durek nodded. “Yes, Your Holy Majesty.”

“We see. And, you were in no position to physically defend your daughter?”

“No, Your Holy Majesty. I was outside the castle, too far away to reach them in time.”

“Hm.” Lortar paused. “Very well. We will now hear the rebuttal of the defendant.”

Krutz stepped up as Durek stepped back. “Your Holy Majesty, blessed be your name. I see from Earl Durek no sufficient grounds for sentencing. I was nowhere near the bedchamber of Priestess Klowe kon Huss at the time and date at which I am accused of raping her, and seeing as the Earl has neither any witness apart from himself, nor any tangible evidence of the act, and that the scenario which he presents is suspect, I can envision no valid argument stating the contrary.”

“We are inclined to agree with you.” Lortar leaned back in his throne, looking to Durek. “And as for his character, Earl, we are disinclined to accept your assertion that it is foul. His father is a recipient of the Order of Pride, granted to him by the late Empress Alga during the war, and a good friend of ours. His younger brother is a good friend of our eldest son, Crown Prince Asuf. From none of the

aforementioned parties were we ever given any indication of foul character on his part.”

Durek pursed his lips. He took heavy breaths through his nostrils.

“And so,” Lortar said, “we consider your argument to be invalid, and will make no declaration of guilt upon the accused. Yet, in consideration to justice, we offer you two modes of recourse:

“The first is a trial by a jury of priestesses, and with a representative of Head Priestess Eidi kon Huss acting as judge. There, your accusation will be examined in more detail, and will, in all likelihood, be rejected. The second is that most sacred of trials, trial by mortal combat, which will be overseen by Duelmaster Ulrik kon Fuss. Make your choice, Earl Durek.”

Durek stuck out his chest and beat it with a fist. “I choose to engage Hirr Krutz in mortal combat, Your Holy Majesty.”

Lortar nodded. “Very well.” He looked to the knight to his left. “Hirr Vulfgang. Escort these two to Duelmaster Ulrik. He will handle things from there.” He looked back to Durek. “You are dismissed.”

“Yes, Your Holy Majesty,” said Durek.

Hirr Vulfgang stepped down from his place beside the king, marching down an empty space along the carpet. After Hirt Krutz and Earl Durek saluted their king, they followed Hirt Vulfgang out of the room.

The knight to Lortar’s right said, “Guild Constable Gutfred and Guildmaster Kunred. Come forward.”

These two, standing at the typically short heights of those savages not of the Stolthelmitic people, approached Lortar. One wore an auburn tunic; the other wore an azure one, and held a stack of papers in his hands. They, as the previous two, stood and saluted their liege.

“At ease,” said Lortar.

They did as they were told.

“We will now hear the argument of the accuser.”

The man in the azure tunic stepped forward. “Your Holy Majesty, blessed be your name. I accuse Guild Constable Gutfred of embezzlement on the grounds that, when my accountants took inventory of the guild treasury, then compared the treasury’s contents to the guild’s monthly financial records over the course of several months, from Harvest Month to Holy Month, they had discovered a disparity between the two. That is, the number of Imperial schullings counted within the treasury did not match that which had been penned down to record.

“I cannot say whether you are already aware of this fact, but in the event that you are not, Your Holy Majesty, I must humbly inform you that Guild Constable Gutfred is known to be disreputable, as many within the guild can attest.”

“We are aware,” Lortar said with a nod.

“So,” said Kunred, “when I had assembled a list of suspects, he was at the very top. Senior Warden Lena kon Cress, of the Secret Service, accepted my humblest request to launch an investigation. Her agents found the missing currency in his coffers.” Kunred flicked his

papers in the air. “I have in my possession a signed, written statement by the Senior Warden confirming this fact. Would you be willing to verify it, Your Holy Majesty?”

Lortar gestured to the knight on his right. “Our associate will verify it for us.”

The knight walked up to Kunred, whose eyes widened and whose brow shot up as he looked up to the armored man who towered over him. After snatching the papers from Kunred’s hands, the knight examined them, flipping through each one in quick succession. Once finished, the knight handed the papers back to Kunred and turned to Lortar.

“It is what he says it is, Your Holy Majesty.”

Lortar nodded as the knight returned to his prior position. “Then, our stance on the matter is clear.” He drew his jaded gaze to Gutfred, who wrung his trembling hands. “Guild Constable Gutfred.”

Gutfred flinched. “Yes, Your Holy Majesty?”

“Do you know how lucky you were to be born without your mind condemned to oblivion?”

Gutfred nodded.

Slowly, Lortar steepled his fingers near his chest. Gutfred’s dread was understandable, but nothing new. “Your guild makes its coin off the backs of your kind who have had their brains altered to prevent just this sort of disloyalty. Your comparatively high status is a privilege, not a right.”

Kunred rubbed his palms together, grinning a pointed grin.

“A privilege,” Lortar said, “that you will no longer be allowed to keep. We, as Lortar the First, King of Stolthelm and High Priest of the Temple Imperial, hereby sentence you, Guild Constable Gutfred, to be gelded and reassigned to perpetual labor in the salt mines.”

All hope, at that point, seemed to flush out of Gutfred. His face froze with despair, not uttering a word as a pair of Immaculate Order knights grabbed him by his arms and dragged him away.

Lortar looked back to Kunred. “You have been granted the king’s justice, Guildmaster. You are dismissed.”

Kunred bowed deeply to Lortar. “I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your generosity, Your Holy Majesty.” He rose back up and left the room with a spring in his step.

“Priestess Gartra kon Uegerstun and District Priestess Uva kon Staatsborg,” Lortar’s right-hand knight said. “Come forward.”

Two women emerged from the crowd. The young one wore a flowing white robe; the older one wore one of dark green. They bowed before their king.

“At ease,” said Lortar.

They did so.

“We will now hear the argument of the accuser.”

The older one stepped forward. “Your Holy Majesty, blessed be your name. I regret to inform you that this misguided little girl has insisted upon rebelling against the orthodoxy of Your Holy Majesty’s Temple Imperial, on the basis of naive misinterpretation of excerpts

from the Book of Crucible and the Book of Purge, which has resulted in a most unorthodox take on the Vulfrumite doctrine of eternal weakness. Despite my sincerest attempts to bring her back into the light of orthodoxy, she remains belligerent and able to accept neither the truthfulness of the orthodox criticisms against her ideas, nor the orthodoxy's ancient and unquestioned authority. Thus, I have been forced, to my disheartenment, to take it up with you, Your Holy Majesty, so that you could talk some sense into her."

"We see." Lortar cupped his hand onto his chin and nodded. "Although, Uva, this is really something for which you should have contacted your local inquisitor. The Inquisition is what roots out heresy in our lands."

Uva took a shaky breath. "Not in the way I feel is needed, Your Holy Majesty. When I brought this up with my superiors, I had insisted on contacting you, rather than the Inquisition, as I feel that His Holy Majesty's justice is more... just. She is simply misguided. Her heart is in the right place, I am sure of it."

“Hm.” Lortar pursed his lips. “Well, you see, heretical thoughts are supposed to be weeded out of any young cleric before she dons the priestess’ robe, not after, when her basic education is presumed to be complete.” He looked to the younger one, Gartra. “How old are you, little girl?”

Gartra bowed her head. “I am sixteen years old, Your Holy Majesty.”

“Sixteen, you say?” Lortar leaned back in his throne, raising his brow. “So, Uva has managed to not only get a child into her robes well before the expected age, but also to take this act of youthful rebellion up to the absolute highest authority in the realm?” He looked to Uva. “You should have joined the Secret Service. This particular talent of yours would have been far more useful there than in the Temple. But, anyway...” He looked back to Gartra. “You realize that the charges laid against you are deathly serious.”

Gartra hesitated. “Y-yes, Your Holy Majesty.”

“The penalties for your crimes against the Temple are execution by the flame, and obliteration of memory.”

“Yes, Your Holy Majesty.”

“If I may interject,” Uva said, “I woul—.”

“Hold your tongue,” Lortar snapped.

Uva jolted in her spot, holding her lips shut.

“Now, then,” said Lortar. “Gartra, now that you are aware of the punishment you face, we will give you the chance to recant your previous heresies, and leave this palace with life and limb intact, on the condition that you raise neither question nor argument against the teachings of the Temple ever again, and that you face appropriate discipline at the hands of the Inquisition. We extend this mercy to you once, and only once, on the grounds that you have demonstrated to your king remarkable courage.”

As Gartra stared at the ground in silence, Lortar waited in anticipation for her answer. Although the girl was inducted into the priesthood too early, thus was given the responsibility before she was

mature or knowledgeable enough to handle it, her spirit would make her a remarkable priestess once she gained some age. Hopefully, she would make the smart choice.

Gartra looked back up to her king. “I humbly reject your mercy, Your Holy Majesty. I stand by my principles in the hopes that I can convince you to recognize their merit.”

Lortar groaned, rubbing his fingers against his eyelids. *Such wasted potential. Uva’s coddling has doomed her.* He looked to Gartra. “Very well, child. We may be a king, but we are also a priest. And as such, we know well enough on religious matters to guide the misguided, and we wish to make one last attempt at letting you know the error of your ways before you go to see mighty Vulfrum above. Now, child, let us hear your argument for your ideas.”

“Yes, Your Holy Majesty.” Gartra cleared her throat. “The orthodox definition of the eternal weakness is the innate proclivity towards weakness that is inherent within every person, Vulfrum’s chosen not excluded. That is, each of us is innately weak, and that it is only through discipline and proper training that we make ourselves

strong. This is not what I argue against. Rather, it is simply the orthodoxy's view that the essence of the eternal weakness is differently potent from person to person.

“Although the difference between the Stolthelmitite and the savage is readily apparent, both in body and in spirit, that essence which separates the chosen from the savage has no difference between one individual and the other. Thus, each member of the chosen people is equally valuable before mighty Vulfrum. Thus, they should be equally entitled to equal respect and impartial treatment before the Temple; before their peers, their superiors, and their inferiors, within the organization with which they are affiliated; and before the law of the land.

“The excerpts from scripture which I utilize to support my argument are as follows:”

Gartra cleared her throat and took a deep breath. “From Crucible, part three, verses seventeen through nineteen: Verily, He smote the priests by fire, as He did smite Kloss and those standers by,

for their weakness bore little difference. His judgment was righteous; their blood was upon them.

“And from Purge, part seven, verses eight through twelve: So verily, Saint Wedrik said unto his men, ‘See how they run. See how they quake and flee before our righteous might. Put them to the sword on the rout, then plunder their households, then butcher their livestock, then render unto their families the burden of servitude by the whip. This, I command of you, and command that my word be carried down, by each leader, to the last cavalryman and foot-soldier. For we chosen of the Lord of Wrath are to their toil and flesh entitled in equal measure.’”

“From the first example, we see mighty Vulfrum casting equal punishment down upon those who offended Him with inadequate sacrifice, regardless of their individual strengths or merits, which are not mentioned within the text.

“From the second example, we see Saint Wedrik explicitly stating to the soldiers of the Imperium that they are equally entitled to the services of the savage peoples which they had sought out to

conquer and subjugate. This would imply an equality before Vulfrum, Himself, as this would be otherwise not possible.”

Another deep breath passed from Gartra’s lips. “So, I conclude that the orthodox view of this facet of the eternal weakness has not taken into account these accounts of difference of essence being ignored, which would, as mighty Vulfrum is all-knowing, imply that such difference does not exist.”

“We see,” Lortar said with a nod. “Does that conclude your argument?”

“It does, Your Holy Majesty.”

Lortar blinked. *Poorly done.* “Very well, then. It seems to me that you have neglected to take into consideration the context of those excerpts which you have used as evidence to support your case, as well as certain other parts of scripture, both of which would oppose your argument.” He paused. “We see that you have recited these excerpts from memory. These recitals were correct. Have you, perchance, memorized any other parts of scripture?”

Gartra shook her head. “No, Your Holy Majesty.”

“Very well.” Lortar looked to the knight to his right. “Prince Garr. Take into your hands the copy of scripture at the back of the throne, and open it to the verses which we mention, when we mention them. Tell us when we recite something incorrectly.”

“Yes, Your Royal Majesty.” Prince Garr bent down behind the throne. From the compartment built into it, he pulled out a thick tome, whose pristine white cover with golden bindings encased its pages. The lavishly calligraphed title, *His Holy Scrit*, held emblazoned on it in gold.

Once Prince Garr stood back in position, Lortar said, “Crucible, part three, verses twelve through sixteen.”

Garr opened the book, flipping its pages to the correct spot.

Lortar recited, “Kloss had brought unto them a cow both feeble and sickly. When the priests asked why the cow was feeble and sickly, Kloss said unto them that his second son had neglected the family’s cattle. When the priests asked Kloss why his second son had neglected

the family's cattle, Kloss said unto the priests that his second son was, not like his first or third son, absent of mind. Thus, the priest asked Kloss if he had in his possession a cow of greater value; Kloss said unto the priests that this cow was their most valuable. Thus, the priest granted acceptance to the sickly cow to give to Vulfrum, Lord of the Heavens, and bound her to the altar. The Lord, Vulfrum, looked upon the paltry gift which had defiled His holy altar, and was not pleased.

“Crucible, part four, verses twenty-nine and thirty.”

Prince Garr flipped to that part.

“And those too lacking in strength to serve Me,” Lortar recited, “must suffer death. So says Vulfrum, all-wise, all-powerful. Purge, part two, verses one through seventeen.”

Prince Garr turned over a large chunk of pages.

Lortar tapped a finger on his throne's armrest. “Saint Wedrik's eldest son, Runhordt, had practiced in the art of combat with the training sword in hand. Saint Wedrik looked down upon the boy as he swung at the air with neither deftness nor grace. Thus, he said unto the

boy, 'Your swings are wanting for deftness and grace.' Runhorrdt replied to Saint Wedrik, 'I apologize, Your Grace, for this is the best of my ability.' Thus, Saint Wedrik said unto the boy, 'Assume the guard of Ochs.' And the boy did assume the guard of Ochs, yet in solid footing, it was wanting. Saint Wedrik was displeased, and said unto the boy, 'Lay a powerful strike from Ochs.' Thus, the boy laid a strike from Ochs, yet in power, it was wanting.

"Saint Wedrik then said unto the boy, 'You worm, you weakling, you pile of excrement. Your swings are wanting for deftness and grace. Your guard wants for solid footing. Your strikes are wanting for power. You, whelp, bring unto me disgrace me with your ineptitude.' Thus, the boy replied to Saint Wedrik, 'My apologies to you, Your Grace. I will seek to improve my craft, so that I may become a good warrior, and be worthy of your esteem.' Thus, Saint Wedrik replied, 'You had better. For, if you do not do as you promise, then I will take you into the caverns so that we may hunt, and from there, you will find neither return nor mourning.' And from that moment, the swings of the boy had wanted for neither deftness nor grace, his guard

wanted not for solid footing, and his strikes wanted not for power. Verily, he would become a warrior worthy of his father's esteem."

Lortar looked up to Prince Garr. "Did we make any error in reciting these verses?"

Prince Garr closed the book and placed it back into its compartment. "No, Your Holy Majesty."

After a nod, Lortar drew his gaze to Gartra. "The excerpts which we have recited to you, one of which happens to be immediately followed by your first example, directly contradict your idea that each Stolthelmitite is equally affected by the eternal weakness. The examples that you cite show equality of consequence, not of innate value or essence. For, when you fail as a collective, you suffer as a collective; and when you succeed as a collective, you benefit as one. Individual merit matters little at that point. This does not mean that each person within that collective is equally valuable—or valueless, however the case may be—to mighty Vulfrum. All it means is that, simply, life is not fair, not even to the strong.

“This is why the Temple holds discipline and order among the highest of virtues. Because, as important as it is for each individual to be strong, that, alone, is not enough. They must also be strong as a single, unified whole. This principle is what allowed the Imperium to stretch throughout this entire continent and beyond, and the Imperium’s failure to uphold it is what led to its demise. Do you see now, child?”

Gartra hung her head down in shame, then after drawing out a long sigh, she nodded.

“Good. Now, then.” Lortar clenched his jaw and swallowed a nascent lump in his throat. “We, as King Lortar the First, King of Stolthelm and High Priest of the Temple Imperial, condemn you, Priestess Gartra, on the charges of conception and propagation of heresy, to death by burning and to obliteration of memory. You are to be burned at the stake, on the morrow, in the public square; and all record of your existence will be destroyed. And you...” Lortar shot a fierce glare at Uva and pointed a finger at her. “We condemn you as well, District Priestess Uva, to death by burning, and to obliteration of memory, on the charge of sheltering an enemy of the Temple Imperial.”

Uva gasped. “What?” Tears welled in her eyes; her breath and body trembled. “No! Y-... Your Holy Majesty, you can’t do this!”

“You will be burned at the stake alongside Priestess Gartra, and all record of your existence will also be destroyed.”

Knights of the Immaculate Order stepped to the priestesses from their lines across the carpet and clutched them by their arms. They were dragged out of the room as they flailed and yelled and cried.

Lortar picked his head up and stuck out his chest, “Let this serve as an example to all those who would abet heresy, and to those who would allow unqualified acolytes to sully the good name of the priesthood.” He stood up from his throne, and with a raised fist, he shouted, “Vulfrum’s will!”

All the Immaculate Order knights in the room lifted their poleaxes up in the air, and shouted in tandem, “Vulfrum’s will! Vulfrum’s will! Vulfrum’s will! Vulfrum’s will!” They then returned to their regular stances.

Lortar lowered his hand back to his side.

“That concludes His Holy Majesty’s arbitration of justice,” said Prince Garr. “Please exit His Holy Majesty’s palace in a calm and orderly fashion. Note that knights of His Holy Majesty’s Immaculate Order keep watchful eye on your departure; any attempt to go elsewhere in the palace will be considered trespassing, and will be responded to as such.”

Lortar sat back down on his throne, watching as the crowd departed through the opening double doors. The Immaculate Order knights formed a straight line behind them, following the mass of people out of the room, leaving Lortar alone with Prince Garr.

“My liege?” Prince Garr kneeled down, looking to Lortar at eye level.

Lortar turned his gaze to Garr. “Yes, son?”

“I don’t understand why you did that, my liege. Why you condemned that girl to burn. It... it irks me.”

Lortar laid a palm on Garr’s cold pauldron. “My boy. These are dark times. Dark, dark times. We need the good graces of mighty

Vulfrum now more than ever.” He paused. “And equally important, we need unity. Because we all know that the Imperium is divided enough as it is. That means heresy cannot be tolerated. Not even from little girls.”

“But, the Imperium is no more, my liege.”

“Bah.” Lortar waved a hand in dismissal. “The Emperor’s title and dynasty may be gone, and the Stolthelmitic people may no longer be ruled under one sovereign, but it’s still the Imperium to me. It will always be the Imperium to me.”

## Chapter Three

As Royal Apothecary Vinrik sat upon a wooden chair at one of the royal library's lustrous marble tables, he faced what was surely one of the most grueling tasks in the entirety of the old Imperium: teaching a dim-witted little boy about the labyrinthine world of politics. Though not far past boyhood, himself, he had donned the Royal Apothecary's flowing white robe and hood after the previous one succumbed to the bloated rot. Vinrik had been there when his former master took his last breath upon his deathbed, his skin laced with bleeding sacs of oozing pus. As the six-year-old son of an Immaculate Order Captain stared up

at him with a glaze in the eyes and a thumb in the mouth, the stench of a dying man's decaying flesh lingered in his mind.

“Well then, Wainzel,” said Vinrik, forcing his lips to curl into a smile. “Let's go over this again. Are you ready?”

Wainzel pulled his thumb out of his mouth, letting a string of spittle fall on his sky-blue shirt. “Why do I have to do this? It's so boring. I'm going to be a knight. What's a knight need to know the names of crusty old kings for?”

“Well, for one, it's kind of important to know which king you're supposed to serve.”

“But why? I want to fight things!” A smirk arose on Wainzel's face as he drove an imaginary sword through an imaginary target.

“Because if you don't know who you're supposed to serve, how do you know what you're supposed to fight?”

Wainzel groaned. “Fine.”

“Very well. First off. Who is the King of Stolthelm?”

“King Lortar, of the Clan of Sodlur.”

“Right. Now, who is the King of Moenster?”

“King Engel, of the Clan of Storer.”

“Who is the King of Reik?”

“King Korl, of the Clan of Gisa.”

“Who is the King of Schwartz?”

Wainzel placed his free hand atop his head, running his fingers through his dark blond hair and toying with something in his belt-pocket. “Um... uh... hm. King Lortar?”

“Tsk.” Vinrik shook his head. “No, that’s the King of Stolthelm.” He paused. “It’s the really, really fat one.”

“Oh, Munrod! King Munrod, of the Clan of Karson.”

“Good! Now, tell me who the King of Elbe is.”

“King Durek, of the Clan of Blot.”

“King of Kerlan?” Vinrik tapped his hand on the table. *He really is improving.*

“King Ut, of the Clan of Halstun.”

“King of Brannstun?”

“King Vardhundert, of the Clan of Stahlborg.”

“Alright. Last one. Now, if you can guess which kingdom he belongs to... I'll give you a schulling.”

A corner of Wainzel's mouth tensed up. “It's the scary one, isn't it? Well, King Engel's pretty scary, too, but...”

Vinrik nodded. “Afraid so.”

“King Runhordt. The Kinslayer,” said Wainzel with a wince.

“Of the Clan of Gulder. He rules the Kingdom of Streicher.”

“Yes.” Vinrik placed a hand atop Wainzel's head and ruffled his hair. “Good work.”

“Can I have my schulling now?”

“I will... after you show me what's in that pocket of yours.”

Wainzel slammed his hand against the table. “Hey, no fair! You said you'd give me a schulling.”

With a grin stretched across his face, Vinrik wagged a finger at Wainzel. “And you said you’d do your bedroom studies yesterday. But you didn’t, did you?”

Wainzel groaned. “Come on! Please?”

“Show me what’s in your pocket, or no schulling.”

“Ugh. Fine.”

Wainzel clutched his hand in his pocket to a fist. He withdrew it, holding it to Vinrik palm-up, and opened it. On Wainzel’s palm laid a band of shimmering silver adorned by a diamond, large like a man’s big toe, and colored with the deepest blue.

“A ring?” Vinrik let out a chuckle. “Looks expensive. Where’d you get it?”

Wainzel closed the ring in a fist, drawing back to his waist. “I’m not telling!”

“Did a girl give it to you?”

“No!” After a pause, Wainzel lowered his gaze downward.

“Yes.”

“Who is it? Anyone I should know?”

“Some Secret Service trainee. She’s eight.”

“It’s really valuable,” Vinrik said with a nod. “She must really like you.”

Wainzel’s mouth perked up to a smirk. “She does.”

“Do you want to know where those blue diamonds come from?”

Wainzel shrugged. “Can’t be more boring than politics.”

“They’re a rare strain of diamond—really rare—from the Kingdom of Moenster. Moon Diamonds. One of the most valuable minerals in all the realms of the old Imperium. No Moensteric royal or high noble would be caught dead without one.”

Wainzel’s face perked up with curiosity. “Really?”

“Yep. Queen Kreta, in particular, absolutely loves them. Almost as much as she loves her Knightwar.”

“What’s Knightwar?”

“Eh. Just some board game. You’d probably find it boring.”

The white wooden door behind Vinrik unlatched. When he looked in that direction, His Holy Majesty, King Lortar, emerged with Prince Garr at his back. Vinrik threw himself up on his feet, pressing his heels together and saluting his king with blinding speed. Lortar walked up to Vinrik; Garr took his spot at Lortar’s right.

“At ease,” said Lortar.

Vinrik did as he was commanded.

Lortar took a glance at the boy, who still sat in his chair. “Why has this child not saluted his king? We come in here to check on you, and see a boy not saluting his king.”

“Your Holy Majesty,” said Vinrik as his gaze bounced from side to side. “I—.”

“We will tell you why, bastard son of ours.” Lortar batted his finger in the air near Vinrik’s face. “It is because you are a poor

disciplinarian. You always have been.” He turned his gaze to Garr. “Get us the whip.”

Garr strode toward the library’s storage room. “Yes, Your Holy Majesty.”

“The whip, Your Holy Majesty?” Vinrik glanced at Wainzel, whose eyes were wide and whose breath was quick and shallow. “He’s just a bo—.”

Lortar glared at Vinrik. “Hold your tongue, bastard, or lose it.”

A heavy breath passed through Vinrik’s nostrils as he pressed his lips together. He watched Garr return to Lortar’s side, handing to the king a black leather whip.

Lortar pointed the whip at Wainzel. “Get on your feet, boy, and put your hands on the table.”

His hands trembling, Wainzel hesitated before standing off the chair and doing as his king told him.

Lortar returned his gaze to Vinrik. “You. Pull the boy’s shirt over his head. Hold him in place.”

The thought of being party to the beating of a child gave Vinrik's stomach a painful squeeze. His brow shot upward as his heart neglected a pulse. "Yo—... Your Holy Majesty, I apologize for my insubordination, but I will not be a part of this!"

Garr stepped up to mere finger's length from Vinrik, staring down at him with searing gray eyes, and an armored hand clutching the hilt of his sword. "Don't do anything you'll regret, bastard."

With the dread of sharp regal steel clawing at his core, Vinrik walked to Wainzel with heavy tread. He held the shirt in his quivering palms and pulled it down over Wainzel's head, revealing the bare back.

"I'm sorry," Vinrik whispered as he locked his sights to one edge of the table, away from the impending punishment.

The whip cracked. Wainzel whimpered in pain. The whip cracked again, followed by another whimper. As each lash dug deeper into the boy's hide, and the whimpering gave way to weeping, the urge within Vinrik to release the boy and run away grew, but it abated when Garr's shining white armor caught the corner of his eye. It reminded

him of the hilt; the scabbard; the sharp steel within that scabbard. It also reminded him that even if he did what his conscience begged for him to do, he would ultimately do the boy no favors. He was an unruly child. Unruly children were punished. That was the reality of things.

“There,” said Lortar. “Now, Garr, take this back to the storage room. We have no further need for it.”

“Yes, Your Holy Majesty.”

As the sounds of Garr’s footsteps trailed away, Lortar said, “Look at the boy’s back, bastard.”

After gathering some of his composure, Vinrik drew his sights to the red cuts strewn across Wainzel’s back. Blood trickled from them, running down Wainzel’s skin until the trousers around his waist soaked them in.

“That,” said Lortar, “is what happens when you attempt to defy the Imperium. Remember it, and understand that it is one of the kinder punishments the Imperium has to offer. Do a better job of keeping the

boy disciplined from here on out, bastard, or the Imperium will. Is that understood?"

Vinrik released his hold on Wainzel's shirt. He turned around to face his king as Garr returned to his side. "Yes, Your Holy Majesty."

"Good." Lortar turned his back to Vinrik. He walked towards the open door with Garr closely following. "Do not fail us again." Once Lortar exited the library with Garr, he shut the door behind him, leaving Vinrik alone with Wainzel.

Wainzel let out a whimper. "Vinrik?"

Pulling Wainzel's shirt up to the nape of his neck to look into his eyes. Vinrik bent down to his ear and whispered, "Yes?"

"Why did the king do that?"

"Because you didn't salute him when he came in here. You're supposed to stand up and salute him when he enters the room. Same goes for anyone else who outranks you."

A pair of tears fell from Wainzel's eyes and splattered on the table.

“And another thing,” said Vinrik. “You refer to him as ‘His Holy Majesty’, not ‘the king’. Alright?”

Wainzel sniffled. “Why is His Holy Majesty so mean?”

“Because he believes he has to be.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I can’t imagine what it’s like, sitting on that throne, having to deal with people like the Kinslayer as part of my duties. It can’t be pleasant.” Vinrik wiped a tear from Wainzel’s face with his thumb. “And stop crying. It’s a sign of weakness. Vulfrum doesn’t want His chosen to be weak, and His Holy Majesty doesn’t want his subjects to be weak. You see?”

With his lips pursed and his eyes watery, Wainzel looked up to Vinrik and gave a nod.

“Good. Now, let’s get you bandaged up, alright? The cloth and cave aloe are in the storage room.”

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