

DAYGAR LEGACY
Templar Five: Journey to Darlet

by Christopher D. Votey

A Note From the Author

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Please note that this book does need work and there are likely some mistakes that I have overlooked. If you find any mistakes I have made, please email me at chris@chrisvotey.com. Do note that I will take your suggestion seriously, but some things viewed as a mistake may in fact be a stylized choice I made.

Thank you, and enjoy the story.

Chapter 1

Jacques rode carefully in the night, ready at a moment's notice for anything. While most people feared bandits or thieves after the sun went down; Jacques de Volker feared something else. He would rather deal with bandits than the other things he knew were in the shadows.

The night sky was filled with stars he knew all too well, even if the land itself was alien to him. He was sent on a mission of great importance and it required him to be riding for a month straight; traveling farther than he had ever done before.

A bystander looking at him now might think he were a lone traveler. The bystander would be wrong. They wouldn't know that Jacques was actually surrounded by his men. They kept their distance from one another, to draw less attention to themselves. During the day that distance was great. At night was different.

The stars were the only bit of home he had right now. He looked up and focused at all of them. He closed his eyes and he saw the farm. He saw Sophie and Bertram; siblings sitting by a fire. Talking, laughing, and occasionally sparring. They would fall asleep, feeling safe that they were close to one another.

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He snapped out of that moment, opening his eyes. As blissful as the stars were, they were a distraction. He turned his gaze back to the land before him. To the distance, he saw an incline leading to a forest.

He let out a small sigh. He knew forests were an excellent place for evil to hide, for people to disappear. Though, that could be true even in the daytime.

As he came closer to the forest, the land started to move upward. Upon approaching the incline, he noticed a man on a horse. The man was wearing red clothing over a bulge that Jacques knew was leather armor. His back was towards Jacques, but he didn't need to see his face to know who he was.

David de Tortosa.

David was their point man in the pack. He rode ahead and searched for dangers. It was uncommon for David to make himself visible to Jacques while they traveled. Often, Jacques would need to ride ahead in search of David to actually see him.

Seeing David, Jacques felt the weight of his armor on his body and his fingers strangling the reins. He didn't change his speed, but his eyes remained focused on David.

David was doing nothing, simply sitting on his horse looking forward. His weapons were not drawn. As his horse trotted closer, Jacques noted an arrow sticking out of the ground. Jacques knew what this meant. His muscles tightened in his stomach. He pulled hard on the reins; his horse made a sudden stop.

Jacques proceeded to move his arms in the air; opening them wide as if he were attempting to hug a bear. He swung them back, then forward. He did this a few times like he might do if he were swimming in water. After a third swing forward, he reached above his head with both arms slightly bent, putting one wrist on top of the other, interlocking for a moment.

Once satisfied, he kicked his horse and rode towards David. While he knew that stealth was of the essence, he also wanted to get to the stationary knight quickly. With his legs, he got the horse to a trot and then brought it up to a canter. He knew a gallop would greatly close the distance, but feared the kind of ruckus it would create. Once he got to a good proximity; he slowed his horse to a walk, stopping once he came alongside David.

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Before the both of them were trees, but all Jacques could see was black. The great trees of the forest prevented the light from penetrating the darkness. The nearly full moon left him blind to what was lurking behind the veil. As his eyes adjusted, he could make out a clearing that he assumed was a path.

He looked over at his olive skin friend. His eyes were narrow and focused with a relaxed stature. David did what he did best; see what others could not, and wait for orders.

Jacques turned again towards the darkness. The dark veil began to lift, now seeing what David could, though for Jacques, it was simply a moving blob. He figured that it was simply a group of figures moving about. He couldn't determine anything else.

"How many?" Jacques asked.

"Three," David answered.

"And they are...?" Jacques was interrupted but knew the answer.

"Feeding."

"The victim?"

"Female."

Jacques's eyebrows furrowed. "What is a woman doing out this late?"

Jacques turned to his left to see the other two members of his pack. They wore clothes of red over their cuir bouilli, like him and David. Directly to his left was Janusz Bakhizen, and on the other side of Janusz was Savio d' Artusio.

Their approach had been silent. Jacques didn't hear them but felt as they got closer. While neither could see into the darkness as of yet, both had their hands on the hilt of their sheathed swords.

"It appears we've got some suckers up ahead, feeding on a victim," Jacques stated.

"More than one?" Janusz asked.

"Three."

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Janusz fell to silence. All of them now were waiting for the order. Jacques's eyes focused in the forest around him; backing up his horse slightly to see past his men to the edge of the forest. He felt uneasy fighting against the vampires. Any other night and he would comply, but tonight was not the night for it. Their mission was a higher priority and being so close to their destination, it was imperative they arrive.

"David, I want you to head south. I need another path that will move through this forest and get us to Darlet," Jacques commanded.

David did not move. Jacques was unsure what to make of that. He moved his horse forward again, making it flushed with the other horses. He didn't look at David directly, but the corner of his right eye noted his head still locked in place. The other two turned their gaze towards Jacques. Jacques met their gaze, seeing inquisitive looks mixed with confusion and shock.

"We aren't going to fight them?" Savio asked.

"Do you question my orders, Savio?" Jacques asked with an inflection of warning.

"Forgive me, Master Jacques, but you know the Hunter code: A seen vampire is a dead vampire."

Jacques knew the words spoken were true. "I know the code, but our mission takes precedence."

Jacques lifted his hand and tighten his legs, ready to have the horse move.

"What of the woman?" Now it was Janusz turn to question orders.

"What of her? Nothing we do now changes her fate."

"What if she turns? Then she kills others, or worse, turns them? The blood of the innocent does not wash from our souls. What will I say to Saint Peter and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ when asked of these stains?"

Jacques had another reason, a reason unknown to the others. However, they were right; the Templar code was clear for Hunters. He knew that either he follow the code or reveal why he wanted to go against the code.

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He stayed silent a moment, considering his options.

He finally broke his silence and turned to his right. "David... on your arrows."

David reached around his back to his quiver. He found the fletching of each arrow, searching for a particular texture that told him the kind of arrow he wanted. He pulled out three silver tipped arrows and positioned his bow at the ready.

Jacques turned back to the other two. "I want you both to ride past them at a full gallop. You will ensure that any that retreat don't make it very far. Keep them occupied. Janusz, maintain your mount at all times. They cannot enter the forest."

Both Savio and Janusz gave a firm nod. They didn't need to know what Jacques was going to do, only that they had a part to play.

Everyone but David shifted in their saddles, preparing themselves for what they needed to do. From the corner of Jacques's eyes, he saw Savio's legs twitch. Savio's horse then moved away from Janusz. Jacques then notice Janusz doing the same, with his horse moving away.

Jacques's eyes were now properly adjusted to the darkness. He could see the vampires in great detail and even see the woman covered in her own blood. Jacques knew as well as he could see; David's vision was still superior.

Jacques pulled out his sword and gripped the handle tight. He then used it to tap David on the shoulder. One moment David merely looked at the vampires ahead, and the next moment he fired. His bow was tightly strung, letting him pull back part way to launch the third arrow within seconds of the first.

The first arrow hit the closest vampire, who was nestled between her open legs. The hit was true and from its back, the arrow pierced its heart. The perfect aim caused a bright flash that turned to fire.

The second arrow hit a vampire in the left arm. It bellowed out as the silver burned its blood. The third vampire noted the flash of first vampire and was quick enough to escape the arrow's velocity.

The other three riders saw the darkness swallow the arrows. Before the flash of the slain vampire, their legs began to kick into the horses. Each horse reacted and pressed their hoofs hard to the ground.

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Jacques rode a destrier, allowing him to arrive at the group of vampires faster than the others. Once he was in place, he leapt from his mount onto the wounded vampire.

Janusz and Savio had a running start on the third vampire, who barely recovered from dodging the arrow. This creature attempted a clean break for the tree line. Luckily, Janusz intercepted and blocked its path. Savio rode past Janusz to corner the monster in place.

Jacques was able to roll off the vampire and settle on his knees with sword in hand. Jacques looked at the vampire who was now on his back, noting it still had an arrow from his arm. Jacques rose to his feet and closed the distance quickly as he raised his Damascus steel sword high in the air. When the vampire was at his feet, he used both hands to drive the sword point downward towards its chest.

The monster lifted its injured arm and touched the sword on its way down, pushing it away and guiding it to the ground. The force of Jacques' ferocity caused the sword to stab the ground and stay in place, missing the vampire entirely. The demon below him shifted its body and gave a thuddy kick to Jacques' side. The impact didn't injure him but did cause him to let go of the sword and stumble back a few steps.

Jacques regained composure as the vampire got to its feet. The undead beast immediately picks up the sword from the ground and throws it away. Jacques feels an anger swelling up, wanting to chase after it, but keeps himself in place. They turn their attention to each other; eyes locked. Jacques brown with the demon's red.

Janusz had his sword out while on his horse, stabbing at the vampire but only hitting the air. The demon didn't try to run and did its best to defend against the horsemen, either dodging or using its arms to deflect Janusz's sword.

Savio had done his best to keep the vampire within vicinity of Janusz. With the creature now focused on Janusz; Savio took this moment to dismount and charge the vampire. While piercing the skin of the demon, its wild movements prevented Savio from piercing its heart. It screamed in agony from Savio's sword.

The vampire turned towards Savio. It must have figured there was an opening to escape, as it turned towards the forest to run. Janusz intercepted the vampire with his horse and tried to stab at the vampire. Savio moved closer to the vampire to try to pierce it again, but the vampire turned to face Savio and proceeded to attack.

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The vampire was without armor but managed to use its arms to defend itself against Savio's advances. The creature seemed to hold its own against Savio while avoiding Janusz. However, with each slice upon its arms from Savio's silver coated short sword, the harder it became for the vampire to endure.

Fortunately for the undead monster, it could endure a lot of pain, especially when defending its life. Savio knew this all too well, and became more aggressive with his swings, trying to attack it from a different direction, forcing the vampire to anticipate from what seemed like multiple attackers. The vampire was no fighter. He seemed unable to deal with this way of fighting; leaving itself open, long enough for the sword to pierce its heart. Like its companion who met a fate with silver tipped arrows, it screamed with a bright flash.

Only seconds had passed for Jacques from being knocked back, and his sword thrown away. The vampire had seen the bright flash and heard the scream from afar. Jacques looked at the light that painted its face, seeing it pale as the moon with blood dripping from its mouth.

The vampire charged at Jacques as if the pain heard from the scream channeled its fear, using it for untold power. The distance between them was soon negligible as it was on top of him. The vampire grabbed onto Jacques and attempted to take him to the ground.

Jacques was surprised by the vampire's quick movement and strength. The strength was not enough to subdue Jacques, as he fought against it. He did everything he could to stay on his feet, but the smell of the thing filled his nostrils and practically drowned him, causing him to cough for air.

The vampire continued to try to pull down on Jacques. Jacques instinctively pressed his right hand on the chest of the vampire and uttered a few words out loud. The monster seemed to pay no attention to this until a force released from Jacques's hand that pushed the vampire away from him.

This spell caused the vampire to let go, knocking it back a meter. The vampire's back did touch the ground, but it used the momentum to roll out of it and get back on its feet.

Jacques took this moment to take out a piece of yew wood from his hip. The vampire wasted no time and once again was practically on top of Jacques. The creature began to punch Jacques. First a right cross in his Jacques's chest plate, then a left in his abdomen. A second right; this time using the attack to grab onto Jacques.

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Jacques took the punches as well as he could, trying to hit back, but the vampire was too fast. As it latched onto him once more, he became desperate. His stamina was weakening, and the stench was not letting up. Each punch made him ready to give up even more. Each hit made a loud thud of his armor; shooting pain throughout his entire body.

He felt his blood boiling, reaching his head. Tears were forming, but Jacques held them back. He kept his focus on the ugly beast. He used his arms to try to deflect the punches, each time becoming less effective. His bones felt stressed, ready to break as the hits got harder.

He took this moment, what he felt was his last moment, and lifted his stake. He would never have a more clean shot, but the vampire stopped his attack. Their wrists locked and the desperate strength Jacques had mustered up proved not enough for this foul creature. It took the stake from Jacques and threw it away.

The others saw what was happening and moved to Jacques. The hard thrusts of the horse's steps slapped against the air. The vampire averted its gaze to the drumming of horses. Jacques, without thinking, grabbed onto the arrow. He gave a hard yank, splintering it where it broke. He took that now sharp end and drove it through its heart.

The vampire took a step back. The arrow protruded from its chest, but the vampire remained unscathed. The broken arrow was sticking out but didn't pierce far enough to touch its heart. The vampire reached for the arrow to pull it out, to which Jacques lunged at the arrow; reaching back with his dominant hand and then thrusting it forward at the end of the arrow. Anything he had left went into that blow.

His aim was true, deadly accurate as it struck the end of the arrow, causing it to push deeper into the heart. The vampire shrieked as light emanated from its body, growing in intensity. Light and fire filled it as Jacques momentum carried him through, passing the intense heat and landing on the ground.

The vampire disappeared into the air and ash fell to the ground at Jacques's legs. The others arrived a moment later. Savio came to Jacques and grabbed his arms. Jacques threw Savio's hands away. Instead, Jacques pushed his hands into the ground, allowing him to get to his knees. Jacques faced both Savio and Janusz. Both of them nodded in the positive. He then looked at David, who nodded in the negative.

"All dead and no more," Jacques muttered.

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He knew it to be true but saying it allowed the cool air to fill his lungs. He hated moments like that, a split second decision making all the difference. He found the broken off arrow shaft that saved his life and grabbed onto it. He then put out his hand towards Savio. Savio grabbed onto it and held his ground as Jacques pulled Savio to him, allowing Jacques to get to his feet.

Both Janusz and David dismounted their horses and moved over to Jacques. Janusz patted Jacques on the shoulder, giving a smile to him. Jacques gave a half smile back to him, but quickly disappeared. "Is everyone alright?" Jacques asked.

No one said anything, though Janusz slightly nodded his head. Jacques accepted their silence as a good sign. He looked over at David. David was of course David, using his senses to make sure they were still alone. When he looked back at Jacques, Jacques handed him the arrow shaft.

No words needed to be spoken. David's look changed to a cold stare, with his eyelids closing slightly. The arrows themselves were unique, made of yew wood with a silver tip. Highly expensive arrows, especially now. Not easy to replace.

Jacques moved away from them and went to the woman. Her clothes covered her body, but torn up and drenched in her own blood. He eyed her body and noted three sets of puncture marks. One set on her neck, another beneath her arm, and the last on her inner thigh.

Savio and David stayed where they were, as Janusz went over the woman. Immediately, Janusz went to his knees near her head and put his palm over her mouth, then moved it over her heart.

"She is without life," Janusz stated.

"I can say I've never seen three vampires on one victim before... at the same exact time," Jacques mused.

"Based on what I saw of their appearance, I believe we were dealing with Gierach," Savio stated, trembling.

"I'm not familiar with Gierach vampires." Jacques was well educated, but only knew of vampires he encountered.

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"Gierach are from Prussia. Their red glowing eyes and awful smell are a dead giveaway. They hunt early in the night but rarely past midnight. Lucky for us they are not full in the head. They stay in the woods and attack any on the path. Very strong, and like to drain a victim completely."

"What are Prussian vampires doing in Poland?" David's voice echoed.

"These days it seems a lot of vampires are doing what they aren't supposed to. Why do you suppose that is, Master Jacques?" Janusz quipped.

Jacques had no answer to this. He agreed with the problem voiced by Janusz. He wished there was an answer to give.

Savio interjected, "That may be why she was attacked."

"Irrelevant now," Jacques stated. "We need to get moving before more show up. Janusz, administer Sacraments. Savio, collect the horses. David, keep your eyes and ears open."

Janusz drew a circle on the ground around the body of the victim as Savio brought all the horses together. With the horses close by, Janusz got up and went to his horse. Jacques took this time to locate his sword and stake. Took him a moment to find the both, putting both back on his belt.

When Jacques returned to the dead woman, he noted Janusz carrying a book and a vial of oil. He was on his knees, rubbing oil on her forehead with his thumb. His voice was low as he said a prayer to God. Jacques heard a word here and there, knowing what they were. A request to God: asking for her acceptance into His kingdom.

Looking down at the woman and seeing Janusz give the prayer, Jacques wondered if it actually served a purpose. A priest might have tried to convince Jacques that there was nothing lost from doing it. That was a hollow answer, but then so was the answer to why would God ever create such monsters.

Once done, Janusz rose to his feet and stepped away. Savio was standing with all the horses looking at what Janusz had been doing. David was scouting the area, slowly moving around looking into the forest. Jacques couldn't help but envy David's ability to see the darkness as anyone else could see in the day.

Jacques pulled out his sword and readied at her throat. It was one thing to kill a monster, as they were not human. Hurting a person was difficult, and desecrating her

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body was sacrilegious. This act was hard for any of them; though it scared Jacques he was less hesitant than he should have been.

He picked up his sword and raised it over his head, with the end nearly touching his back. He then swung down. The fierce velocity of his swing almost made her skin split about before the blade could touch it, opening wider as the blade got deeper. The metal made a straight cut through her, and the head roll back. Only a little blood sprang forth from her, as it seemed there was little blood left inside her.

Jacques used to tell himself this was necessary. Now, he didn't tell himself anything.

Janusz used two fingers to make a cross in the air. "Thy Lord's work has been done."

Jacques turned and went to his horse. He sheathed his sword and lifted himself on. The others did the same, and now all four were back on.

David kicked his horse, and it began moving towards the direction they needed to go. Once he was a good distance away, Jacques followed David.

Jacques could only think about what consequence this might have caused.

What was done had to be done, though that thought didn't make him feel better.

Chapter 2

The ride to Darlet took little time. Jacques saw the glimmer of light about two kilometers back, knowing they were close. Unlike most other villages, this one sat a distance from any other. Also unusual was that it was watched over by a Keep. Most Keeps watched over towns or cities, not villages.

The sight of Darlet was uninspired. From a distance, nothing about it seem to stand out. Even up close, the village was just a village. The Keep, however, was anything but a Keep. It stood tall on a hill above the village, blending with the night sky. The village itself drowned in torchlight, yet those lights seemed to avoid the Keep itself, as it warded off the light and bathed itself in darkness. If one weren't looking for the Keep, they could easily miss it.

Jacques knew the Keep was there, as it was their final destination. The closer they came, the more nervous Jacques became. Despite anything the Pope told him; he was still uncertain what was waiting for him. However, it was more than that... Jacques felt something. Something weighing on his heart; it was beating fast and slower at the same time. Looking at the Keep, he knew the feeling was coming from there.

After nearly a month long of riding, this moment seemed to move too fast. Jacques swore he only kept his eyes closed for a moment... he went from being a distance away,

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to now riding up the path leading to the Keep itself. The trail ended in front of the Keep, where David was already there waiting for him, still on his horse.

Jacques got off his horse and waited for the others to come. He knew that he could give an order to David, and David would instruct the others. However, this very moment, Jacques knew the order should come directly from him.

David kept eyeing the Keep. Jacques imagined David's eyes seeing every bit of the Keep, to understand the structure and the land itself. From what Jacques could make out, it was a big round Keep, built of stone, which appeared to be three levels high though the top level seemed to be decaying. The stones themselves appeared not to be painted but were simply dark. The air surrounding the Keep was warm, and stale. It felt as there was no wind, and yet smelled of death.

Despite the unwelcoming gloom, the Keep had a few windows with light coming from them.

The feeling Jacques had felt before intensified. He knew that David felt it too, and the others did as well. Being a Hunter enhanced one's senses, but also gave them added senses to be more aware of the world. Not always exacting in what it sensed, only that it sensed something. It was hard to determine where it originated from; to Jacques, it appeared to come from everywhere.

Jacques heard movement, and to the direction it came from, he saw Janusz and Savio on horseback. They said nothing; they simply dismounted where David and Jacques were. David did the same as well, jumping from his horse.

Jacques look at them. In his mind, he rehearsed what he needed to say. All of this was unfamiliar to Jacques; he wasn't entirely sure what to expect, but as a leader, he needed to maintain confidence in his voice. If he even gave a hint of worry, it would cause the others to worry. His show of strength gave the others strength.

Jacques took a mental sigh. "I trust that everyone is well. I imagine that all of you are in need of a good break. I know when night comes, we typically set up camp and decide who guards for the night, but I knew we were close. The importance of this mission demanded that we get here as soon as we could."

"Do you think it wise to visit in the middle of the night?" Janusz asked.

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There were some instances that Jacques didn't like Janusz inquisitive nature. Jacques knew that any other night in any other place; that question might be valid, but tonight at this place, it was invalid. Unfortunately, Jacques couldn't quite say that.

"A message from the Pope himself; I don't image anyone would want to wait until morning to get it. I'm sure they'll understand our late night intrusion. We are here on the behalf of the Pope and must act accordingly. For this, the Pope's instructions were clear; I would be the one to go in. All of you must remain out here," Jacques said.

"Is that smart? Do you even know who these people are?" Savio asked.

Jacques had a very good idea who they were. "I don't know."

"Then how do you know you don't need support?"

"The Pope assured me that my presence alone would suffice. So long as we did as he ordered, that we would be unharmed."

Jacques couldn't blame Savio for questioning the orders of the Pope. Jacques had difficulty putting his trust in him. Seeing how his own orders carried weight with them, he felt no reason to discuss any further. He knew they wanted to object, but their sense of duty ran deep.

"Perhaps it will be best for us to stand watch while you're inside," David advised.

"No," Jacques responded.

Janusz and Savio eyes widened and furrowed their brows. Their cheeks were becoming discolored with their mouths open. Jacques was not surprised by their action, but was of David, the stoic, who cocked his head and shot Jacques a look, with narrowing eyes.

"Forgive my questioning, Master. You stated yourself you don't know what to expect or who these people are. Being out in the open like this, vampires could very well strike us at a moment's notice. I'd rather be prepared for an attack than be easily ambushed. We should be on our guard and prepared for anything to happen." David's demeanor was stiff though his voice was elevated.

Jacques wanted to breathe out. "Not this time, David. The Pope was the one who sent us here, and he has his reasons. More than that, those who dwell here may not like us doing anything without an invitation to do so. If they ask us, that is one thing, but to

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presume what is best, is an insult to them and sends the wrong message. We are guests here, and we will remain so until stated otherwise. Understand?"

David gave a forceful nod.

Jacques went to his horse. He pulled his key chain from his neck. The keychain held a special emblem and a couple of keys. He picked the key he needed and unlocked his saddle bag. He pulled out two objects; then closed the bag and locked it. Before turning around, he put the key chain under his armour.

He walked back to the group, revealing a white candle. His other hand took a nail that he was holding with the candle. He eyed the candle, finding the perfect spot, and drove the nail into the wax.

"Janusz, light the candle," Jacques ordered.

Janusz took the candle and did as he was commanded. He spoke under his breath and used his finger and thumb to touch the wick. He pressed them tight and quickly let go, leaving a flame behind.

"Whatever you may hear from within the Keep, you are not to enter," Jacques commanded. "Under no circumstance will you enter. Even if you believe I may be in danger. If I am not back when that nail falls, you are to ride into town immediately. By morning, you will ride back to Avignon. Do not come for me."

Jacques looked each of them in their eyes. All of them, including David, told him they would follow, even if they didn't understand. No words were spoken. It was uncharacteristic for them to leave a man behind, but Jacques didn't know what dangers there were beyond the Keep's door.

Jacques turned and went to the Keep's entrance. He told himself that he would be safe; no harm would come to him. He tried telling himself that God would protect him, but also knew that God had his own plan about things, and that would be more important. Hoping God had his back was wishful thinking.

His walk brought him under an entrance way, made from timber and stone. The timber was warped, and the stone was cracked. Jacques wondered what this Keep might have looked like when it was first built; believing its decay was from improper upkeep.

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He was soon met by a large wooden door. From the height of his head was a metal ring hanging down, position in the middle. He lifted the heavy metal and used it to bang the door three times. Each bang had an echo behind it, an echo Jacques could feel inside.

On the third swing, he let it drop from his hand. There he stood to wait. He hated being in this position, not knowing what would happen next, not able to anticipate the next action. Being in a battle was easy, diplomacy was hard.

Jacques had never been more aware of his weapons, and his heartbeats hitting harder against his chest. He took in a breath and let it out, having a bad taste remain.

The door began to move. He heard the door creaking. His mind anticipated someone on the other side of it. When it swung open, he saw only the foul air.

His body tensed up. A voice in his mind whispered that it was a bad idea. He closed his eyes and spoke in his mind, repeating he had to do this. He had come too far not to see this through. Luckily, the droning of his voice made the whisper vanish.

He opened his eyes and found he had control of his body once more. He stepped through the portal and was now in the Keep. From the door, he walked into a large room. To the right was stairs of stone that protruded from the wall itself. At the top of the stairs was a door that led to the second level of the Keep.

From beneath the stairs was an entryway to a hallway with another entry way matching it on the other wall. On each side of the entryways were unlit torches, and high in the room was a chandelier of what appeared to be wood and iron with candles. Unlike the torches, each candle was lit up.

He moved to the center of the room. It was big enough that he could see the door on the second level. He had a good sight of both hallways, able to see where the light led him, and where the darkness lived.

He suddenly felt air blowing at him, followed by a loud bang. He turned to see the Keep's entryway was now closed.

The noise echoed through the room and continued down the hallways past where Jacques was standing. He wondered if the others in the Keep heard it too. Given how loud it was, how could they not.

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He was alone and yet, felt surrounded. The feeling he had since he first laid eyes on the Keep was much stronger in here. Being in this room, he felt it coming in all direction. Someone, or something, was definitely here.

He turned back from the door and looked ahead. He wasn't sure what to do, but assumed they knew he was here. Someone was responsible for the door.

Off to the distance, he heard a faint sound. He couldn't describe it. Only that it was small and at a distance. He looked around, trying to identify its source. The more he heard it, the greater in volume it became, yet was still very quiet. He surmised that whatever it was, it was coming in his direction.

He continued to listen, and soon was able to pinpointed its location. It was coming from the hallway that was beneath the stairs. Once identifying the direction, he realized they were footsteps; quiet footsteps that barely made a sound. He knew if they made a loud echo in the hall, that those feet would have been covered, but the quiet sound told Jacques they were uncovered by armour; possibly even barefooted.

He looked down the hall but saw nothing. Not even the shape past where the chandelier revealed. He continued to stare down the hallway; squinting his eyes.

Slowly a figure came to shape. It walked on two legs. The closer it came to the light, the more that was revealed. It had hair, long flowing hair, down past its shoulder. It had an hourglass figure with swaying hips, and a revealing top. No, no top at all. Bare breasts, bouncing with each step she took.

A woman with a crown of crimson, as bright as the sun. She wore a skirt that hugged her hips and met the floor. The only thing worn above her waist was an empty stare. Her skin was a tanned olive color, moist in the light's glow.

When her eyes were revealed, Jacques's eyes were memorized by them. She looked into his eyes for only a moment, and then glanced back towards path before her. For Jacques, looking at her was like looking at a painting, vibrant in color, or a statue, chiseled to perfection. He lacked any other thought as her body quivered with each step.

She was close now. Jacques, if desired, could reach out with his hand and touch her. His Templar training ran deep. A Templar Knight does not engage in any sexual activity. A selfish part of him wanted to disobey, but he was Templar, and Templar he would remain.

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As she moved past him, he did nothing but focus his eyes on her. She continued to move towards the other entrance; opposite of the door she came through, leaving as easily as she came.

Jacques turned his body in her direction. Seen from behind, her hips swung from side to side. He was unsure of what to make of this; a woman walking around with only part of her body covered. He felt confident she was human, sensing nothing from her.

Perhaps Jacques was in the wrong location, or what he had been told was incorrect. He didn't have a map, mostly directions from one village to the next. This place was as villagers explained. He was certain he was where he needed to be, and the feeling all around help convinced him of that.

He didn't take his eyes off of her. She crossed the threshold of the light that led to the darkness. It spread across her body like a wave of water spreading on the beach. Soon she was enveloped and gone from his view.

"Quite a lovely sight!" a voice hearkened from above.

Jacques was unaware another person was here. He quickly moved his body in the direction of the voice, jerking his head upward. He immediately saw a smile at the top of the stairs, with fangs visible.

Jacques instinctively moved hands. His left found its way to the sheath hanging from his belt with his right grasping his hilt. An alarm went off in his mind, screaming to take it out. He wanted to, more than anything he wanted to, but he stopped himself. Rather, he waited to see what would happen next.

The vampire smile disappeared and was replaced by a glowering stare. "You come into my Keep uninvited and dare draw your sword on me? Here I thought Templars had manners."

Jacques's heart pounded in his chest. He still waited for the next move to be made. The vampire's smile was no more, but his body remained the same. It wasn't enough for Jacques to react, but the sight of its fangs burned into his mind, an image that told him to do something. However, the words of the vampire did come to him; ringing in his ears.

He wanted to speak but felt he would show fear in his words. He closed his eyes and took a mental breath. He opened them and asked, "How do you know I'm a Templar?"

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The vampire locked his gaze with Jacques. This vampire had the eyes of a human, blue in color. Jacques tend not to have any more than a moment of a gaze with such a beast, yet this gaze allowed him to see intelligence behind its eyes. Cold, but calculating. Jacques wondered if he had seen eyes like that before, or if this vampire was different.

"I can smell it. You reek of a warrior, a Knight of the Templars... might I say, a Hunter of the order. I would revel in the thought of what that could mean, if not for your focus to be my enemy," the vampire asserted.

Hearing the vampire triggered the words of the Pope. He spoke of these vampires, telling him they were different. Despite his coming on this journey, a part of him didn't want to believe it.

Jacques's eyes were still locked in, his hands held firm. Only his mind was detached, convincing himself to let go. He first spoke calmly in his head, but that soon became shouting. Eventually, his hands managed to let go, and he forced them into place on either side of his body.

"Hmmm... we can't have that now can we? If your intention here is peaceful... drop your sword to the ground."

Jacques balked at the idea. "You can take my word as a Templar; no harm will come your way."

The vampire's face would not let up, it stayed angry. "Maybe forty years ago, that might have meant something to me. Now, it means nothing but an empty promise."

He saw that this vampire was serious. This demand, very likely, was non-negotiable. He begrudgingly unhooked his belt and grabbed the sheath. The belt came off with the sword, as he set it on the ground before him. The belt also carried his coin purse, his wooden stake, and his ceremonial dagger. He was ready to hear the vampire instruct him to kick it away.

The vampire's demeanor changed back to what Jacques would describe as his jovial face; bright with a smile and a twinkle in his eye.

Jacques broke contact with the vampire to look him over. He dressed as someone with money, wearing a red overcoat. Beneath the coat was black, from his neck down to his feet. Its skin was pale, but seemed to have some color to it.

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"Now, with that out of the way... What are you doing here?"

"I am Jacques de Volker. I have come here seeking out your house. I wish to ask for your help."

"What... an interesting name. A clash of French and German... how pray tell did that happen?"

Jacques at first ignored him. He looked back at its eyes. A moment had passed before he responded, "Again, I am here to seek your help."

"Tight-lipped I see. So you want my help." His smile faded. "Was it not you and your men who killed vampires within my territory? Is that how a French German countryman asks for help? Kill us as a bargaining chip?"

Jacques didn't like where this was going. He wanted to reach for his sword. He had to remind himself that it was hooked to his belt; rather it laid on the ground before him.

Jacques's hairs began to point straight out and felt goose bumps on his arms, crawling up on his neck.

"Forgive me your grace; I had not known they were yours. We saw a woman being attacked; our code is very specific." Jacques boosted his voice a bit.

The vampire's smile returned once more, "Those things you killed were not of us. They are immature children who thirst for death and suffering. They are nothing more than savages, much like the rest of their brethren. In fact, I thank you for your good deed."

The vampire walked to the stairs and began to go down. He maintained his eyes on Jacques. "So Templar, who sent you?"

"What do you mean?" Jacques asked.

"You might be a Templar Hunter, but the order is dead. Someone else is pulling your strings. Tell me who it is."

Jacques paused a moment.

"Pope Clements VI," he said in a low voice.

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The vampire bellowed a laugh, still moving down the stairs, taking his time. "I'm afraid the Pope has no welcome here. Since he is your leader, that means you have no welcome here either. I'm afraid you've come a long way for nothing."

Jacques wasn't ready to leave yet.

"It's not that simple. People are dying out there." He understood the importance of this, and would do whatever was needed of him.

"Your people have been dying since you first learned to walk on two legs. There's nothing we can do about that."

"It's more than that. Rumors tell of people dying by the hundreds. New villages each day are dying. I have seen it for myself; something is killing them from within."

"So sad to hear," he said dry and cold. "What makes you think we can help you with that?"

"For the last few years, vampires have been growing in numbers. We believe there is a connection. That somehow the vampires are behind this." Jacques stated.

The vampire was now halfway down the stairs, above the door leading into the room.

"That very well may be. If only there were an army trained in fighting vampires and dealing with this mess." The vampire looked away from Jacques and chuckled a bit, "Oh wait, there was such a force. Then the Papacy turned its back on them. Now here you stand; the final remnant of that once great force."

He then looked back at Jacques. "So... what would you have us do?"

Jacques took a moment. He wasn't sure how this was going, but he was still alive, so he told himself that was a good thing. The vampire stopped on the stairs while looking at him, waiting for an answer.

"There are stories of your house; helping Charlemagne deal with the great vampire threat of Europe in his time. Within the records of the Templar Archive, the story holds 'for had it not been for the wisdom of Melanthios, Europe would know only of darkness, and Charlemagne would have failed the people he sought to protect'. The Pope told me that Melanthios was a house of vampires."

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Now it was the vampire's turn to take a pause. He looked away once more and started down the step. He came to the foot of the stairs, looking forward but not meeting Jacques's gaze.

"So, you figured we did it once, we can do it again? See, the story I heard is that Carolus Magnus gave us land in his mighty empire for our helping him. We would have our own kingdom and be left alone while under his protection. As soon as his family came out of favor, we were run out. An injustice that to this day has never been corrected," the vampire stated.

Jacques had been privy to that part of the story, by the Pope. The Pope was a keeper of secrets, and yet this one he was very forthcoming with. Jacques reached under his armor from above his waist and pulled out a papal bull.

Jacques held out the papal bull. "I was order to give this to you."

The vampire came down to the floor of the room and moved swiftly to Jacques. He was now in reaching distance. Jacques has never been this close to a monster unless they were trying to kill each other.

The vampire snatched it from Jacques's fingers. It was a folded up paper with a wax seal and metal medallion. After inspecting it, the vampire asked, "What does it say?"

Jacques responded, "I don't know."

The vampire gazed narrowed. "You lie. You might be able to lie to the Papacy, but it is much harder to lie to a vampire."

Jacques began to blink, "The Papal is sealed. I would have to break the seal to read it."

The vampire broke contact and turned away from him. He moved towards the door beneath the stairs. He ran his arm along the wall; hovering his hand above the torches. As he moved from one torch to the next, the torch came alive with fire. The second one did the same after his hand passed by.

Despite creating the flame, the vampire kept its distance; except for the papal bull, now being poked into the fire. "You see my dear boy; there is a difference between a wax seal done by hand and a wax resealed by a magical touch. So tell me now, Templar, what

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does it say? Or would you rather be responsible for the death of millions? Responsible for the fall of the Papacy? Responsible for the death of your family?"

Jacques stood his ground. He knew the vampire wouldn't do anything, especially not a potential promise from the Pope.

It seemed that the vampire knew what Jacques was thinking. He poked the papal bull deeper into the flame and let it sit there. The papal bull caught on fire. The vampire pulled it out and then turned to Jacques with a big smile.

The paper was very waxy, designed to be protected from the elements, and it had a slow burn. However, Jacques did see it start turning to black.

"OK, OK... I read it. I will tell you what it says, just put it out first."

The vampire waved his hand through the flame and let out a loud grunt as Jacques heard a sizzle like he would have bacon on a pan. The demon continued to wave his hand through the fire, and the flame began to retard. The paper went from a black to its original color. As soon as the paper looked as it did when handed to the vampire... the flame disappeared.

Now relieved, he answered the vampire, "It states that Pope Clements VI will grant you the original agreement set with Charlemagne. You will be given sovereignty and your own lands. This is contingent on the defeat or removal of the vampire threat from our lands."

The vampire cocked his head back let out a bellowing laugh. "Oh my... I am impressed. The Papacy is more desperate than I gave him credit for."

The vampire continued to laugh a few more seconds, and then stopped immediately. He turned back towards Jacques. "Seems like a decent offer. However, I really don't see this as being our problem. It was your kind that turned on my House. These vampires are after you, not us. Our best move is to stay out of the way."

Fortunately for Jacques, the Pope had been prepared for this answer. "I do not believe that to be true."

A single eyebrow on the vampire's face twitched up. "Oh?"

Jacques swallowed.

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"We have evidence from a raid on a vampire camp. A letter stating their intention of coming after you once we humans have been dealt with. The vampires view you as traitors."

"Is that so? Did you happen to bring this evidence with you?"

"No."

"Have you yourself seen this?"

Jacques eyes began to flutter a bit, "I have, though, I didn't understand what it meant until the Pope explained it to me."

The vampire just looked at Jacques. Jacques's eyes stopped fluttering the moment he stopped talking. He maintained a tough front. He tried to keep his face still, but felt the need to blink the more the vampire looked at him. Jacques wondered if the vampire could see through him.

The vampire broke the silence. "I guess that does change things. It's a shame about the Papacy; he must have great regret for what he did to your forefathers so many years ago."

"That was a different Pope." Words that Jacques often found himself saying.

"Was it? Are you sure about that? Perhaps the man has change, and even his location has changed, but the office itself remains the same."

Jacques had no response to that. The vampire returned to silence. The sounds of the flames themselves were now noticeable. His own heart chimed-in, beating hard in his chest, convinced it was in battle.

The vampire started to walk towards Jacques. "I must say; I am quite surprised that someone related to Jacques de Molay would be working for the organization that turned their backs on him, and his men; let them burn at the stake as heretics, than to revealed the nature of my kind."

Jacques brow furrowed. "How... How did you know of my lineage?"

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The vampire smiled once more. "Aside from your name?" The vampire tilted his head towards Jacques and noticeably let in a small rush of air through his nose. "It is the way you smell. Vampires have an excellent nose for human blood. In fact, we can smell the blood of a distant relative several generations apart. It's a smell from long passed, but I know you are related. Funny... he never mentioned having children."

Jacques's eyebrows went from furrowed to going up, with his eyes opening wide. "You... met Jacques de Molay?"

"Oh yes. He came here... much like you are now. Of course, he had so much bravado. Even his enemies bowed to his presence. I can honestly say I've never met a human such as he."

"Why did he come here?"

The vampire responded, "Same reason you did. Though his request was for Jerusalem. He wanted the Templars to return there, to fight off the Mongolians in the area. He knew that the vampires were the source of power for the Mongolians, even if the Mongolians didn't know it themselves."

"What did you say? Did you agree to help?"

"The Templars, like the Teutonic Knights, had always left us alone. They honoured our agreement with Carolus Magnus, unlike the Papacy and the power behind it. We told him if he could obtain the authorization; we would provide him help. However, he was not to mention us to King Philip IV. The King... was not to be trusted."

Jacques, wondering what he had meant by that. He knew well the story of his Great Uncle and King Philip IV; the King responsible for arresting him and killing him. The demons words made him wonder if there was more to the story than he was told.

"Do you mean that the King was...?"

The vampire cut him off. "I simply mean he was not to be trusted. Look at what happened to the Grand Master of the Templar. The last Grand Master."

The vampire looked at the papal bull. He held it in his hands, and Jacques tried to wager what he was thinking. A vampire is hard to understand, and the way the vampire moved his hands, he would have guessed the vampire was attempting to guess its

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weight.

"I need to discuss this with the Elders. You will have an answer by morning."

The vampire moved to the stairs.

Jacques watched him walk up the stairs. He waited to see if there was anything else he would say. Only silence came from the vampire in red.

When he came to the halfway point, Jacques broke the silence. "Begging your pardon?"

The vampire stopped and turned once more toward Jacques. "Yes?"

"I didn't travel alone. My men are outside. We've traveled a long way and could use a good bed and a warm meal to eat."

The vampire bowed his head. He was silent for a moment. Then he raised his head and asked, "Do your men know why they are here?"

Jacques bowed his head and looked away. He gave no response to that.

"That's what I figured," the vampire stated. "Under the circumstances, and given how quick you were to reach for your sword, I'm afraid they must remain outside."

Jacques moved his head back up to face him. He understood the vampire's reasoning. "I will then send them to town."

"No," the vampire spoke harshly, almost a yell.

The vampire seemed to lose his composure a bit, and Jacques could see his fangs clearly. He attempted to regain his composure and speak calmly.

"Your men will remain here. They are free to set up a fire if they wish. There is some wood near where they are standing now, on the side of the Keep. Take what you need.

"They are welcome to sleep the night by their fire. You have my assurance; no harm will come to them. You, however, are free to come in as you wish, but only to this room. I cannot guarantee your safety if you break any of these rules I have laid out for you.

"When a decision has been reached, I will send for you."

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The vampire started up the stairs once more.

"Wait...," Jacques blurted out. "I didn't get your name."

The vampire was now at the top of the stairs. He turned to him, just as he did when Jacques first saw him. He displayed the same smile as well. "Oh, where are my manners? You are free to call me Harlan."

Harlan. Jacques would remember that name. He bent down to pick up his sword and heard a loud bang. He looked up and the vampire was gone. Then he heard a loud creaking noise. He looked behind him, and the door Jacques came through was now open.

Jacques knew it was time to get back to his men.

Chapter 3

The air outside was warm and stale, just like he remembered it. Somehow, it was better than before. He figured there was a difference between being inside than outside and having experience inside made the outside more tolerable.

The wooden door shut behind him. Not so much a slam, but definitely a sound of wood scraping stone. He didn't want to dwell here any longer than he needed to, and his mind went to his men.

He walked briskly. He didn't want to run, in fear that it might put his men on alert and send the wrong message to Harlan, but he definitely wanted to get there as quick as he could.

He soon had them in sight. They were standing there, still on guard despite Jacques telling them not to be. They were looking around in all directions, waiting to be attacked.

The curse of being a Hunter, Jacques thought.

Paranoia seemed to be a common trait to Templar Hunters, always waiting for the next attack.

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It was David who noticed him at first, and then a moment later the others did as well. Jacques slowed his stride to a normal walk. He was relieved they were still here, that they hadn't gone to town, or something worse happened to them.

They said nothing, nor did they move from their position. Jacques immediately noticed the candle. The wick was definitely lower. Close to the nail. Upon reflection, he realized that he was in there for a short time though it felt like hours had passed.

All of them were standing in the dirt, though it was off from the trail leading to Keep's entryway. There was a lot of dead grass around them, with small patches of green here and there. Jacques turned to look for the wood Harlan told him of. Sure enough, there was a box.

David's attention went back to the surroundings. Jacques turned his attention to Janusz and Savio, who looked at him, waiting for him to tell them about what's going on.

"We are to stay for the night," Jacques stated.

Both Janusz and Savio eyes lit up.

"I will get our things together. Do they have a room big enough for all of us?" Janusz asked.

Jacques hesitated. "We're not staying in the Keep."

"Oh, we are going to the town we passed by, then?" Savio inquired.

Jacques was silent again. His men were as tough as they came. Most of their lives as Templar Hunter's were sleeping outdoors, under the stars. When it rained, they made shelters for themselves. They never complained about this. Templar Knights and Hunters took a vow of poverty. However, Jacques knew that they needed a bed and a warm place to sleep once in awhile and several weeks is a long time to ask of anyone.

Their journey from France to Poland did allow them to visit Jacques family for a night. Not long enough to relax, but enough that they could trade horses and sleep comfortably. More than likely they would go back to his family's village. Even then, it wasn't enough time to unload their burdens, and it was a couple of weeks ago.

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"We've been asked to stay here for the night. We will make our camp here, and wait for their command to be seen again."

Both Janusz and Savio closed their mouths. Their faces revealed nothing, but their bodies stiffened up. Jacques knew they had hoped to spend the night in the Keep. Nothing he could do but be the bearer of bad news. He could offer no sympathy, as this was the life they all led.

"Here is a good place to be anyways. I can easily keep guard," David interjected.

"That won't be necessary. We have been guaranteed our safety tonight from the Keep. No harm will come to us tonight." Jacques stated.

David turned towards Jacques. He too lacked an expression, but his eyes told Jacques everything he needed to know. They all had the same reaction. Jacques would tell them that it is better than all of them staying on guard, but he knew it was futile to try to say anything to them.

The best thing Jacques could do right now was keep them busy. "Savio, tend to the horses. Find a patch of green and have them feed. Also check for any remaining food we might have in the saddle bags. David, there is some wood in the box over there." Jacques pointed to a box behind himself. "Grab out a few pieces and bring them here.

"Janusz, collect some dry grass together and start a fire."

Everyone started moving. Jacques began to clear a place for a fire. This location seemed suited for a fire; flat land and an open dirt area. It even had a variety of large stones that one could lean their back against and be somewhere comfortable. Better than tree bark poking you in the back.

Jacques saw Savio get all the horses and lead them to a patch of grass. Janusz was the first back with a handful of grass, but David was soon behind him with a couple of pieces of wood.

Janusz grabbed the candle he lit and began setting a piece of dead grass on fire.

"Put that out," Jacques demanded.

Janusz looked up, confused by this. He did as he was told and put out the piece of dead grass.

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"The candle too," Jacques ordered.

"You told me to make a fire. I'm just following orders," Janusz remarked.

"You are. But I rather you use your book to start the fire, not the candle."

Janusz blew out the candle, harder than was necessary. He set the candle on the ground next to where the fire would be, and then pulled out his small little book from his purse. He began to thumb through the pages. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for.

He closed his eyes. His face was serene, no folding of the skin, very smooth. He began moving his lips, saying something, but only to himself. He would occasionally look at the book as if he was memorizing what it said.

Janusz opened his eyes and focused on the pile of dead grass. He began speaking, "High in sk-sky... the air comes... da-down. Engulfs us all...circles us all. Moisture gone, heat rise... heat will rise. Make a spark, and, and cast the eyes. Push from me, set abound. Grow from light and life the ground."

Upon saying the last line, Janusz pushing his hand towards the ground in the direction of where he intended the flame to start, conducting its placement as if his hand were a wand.

Nothing happened.

Janusz looked at Jacques. He was perplexed.

"Check the book again. Did you get those words right?" Jacques asked.

Janusz looked at his book. He read it again, perhaps even read it twice. "Oh, oh oh oh... yes. I see now, I did get a few wrong. I think I see where I messed up."

He didn't close his eyes this time; he began to recite what he had read.

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"High in sky, the air comes down.
Engulfs us all, encircle around.
Moisture gone, heat will rise.
Make a spark and cast the eyes.
Push from me and set about
Grow from life, and light the ground."

He did the same action as he did before, again nothing happened.

"Master Jacques, why do I have to do this? It would be so much faster to just do it the conventional way." Janusz stated.

"What did you do wrong?" Jacques asked.

"I don't understand the question."

"You lit the candle with no problem, yet you can't do this."

Janusz looked at the candle that he had set down. "The candle was smaller, much easier to handle. How about I light the candle again and start the fire that way?"

"No. Janusz, at 26, you are the oldest of all of us. Which, from my understanding, makes you the most powerful. I can do a few spells, but you have at least four years on me. You need to be ready to one day carry out important spells and until such a time, you need to practice. Our lives may depend on it one day."

"Very well, Master. However, I just tried, and it didn't work."

"What were you thinking about?"

"What do you mean?" Janusz asked.

"When you said the word, what did you think about?"

Janusz thought a moment on that.

Janusz shrugged. "I guess... nothing, I was just trying to get the words out properly."

"Janusz. It is more than saying the words. You have to make the words apart of you. You have to think about them, what they mean, how they relate to each other. Then direct that into a thought of what you want to accomplish. Try again."

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Janusz attempted to try again. He said the words with more confidence. Nothing happened.

"Again," Jacques ordered.

Janusz did everything the exact same way, though Jacques noted he was taking extra measure to stay focused. Same result as before, nothing happened.

"Again."

"Master, it's not..." Janusz was interrupted.

Jacques nearly shouted, "Again."

This time Janusz was more forceful in his delivery, closing his eyes this time, and thrusting his arm down.

This time the grass caught fire. Janusz opened his eyes up and noticed the fire. He looked towards Jacques and excitement all over his face.

"Very good Janusz. From now on, you light the fires each night."

The excitement turned to a groan.

"Janusz, don't worry, you did it once, you can do it again. You'll get plenty of practice."

The fire began to grow, consuming the dead grass below the wood. The wood was now part of the flame, and the fire was much bigger now.

Savio came back empty handed. Jacques figured there was nothing left. Despite stocking up from his home, food can only last so long despite rationing it off.

If they couldn't have food tonight, they could at least have comfort. Jacques took off his leather chest piece. He ordered the others to do the same. They were hesitant at first but did as they were ordered. Their armor was designed to be slipped off very easily, and slipped on again if a situation arose.

"Everyone sit down, let us enjoy the fire."

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They each found their own little corner of the circle and sat down. They had all remove their belts and laid them next to where they sat. It was uncomfortable to have them on as they sat, but each of them kept it within reach... just in case.

This was strange for all of them, and even though Jacques had ordered them not to be on guard, they still were. He understood how they felt. He too felt naked without his armor on, and uneasy they were vulnerable.

Jacques looked at each of them. He never gets a chance to really look at them, even when they are not out and about. Janusz is the oldest of them, and the tallest. His beard, like his hair, was light brown, which made his blue eyes stand out. Janusz was the cheerful one of the group.

Savio was the shortest and by far the youngest. He liked to keep his head down a lot. Jacques figured he often kept himself lost in thought. What he went through in life, Jacques wouldn't blame him. His dark brown wavy hair covered his face well, giving others the impression that he was hiding from plain sight, hiding behind his hair.

David was somewhere between their heights. His skin was a good bronze, perhaps olive color. Similar to the woman he encountered in the Keep. His broad shoulders were very noticeable; likely added to his skill as an archer, though his hips seem narrow in comparison. Always serious. Jacques is quite sure he's ever seen him smile.

Looking at all of them, they just sat there, with nothing to do. He knew they couldn't sleep. They were too wound up. The only way they could sleep is if they knew one of them was on guard for the night. How could Jacques ask them to relax?

Jacques then got an idea, something a bit unorthodox. He got up quickly. The others focused on him, as he walked past the fire and to his horse. He removed a keychain from around his neck and inserted a key into one of his bags. He opened the sack and pulled out a stack of papers. He then locked his sack again and put the key back around his neck.

Each paper was folded up and had the names of each of his members. He handed them out and went back to where he was sitting.

They looked at what was handed to them, and then back at Jacques.

"Why are you showing us our mail?" Janusz asked.

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"I figured we could read them. Help pass the time." Jacques responded.

"This is an old letter; I've read it a few times already."

"I meant out loud. You read it to the group."

"But you already know what they say," Savio stated.

This was true; he did know what each of them said, as he reads all of them before his men see it.

"Yes, but the rest of us here haven't. I think we should read them out loud," Jacques said in a suggestive way.

"No offense, Master Jacques, but this is very private. I don't even like the idea of you reading it," David grumbled.

"Well then, you have a choice: either you volunteer to do it or I order you to do it."

The three of them looked away. Jacques could understand. He wasn't one for sharing. None of them ever really talked to each other. The only reason Jacques knew as much as he did was that he personally recruited each of them.

Jacques opened his letter first.

"Dear Jakob." Jacques began to read.

Janusz and Savio looked up at him as he Jacques spoke. David's gaze was somewhere else.

"Jakob?" Janusz asks.

Jacques realized that none of them knew. He had gotten so use to the name that even his own father called him Jacques. It never occurred to him to tell the others about his name.

"Oh, this is a letter from my sister. She still calls me by my birth name. I changed it soon after I became an adult."

Janusz nodded.

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Jacques started over.

Dear Jakob,

By the time you read this, you will be back on the road. I overheard you speak to father about it, something about going to Poland. I knew it was not my place to ask, so I didn't. That didn't seem to stop father though.

I can't believe it's been nearly a year since I saw you. I am happy to get your letters when you have time to write. I do get many letters from Bertram. He seems to enjoy his duty to the French Army, but I'm sure it is more that he enjoys the drinking.

Father has continued to pressure me to get married. Now that you are gone, father tells me that I must fulfill the role that was set before me from birth. I understand the importance of it, now that you are fighting against vampires; I need to carry on the tradition and train my children.

As you know, I really don't want to. So far, I've avoided the issue with father as much as I can. He's started to put me to work in the village. I'm dealing with animal waste and working at the butcher shop outside of the village. I'm guessing he's trying to make it hard on me so I will agree to his wishes. I do it with a smile on my face to spite him.

There are days I wish to run away, make a new life for myself. But most nights I'm glad you talked me out of it. I'm sure you know more than me about this, but there have been more vampires in the area lately. I'm on the hunt every night. I've been taking Hans with us. He's about 12 now. Father has put him and Greta under my care. Another manipulation of father. I am training them. Hans reminds me of you at that age, over eager and hates failing.

I know that you weren't able to stay here for very long when you were here, but I believe I heard you speak to father that you would be returning for your horses in a few weeks. Perhaps we can spend some time when you get back, perhaps share a few drinks, and you can share stories of your adventures.

I am very proud of what you and Bertram have become, and I love you very much. Father tells me I should pray for you, but I don't think you need prayer. You both have everything you need.

Stay safe,
Sophie

Jacques set down his letter and looked up. Janusz seemed to focus on Jacques as he spoke while Savio was leaning back looking at the stars.

Janusz seemed to wait until Jacques was done, as when Jacques looked up, that is when Janusz spoke. "Who are Greta and Hans?"

"My brother and sister. My mother died during childbirth with me. Years later he remarried and had two with her." Jacques responded.

"So your sister Sophie also hunts?" Savio said, still looking at the stars.

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"Oh yes, very good at it. Me, her, and Bertram trained together and would go on many overnight hunts. She's very good to have around."

Everyone fell into silence again. Jacques was happy for them to ask questions. He felt a little weird talking about it. He knew it was necessary. The night very quiet; not even nature made a sound.

Jacques looked over at Janusz. "Janusz, would you like to go next?"

Janusz sat forward, moved slightly to get the light of the fire to reflect on his letter.

"This is a letter from my wife.

Dear Janusz,

I hope things are going well for you. I guess as well as they can. The children, and I, miss you greatly. The children are asking me every week when you will come home. I try to tell them sometime soon, but I'm starting to think that doesn't work anymore.

People in town are also asking about you. They still believe you are traveling around, finding new suppliers. It's getting harder to lie to them. I've actually stopped going to church. I've told everyone that I'm needed at the shop more and more.

Business is starting to slow down a lot. In the past month, I've had to increase the prices twice. Luckily very few complain about it, I think everyone knows that there is a problem going on.

Your mother came to visit a few weeks ago. She came to look at the books. I never remember her doing that when you were here. The children love to see her, but when they are not around, she talks down to me like I was a pig in the streets. She blames me for the bakery losing money. I've tried to explain to her about the increase of prices, but all she says is that when you were here, there were no problems. She tells me their shop is making a profit, but I think she's lying to me.

She has told me that I should close up shop and move in with her and your father, that it would be better if the family were together. I told her that the decision was not mine to make, that I would need to get word from you. That seems to have stopped her nagging, but the truth is, this town is my home. I grew up here. I may avoid people, but I think it is a mistake to abandon them. Whatever problems there are now, they won't last forever. I know you are doing something about it, and I trust you with all my heart.

Willem may start school soon. The church has an opening. Initially, they said he was too young, but they might be willing to make an exception if we'd be willing to offer a discount on bread loafs. I figure with everything going on, the church is using our son for their own greed, but hard not to pass up a chance to get him enrolled. It might be a cut, but I think we should do it.

I really wish you would write more often. I spend every night worried that I may never see you again, and I get a letter from you once every few months. I've come to accept that a long time without hearing from you is normal, but the children are so delighted to listen to your travels. I know your leader keeps you on the road a lot, but perhaps you can talk to him about letting you come home. In your last letter, you said there were 9 of you; perhaps you can come home to your family. I know you are needed for what you are doing, but your family needs you more. I need you

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more. It's wrong of me to ask you, I know, but I deeply love you, and I cannot not bear the thought of losing you.

I know things will get better, I have faith in you. You always make things better.

Love,
Layne
Willem and Lisbet

Jacques kept his eyes on Janusz the whole time. He could see some tears well up in his eyes, and he stuttered a bit here and there as he read it.

Jacques felt a bit bad about keeping all of them away from their families. He was the one to ask each of them to leave their lives behind.

Savio looked over at Janusz. "How long ago did you receive that letter?"

Janusz looked up, almost like he didn't know who asked the question. Looking over at Jacques, he replied, "Two months ago."

Jacques did feel guilty for that. He only got a letter from his sister because they happened to visit there in route to Darlet. Plus, without that, the horses wouldn't have been able to go on much farther.

David's head twitched. Jacques could see it from the corner of his eye. He looked over at David, and his attention was turned towards the Keep. Not to the entrance, but in the direction of where the box of wood was.

"David," Jacques said.

"I hear movement. It's coming towards us," David replied.

Jacques noticed from the other corner of his eye that Janusz was reaching for his hilt.

"Janusz, stand down." Jacques hadn't moved his head.

Jacques could tell that Janusz was looking at him. Whatever was in his eyes, Jacques couldn't tell. However, Janusz did obey him.

Jacques could hear the smashing of dead grass, and it was loud. He concluded there were multiple feet coming their way, and they were doing nothing to hide their approach.

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Jacques rose to his feet, hoping to get a better view. At first he saw nothing. He looked into the darkness, and suddenly, he saw fire walking. No, not fire, bright red hair.

It's her!

The woman he saw in the Keep before meeting Harlan. She was walking outside now, with a group of men behind her. Much to Jacques relief she was fully clothed. Not so much a relief for himself as much as it was for the others.

The men behind her were carrying a pole. It took Jacques a moment before he saw that it was a pig. A dead pig.

At the presence of the woman, Janusz and Savio stood. David remained in a sitting position. Jacques figured that whatever this was, it wasn't worth David's attention.

The woman walked out into the open, where the light of the fire would caress her. The men of varying heights and shapes went directly to the fire and began to hammer in poles into the ground. The way they hammered seemed to show they have greater strength than their physical appearance would allow.

The pole holding the pig seemed to have been pushed into its mouth and shoved all the way through to the other end. With the poles in the ground, they laid the pig with a pole through it on the other poles.

Another man left some knives and plates next to the fire, with a bottle of something. Jacques guessed was wine.

The men who set up the pig turned and walked the direction they had come from. The woman remained.

"My Master offers you a small feast tonight. He regrets that they are unable to do more, but hopes this will be enough for you tonight," the woman with fiery hair said.

Janusz and Savio seemed excited by this, and Jacques could tell they wanted to say something, but it would not be their place to do so. They simply looked at the pig on the fire, watching the heat of the fire attack its skin.

"Please tell your Master that we humbly accept his gift and are gracious to receive such an offering."

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The woman nodded her head and dropped her body a little. She turned and walked away.

Jacques looked over at the pig and was impressed with how fat it was. He guessed that either all the pigs were so plumped or Harlan actually did give a great gift.

Jacques then turned to David. David did not look at the pig. Jacques realized something was wrong, something he should have realized.

Jacques moved to the woman, calling out to her, "Miss... Miss..."

The woman stopped and turned back to him. She then used a finger, telling him to come closer. With the fire painting the light on her, he noticed her lips. Peach in colour, blending well with her skin. Lips that loved to smile.

He moved over towards her. He wasn't sure why they couldn't speak out in the open, but he was now at her mercy, so he did what she requested.

"I apologize; I don't know your name."

She smiled at him. Her eyes were seductive and confident. "You are free to call me, Mercedes."

Mercedes!? Jacques knew that her name must have a story, realizing she would be of Spanish decent, yet here she was in Poland. Perhaps another time he could find out.

"If it is not too much of an imposition, Mercedes, could you take a message back to your Master?" Jacques asked.

"It wouldn't be an imposition at all," she stated. "What do you need?"

"I was wondering if you could bring back some bread?"

Her thin eyebrows shifted upwards, "Bread!?"

"Yes, bread. I only make this request on behalf of one of my member, he's... unable to partake in your Master's offering. I do not wish to say why, only that it is a very personal reason."

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Her eyebrows returned to normal. She looked over at the fire with the pig, then back at Jacques. "I understand. We didn't know. I will see what we can do."

The woman looked him once more in his eyes, a moment longer than Jacques expected her to. She then turned and walked away.

Jacques wondered if she knew what he was talking about. She seemed to, but Jacques hadn't been this close to a woman other than his sister in a very long time. He never knew how to read women, and so he could never wager what they were thinking.

Jacques turned and went back to the fire.

Janusz was inspecting the pig. Upon seeing Jacques approaching, he asked, "Getting acquainted with the help?"

Jacques knew Janusz was joking. It's what Janusz did when he was happy. The rules of the order that Jacques set forth would prevent them from engaging in such interactions with women.

"Just asking for some bread," Jacques said coldly.

Janusz just smiled at Jacques before checking the pig, poking at it.

"How does it look?" Jacques asked.

"Looks good to eat now. Seems like they were cooking this for several hours," Janusz replied. "Did they know we were coming?"

Jacques himself wondered that as well; a thoroughly cooked pig within an hour's time. It was a small pig, though fat, but even then it would take a few hours to prepare.

"Doubtful," Jacques stated.

Jacques wondered if they were being offered someone else's meal. Whether it was for them, or someone gave up their meal, the best that could be done was to eat it.

"I don't know about everyone, but I'm ready to eat now," Janusz exclaimed.

Savio chimed-in, "Should we say a prayer first?"

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"No, go ahead and eat. It's too late in the night for us to ask God for his blessing to eat."

This was all Janusz needed to hear, and he began cutting into the pig. Rather than feed himself immediately, he began putting his bits of meat on a plate. He was very masterful in how he cut the pig, telling Jacques he had done this before. It appears baking wasn't the only type of cooking he had known.

After getting some meat, he set out the plate for others to pick off of. Savio went to the wine first. He picked it up and inspected the bottle. Whatever he saw written on it, made his eyebrows jump up. He popped the cork and held it up to his nose.

"Some good stuff. Smells like it is single pressed," Savio stated.

He took a small amount and handed it to Janusz.

David again looked back in the direction the group from within the Keep had come from. This time a man of dark hair came out with a platter. The platter had a loaf of bread on it and a knife for cutting. The man laid the platter down near them, then turned and hurried back in where he came from.

From the smell alone, Jacques could taste the pig in his mouth. The vampire servants seemed to know how to cook very well. He was glad there was bread so that David could have something to eat, though David didn't seem to move from his position.

Jacques went to the bread himself and sliced a few pieces from the loaf. He took the pieces and gave a slice to Janusz and Savio. He delivered the rest of the loaf to David, for him to eat how he pleased. He didn't take a piece of bread. Bread was a common food for them during their travels, and tonight he would just have meat.

He moved to the pit where the pig rest. Up close to the roasting pig, he could smell a mixture of olive oil and spices. Jacques was amazed to smell olive oil this far north. Rather than pick off the plate Janusz reserved, he picked the knife to get some chunks of meat. He normally paced himself with food, but tonight, he took as much as he could to gorge himself.

With his plate full, he went back and sat down. He began eating. His face was focused on his food, but his eyes kept focus on his men. David was eating the bread piece-by-piece, ripping it off with his fingers rather than cutting it. David was often a conservative eater, and was only taking small portions to keep him well tonight, likely making the rest be their food for the journey back.

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It was good to see a smile on Janusz face. Jacques realized that this time spent away from society, constantly hunting was wearing on them. Not just for the month of traveling, but for the several months going village to village, eating porridge at best, or at worst, whatever they might find in a forest at night. A smile tonight erased all of that, even if for just a moment in time.

Savio seemed to be enjoying himself a bit, at least with a little drink in him. Both he and Janusz passed the bottle back and forth. After a bit, Janusz nodded to Savio towards David.

Savio got up and went to David, and offered him the bottle. David took the bottle without looking up and took a very little. He then moved away from Savio. Savio then went to Jacques and offered him the bottle.

"Thank you, Savio," Jacques said as he took the bottle.

The bottle was about half-full by this point. Jacques tilted his head back and drank half. He wagered that would have been his equal share of it. The wine was good, very sweet. He handed it back to Savio and waved his hand at him.

Savio took another drink of it before walking back to Janusz. Janusz took the bottle and finished it off.

Luckily the wine wasn't for getting the food down. The pig was succulent and juicy.

Everyone took their time eating. Despite having a whole pig to eat, so much of it was left for them. They always had small meals, so it didn't take them long tonight to get full. Jacques himself only had two helpings of the pig. It would be good to take on the road with them.

Once done, he saw Janusz sucking on a bone and Savio leaning his head back. Their muscles seem loose, almost hanging off their bones. For a quick moment, this brought a smile to Jacques' face.

"How long has it been since we had a good meal?" Janusz asked.

"Too long," David said bitterly.

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The conversation went back to silence once more. Some more time had passed before someone spoke.

"Is it me, or does anyone else feel like a vampire is close?" Janusz asked.

Savio seemed to wake from his stupor and looked at Janusz. Savio had the look of agreement.

"I felt it when we first got here," David stated.

"Shouldn't we be patrolling or something? Perhaps searching for them before they find us?" Savio had panic in his voice.

"I don't think we need to go search for them, but I think it would be best if we kept someone on duty tonight, just to be safe."

Jacques couldn't help but give a heavy breath in response. "There is no need of that David; we have been assured of our safety."

"By who? Those within the Keep?" Janusz quipped. "How do they ensure our safety? I don't see any guards, no patrols... not even a dog."

"It is not for us to question their methods; they guaranteed our safety, and it would be rude not to accept their assurance. After all, they did offer us a meal."

"Oh, don't get me wrong, I am thankful for the pig, but they are in there protected by stone, and we are out here. Here in Poland for some unknown reason. Why are we out here?"

Jacques wished he could tell them; he disliked not telling them the truth.

"It is not for me to say." Jacques responded.

"Who is it to say then? The Pope? The one pulling your strings?" Janusz asked angrily.

Jacques wanted to respond back, to yell at Janusz. He knew it was a mistake to do so.

"Savio," Jacques said.

Savio looked over at Jacques, "Um... yeah?"

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"Read your letter."

"Now?"

"Yes," Jacques replied.

"I don't know; it is a letter from my Butler, mostly talking about business."

Janusz, hearing this, turned his focus from Jacques and put his eyes on Savio, "Why would your Butler talk about business?"

Jacques wagered that Janusz must have never had a Butler to not know the answer to that question.

Savio didn't look up at Janusz when he spoke, "When my parents died, I was given control of the family business. We own several boats and a private dock in a few cities. Initially, I had my Uncle run things, but he was stealing money and gambling it away. I then had my Butler take control of the business, especially now that I'm doing this."

The blood from Janusz face disappeared, and now was whiter than normal.

"I'm sorry Savio, I didn't know." Janusz's voice was very apologetic.

"No, no. Don't worry about it. It all happened long ago. It's not a big deal." Savio's voice was trailing off, almost to a whisper when he finished.

Janusz and Jacques both sat down, and Savio opened his letter. At first he sat looking at it. Jacques wondered if he was simply staring at it or reading it.

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Dear Savio,

This will be a short letter, I am sure you are very busy. I wish I had good news to give you. There is only bad news to be given.

The city has instituted new rules that ships can only dock if they receive permits from their previous port clearing the ship. There is talk of a disease going around, killing whole ships within a matter of days. Also talk about towns losing people by the hundreds a day.

Unfortunately, these new permits are causing us to send ships away. Whatever cargo they have is lost, but also ships and crews are lost, forbidden to dock. I have sent a week of pay to their families. If I could do more, I would.

Whatever is going on, we are losing money each day. I've been advised by investors to sell off the company and take what I can. This is your business, and I work for you, Master.

Many businesses are selling assets, many for a low price. While we are hurting financially, I believe our solution is to invest in assets and resources. Until you tell me otherwise, I will buy what we can and take extra measures to ensure safety.

The worst part is with less supply and higher overhead costs; we've had to increase our prices. The Church is very unhappy with this, but as I told them, if we weren't required to have permits, we could continue giving them a discount. They, like all other traders, want it for a low price without excuses. Even if I can maintain our ships and supply, the customers will be even more difficult to hold onto.

Since you've been gone, I've had your place taken care of by a housekeeper. I inspect your home once a week myself; she does good work. Your home will still be here when you return. I've also have the home in Milan maintained; this being your childhood home, I know the importance it serves to you.

I want you to know that I will need to dip into your family's fund so I can continue paying our workers. I know this is what you would want done. I am also selling my home and going to move back into your family's manor.

As I said, no good news to report. I look forward to your next letter. I know that your responsibilities keep you busy, I won't presume to understand what that entails. Until I hear from you, or I see you, I wish a safe journey.

Dimitrios

Jacques listened to the letter. To him, Dimitrios sounded dispassionate. He did show great respect to Savio. Jacques knew quite a bit about Savio's life but felt it was not his place to discuss with others.

Jacques looked after all his men, but reading the letters he received, Savio didn't have anyone waiting for his return. His Butler was the closest family he had. Jacques did feel for Savio.

The wine and the pig started to catch up to him, and he felt his eyes getting heavier. He looked over at David, who seemed relax, but was still quite alert. Jacques imagined the

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eating of bread, no matter how good it was, didn't give him a sleepy feeling like the others had.

"OK David, your turn," Jacques said in a hazy voice.

David, who seems to argue about doing it before, didn't seem to fuss this time. Though he over exaggerated his movements as he opened up his letter.

"This is written in Hebrew. It's hard for me to translate word for word, so I will need to describe what it is saying."

Jacques nodded.

David began moving his lips for a short time, staying silent. Jacques imaged he was speaking Hebrew in his head while his lips moved to it.

"It is from my Mother. She is saying a prayer for me. She likes me to read a prayer she says for me. Mostly about me being protected and doing the work of God."

David continued to read a few more passages, again with his lips moving.

"She speaks of my family. My younger brother helping our uncle make belts and shoes. My Uncle owns a shop in Tortosa. My mother says he's doing well and may start doing it full time.

"She then goes on to talk about my fiancé. Her family came to visit, and they had dinner with them. Her family seems excited to plan the wedding. Apparently, when I get back, we will get married immediately."

Jacques noted that while David was always emotionally disconnected from everything, that talking of his wife seemed to elicit no emotional response.

Janusz seemed to pick up on this as well. "I didn't know you were engaged? How did you meet her?"

David looked up from his letter, "I've known her since I was very young. Our parents arranged for us to be married when we became adults."

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Janusz looked down a bit when David mentioned it was an arranged marriage. Some cultures still do arranged marriages, but Janusz was fortunate to have met and fell in love with his wife.

"Are you excited about the marriage? She must be a lovely girl." Janusz probably figured this is the only time to really get to know David, might as well take the chance.

"I'm sure she is. I never really knew her. I do what is best for my family."

Janusz nodded.

Jacques had a bit of a smile. He too had tried to understand David more, though as he did, he learned that David was who he expressed himself to be.

David continued, "So they had dinner and talked about the wedding. She apparently wore an exquisite dress.

"My mother says she is hearing rumors of towns killing Jews, hearing that they are bringing in diseases and poisoning wells. She personally hopes they are just rumors, but fears that they are not. She feels fortunate that it has been a few years since of any incident of their city getting harassed.

"She ends the letter, hoping I am well, and I am getting enough food. Reminds me to thank God and pray to him when I get time. She doesn't like I am doing work for the Pope, but knows that the Golems represent a greater threat."

"Golems?" Savio asked.

"My people refer to Vampires as Golems. Golems are creatures created from dirt or mud that are initially created without shape. Some Jewish people believe Adam was initially a Golem and as he approached God, he obtained a piece of God. Vampires are believed to go towards Lilith and become like her," David replied.

"I can say I've never heard that."

"Not a commonly held belief among the Jewish. Though, when you call something a Golem, they tend to understand it to be bad."

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David goes back to his letter, "So, she wishes me well and hope that I will come home soon and start a family. She tells me that my father is securing some land for me. When I get married, I will have my own place.

"She sends me her love."

David folded up his letter and turned away from the group. Jacques knew this wasn't done in shame. He didn't have fear of expressing himself; he just had nothing to express.

Hearing the letters was nice, and the others seemed to enjoy them. In the year he's known them, they have always been busy and on the move. This is the first time any of them have talked beyond a few sentences at mealtime or during battle.

He looked over at Savio. His eyes were closed, and his breathing slowed. Janusz's eyes were starting to close.

Jacques looked at the fire. It was dying down. He thought about putting a piece of wood on it, but all the wood collected had been used. He would have to get up and go to the box again, and he would have if he weren't so tired. He reasoned to himself that the smoke would be good to dry out the pig.

As the fire continued to die down, his eyelids followed, and he soon fell asleep.

Chapter 4

Jacques woke up.

He didn't open his eyes, but mentally he was awake. Looking at his eyelids, he could tell that the sun was rising. He didn't feel the rays of the sun on his face, but there was enough light out to tell it was early morning.

This is not what woke him though. He was surprised he didn't wake up sooner but figured his long journey and gorging caused him to sleep longer than anticipated.

What woke him were footsteps. Soft ones. It wasn't the sound they made, but the fact they were there. He could tell they were getting closer to him. He laid very still, waiting to see what the steps would do.

He could tell the person was light on their feet. Likely not a vampire, unless they had a death wish. The feet were now next to him. Within seconds, he felt a soft hand caress his face.

"So I guess I'm not dreaming," he said in a groggy voice.

The hand quickly snapped away from him.

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Jacques opened his eyes to see a woman kneel by him. Her face looked the same, yet her hair was now black. If not for her eyes, Jacques would wonder if it was the same person as he had seen two other times.

She smiled upon seeing his eyes. "Was I in your dreams?"

The early morning sun made her enchanting, more beautiful than midnight fire could ever do. Jacques could guess the answer she wanted, but wouldn't give it to her. "No, afraid not."

Her smile seemed to widen, "I guess we'll have to work on that. Master Harlan wishes to speak to you."

Jacques closed his eyes and then opened them real wide. He began to move forward with his body. The woman stood up and backed away. She offered her hand to him for support, but Jacques got up on his own.

He looked over at the fire. It was now just ash. A small wind blew past him, and some of the ash scattered. The pig looked dry to the touch. The men themselves were still lying in place.

"OK everyone, time to get up," Jacques ordered.

All three got to their feet.

"They were awake the whole time?" the woman asked.

"No, just when you got close to us," Jacques responded.

All of them got their armor on, including Jacques. They also put on their belts and attached their swords.

"David, take a horse and scout ahead for us. Don't go too far. Go about a kilometer past the village and come back. Janusz, get the horses together and start packing the bread. Then help Savio get the pig cut up and packed in our bags."

David, Janusz, and Savio moved immediately.

Jacques turned to the woman. "Should I follow you?"

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She was facing him directly, but a space between. "Oh yes, I am to show you where to go."

"Lead the way."

The woman turned and began walking towards the front entrance. She picked up her dress as she walked, careful not to let the bottom of it touch the ground. Jacques noticed she was barefoot.

She was slow moving, much the same way she was last night. Jacques was nervous about seeing Harlan again. Part of him wanted to walk past this woman and see what he had to say, and another part wanted to forget about all of this and ride off. His duty as a Templar won out.

Their journey didn't take long to the entrance. He was a meter behind her, staying in pace with her. She didn't wait for him to catch up with her; she immediately lifted the door knocker and gave the door one loud bang. She was almost as tall as him, if not the same size since he was wearing boots, and she was wearing none.

After one bang with the knocker, the door opened up. She went in swiftly as he waited a second before moving in after her.

The Keep inside looked very much the same as when Jacques was here. He noted to himself that there was no sunlight coming in, which only made sense.

She took him to the main hall where he was last night, and he stopped as she moved to the door under the staircase. She went past it. A moment later, she came back from the hallway to look at him.

"Is there something wrong?" she wondered.

Jacques looked at her. "Is the meeting somewhere else?"

"Oh yes, I am taking you to him now."

Jacques began to move to her past the unlit torches, through the entryway and into the hallway. It was dark, but the light bounced off her white dress.

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She began walking with Jacques close behind. She eventually stopped and was standing near an open door. She turned towards Jacques and opened her hand out toward the door.

Jacques slowed his pace, feeling his heart beat hard with each step. He got to her position and turned toward the door. It was dark inside. He felt betrayed by his heart. Last night it wanted to fight and today it wanted to run.

He moved forward once more, stepping into the room.

"Master Jacques, so good to see you again. Please, please, come have a seat."

The room itself was dark. It had a desk and a big chair that face away from him. Jacques still couldn't see Harlan, but his voice revealed him to be directly in front of him. He turned to his left and saw a chair. Jacques moved to the chair but didn't sit down. The woman stayed near the doorway.

Jacques turned towards the chair. "Thank you for having me, Master Harlan."

"Hmmm... not often one of your kind shows one of my kind respect. I guess that is why you are a Master Knight... or is it Grand Master, since there are no other Masters?" Harlan exclaimed, almost like he wasn't asking a question but stating a fact.

Jacques gave no response.

Jacques continue to look at the chair. He felt the presence of Harlan in here but was displeased Harlan wasn't looking at him. This worried Jacques, and his worry made his heart scream at him, scream that he should run.

Harlan spoke again, but this time the voice didn't come from ahead, but from behind Jacques. "I'm sure we are past formalities. You call me Harlan and I'll call you Jacques. How does that sound?"

Jacques turned to see Harlan emerge from a dark corner and walk towards the big chair. Jacques then heard a popping noise, two popping noises; one on either side of him. He looked to his right and saw a torch come to life. He looked the other direction and noticed another torch.

Harlan looked over at the woman. "Mercedes, I believe you are needed elsewhere."

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The woman stepped backward into the hallway. Jacques could hear her feet walking away from this chamber.

Jacques kept his focus on Harlan. He was taught as a boy that eyeing down a predator could be seen as an attack, but Jacques didn't care. This thing before him had an answer for him, and whatever his heart might say, his mind was focused on the issue at hand.

"Sleep well last night?" the vampire asked, with a small smile on his face.

"Yes," Jacques said coldly.

"Good. I hope you understand why I couldn't let you sleep in the Keep. Perhaps in the future that will change."

Jacques gave no response.

"How was the pig? Was it to your... satisfaction?"

"The pig was adequate," he lied.

"Oh, I guess next time we'll need to try harder." Harlan smile became a flat line on his face. "I discussed with the Elders about your proposal. We have agreed to help you."

Jacques hadn't expected that answer and involuntarily let out a big sigh of relief. His heart started to calm down. Harlan himself couldn't help but let a little smile return.

"I see the news makes you excited. That's good to see," Harlan joshed.

"Sorry, it's been a long few weeks. That is magnificent that we can work something out. How soon before we can get your support?" Jacques asked.

Harlan leaned back. "That's the thing... before we can move forward with anything, the Elders were very curious about this note you found; the one showing the Vampire Army wishing to attack us."

Jacques's heart started to beat hard again. He had given himself a mental breath before he spoke. "I'm happy to answer any questions you may have about it."

"I'm sure you are. I even told them that on your behalf. However, they are... wanting... wanting to see it for themselves. Since you didn't bring it with you, we want you to

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bring it to us. I hope that won't be a problem?" Harlan said. He seemed to speak slowly, careful to enunciate his words.

"Problem?" Jacques felt his eyes widen. He tried to keep them from doing so, but couldn't help it. Jacques wondered if the vampire could see through the ruse.

Jacques felt the need to come clean but feared possible repercussions in doing so. He felt it best to do what he could to get out as quickly as possible.

"No, that won't be a problem, not one bit, we'll be happy to deliver that for you," Jacques said nervously.

"Good. Very good. We'll await your arrival. Should I have someone escort you out?"

"Escort!? No, no no. That's fine. I can find the way. I should be off immediately."

"Of course you should. You know where to find us. Look forward to seeing you again." Harlan said with a big smile.

Jacques gave Harlan a nod and immediately walked out the door into the hallway. There was no sign of anyone in the hall. He turned back the way he came, seeing the main hall. He wanted to rush out of here but didn't for the same reasons as before.

He walked at his normal pace. The main entrance seemed so far away. Chills came up his spine and traveled down his arms. He kept thinking, how did he get himself into all of this, why did he persuade the Pope to do this? Why had the Pope insisted on him lying to the Vampire Lord?

Within minutes, or was it hours? No, minutes... he got to the main entrance. Much as he expected, the door was opened. He walked out to an even brighter sky than the one he left.

He felt a measure of safety. Still, he wanted to get to his horse as quickly possible. He didn't run, but rather walked fast. He felt like there were eyes on him, but wondered if that was simply paranoia.

He got to his horse and got on immediately. All three were there waiting for him.

"What's the word?" Janusz asked.

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"The word? The word is that we get out of here now. We need to get back to Avignon immediately," Jacques said quickly.

"Immediately? It's a month's journey."

"I'm aware of that. Less time talking, more time riding. Sun won't stay up forever."

"Are we going to your family's village?" David asked.

"Yes, yes we are," Jacques responded.

"Is everything OK?" Savio questioned.

"Things will be better when we get to Avignon. Now ride."

Jacques kicked his horse hard and began riding out. Soon the others followed him, and they began to ride towards Avignon.