Prologue – 300 Years Ago

Smoke. I smell smoke. It's the familiar smell of prajiik weed, but it's far too strong to be Homas's pipe. Are the fields burning? Am I imagining this? Then the screams start. That's Felsa, no doubt, and she's in trouble. My eyes pop open and I see the smoke pouring in through the window, lit with the orange glow of fire.

I know I'm disoriented by the prajiik smoke in the air, but Felsa needs help. Stumbling to the doorway, I remember my papers. In a box under the bed, I've written all my dreams... my prophecies. The fields are burning. Will the house burn too? Do I go save my wife and kids, or do I grab the box and run for it? Could my prophecies possibly mean more in the long run than my farm and my family?

My moment of indecision is a moment too long. The door rushes to meet me, knocking me off my feet and crushing my face. The doorway is filled with the form of an Imperial soldier, complete with the Delyroth Seal on the chest plate. He grabs me by the collar of my nightshirt and drags me, bleeding, down the porch steps and through the dirt below.

The scene outside is one of pure terror. The fire has spread beyond the prajiik field, into the oat and samarsi fields. My wife, Felsa, lays limp in a pool of blood no more than a meter from my face. My brother, Homas, is being beaten senseless by one of the soldiers. His face looks like mine feels, and one arm hangs at an unnatural angle, yet he's still standing, spitting both curses and blood at the soldier. The soldier only beats him harder for his effort.

Where are the kids? To the left, one of the bussit bulls streaks by on fire and screaming. I turn my head right to avoid watching, and that's when I see Mistas hanging by her neck from the barn door. Well, that's
one of the kids, and now I'm not sure I want to know about the others. When I look up into the face of my assailant, a question forms on my lips, “Why?”

“Because the Kingdom of Delyroth will not tolerate heresy,” is his only answer before he sinks his blade into my gut. In pure shock and terror, I squeeze my eyes shut and curl into a ball. A moment later, I open my eyes and glimpse one of the soldiers carrying my box out of the house. He's got my life's work in his hands, and it looks like they're arguing over what to do with it.

Everything goes black as I bleed out all over the dirt path, and I have one last clear thought before I'm gone. It's a complete vision of the entire future with every cloudy prophetic dream I've ever had, suddenly made crystal clear - and the realization that I should never have written or shared a word of my prophecy.
It has been foreseen that seven dreamers will follow their dreams through the wilderness to the summit, upon which they shall convene with the seven immortal spirits. Each dreamer will be paired with an immortal spirit, and the dreamers will be as gods among men.

-from The Immortal Prophecies by Theress Taibur

Jidaan woke from his dream with a start. He found himself safe in bed, laying next to his wife, Ibanna. But he couldn't shake the images of burning fields and broken bodies. Jidaan wavered between struggling to recall the rest of the dream, and trying to shut out the horrific images forever.

“What's wrong, Ji?” Ibanna mumbled at his side, “More bad dreams?”

Jidaan nodded gravely, swallowing the anxiety that accompanied the scenes in his mind. “Afraid so, Iba.”

“They're getting worse, then. That's at least three times this week.”

Jidaan rose from the bed and made his way over to the wardrobe. “Forty-seven years old, and I'm still getting spooked by nightmares. I should be ashamed if you ask me,” he said as he removed his nightshirt and started getting dressed for the day, “I know what my pa would have said.”

“It's still full dark, Jidaan. You can't start working the fields this early, no matter how sleepless you feel.” Ibanna lit a candle on the nightstand, letting Jidaan take in her full beauty as she continued, “and your pa's been gone for the better part of ten years. I know you miss the old man, but you can't dwell on what he would have thought.” She unfastened the top two buttons of her nightgown, exposing a hint of her generous cleavage, then gave him her most inviting smile and said,
“Come back to bed, Ji. There's plenty for you to do right here.”

Jidaan struggled to finish buckling his belt. “Never too early to get the coffee boiling,” he said matter-of-factly as he turned and walked out of the bedroom.

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Jidaan took his breakfast in silence that morning, avoiding the looks from Ibanna and their young son, Daniel. He refused the usual banter from his wife, and didn't answer a single one of the child's numerous questions, all of which he normally would have entertained with the grace of a saint. No sooner than he had shoved the last bit of fried qualma egg into his mouth and sucked down that last drop of his coffee, he was out the door and into the samarsi field.

On this day, Jidaan took no solace in the beauty of the land around his farm. He couldn't take the time to enjoy the soft, green grass in the surrounding fields – the kind that had just the slightest hint of blue when seen in the right lighting conditions. He had no care for the distant mountains that painted the eastern border of Delyroth, over which the sun now steadily rose. And he certainly couldn't bear to enjoy, nor to even notice, the music of the local songbirds which nested in the finwood trees that grew in small clusters all around the property.

Jidaan couldn't be bothered with these things, because on top of being robbed of his sleep by the dreams of slaughter, he knew that he needed to work harder than he had been working on the farm. He knew that he needed to be harvesting more of the samarsi and oats that grew on this farm if he were to catch up with what he owed in taxes. He wasn't selling enough at market to pay his taxes after purchasing the necessities for life in the country. Nor was he able to harvest enough to give the ten percent of his crop that the kingdom demanded be sent along to the capital.
Jidaan had no clue how they had determined his taxable earnings, nor did he know how they had calculated what ten percent of his harvest should be. What he did know was that they were dead wrong on both accounts, and he was sinking further into debt with his king and country because of that miscalculation.

When the Alsiban family had first purchased the land several generations back, the previous farm had been burned to the ground, leaving behind ashes that made the ground fertile and produced the finest quality of crops. It took a whole family of brothers, sons, cousins, and a few hired hands to bring in the harvest each season. But within his own years, Jidaan had seen the soil start to dry up. He had seen his own brothers and cousins leave for jobs in the city or work on other farms. He couldn't afford to hire anyone on, and his own son was still a few years from being able to do enough chores to earn the food on his plate. By himself, Jidaan couldn't even tend and harvest all of what little the fields could still produce. And the quality of those crops wasn't fetching him the price he would need to hire on some farmhands and pay his bills.

He longed to purchase the fields of grass that surrounded his land on each side, as the hint of blue in that grass was suggestive of the nutrients that were required to grow a good samarsi; to give it the proper shape, size, and color to fetch the right price at market. Sadly enough, without the good crops to sell, he didn't have the money needed to buy the land that could grow good crops. And the owners of those fields would rather let the land sit, idly growing grass, than to give it over to the uncertain future stocks and promises of a failed farmer.

It was while Jidaan had his hands in the soil and his head immersed in these thoughts, that the clomping and beating of hooves could be heard coming down the path from the distant treeline, toward the Alsiban farm. Jidaan looked up from his work and spotted four white horses pulling a wagon. Though he couldn't quite see the Delyroth Seal on the side of the wagon from this distance, there was no mistaking the gleam
of the rising sun, reflecting off the armor of the Imperial soldier who held the reins. *Here comes the tax man to collect what I owe, what I don't even have, what I really shouldn't owe him at all,* Jidaan thought to himself as the wagon approached.

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That night at dinner, Jidaan was still in no mood for conversation, but he felt compelled to share the troubles of the day with Ibanna. After all, this would affect her as much as it affected him. Daniel, too, for that matter, although he didn't think a boy that young should have to know such troubles.

“The collector came by today,” he blurted out between mouthfulls of bussit steak.

“Oh?” Ibanna replied inquisitively, with a sudden sadness in her eyes, as if she had already figured out what was coming next.

“They say we're selling more than we're selling, Ibanna. They say we're harvesting more than we're harvesting. And we're behind on our payments.”

“Maybe you should let me help with bringing the crop to market, Jidaan. And Daniel could start picking samarsi with you.”

“No, dear,” Jidaan said knowing that this was an issue that he needed to solve on his own, if only out of pride. “I wouldn't want you to fall behind on the housework, and Daniel's not strong enough yet for a hard day's work in the field. Besides, next year he needs to start classes. I won't have my boy growing up to be some ignorant farmer like me; working his hide off, and nothing left to show for it. He needs to get educated, and move on. Especially since by the time he grows up, there won't be any farm left here for him to run, anyway!”

Ibanna's eyes widened at this last bit, and she asked, “How bad is it, then?”
“They said if I couldn't pay the money, they would take more of the crop,” Jidaan answered with a heavy heart.

“Well that's not so bad then, is it? Saves you the trouble of hauling it off to market and trying to peddle it to those filthy city folks that wouldn't know a good samarsi if it hit them on the head, doesn't it?”

“Ah, but that's not all. No, it's never that simple, is it?” Jidaan asked rhetorically, before telling her, “They say they'll take all of what we've harvested, leaving me nothing to sell at market. And that will only serve as interest on what we owe. They'll be back for the rest of the money in a month's time. And how am I to earn that money, if I have no crop to sell?”

“What happens then?” Ibanna demanded. “What happens in a month if we can't pay?”

Jidaan finally looked up from his meal and admitted the inevitable to his wife, “Then we pay in flesh,” he gave a heavy pause and continued, “They'll take our land. They'll bring us to the capital to be servants for the nobles - that is if they don't decide to just kill us for the trouble! Probably string us up from a finwood, and send Danny to a workhouse. Either way, life as we know it will be over, come next month.”

At this, Daniel finally broke the silence that had already been unusual for him. “What's happening Daddy? Are you losing the farm? Am I really going to be a slave? Can't we just grow more food for the king? Are the soldiers going to kill you? Mommy, I'm scared!”

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Settling Daniel down for bed had been no small task that evening. The boy had cried into his mother's bosom for hours. All the while, Ibanna had been casting angry stares to Jidaan, who she felt should never have allowed the conversation to go that far in front of Daniel.
“He's only four years old,” she chastised him now in the privacy of their bedroom as she changed into her nightgown. “You shouldn't scare him like that! You will find a way out this whole tax mess before that month is up. I know you will. You're a smart man, and you've got a lot to live for.”

“I know, Iba,” he said with a genuine regret in his voice. “I got carried away. I'm just so terrified that we'll lose everything...” He paused before turning his voice from regret to passion, “We should go, Ibanna. We should take Daniel and we should just go right up over those mountains. We can leave Delyroth and start a new life on our own!”

“Don't be silly, Jidaan! This place is everything we know. It's everything we've ever known. We'd never make it up and around the mountains, and we don't even know what's on the other side.”

“A new life is what's on the other side,” Jidaan countered, “It's a new start no matter what's on the other side, and I'd rather take my chances on a new start over there than a certain ending over here!”

“Hush, Jidaan,” Ibanna soothed in her softest voice as she eased herself into bed beside Jidaan, “We can talk about it in the morning. For now, let's enjoy just being together. Daniel's asleep and we have the night to ourselves.” She smiled and undid a couple of buttons on her nightgown, as she had done that morning.

But Jidaan was in no mood to enjoy anything on this day, and he felt no lust for anything besides a good night of sleep. He sighed heavily, then turned over in bed to face away from his wife, who had gone unsatisfied since he had started having his dreams. Sleep came to Jidaan quickly, for despite his busy mind, he was thoroughly exhausted from his day in the field.

As Jidaan slipped into a world of dreams, Ibanna slipped out of bed, and back into her clothes. She began packing what little clothes and food they had into the family wagon. Although she wanted to find the words to give Jidaan the confidence he so badly needed to confront his
problems head-on, she knew it was no use. They owed a debt that they could never pay to a kingdom that had grown corrupt in its taxation. Fleeing their home was quite possibly the only thing that could save them.

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Jidaan slept deeply, fully immersed in his dreams. But tonight, the dreams were different. Until now, he had been a different man in his dreams; a man who had lived on this land long before him, and had gotten his entire family slaughtered for heresy. Tonight he was himself, he wasn't on the farm, and there were no Imperial soldiers coming to kill the family.

In this dream, Jidaan climbed one of the great mountains to the east, and at the summit the land became a shallow bowl of rich-looking grass, with a stream running through the field. There were trees here and there, painted in all the most wonderful shades of autumn.

Jidaan watched as day turned to night, and his attention was turned to the heavens. Sevens stars seemed to dislodge themselves from the night sky and fall gracefully toward the summit. When the stars landed, they bounced and rolled along the grass toward a pile of rocks, where they finally disappeared.

Jidaan looked all around himself, and saw that there were 6 other people with him in this dream, although their faces were blurred. Too soon, the dream whispered through his mind to keep him from dwelling on who the other people might be. As the group approached the pile of rocks, they found that it was actually an entrance to a cave.

Inside the cave, they found a wealth of rare crystal formations. Some of the crystals glowed, while others hummed, and there were others still that vibrated too deeply to make a sound, but could be felt at a subconscious level, nonetheless. At the center of the cave, there was a
bowl raised from the ground on a pedestal, as though it were meant as a washing station.

Within the bowl, Jidaan and the others in his dream found a spring of perfectly clear water, holding seven crystals. These crystals were different from the others in the cave. They had an inner glow that matched the light from the fallen stars perfectly. They hummed louder than any of the other crystals around them, but in a tone that was as soothing as the lullabies that Ibaana had sung to Daniel throughout his infancy, as Jidaan's own mother had once sung to him. And although the water was perfectly still, when Jidaan reached into the bowl and picked up one of these crystals, it sent a vibration through his mind and his body that relieved him of all stress, made him feel young and alive, and took away the aches and pains of a lifetime of hard work.
A mighty foe looms over all that is known in Delyroth, a shadow wrapped up in a guise of righteousness. He hides in plain sight, calling himself a cleric, all the while he turns the kingdom's nobility to no more than puppets. Casting doubts upon the subjects, he then cries a fatal accusation, "Heresy!" Though at the heart of all things, he is the worst and most offensive of all the heretics.

-from The Immortal Prophecies by Theress Taibur

Brother Pollid woke with a start that morning, shaken to the core by yet another of the hellish nightmares. It was all he could do to stop himself from screaming in terror, so as not to break his Period of Silence. Serren had sinned once before, upon first arriving at the Great Church of God Himself. Who would have known that it was holy water, and not mop water in that bucket? Father Aldage Veen had been angry over the incident, though many of his followers had joked that the kitchen floor would now be eternally blessed, as would the rats living in the alley where Serren had tossed the bucket of blessings. Brother Pollid had wanted to joke along with the others, to lighten the mood surrounding such a serious offense. But Father Veen had stricken him silent, insistent that the Lord's Blessings should never be taken so lightly. That was before Serren's enlightenment; before he knew the rules of The Church. But three years of silent repentance had taught him the rules, as sure as the rain wets the ground. Or as Brother Orrid would say, "As sure as Brother Pollid blessed the kitchen with a mop!"

Today at noon, that period of repentant silence would end, and he would be allowed to begin training for his priesthood. At the age of twenty and after three years of silent chores and hard-learned lessons, Brother Serren Pollid would finally be allowed to begin what he had
come here to do. He would finally be allowed to open his mouth and speak as an adult and a contributing member of The Church.

Now, as Serren busied himself with dressing in the humble robes of a servant brother of The Church in preparation for his morning chores, he knew he could finally share his hellish visions with Father Veen. Surely, the dreams were some message from God; a message that only Father Veen would be able to help him decipher.

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“Next,” Father Veen called from behind the myrthwood desk in his office. While the office was of modest size, it was decorated with all sorts of lavish items that had been donated to The Church by many of its upper-class parishioners.

“Come along, then...” the young boy standing his post near the doorway half-whispered, half-shouted across the sitting room just outside Father Veen's office, “It's your turn to see him, Brother Pollid. Don't keep the Father waiting!”

Brother Pollid looked up, shaken from his meditative silence by the boy's innocent desire to help. Serren gave a warm smile to the boy, who couldn't have been any older than seven or eight years, and he ruffled the child's hair as he passed by on his way into Father Veen's office.

“Please, Brother Pollid, we should have privacy,” Father Veen insisted, gesturing firmly toward the door.

Serren reached behind himself, and gently shut the door, then bowed deeply to Father Veen before lowering onto his right knee.

“You may rise,” Father Veen recited in the same passionate tone he had used to utter those three words (and so many others) before the entire parish every Sunday. And as Brother Pollid rose to his feet, the Good Father also added, “and you may now speak, Brother Serren Pollid, for I officially lift your Period of Silence. You have repented
thoroughly, and are now free of your past sins. And surely, you have learned to avoid the temptation of future sins.” Father Veen gave a smile full of Fatherly smugness, likely pleased with himself for having the good memory to have rehearsed the Rites of Repentance for so many years without flaw.

“Thank you...” Brother Pollid started, but found himself needing a moment to clear the last three years of silence from his throat before he could find his voice, “Thank you, Father.”

“And what choice have you made, regarding your path within The Church, Brother Pollid?”

“As I said the very day I entered The Church, Father, I will say again today. I still wish to study for priesthood,” Serren bowed deeply at this, so as to show the Good Father how serious he was.

Father Veen seemed to chew this over for a moment, then he replied, “Very well, Brother Pollid. You have proven your dedication to The Church. You will be given a uniform more suitable to priesthood, and you will be given access to The Archives to aid with your studies. For now you will still be known as Brother Pollid. However, upon completing your training, you will be given a white collar to add to your uniform, and you shall then be known as Father Pollid. I wish you all the best in your studies, Brother. And may God light your path.”

Brother Pollid bowed and smiled, then lingered a moment more, trying to think of a way to bring up the subject of his dreams.

“Do you have more to say, Brother Pollid?” The Father asked. “It's just... I've had some strange dreams lately, Father.”

“Strange in what way, Brother? And watch what you say and what you let into your head, because dreams have been known to be the path to heresy for so many men in this kingdom's past.”

_The Archives... the past_, Serren thought to himself, wondering at Father Veen's preemptive admonition. _I need to look into these things more thoroughly before I incriminate myself!_ “Nothing too important,
Father. I merely had a dream of a heretic from past times being brought to justice.” Serren emphasized the word “justice” to the best of his ability, yet a heavy silence lingered between the two men before Serren added hastily, “Probably just the Good Lord telling me to keep it on the straight path, Father. Nothing to worry about! I should really be on my way... got studies to do after chores!”

“Right you are, Brother Pollid,” Father Veen said as he narrowed his eyes at Brother Pollid. “And don't forget to have lunch. The rest of the Brothers should be in the courtyard now, taking their meal. You are dismissed, Brother Pollid.”

“Yes, Father,” Serren said, bowing once more as he opened the office door and backed his way into the waiting room. He gave an uncertain smile to the boy, who stood faithfully outside, waiting to inform the Father of visitors to his office. Serren no longer felt the playfulness that had caused him to ruffle the boy's hair earlier. He instead made a straight line for the courtyard, but threw a quick look over his shoulder at the last moment, and veered off toward The Archives once he could be certain that he was out of Father Veen's sight.

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Brother Pollid had been in The Archives for nearly three hours when he finally found what he had been looking for. There was a whole shelf of papers which gave accounts of heretics throughout the history of The Church. There were records of the criminals, their crimes, the trials (or lack thereof), and the swiftly just punishments that had followed.

Going back about 300 years, Brother Pollid found some records that very closely matched his dreams. A man named Theress Taibur had been going around telling people that there were seven immortal spirits of light who would choose to be paired with seven individuals from the realm of mortals. According to Taibur, the spirits would inhabit the
bodies of these men, giving them eternal life. And in return, the spirits would be able to indulge in the senses and pleasures of the flesh: taste, touch, smell, and even the act of lovemaking. Serren knew very little of this last item – only that it was sinful for those who were unwed, such as himself.

The problem with all of this, of course, was that everyone knew there was only one God, not seven spirits of light. And everyone knew that God would never degrade himself in such a way, as to partake in pleasures of the flesh. Indeed, what the so-called-prophet had been preaching to anyone who would listen was defined by The Church as demonic possession. And they had believed that the prophet himself must have been possessed to be having such dreams.

And so, the man's farm had been raided by Imperial soldiers in the middle of the night, marching on the orders of both The Church and the king. The prophet's wife and his brother had been brutally beaten to their deaths by men in heavy armor. His three daughters and his son had been hanged from the barn. The man had been made to watch all of this while his crops and cattle burned all around him. He was then stabbed to death, and left to rot.

*Swift justice, indeed!* Brother Pollid thought to himself, horrified for the moment that The Church could have issued such brutal orders. Surely, the soldiers must have mishandled the situation. Surely, they must have botched the job! At least now Serren understood why Father Veen had warned him to be careful of his dreams.

Brother Pollid turned over the last sheet of paper in this record, and found one last bit of information. A box filled with papers that had been written by the so-called-prophet had been transported back to The Church to be sorted and properly disposed of by the head cleric, a Father Gaven Daele. Serren thought that perhaps they had decided to keep some of Theress Taibur's papers as historical documents, and so he went about searching The Archives for any sign of Taibur's prophecy.
Aldage Veen stood impatiently in the shadow of the blood-red curtains behind the throne of King James Heirless, whom some had jokingly called King Heirless the hairless, for he had been balding at a quick pace ever since he had taken the crown four years earlier.

Father Veen waited as the king saw to the last of his subjects for the day. He couldn't fathom what drove the king to hear out the cries of the countless peasants who paraded themselves before him each day, though he never did a damned thing for any of them. Perhaps, as Father Veen secretly hoped, it was merely the king's vanity and narcissism that made him want to flaunt the fact that he would do nothing to help the lower class, no matter how badly he could see that they needed it. One wouldn't think that the Good Father of the Great Church of God Himself would be capable of such thoughts and desires. But Aldage knew better, and he suspected that the king did too. For although he had led the life of a very good man for the public eye to see, he had a heart that was very wicked. After all, it took a very wicked man to be so devout to his religion as he had been. Sure, The Church was all smiles and friendly hellos on the outside, but at the heart of all matters, those who ranked highest in The Church were the bringers of darkness who sought to prevent the Immortal Prophecies from ever coming about.

Earlier, the story of Brother Pollid's dreams had painted a sweat across Father Veen's brow, for he had been quite familiar with the subject of these dreams. As soon as Brother Pollid had left Father Veen's sight, he had closed and locked the door to his office, warning the child outside not to disturb him. He had then shakily worked the hidden control on the mantle in order to open one of the two secret doors in his office. Behind this door, there was a storage locker containing only two items. The first was a box full of papers, which had been taken from a dead man's house
300 years earlier. The other item was a stone tablet that had been excavated from a cave in the eastern mountains nearly 1,000 years earlier, when The Church had first been established.

From the box, Aldage Veen had pulled out a paper that held nothing but a date. The sweat on Aldage's brow had started to drip as he suddenly realized how lazy he had grown, and how close it had come to the time of the Prophecy without his notice. Father Veen had then lifted the stone tablet, whose runes had lain dormant for the last millenium. As if to punctuate the lateness of the hour, the tablet now featured a prominent orange glow within the first of the many runes, indicating that the first events of the Prophecy had begun.

Aldage had dropped the stone tablet back into the locker and slammed its lid shut, before once again sealing the secret chamber. He had then dropped to the floor, his back against the wall, and breathed heavily as the anxiety slowly bled its way out of his system.

After a few hours of silent meditation to sort out his thoughts, Father Aldage Veen had opened up the other secret door from his office, and had traveled along an underground passage. This passage led directly to a locked door at the rear of the king's throne room; a door to which Aldage held the only key. Although he respected the need for the king's public personae, both he and King James Heirless were well aware of who the true power behind the throne was. For if the king should ever rule in disagreement with The Church, Father Veen would have no choice but to cry, “Heresy!” and the Imperial soldiers would surely side with The Church out of fear of what afterlife may await them.

Now, as the king's last pitiful subject left the spacious chamber, Aldage stepped out from behind the curtains which concealed his secret entrance and approached King James.

“What is it, Aldage?” the king sighed before Father Veen could take any more than two steps. Aldage stopped short, surprised that the king had known he was there. “What, you think I didn't notice you
lurking in the shadows for the last hour and a half?” the king continued. He turned slowly toward Father Veen with a gleam in his eyes, “You're not the only one in the great city of Vesqar who has his ways of knowing things, Father.” The King indicated an uncut gemstone hanging from a gold chain around his neck. The stone was blood-red, with flecks of orange and pink showing along its rough surfaces.

Aldage resumed his walk to the throne, then loomed over the king with piercing eyes. “I didn't come here to kid around, James Heirless,” he dropped his voice to a whisper before continuing, “I have come to warn you that a time of much heresy, as well as demonic possessions, shall soon fall upon your kingdom.”

“What do you mean? Are you talking about all that Prophecy stuff again?”

“Indeed, I fear that even a beloved brother of my own parish may come under the wicked spell, should I not take great care to light his path,” Aldage conveyed to the king in a remorseful tone that was being laid on a bit too thick to ever be coming from this man.

The king sat in silence for a moment, and saw right through Father Veen's guise, as he had on many occasions before this day. He knew fully well how a man like him would “light the path” for one of his brothers. Finally he asked, “What would you have me do, Father? What would you have my kingdom do?”

“We must step up our efforts to seek out and destroy any heretics, James. We must not let this wickedness spread through our land. Have the guards keep their ears open and their mouths shut as they roam the streets these next few weeks. And have them report anything unusual directly to me. I will be in attendance, here in the throne room with you, from now on. I think the people need to see that the king, the country, and The Church are a united front.”

The king's eyes sought out the luxurious weave of the red carpet that lined the floor beneath his throne as he considered the implications
of having Father Veen constantly looming over his shoulder. “Yes Father, we'll do as we must,” he finally replied.

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That night, as Serren fell into the world of dreams, he found that his dreams had finally changed. On this night, he found that he was himself rather than the heretical prophet. He found himself running through the streets of Vesqar, fleeing from the Imperial soldiers, as well as from a growing shadow that loomed over his faith. In the dream, Serren left the city and crossed large expanses of forest until he reached the farm from his previous nightmares. He knew it to be the same farm, although the previous farmhouse had long since been replaced. The new farm still grew oats and samarsi, but lacked the expanse of prajiik weed that had been there before. From the farm, Serren looked upon a great mountain range, and somehow he knew which of those mountains he must climb in order to meet his destiny.

In this dream, Serren was joined by 6 other men and women as he climbed this mountain. Stars rained down from the sky, and lit the way to a secret cave. The cave was full of beautiful crystals that spoke to him, whispering the way to a raised spring, filled with the most beautiful of all the crystals.

At the end of the dream, Serren found himself gripping one of the seven crystals that glowed with starlight. Although it seemed peaceful, Serren was more fearful of this dream than he had been of the previous nightmares, for he knew that he was falling victim to the heresy that had led Theress Taibur to his own demise so long ago.
There will be a woman who serves men, and who longs for another world. When the time comes, she will be served by the light of the Immortals, and she will know the freedom of everlasting life.

-from The Immortal Prophecies by Theress Taibur

Sophie stood behind the bar, wiping down glasses, as was her custom most evenings, just before the dinner rush. She surveyed the patrons of The Bloated Goat as they slowly filed in for a barely passable meal, to be chased down by the best ale in the City of Vesqar. She stole a few fleeting glances at the most familiar and friendly of her customers, while doing her best to hide grimaces when she noticed the notoriously bad tippers and grumpy curmudgeons. She even made eyes at a couple of the more attractive young men who she hoped might spare a few gold pieces in exchange for some “extra service.”

Truth be told, Sophie wasn't a huge fan of servicing strangers for money, but it always seemed necessary when she was earning it. Her wages and tips from tending the bar and waiting tables was barely enough to pay for the room she rented upstairs. She found herself needing the extra income just to pay for food and clothes. The perfumes, jewelry, and other gifts that men showered her with were merely a perk; one that she rarely admitted to herself that she enjoyed.

The dinner hours went by in a blur on this evening. Sophie hardly had time to breathe between orders. Before she knew it, darkness had settled in and there was only the drinking crowd left in the bar. This was a rougher crowd than the folks who came for dinner. There were booted feet placed on the tables, most of which hosted card games. The air was thick with prajiik smoke, liquor, and what Sophie thought of as man-stink; a special combination of musk and flatulence.
Just when Sophie had lost hope of finding a decent bed partner for the night, that was when he walked in. He was well below average height, had a solid build, and that head... it was a square, thick head, no hair, face always smiling, and the friendliest eyes she had ever seen. He was more than just a customer to Sophie. He was the man she loved. He was the only one in this city who had ever made her feel like a person, rather than an object of his entertainment. Sophie would drag this man up the stairs every night if she could, but she understood that his job prevented him from openly having a relationship with her. Just as he understood that when he wasn't around, there would be other men keeping her company; paying her bills. Watching Brother Orrid walk toward the bar, Sophie knew for sure that tonight would be a good night.

The evening hours wore on into late night. Sophie made polite conversation with Orrid as he tossed back a few rounds of ale, smoked from his pipe, and wolfed down the meal that she set down in front of him. Stoney, the owner and head cook of this establishment, went about his nightly routine of kicking the drunks out at quitting time. He left Sophie's man alone, as he had seen the look on her face when Orrid had entered the bar, and he knew her well enough to know that Orrid would be spending the night.

* * * * *

That was amazing! Was the only thought going through Sophie's mind when Brother Orrid climbed off of her body, and reached for the pipe on the nightstand. No sooner than he had lit the pipe, he was right back at her side, with his body pressed against hers and his blocky head resting softly on her breast. He took a few puffs of the weed and began to talk about his day, being sure to ask about her day as well. This is why I love him, she thought, because he is still interested in me, even after his needs have been met. And because he always makes sure that my needs
Orrid passed Sophie the pipe, always eager to share his stash with her, and she obliged by taking a puff and handing it back. Not wanting to waste a minute of what little time they had together, they kept on talking until the first light of day shone through the window.

Orrid's company was a rare and welcome reprieve from Sophie's usual customers. The married ones were always gone before their wives could notice them missing, while the single ones were usually just passing through town and only stayed the night so they wouldn't have to rent their own room. On the nights when Sophie did end up alone, she would dream terrible things. Burning fields. People being beaten to death. Children hanging from the doorway of a barn. Sophie shook the images from her head, and focused on enjoying the rest of her visit with Brother Orrid. With the sun coming up, he would need to be back to the Church soon.

“Someday Sophie,” Orrid prattled on in his sweet, western accent, “We're gonna run off together. Leave all this business about the Church and the Bloated Goat behind us. We'll run west, back to my home, and we'll have twenty babies!”

“Go on, Orrid,” Sophie let into him with an incredulous look on her face, “Twenty babies? I hope you're giving birth to some of them, because I'm not doing it!”

“Come on, Sophie,” Orrid pleaded, “Can't a man dream about havin' a big family back home?”

“Well, if you want to run off,” Sophie countered, “then why haven't we done it yet? Why do you still serve that horrible Church, and why am I still whoring around the upstairs of this filthy bar?”

“A fella's gotta get his ducks in a row... save up some money. I can only skim so much from the collection plate without Father Veen taking notice.”

Orrid looked hurt, and he was starting to get defensive. Sophie
regretted her harsh words, and wondered what had made her lash out like that. She knew Orrid needed to leave soon, and she hated to part company with hurt feelings. She leaned across the bed and kissed him with a deep passion, making sure that he would remember her lips, not her words, when he thought of her later. “Soon, my love,” she whispered when she finally released him.

* * * * *

When Orrid was gone, Sophie found herself back in bed, clutching tightly to a pillow and wishing it were him. She drifted off, catching a few hours of badly-needed sleep before the bar opened for lunch. Her dreams were far more peaceful than they normally were. No hanging children. No burning fields. No beaten bodies. Just a hike up a beautiful mountain, some shooting stars, and a cave full of glowing crystals. She woke with an unnatural energy and a sense of purpose she hadn't felt in years. *Yes, Orrid,* she thought to herself, *we will be running off together very soon.*
ALLEN RYNDIEL

One dreamer, a man who works with metal, remains a great mystery in my clouded dreams. I cannot know precisely what he will do. I see images of his life's work that I don't understand. But for better or worse, I know in my heart that he will change the world.

-from The Immortal Prophecies by Theress Taibur

The blacksmith took his place in front of the forge, just outside the door of his shop, The Fiery Furnace, in the city of Vesqar. While many blacksmiths of the day had their forges inside their shops, Allen Ryndel preferred to do his work outside for two reasons. The first reason being that Allen's large body would simply grow too hot cooped up inside with all that heat. Out here in the street, he was only a few steps away from fresh air at any time. The other reason was that Allen was an extremely sociable man, and he had found that standing outside to practice his trade lent itself to all sorts of conversations with folks who would never have stepped foot in his shop. In the afternoon when school let out, sometimes children would gather around his shop, watching him work and asking him all sorts of questions about the different methods and materials he used. And if there was one thing that Allen truly loved, it was talking about the science behind his work.

On this morning, the air was as fresh and crisp as Allen had ever known it to be. Even standing here, in front of the forge, Allen enjoyed the cool breeze through his hair. Yes, he thought, this is why I work outside. Allen knew his good mood today was not only a product of getting to be outside, but also because his nightmares were finally starting to go away. Last night, he had dreamed the best dreams of his life. These dreams seemed to erase the stress and fear of the last few months' worth of night terrors. Everything suddenly felt like it was going
As Allen pounded away at one of the many swords he would be making that day, he was pleasantly surprised to see Brother Orrid from The Church walking down the street, and with a clumsy grin plastered on his face. Allen noticed that Orrid was walking toward the center of town, where The Church sat nestled up against the castle walls. He was surprised to see a man of God out so early for an errand that he would already be returning, as it hadn't yet occurred to him that any Church staff would have cause to spend the night away from The Church.

“Mornin' to ya, Brother Orrid,” Allen called out across the avenue. Orrid, ever the friendly fellow, immediately crossed the street to return the blacksmith's greeting. “It's a fine one, isn't it Allen?”

Allen took the first hint that Orrid may not have been on Church business, when he caught the stench of prajiik weed and ale coming from the monk's cloak. “It sure is fine, Brother. The air seems especially fresh today, if you ask me!”

“Aye,” agreed Brother Orrid, “You've got the look of a man who's been enlightened.”

“I could say the same for you, Brother!” The blacksmith laid down his work and drew closer, so as not to be overheard, “Old friend, have you been off for the night? I thought such a thing was forbidden within your order.”

Orrid cast a nervous glance behind him, and that was when Allen noticed the Imperial soldiers roaming the streets. Sure, they had always patrolled the capital, but they seemed to be out in heavier numbers this morning. What are they looking for?

“Don't worry,” Allen reassured his friend, “I wouldn't rat you out. To tell the truth, I fancy myself as more a man of science, than one of faith. Too many rules in that Church of yours. Wherever you've been, it's safe with me. But I would change into something a bit more fresh before you bump into Father Veen, if I were you. I hear the old man is strict.”
Orrid grasped Allen's forearm and looked him directly in the eye. “I thank you for your discretion, my friend. After all, we are all only human.” Orrid removed a piece of parchment from the folds of his robes, and handed it to Allen before continuing, “In fact, if you can keep your discretion, I'd like to commission you to do a bit of work for me.”

Allen unfolded the paper, revealing a rough sketch of a dagger, with the name, “Sophie,” engraved on the handle. Below the sketch, there was a list of choice materials to be used in the blade's construction. This was obviously a well-thought-out gift, and not something that was intended to actually be used. The blacksmith let out a low whistle and said, “You know this isn't standard construction, right Orrid? I'm going to have to search for some of these materials, and it won't be cheap.”

“Whatever it takes, my friend,” was Orrid's only reply.

“I wouldn't have expected a man of God to have the resources to commission a gift like this.”

“Between you and me, Allen, the Church and I will be making a clean break in the near future. And I'd like something nice to give to the gal I'm gonna ask to leave with me.” He put a finger to his lips and made a shushing sound as he backed away from the blacksmith. Then, turning to leave, Orrid called over his shoulder, “Good luck with that! Let me know what you find,” and he was instantly gone from sight, lost in the crowded streets of Vesqar.

“What ever happened to giving a lady a ring?” Allen muttered under his breath as he returned to his work.

* * * * *

The sun was high overhead, the heat from the blacksmith's forge was at its greatest height, and Allen was about to break for lunch, when he spotted the soldier approaching his shop. From the fancy red plume on the soldier's helmet, Allen knew this to be Edward Vinius, the captain
of the guard.

“What can I do for ya, Captain?” the blacksmith asked the soldier.

“I have an order for you, Mr. Ryndel,” the guard captain handed Allen a list, “Straight from the King, himself.”

Allen examined the list. A thousand full sets of armor, complete with swords and shields. Two hundred bows, and a full quiver of twelve arrows to go with each. Fifty crossbows (Allen's own design, and one he was quite proud of) and a full case of twenty-five bolts for each of those. This would keep Allen busy for months.

“What's wrong, Captain? Already lost the last order I gave you?”

“No, Mr. Ryndel,” the captain was in no mood for jokes, “The king has ordered the guard to be doubled in every city across Delyroth. This is just a start. Dark times are upon us, and His Majesty will be ready.”

“Well,” Allen replied, “this will take some time.”

“We will pick it up as it's ready. Just let us know when you get enough pieces to fill a wagon, and someone will be by to collect what you've got and issue payment.”

“Very well, Captain. You had me at 'payment.'”

Still humorless, the captain replied, “As soon as you can, Mr. Ryndel. Your kingdom depends on you.” Captain Vinius, deciding the conversation was over, stalked away from Allen, his red plume bouncing ridiculously to the soldier's marching stride.

“Whole city's gone nuts, if'ya ask me”Allen mumbled as he reviewed the King's order. “First the holy man's shackin' up with girlies, now the King's doublin' up His army. Next thing you know, they'll be linin' us up in the street and chargin' us with heresy... hangin' us.” Allen was suddenly struck with a very specific visual of such a hanging, and found that he couldn't shake the idea from his head. Maybe things will make more sense after lunch.

Before cutting out for lunch, Allen ducked into his shop, (literally ducked through the door, for he was an unusually large man, both in
breadth and height) to look in on Gregory, his apprentice. There Gregory sat at the table, his young eyes darting between the pages of a book and the poorly wrapped hand-grip of a sword that had been the boy's own work. *Good lad,* Allen thought, *using the text I provided him. The boy understands the need for learning; that talented as he may be, no man can do his best without first learning from those who came before him.*

Startled, Gregory looked up from his work, then smiled when he saw that it was only his master in the shop.

“How's it coming along, then?” Allen asked the boy.

“I see where I went wrong, Sir. It's all in the book you gave me.”

“And you can fix it after lunch? I thought we'd go to Roland's today.”

“Actually Sir, I just ate. Brought my own today.” The boy indicated an empty pail under the table, with a few crumbs and an apple still inside. “I didn't feel right about you buying me lunch every day, Sir. I've yet to contribute anything you could sell, and you've taught me so much... I can finish this while you're at lunch. It'll be my best one yet, once the grip is right!”

“You're a good boy, Gregory. I can see you want to earn your keep, and that's an honorable trait.” Allen paused to let the boy soak up the compliment before he continued, “If that sword's half as good as you say it will be by the time I'm back, you'll have your place at the forge. I'll need you to start work on an order, while I go out to the mines and fetch ore. Think you can handle that?”

Gregory beamed up at Allen with his fourteen-year-old smile and his curly frock of black hair for just a moment before he managed to compose himself properly and say, “Yes, Sir. I would be honored to have a place at the forge.”

*  *  *  *  *  *
After having his fill of bussit brisket and a side of samarsi-fried rice from Roland's Deli, Allen was feeling just a bit better about the condition of the world. *Can't say nothin' bad about any place that has meals like this! Could have been a little more samarsi in that rice, though...*

“Hey, Roland!” Allen called from his seat at the lunch counter. Roland, a lanky brunette who was past his prime, came to the counter with a mock-scowl on his face. “If it isn't the critic... How are ya, you old bastard?”

“Hey, you leave my parents out of this! You don't even know them!”

“Neither do you,” Roland countered, and both men's scowls turned to big sloppy grins as they clasped hands. “So,” Allen inquired, “What's with the samarsi-fried rice being so light on the, uh... *samarsi?* I thought the stuff was in season. You goin' cheap on me?”

“I knew you was callin' me over to complain... Bastard.” Roland sighed as he wrung his hands together. “No, we can't get much in, to tell the truth. My supplier's been light on it too. Says the guy he usually gets it from ain't been bringin' it to market. Rumor is, the guy is dodging his taxes.”

Allen scoffed, “You know how taxes run in this kingdom, old friend. They only go one in one direction...”

“Up,” both men said in unison.

“Ain't it true,” Roland agreed. “The King, in all his wisdom knows that your income never goes down. If you claim less income than last year, then you're a cheat.”

“Yeah, a cheat,” Allen paused dramatically, “don't be complaining too loud. I hear the guard is doubling. Pretty soon, half the lunch rush will be soldiers. And you know how they deal with the nay-sayers in these parts,” he ran a finger across his throat and gave a slight gurgle for effect.
Roland nodded and added, “Much the same as they deal with heretics,” he yanked an imaginary rope behind his neck, and made a gurgling of his own as he crossed his eyes and stuck out his tongue. This sent a shudder down Allen's spine, and he wondered when he and Roland had become so jaded.

“Doubling the guard, though? Really?” Roland asked with renewed interest.

“Sure thing,” Allen replied, “Cap'n brought me an order for a thousand suits, and weapons to match. Says it's just the start.”

“No,” Roland was having a hard time imagining such an expansion of the ranks.

“Sure thing,” Allen repeated, and pulled the order from his pocket to hand it to Roland.

Roland shook his head, mumbled something about where the tax money was going, and disappeared into the kitchen. Allen took the hint. The conversation had gotten too serious for old Roland, and it was time for him to go anyway.

Next to the deli was Belrod's Books, where Allen headed after lunch each day to browse the one thing in the store that wasn't for sale: Miss Annie Belrod.
ANNETTE BELROD

*A woman of words, mostly written, she may seem timid at first. But rest assured, she will be the spark that burns the Church to the ground, like an old book tossed onto the hearth.*
- *from The Immortal Prophecies by Theress Taibur*

“Get your nose out of that book and look at me for once, Annie,” John Belrod huffed from across the small table in the back of the bookstore, where he shared a lunch with his grown daughter, Annette.

Annette, or Annie as she preferred to be called, looked up from the novel she'd been reading, and stared her father square in the eyes. “What's to talk about, Father?” she asked cockily, although she already knew what he wanted. It was the same thing every day. *When will you find a man?*

“You're twenty-three God-loving years old, Annie. You need to stop looking in those books, and start looking for a man. I can't take care of you forever.”

“You aren't taking care of me, Father,” Annie replied, “You haven't taken care of me since I was fifteen. I've been minding the shop these last eight years, selling books, and *that* has allowed me to take care of myself.” Annie rose from the table, clearing the simple wooden plates from their lunch as she went. “And furthermore, Father, if I don't read these books, then how am I to recommend them to our customers?”

John was taken aback by his daughter's comebacks, but he wasted little time in getting his lecture back on track, “Your younger sister is already married. You're going to be an old maid. Already, you're too old for what half the men in this city would consider marriage material.”

Annie dropped the lunch plates in the large iron basin, to be washed later. She whirled on her father and roared, “I don't want half the
men in this city, Father! What I want is to read my books, and to enjoy them, and to not have my father trying to tell me that I need a man to take care of me!”

“Fine then,” John said in a cool tone, still sitting at the table with his arms crossed, “I can see you're in no mood to discuss this now. Get back out front. The store won't mind itself.”

Annie made a show of scooping up the book she had been reading, before stalking out of the store's backroom and into the storefront. She had once had a peaceful relationship with her father. She had chosen to continue living and working with him, even as a grown woman, because she had wanted to care for him in his old age, as he had cared for her as a child. And now, he could do nothing but prattle on about her need to find a man. It was almost like he didn't want her around anymore. And then, who would care for the old man? Certainly not her sister; that was for sure. Adelia was married off, gone west, and raising babies. Babies needed more looking after then old men, after all.

By the time Annie reached the front of the bookstore, she was already face-deep in Fistfuls of Daggers, the latest cloak-and-dagger novel featuring Diggs Brandt, a deadly assassin who carries out secret missions in the name of the King and always saves the day (and isn't that just what the lead man in every book does?). Fumbling for a stool at the counter with one hand and holding her book with the other, Annie was just settling in for an afternoon of reading between customers when she heard the bell over the front door make a light jingling noise. Pulling the book from her face, she felt a warm breeze from the door. When she looked up, she saw a familiar face pass through the doorway and approach her counter.

“More political intrigue on this fine day, I see, Miss Belrod,” Allen posited through the biggest smile that Annie had ever seen plastered on the man's sloppily handsome face, as he indicated the book in her hand.

“You know the works of Harold Hayes, do you Mr. Ryndel?”
Annie asked from her seat across the counter, now holding the book to her chest.

“Aye,” Allen said, “I caught my lad, Gregory, reading one of those things last week when he should have been wrapping the haft on his latest heap of scrap.”

“Daggers and Dames,” Annie added, “Your lad is one of my best customers, Mr. Ryndel, and Hayes is among his favorite authors. I hope you weren't too harsh on the boy when you caught him.”

“I'll admit I had half a mind to cuff him somethin' good, but I was too happy to have discovered the lad could read. I ran right down here and got that book for him to learn his skills from.”

“Haft-making: A Step-by-Step Guide,” Annie recalled, “Has it served him well?”

“Aye, it has,” Allen grinned, “In fact, he's promised to have his work perfected by the time I get back from lunch. It seems the boy can learn better from books than from the old master.”

“It's not unheard of for boys his age, Mr. Ryndel. His head is too full of what he reads in books (and too busy imagining what might be under a pretty girl's skirt-folds, should he ever have a chance to gander) to be paying much mind to what his master would say,” Annie paused, “Give that one a book and he's a sponge, though. He'd tell you every line in every Diggs Brandt novel if you gave him the chance.”

“Well, if that's so then I suppose I'll fetch a few more titles for him,” Allen conceded, “You got anything on bow-making? How about armor? I find gauntlets can be especially tricky...”

“Of course, Mr. Ryndel,” Annie smiled greatfully, as she always did when she thought Allen would soon pull out his purse and leave the Belrods a little bit better off than he had found them, “I've picked up a small selection of titles related to your trade, in the corner over there.” She pointed to a shelf just past the gaudy section of Church writings that took up half the store. I wish I could just throw that whole section out the
door, she thought, *if only the King hadn't decreed that half my storefront must be dedicated to the Church's Suggested Reading List. And nothing that's off the Approved List.*

“I might suggest *To Build a Soldier* by Norman Kefter. The title would suggest a Wartime novel, but it's actually a set of tutorials for building any piece that a soldier may have need to carry.” Annie, now fully engaged in making a sale, set her novel aside and came around the counter. She led Allen down the aisle, to the section she had indicated. Picking up a copy of *To Build a Soldier* and handing it over, she added, “This latest edition has even added a tutorial on the very crossbow that you designed just three years past, Mr. Ryndel. Apparently, they are now considered a standard in the King's army. You should be proud.”

Allen's face flushed at the mention of his achievement, as he regarded the book in his hands. “Miss Belrod,” he started, then for some reason unknown to himself, he switched gears, “May I call you by your given name, Annette, milady? I've known you all the years you've worked in this old bookstore, and I must admit that I've come to think of you as a friend.” Allen's heart now raced, sweat rising upon his brow. He hoped he hadn't been too forward with the young lady.

“That would be fine, although I prefer to be known as Annie,” she replied, and when she saw the man's cheeks and neck turn pink, she couldn't help blushing a bit herself. *Perhaps there's one man in the city of Vesqar who I could stand to spend my time with,* Annie thought as she tried not to be too obvious. *Too bad I'm closer to his apprentice's age than to his own. Oh well... I suppose that youth never did stop any man in this city from taking the maiden of his choice.*

“Allie it is, then,” Allen conceded, “and you can call me Allen.” The two shook hands awkwardly, then managed to fumble through Allen's purchase before parting ways. Having all but forgotten the novel she had been reading, Annie waved and smiled as Allen left the store. Somehow, his extending a simple pleasantry had turned their business
relationship into something awkward and sophomoric. It was as if he had never spoken to a woman before; nor she to a man.

No sooner had the door had shut between Annie and Allen, there came a low whistle and a clap from the store's back room. “Good job, Annie!” her father's congratulatory voice came from a shadow in the doorway between the two rooms. John stepped forward with a smug look on his face. “Now there's a man that could take care of a lady with what he makes in his trade. Not to mention, strong enough to offer any protection you'd ever need. He's unwed, Mr. Ryndel is, and to top it all off, he's got eyes for you.”

Annie was struck with embarrassment that her father had witnessed the awkward flirtation which had passed between herself and their long-time customer. “Don't be ridiculous, Father,” Annie turned to face her father, trying to hide her blush as she responded to his banter, “Mr. Ryndel is a friend and a customer. Nothing more.”

“Aye, Annie, until today the love was all in his eyes. But today, you finally took your nose out of that book and gave that man your first good look. You liked what you saw! I could see that much on your face, just as plainly as I've seen it on his face for the last eight years!” Although John had raised his voice, it wasn't anger that colored his words, but rather an almost-hysterical happiness. He was truly enjoying the idea that his daughter had finally taken notice of a real man made from flesh and bone, rather than one made up from words in books.

“He's too old, father. He just admires my youth, that's all,” Annie knew this much was a lie before the words had left her mouth.

“Don't forget, Annie, that men often come to want the things they at first admire from a distance. And that one's been admiring you for some time,” John paused and lowered his voice, coming within arms' reach of Annie before he continued, “I mean no offense, Sweetheart. I truly am happy just to see you happy. I care about your future. I know you think it's your job to take care of me in my old age, Annie, but I
won't be here forever. What will your life be when I am gone, if you
don't allow yourself to experience the world now?”

Annie thought she could see moisture starting to well up in the
corner of her father's eye, and she could suddenly bear no more of their
talk. She closed the distance between them, wrapped her arms around
him, and pressed her face into his chest (now wet with tears of her own),
before she knew what she was doing. She stood there sobbing for over a
full minute before she lifted her face and opened her mouth to say
something. She found she had nothing to say, so she returned her face to
the safety of her father's shirt, and waited for the moment to pass.

When several minutes had passed, John took a step back, held his
daughter at arm's length, and said, “I love you, Annie. I want you to be
happy. Please don't hold back for an old fool like me.”

Annie wiped her face dry and looked up into her father's eyes. “I
love you too. No matter how bitter our talks become, I still can't bear the
thought of leaving you alone.”

“I'm not worried, Annie. I know you'll never go far. You'll be there
when I need you. There's room for another family in Vesqar if you'd have
one. You don't need to run off to West Watch, like you're sister did.”

Annie had to chuckle at this, “Ha! Yes, Aledia! Running off with a
wild man... off to a land where folks have no last name.” Annie was, of
course, referring to the independent village on the western shore of
Delyroth. She had gone to see West Watch only once, when her sister
had first been married. The village was technically a part of Delyroth,
although one wouldn't know it to see the place. She hadn't seen hide nor
hair of a soldier within the village, nor had she seen a single Delyroth
seal on any banners within the city. Although nobody had spoken of it,
she had gotten the impression that the people of West Watch had gained
some hard-won agreement with the kingdom of Delyroth; something that
seemed highly uncharacteristic for the King's army to have honored for
so long.
The culture in West Watch had been a far cry from the customs typically observed in Vesqar, and other civilized areas of the kingdom. Names, for instance were different. Rather than using the typical surnames that get passed down through the generations, each person bore their parents' given name as their own last name. Adelia had married a man known as Zekiel of Orrid, Orrid being his father who was known as Orrid of Kister. Now that Annie thought about it, wasn't there a Brother of the Church who was known as Orrid? *Not the same man, though,* she thought, *perhaps another son of the old man: Orrid of Orrid would be his full name.* *Aye, that sounds right, even if a bit odd.*

Having had a laugh at her sister's expense, she was starting to feel a bit better about her own life. Of course her father was right. She could very well fall in love, have a family, and still be there for her father. She would need only to plant her family's roots firmly in Vesqar. And with a man like Allen Ryndel, whose blacksmith shop had been just a block away for generations, she wasn't likely to get dragged out to the wild lands. She did know, however, that she would never be able to give up her love of reading.

* * * * *

That evening, Annie had her head in the clouds as she was closing up shop. Staring out the front window, her eyes soaked in every detail of the scene outside. From the pinks and oranges of the sunset, to the day's last golden glimmer on the cobblestone street, everything seemed just fine to Annie.

Annie wondered for a moment at the sudden change she had made today; from stubbornly refusing to seek the love of a man, to (in the same day, mind you) flirting with her long-time-customer Allen Ryndel. And now the daydreams of marriage and babies wouldn't leave her mind. Perhaps she was still living in that wonderful dream from last night; the
one where she had been on top of a beautiful mountain in the East, overlooking the entire world. The dream had been full of wonders: the most amazing sunset ever, followed by a night sky full of shooting stars, and then finally a cave full of magic crystals. That had been a much-needed break from the nightmares that had plagued her for the last few months. Those horrible dreams had been of a family that had been slaughtered for heresy.

After securing the front door, Annie headed for the store's back room, where she happened upon her father, seated at the table and hard at work with his quill and parchment. “Further adventures of Diggs Brandt, I take it?”

John, too steeped in his work to have noticed his daughter's approach, now looked up with a startled look upon his face. “Oh, yes... uh, you know... cloak and dagger and all that...”

Annie smiled and replied, “Yes, dad, I know. Don't forget I like to read those things.” She bent over to give the senior Belrod a kiss on the forehead, before heading for the back door. “Do you have any idea how hard it is to keep the secret of Harold Hayes's true identity?”

“Aye,” John looked up once more from his work, this time with the sharp, analytical eyes of a father who sees his daughter going out (as opposed to those of a man who can barely be bothered from his work). “Where d'you think you're going?” he asked.

“I'm meeting with Vincent Oldard. I thought I told you that yesterday! There's a new book list coming out next week, and I need to make sure your latest installment is on it.”

“Well, can't that wait until closing time?”

“Father, it is closing time.”

John craned his neck around to get a view out the window, and suddenly he looked surprised to see that the sun had gone down, and it was now growing dark.

“I lit the lamps an hour ago, Father. I swear, you sometimes get so
steeped in the world of Diggs Brandt, it's a wonder you can stop to eat.”
  “I could often say the same of your reading,” John countered.
  “That's your writing, Dad. It just pulls me in!”
  “You don't have to suck up to your old father, Annie. I see you reading other books too.”
  “You've got me there,” Annie admitted in with a grin. “I've really got to be off, now. I can't keep your publisher waiting.”
  “All right then,” John grinned back, “hurry back and stay out of trouble, you hear?”
  “I'm not fifteen anymore, Dad. Besides, what trouble can I get into between here and Mr. Oldard's office?” Annie gave the old man one more kiss on his forehead, and then walked out into the crisp evening air.