

A Constable Inspector Lunaria Adventure

Fear of the Minister's Justice



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&
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Content Notice:

This book contains scenes of torture that some readers may find disturbing and traumatic.



Prologue

The feeling of being watched danced across the nape of Carum's neck, so he stopped and glanced around. A chill breeze from the bay carried in a fog that haloed the light from the lanterns that lined the road. Carum tried to make out the shapes that were barely visible through the diaphanous curtain of fog. Was it the grocer, sweeping up at the end of the day, who was watching him? Could it be the cat that was lazily cleaning its paws? Or maybe it was the elf walking on the opposite side of the road, the one with his dark cloak drawn tightly around his body? Carum shook his head. It could have been any of them, or even none of them.

He hurried on, but the feeling just wouldn't go away. He turned down a side street, his feet splashing through a puddle as he glanced over his shoulder. He sucked in his breath as the elf with the cloak came into view, and then let it out slowly as the elf greeted a friend and the pair entered a tavern. Carum's knees wavered, and he stuck a hand into the pocket of his cloak. The edge of the card that he felt there quelled his fear and spurred his feet back into motion. He had to tell them. He had to share with the constables the information he had only just remembered today. It wouldn't bring Hoehnea back, but it might calm her spirit and, hopefully, his own.

It had been three days since Hoehnea's death. Three

nightmarish days since he had discovered her naked body, staked to the ground outside of where she had worked. Three sleepless nights since Carum had seen the symbol that had been seared into her chest, a sickening brand that seemed to mark her like some sort of harlot or adulteress. Only Carum knew that it was much, much worse than either of those. The brand had marked her as being a sorcerer.

His finger traced the edge of the card in his pocket, and then over the surface, outlining the symbol that Carum couldn't quite feel but knew was there. A wave of guilt washed over him, and he jerked his hand out of his pocket as quickly as if he had been stung by a wasp. He crossed the street, glancing to both his left and right, avoiding the shadows.

The Narris constables had questioned him, of course, but he'd been an absolute mess. Hoehnea had been more than just a friend. They had been confidants, sharing each other's fears and deepest secrets. Her death had left a bottomless hole in his soul. The Constable Inspector had tried to question him, but Carum had been a gibbering idiot. Finally, the inspector had thrown up his hands and told his partner to try to get something of value out of him.

"I'm Seeker Cas Rubus," she had said, putting a hand on his arm. "I know this is hard, but I need you to tell me about Hoehnea."

"Why did this happen?" Carum asked, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Why is she gone?"

"That's what we intend to find out," the Seeker said, "but it will be easier with your help. I can tell that you cared for her, so please help us." She lifted the edge of her cloak and blotted a tear from his eye. "You may have been the person to know Hoehnea the best, so your help will be crucial in finding out who did this to her."

Her voice had soothed his shock, her gesture a balm for the trauma. "Anything," Carum had sniffed, wiping away more tears with the palm of his hand. "What do you want to know?"

The Seeker's questions from that horrible day now echoed in his head with each step that he took toward the constabulary. *Where did you and Hoehnea spend time together? Where did she live? Did she have any family? Where do they live? Did she have any enemies? How did she get along with her co-workers? When did she tell them that she was a sorcerer? How did they react to the news? Were any of them angered by this? Have you seen the symbol that was branded on Hoehnea before?*

He'd left the Seeker feeling like he'd helped and that, by answering her questions, he'd honored Hoehnea and their friendship. But he hadn't helped, or told the constables anything that was actually useful. The card that he fingered in the pocket of his cloak spoke the lie.

Hoehnea's death had hit him like a punch to the gut, and it knocked any rational thought from his mind. He told himself that was why he'd missed it. Why he'd forgotten about the card and the symbol that blotted its surface.

He *had* seen the mark before, as had Hoehnea. The card had been on her table at work, an omen of her impending death that they had both ignored. *Why? Why didn't we do anything about it then?* Carum stopped and looked up into the foggy night, fighting back the tears. He thought he heard a noise to his left, so he ducked his head and took the next right.

Hoehnea had found the card a week after she'd told her co-workers that she was a sorcerer. Being a sorcerer wasn't a crime, at least not anymore, but there was still so much stigma, so much misunderstanding and prejudice, that openly being a sorcerer was a risk that few were willing to take. Her co-workers were all wizards and, for years, she had pretended to be one, as had Carum and most of their other sorcerer friends. It was just safer that way. But Hoehnea felt that she was living a lie with all of the pretending, and that she was perpetuating the myths and intolerance. She wanted to live openly as a sorcerer, to be who she really was.

So, she'd trimmed the branches, gauging each of her

co-workers on their thoughts and beliefs. She'd been unsurprised by the outdated ideas, preconceptions, and subtle bias about sorcerers that her co-workers seemed to hold. As she slowly and subtly educated them, she was surprised to find them receptive to the idea of working with a sorcerer. She wanted to come clean to them.

She agonized over the decision for nearly a month, and then finally steeled her resolve and told one of her co-workers; one who she thought would be the most tolerant of the idea. To Hoehnea's relief, he had embraced her for who she was and had supported her in telling the others. Everyone seemed to be accepting, or at least unconcerned. She'd been ecstatic, relieved to finally be able to live her true life. Then she got the card.

Carum hesitantly put his hand back into his pocket and pulled out the card. The same symbol that had been burned into Hoehnea's skin seemed to mock him, so he quickly turned the card over. There, in a neat hand, written in dark blue ink, was: "You are an abomination. You will be cleansed."

Footsteps echoed through the fog and Carum turned away from them. He stuffed the card back into his pocket and picked up his pace. He had to give the card to Seeker Rubus. He had to make up for his mistake.

Hoehnea had shown the card to Carum that night at her apartment. She'd been so angry, so full of fury that she wanted to tear up the card, but Carum had stopped her. Instead, she had tossed it to the floor, determined that no one was going to intimidate her. She had lived in fear her entire life, and she wasn't going to turn back now that she was finally free. Two days later she was dead.

Carum had forgotten the card until today, when he'd finally drawn up enough courage to go to Hoehnea's apartment and collect her things before her landlord threw them out onto the street. He'd found it on the floor where she'd thrown it, and the sudden shock at seeing the symbol again had caused Carum to recoil in horror. When he saw the symbol, his thoughts flashed back to Hoehnea's battered body,

the same symbol burned into her skin. It was then that he realized his mistake. The constables didn't know about the card, about the threat. They thought that she'd been killed by a new thieves' guild, that she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, her death merely a warning to others that there was a new guild in town. The card in Carum's pocket proved otherwise.

Carum again heard footsteps, this time growing louder in the foggy night. He looked around and found that he'd somehow turned away from the constabulary and was instead somewhere near the docks. The footsteps sounded closer. Carum's throat tightened with the sudden realization that he was being followed. The elf responsible for killing Hoehnea was after him now. He knew too much. Carum's hand again went into his pocket, touching the edge of the card. *Her killer doesn't want the constables to know about this.*

Carum took off at a run, heading away from the bay and trying to get to the constabulary. The fog thickened around him, and the sounds increased. *Was there more than one murderer? Is it a new gang?* He turned in a panic and headed down an alley that ended in a dead end.

Shit. He scanned the area, his mind racing, trying to find a way out.

"Nowhere left to run, demon."

Carum spun around at the voice, deep and threatening, yet calm and collected. The fog had thickened even more, an impenetrable mist that concealed everything. Finally, his own mental fog cleared. He reacted instinctively, waving his hands and saying, "*Beni korumak!*" The shield spell shimmered in a ripple of rose-colored light in the air just as a dart appeared out of the mist and glanced off, hitting the wall and clattering to the ground.

"You bargained away your eternal soul, and in return you got nothing but parlor tricks," the voice mocked from the fog.

Carum swallowed, his throat suddenly going dry.

"*Sürüklemek!*" he cried, thrusting his hands forward. A gust of air seemed to billow around him, gathering speed as leaves and litter swirled against the wall and then rushed forward, blowing the thick fog away.

The night became surprisingly clear as Carum now realized that the fog had been magically created. Before him stood a tall male elf wearing deep blue robes that had words embroidered in silver thread along the hem and cuffs. In his left hand, he gripped a staff with sigils burned into the polished redwood. The bottom of the staff was capped in copper, and a gemstone in a setting at the top reflected the newly revealed moonlight. His right hand held a small crossbow, with another dart already loaded. The wizard's face was a weathered birch color, lined with wrinkles showing age and hard labor. Long silver hair with moss-green highlights flowed from beneath a broad-brimmed blue hat that looked like it would be more appropriate on the head of a country priest than a wizard. He stared at Carum, his eyes filled with hatred and loathing.

"Ah, you choose to face your fate head on. Excellent! Perhaps I will spare you a coward's death as I send you to meet your demonic master."

"What?" Carum had no idea what the wizard meant, beyond plain bigotry, but the vehemence of his words and the hatred in his eyes caused Carum's legs to shake. He took a tentative step backward and bumped into the wall. He licked his lips. He was not an adventurer or a constable. He had magic, yes, but he'd only ever created a few offensive spells—stuff to keep away thieves or drunks at the pub. He was a translator, a scribe of ancient magic, not a fighter, but he was desperate. The only way to save himself and get revenge for Hoehnea's death was to take the fight to this bastard.

"You'll pay for what you did to Hoehnea!" he yelled.

The wizard laughed, "I hope you'll provide more of a challenge than she did. Maybe you'll give me what I seek."

Carum had stopped listening. He gathered his magic and said, "*havanın oku,*" as he swung his arm as though he

was throwing something. The air hardened and flew at the wizard, striking him in the shoulder. The wizard grimaced in pain, a cruel smile curling his lips.

“Know that I will take great pleasure in what comes next, abomination.” He tapped his staff on the ground. A mist of red light flowed from the gemstone and struck at Carum’s shield, which quickly dissolved as the magic was countered.

Before he could do anything else, a dart seemingly appeared from nowhere, burrowing into Carum’s chest. He pulled it out but, as it fell to the ground, the alley was already starting to sway. Blackness edged in at the corner of his vision. The image of the wizard blurred and became two, then combined back into a single person as he advanced toward Carum. Feebly, Carum tried to move, but a dark feeling of fatigue pressed down on his mind and he collapsed to the ground, asleep.

† † †

Carum regained consciousness with a start. He was bound to a chair and had been stripped naked. He blinked several times and shook his head to clear it. The space he was in slowly came into focus. He blinked again in amazement as he realized that he was in his own apartment! He looked around, twisting his head. He was in the middle of the small living space, and his few pieces of furniture had been shoved into a corner. He noticed that he had been placed in the center of a magic circle that had been drawn—carved?—into the floor. He’d never used magic circles himself, but his work as a magical translator had exposed him to several magical scripts. He recognized the ones that were scribed into his floor now. He was in a magic circle that protected against evil and demonic possession.

He heard a noise from his kitchen and turned to see the wizard sitting in a chair, his back to Carum, eating one of Carum’s apples. The wizard had hung up his robe, leaned his staff against the wall, and removed his hat so that his long hair formed a curtain down his back. He wore simple

breeches of a dark blue color and a pale green linen shirt.

"Wh... what do you want? If this is about the card, I won't go to the constables. You can take it or destroy it, or whatever you want. I won't say anything."

The wizard didn't respond, but gave a curt nod and took a final bite of the apple. He stood up, put on his robe, and pulled out a wand. He grabbed his staff and turned around, staring at Carum with a mixture of hatred and... sadness? No, maybe it was weariness. Carum couldn't be sure, although at this distance he could see that the wizard's eyes were deep pools of dark blue, almost black. His stomach churned under that gaze, and he struggled against his bonds. With his hands tied, he couldn't cast any of his spells. "Who are you? What are you going to do to me?"

"I ask the questions, abomination!" The wizard thrust his wand forward and jammed it into Carum's shoulder. Pain shot through Carum's arm, and his body jerked as electricity surged through him. The wizard pulled the wand back and the shock ended, though the pain lingered. Carum was panting, tears already streaming down his face.

The wizard straightened up. "I am The Minister," he said, "and you will answer all of my questions, demon spawn, or you will suffer the consequences."

"Wha...?" Carum was confused and scared. "Consequences?"

"I seek information," The Minister said, ignoring Carum's blathering. "Answer my questions truthfully and you will be freed."

Carum was smart enough to see through the lie. He was convinced that he was looking at Hoehnea's murderer. The thought seemed to give Carum some peace as he was sure that he was experiencing exactly the same thing that Hoehnea had endured. But he would be strong—for Hoehnea. He wasn't going to tell this wizard anything. Carum gave a bitter laugh, "You'll set me free in the same way that you freed Hoehnea? You may as well kill me now as I won't tell—" He couldn't complete his sentence as The Minister

jabbed the wand into his other shoulder and pain exploded across his body.

“Tell me his name! You know of whom I speak. Tell me his name!”

Carum managed to gather enough saliva to spit at the wizard, but it just dribbled down Carum’s chin. The action was enough to warrant another shock. Carum cried out, a loud, anguished yell. *Somebody will hear me. My neighbors always complain about the least bit of noise. Surely they will hear my screams and call for the constables.*

“Tell me! Who allowed you to steal Qurna’s gift?” Another shock was delivered as Carum refused to answer.

“Which demon gave you this power?” Carum didn’t have time to respond, or even to think, as The Minister jabbed the wand into his knee, causing more pain and more screams. Carum was panting again, trying to catch his breath. Saliva dripped from his mouth and sweat ran in rivulets down his body. His mind picked out a single word from the wizard’s question. *Demon. He thinks I got my magic from a demon. Oh gods, I’m going to be killed by this bigot. I’m sorry, Hoehnea. I’m sorry you had to suffer this idiot in your final moments.*

The Minister took a step back, crossing his arms and pulling himself up to his full height. “You will tell me the name of the demon who has allowed you to steal Qurna’s gift. Tell me, and I will end your suffering.”

Why has nobody come? Have they not heard my cries? Carum’s chest felt like it was going to explode. Pain stabbed throughout his entire body. He couldn’t take it anymore. He knew that he was going to die. This “Minister” hated what Carum was. He hated sorcerers. And like many people who hate, he also feared Carum and what sorcerers could do. There was no way that he was going to let Carum live. *And I can’t take any more pain.*

“Agn—,” he tried to say. The word cracked as he spoke. He swallowed once and said again, “Agnatha.” The word was something he’d heard before, an Arisportian term for a lam-prey, if he remembered correctly, but it sounded good. By

The Minister's reaction, he had never heard the word before.

"Interesting." The Minister's eyes sparkled with pleasure and anticipation. "You've spoken a name I have not heard before. Perhaps this is the knowledge I need in order to finally rid Ados of you abominations." He then looked directly into Carum's eyes.

"Thank you. You will meet your end knowing that you have helped to bring an end to the rest of your infernal brethren. Rejoice, as I reclaim your ill-gotten magic and return it to Qurna!" The Minister whispered something as the wand stabbed again, straight at Carum's heart. The pain quickly drowned out Carum's fear, and then there was nothing.

† † †

The Minister shook his head in disgust at the body slumped in the chair. He felt no pity, no sympathy for this devil. Why would one pity evil? He also held no illusions that the name he'd been given would be the one that he'd been searching for his whole career. He'd collected hundreds of demon names, and not one had ever been summoned in the ritual. This Agnatha was new for him, though. With the newness came a glimmer of truth and hope. He would again perform the ritual with the other members of the Qurundora and try the name. Even if it proved as false as all the others, at least he had removed one more stain from the world. Jansure's work was exhausting, but The Minister only felt excitement and elation at the completion of his latest task.

No, it's not completed yet, The Minister chided himself. He needed to prepare the body so that it could be left for other sorcerers to witness; a message to let them know that their taint upon this world was coming to an end. The Minister cut the ropes holding the body and let it fall to the floor. He then made the sacred gestures, spoke Qurna's blessed words, and cast his spell, burning the symbol of the Qurundora into the fiend's chest.



Chapter 1

Constable Inspector Reva Lunaria gave a distasteful glance at the crowd of gawkers who were being kept at bay by a group of Birches. The Betula Division constables had their hands full as patrons from several pubs had spilled onto the street to see what was going on. She hated being in West Gate Grove on a good day. Today was not a good day.

The grove was full of stinking pubs, decrepit taverns, shabby inns, illicit brothels, and shops selling everything that travelers and adventurers thought they might need. It was also crawling with adventurers, as this latest murder was like kicking open an ant hill; they all came out to stare and think that they could help. They were all itching to find the killer themselves so that they could be the one to stop him. Amateurs. It made her sick to her stomach.

She turned her back on the gawkers, her silver-red hair seeming to give the crowd a dismissive wave as she took in the murder scene. The victim lay in a crumpled pile of arms and legs at the intersection of two roads. One of the shop keepers had found the body and sent for a constable. The crime scene had been contaminated. So many people had tried to get a look at the victim that Reva was sure that there was no useful evidence around the body. She sighed, barely controlling her urge to go smack the people who'd messed up her crime scene.

The incessant chattering of the crowd was also starting to grate on her nerves. She looked up at the crowd again, contemplating if she should have the Birches move them all back. She shook her head and turned to find Senior Constable Ghrellstone, but she didn't see where Willem had gone, so she returned to looking at the murder victim. She had other cases that she was working on, and the more time they spent here was less time she'd have dealing with them. Ever since the fight at the port a month ago, she'd thrown herself into her work. It was her way to forget about everything that had happened. To forget about how Aavril had run away from her. He hadn't been able to decide that she was worth fighting for, or to admit his mistakes, so he'd given up. She knew he was at sea now, still running further away.

Despite the heavy workload, Reva wouldn't acknowledge that she was being stretched thin. That would be admitting defeat. Instead, she pulled out a small tin from a pocket, opened it with a practiced flick of her thumb, and then took out a pinch of red-orange powder and lifted it to her nose. The Wake had taken immediate effect. She felt as if a cleansing breeze had blown away the clutter of leaves from her head.

"Already?" Seeker Ansee Carya asked, with a condescending shake of his head. He should have been examining the body, but he had apparently been watching her instead of doing his job. "It's barely mid-morning."

"Mind your own business, Seeker, and do your damn job. You're not my mother."

She could see that Ansee wanted to say something back, but Constable Kai Gania chose that moment to step up to her. He handed her a card made from rough, heavy paper. "This was found on the body. One of the shopkeepers had it."

"Gods damn them, interfering with my case," Reva swore. She turned to look at the shops. "Which one of these *upstanding* businesselves did it? I'm going to rip them—"

"Ma'am," Constable Gania interrupted her. She turned to glare at him. "He took it to make sure that none of the oth-

ers would take it. He was afraid someone would want it as a memento of the murder. He held onto it, and then gave it to Senior Constable Ghrellstone once we started interviewing people.”

Reva gave a nod, her cheeks flushing a bit. “Thank you,” she told Kai, and then as an afterthought said, “And give my thanks to the shopkeeper.”

Constable Gania nodded and headed over to the shops where she could now see Willem conducting more interviews. With a look over her shoulder to see that Ansee was actually doing his job—she could see the golden glow around his eyes now—she examined the card that Kai had given her. A glance was enough for Reva to confirm that it was identical to the cards they’d found at two other murders in the past month. That in itself was significant, since it confirmed her suspicion that they were dealing with a serial killer. The card was made from rough paper, which was unusual, since parchment and vellum were cheaper, but their efforts to trace the maker had been fruitless.

Reva flipped the card over to look at the strange symbol there. It had been applied to the card using a deep black ink. It looked like a misshapen square, with the sides squished in, while a squiggle of ink—it looked like a lightning bolt—ran across the square from left to right. It didn’t match any symbol she, or anybody else she’d asked, had seen before. She figured it was something the killer made up, as a sick kind of way to sign his “work” and, as such, it wouldn’t lead them to their killer.

She pulled out her notebook, her hand caressing the leather surface and the caricature of an elephant that was embossed on the cover. The leather was worn, and the paint faded, the spine well creased from use. She ran her fingers over the fading words painted on the cover, “Remember, if you didn’t write it down, it didn’t happen!” She gave a small smile as she remembered better days with her father, before his untimely death. He’d given Reva the notebook as a gift when she’d been promoted to Inspector, and the memory

tugged at thoughts that she didn't have time for. She opened the notebook to a blank page—the enchantment on the notebook guaranteed there was always a blank page, no matter how much she wrote in it—to make a new entry. She started to jot down the important details: the location of the crime, the date (3 Lyzar), and the details about the victim, but her eye caught the same symbol that she'd copied into the notebook from the other crime scenes, and found herself copying the symbol again. She drew it with hard, sharp strokes of her pencil, then drew it again, and again. Soon the page was filled with the symbol, in different sizes, and she started tracing over them again.

“Reva?”

She continued to trace, to darken the symbols that she'd drawn, pressing down hard on the page. The murders, her current cases, and other thoughts jumbled together and fought for attention in her mind. *Nobody gives up on me.*

“Reva?” A hand and red-colored bracer with a maple leaf worked into the leather gave a wave, but Reva's eyes were focused on the symbols. *I am worth fighting for.*

“Reva?” Ansee called a third time, louder. Fingers snapped under her nose, and she glanced up at him, glaring.

“Are you finally done, Seeker?” she snapped.

“Who pushed you out of the tree this morning? Or maybe you've hit the wall with your Wake use.”

“I don't need you lecturing me. Did you find anything useful?” Reva closed the notebook and tucked it into a large pocket.

Ansee stared at her for a moment, and then said, “It's nearly identical to our other murder victims. There's evidence that he was casting magic, defensive spells from the look of things, but there are also traces of magic that affected him as well. They're from the murderer, just as in the other cases. There's evidence that he was struck with at least one, or possibly more, force missiles.”

Reva slowly nodded her head. This matched with the other two murder victims. “Does our victim have anything

on him to suggest that he's a wizard? We might be able to get somebody from Auros to identify him."

Ansee shook his head. "No spellbook. Not that I'd expect a wizard to just be carrying one around, but there's nothing that might be considered a magical focus either. No staff, no wand. I'm pretty sure that our victim is a sorcerer. Again."

Reva nodded. She'd hoped that it would have been different, but it was probably too much to hope that a serial killer would change his choice of victims. "Anything else?" she asked.

"Again, there were odd traces that he was affected by some kind of teleportation spell," Ansee added. "I still can't tell if it was cast by our victim or by his killer."

"You forgot the best part," Senior Constable Ghrellstone said, as he walked up to them. "His legs are broken in about fifty different places, along with his arms and probably the rest of the bones in his body. I'm sure the Alkies will be able to tell us for sure when they count up the number of pieces."

"Well, it's clear that this is our third victim," Reva said. "Please tell me that somebody saw something this time."

Willem shook his head. "Sorry, Inspector. As usual, nobody saw or heard anything. The elf that found the body," he jerked a thumb over his shoulder to a candle shop on the corner, "said that he found the body just before sunrise as he was getting ready to open his shop. He lives above his shop and he didn't hear or see anything last night."

Reva looked around at the buildings. Most of them had apartments built into the second or third story, either for the shop owner to live in or to rent out to others. "And nobody heard anything? There's a mage duel going on in the street and nobody knows anything?"

"Not that anyone will admit to," Willem said. "There are at least three pubs within sight of this spot, and you know how rowdy those places can get."

Reva shook her head in frustration, "Adventurers."

"And depending on the spells, the sound of casting might have been covered up by other noise. It's not like they were

throwing fireballs at each other.”

Reva had to nod in agreement. She knew that magic, despite all its flash and sparkles, could often be quiet. Unless they were hurling fireballs or lightning bolts at each other.

“Well, expand the interviews to other shops and homes. Maybe we’ll get lucky.”

Willem nodded, and then pointed toward the crowd. “Looks like the Alkies have arrived.” Reva turned to see Thea Bromide and her staff working their way through the throng.

“Body’s all yours,” Reva said, by way of greeting.

Thea took a look at the body. “Another jigsaw puzzle?”

“Only on the inside. I think his skin kept most of the bones in there.”

Thea gave a snort. “Any chance we know this victim’s name? With this being the third victim, I’m sure that Aescel would authorize the expense for a Speaking ritual.”

Reva turned to look at Willem and Ansee, who both shook their heads. Constable Gania approached them at that time and also shook his head. *Figures*. “Fresh out of true names today. We might be able to find out.”

Thea waved the thought away. “By the time you do, it will be too late to perform the ritual anyway.” She sighed and turned to her work.

Ansee gave a polite cough.

“What?” Reva said, then saw the look in his eyes. “No, not this again.”

“Come on, I’ve not heard any brilliant ideas from you on how to solve this.”

His tone was light and reminded her a bit of how her former partner, Cas, might have spoken, but Reva found herself gritting her teeth and clenching her fists.

“What idea?” asked Willem, clearly trying to distract Reva from Ansee’s comment.

“I think our murderer works, or spends most of his time, at the Violet Clover Tavern.”

“You mean the *violent* clover. That place is a wretched hive of scum and villainy.”

"I thought the Violet Clover was an adventurer's tavern?" Kai asked.

"That's what he just said," Reva replied. She turned to Ansee and placed her hands on her hips. "We don't have any proof that our murderer works there. We've interviewed the staff and the regulars."

"And every other tavern and pub in the Grove," grumbled Willem.

"Nobody knows anything—"

"That they'll admit," interrupted Ansee.

Reva ignored him. "And everybody conveniently has an alibi for the times of the murders."

"But it's the only tavern in the Grove that all of our victims are connected to."

Reva glared at him. "And how do you know that?"

"We've already connected the previous two victims to the Tavern, and I saw our latest victim there when I was interviewing the staff. Our victims were adventurers, all sorcerers, and were either part of established groups, or looking for one. I didn't catch this one's name, but I know he was there looking for work, and trying to join a group."

"So, what's your idea?" asked Kai.

"We should disguise ourselves as adventurers and go undercover at the Violet Clover. That will allow us to lure out our killer and then arrest him."

Reva made a cutting motion with one arm. "No. And not just no, hells no. This is, by far, the dumbest idea anybody has ever come up with in the history of dumb ideas."

"So, when I think of going undercover it's the dumbest idea ever, but when you play dress up to infiltrate a deranged cultist and his merry band of Disciples, it's okay?" Ansee said, sarcasm coating his words.

"That was different," Reva retorted.

"Yeah, because *you* thought of it," Ansee snapped back.

"Look," Willem said, interjecting himself between Reva and Ansee. "It's not the craziest idea we've ever come up with." Reva glared at him, but the look just rolled off Willem's

back. He turned to Ansee, "But it's also a long shot if I ever heard one." Ansee acknowledged that with a nod. "Maybe we should propose it to the First Constable and see what he thinks?"

Reva and Ansee each gave a reluctant nod. "Fine," she said, "but I am not going to dress up as an adventurer."



Chapter 2

Constable Acanta Sulwynd's boot connected with the loose stone, and it skipped along the broken cobbles and nearly struck the halpbloed that was trying to wash clothes in a barrel. The halpbloed turned to say something, probably thinking that it was unruly kids, and then quickly turned back to her work as Sulwynd leered at her. Beside him, Constable Senecio Gallwynn guffawed at her reaction.

The pair continued down the broken road. Once, when this had been called South Bank Grove, it had been neatly paved with smooth cobblestones. But ever since the passage of the third Purity Law, and the halpbloed had been shoved into the renamed Nul Pfeta Grove, they had pried up loose stones to build walls in order to add on to the existing buildings. It made the buildings look decrepit and dangerous, while the roads became pockmarked with deep holes and ruts as the rains washed the soil into the river.

"As I was saying," Gallwynn said, "she has the most beautiful ass you'd ever seen—for a halpbloed, that is. And she knows how to behave, if you know what I mean."

Sulwynd knew exactly what he meant, and he did his best to hide his revulsion. The thought of having sex with any halpbloed made his skin crawl. They were lower than vermin, and he did his best to avoid touching them in normal circumstances, let alone have sex with one. But he knew that

Gallwynn didn't care. He'd bed any female and, from some of his stories, Sulwynd thought he probably had. Young or old, pretty or ugly, it didn't matter to Gallwynn. "And what sort of favor did she ask for in return for her services?"

Gallwynn laughed, "It wasn't even for her. She wanted a pass for her brother to be out past curfew. He has to work late, and she was afraid that we'd throw him in the cells if he was caught."

Sulwynd joined in with his own laugh at that. "Are they really getting that dumb? She just had to show proof of employment to the Senior Constable or the Inspector, and they'd have written her a pass."

Gallwynn made to shush him. "Keep your trap shut, I don't want that getting around. I've convinced her she has to put out every week if she wants to keep her brother out of the cells."

"Well, just make sure she doesn't give you rootrot. It'd be a shame if your elfhood were to fall off." Sulwynd had to jump aside to avoid the kick that Gallwynn had aimed at him. It also meant that he avoided the splash of waste that fell right where he'd been walking. He quickly looked up to the building. It was four stories tall, and the upper floors leaned out over the road. There was an open window on the third floor, but he couldn't see anybody there. It might have been intentional, or just a careless halpbloed. He wanted to be angry, to charge into the building to scare the hells out of whoever had done it, but Gallwynn had broken into hysterical laughter at the near miss, pointing and saying, "Oh, you almost bought it that time."

Sulwynd gave a half-hearted laugh and walked on, doing his best to remember the building. He might still make a return visit to teach whoever lived there a lesson in respect.

They walked on, glaring at any halpbloed that dared to look at them, shoving those that couldn't—or wouldn't—get out of their way. They took a couple of loaves of fresh baked bread, even though it had a few weevils, along with grit from the millstone, in it. Then Sulwynd spotted someone up the

road, carrying sticks and twigs in a wicker basket. He leaned over to Gallwynn and shoved his bread into Gallwynn's hands. "Hold this. There's a troublemaker up there that I need to deal with."

A gleam came to Gallwynn's eyes. He enjoyed putting troublemakers into place. "Need any help?"

"Nah," Sulwynd said. "He's a runt, like all the others, but he needs to learn his place. Just make sure none of the others start any trouble." He pointed a finger at his partner. "And don't eat my bread."

He turned and took off at a jog. Soon enough, the halp-blooded looked over his shoulder at the sound of quickly approaching feet and noticed him. The halp-blooded dropped his basket of kindling and took off at a run. Sulwynd smiled and gave chase. He liked it when they ran.

† † †

Inquisitor Rhus Amalaki pulled his cloak tightly around him as he watched the two constables from the shadows of a building. Space was so tight in Nul Pfeta that there were hardly any alleys between buildings, but the haphazard upward construction turned the roads into canyons that created deep shadows in the morning light. His dark green cloak did the rest, making him nearly invisible among the buildings.

His target was too absorbed in what he and his partner were discussing to have noticed Amalaki anyway. He watched as Constable Sulwynd kicked a loose stone, nearly hitting a washerwoman with it. The pair laughed and continued along their patrol. Amalaki didn't give the woman a second thought as he slipped between the shadows to keep his target in sight.

His investigation into Constable Sulwynd wasn't bearing fruit, and his superiors at the Red Keep were demanding that he either make an arrest or drop the issue. He was stretched thin, working too many cases, and the lack of progress was turning this lead into a thin branch. He'd asked for some

Novices to assist him, but Senior Inquisitor Heimia had refused to authorize any help. Amalaki had tried to explain that he was gathering evidence, when the Senior Inquisitor had interrupted him. "We're not the damn constabulary, Inquisitor Amalaki. If this Sulwynd is a threat to the King, then haul his ass into the Red Keep. We will pull the information out of him. We don't need evidence. You've been on this case for over a month now, and you haven't made any progress. Either bring in your target for questioning, or drop it."

Amalaki should have done that. He should have gathered a group of Novices and pulled Sulwynd from his home and taken him to the Red Keep. But here he was, sneaking around the stinking underbelly of Nul Pfeta, trying to find evidence that Constable Sulwynd was up to something. *Why in the hells am I torturing myself over this?* One thought immediately came to mind: Constable Inspector Reva Lunaria.

He didn't know why he was trying to please her. She'd wanted evidence that Sulwynd—a fellow constable—was up to no good before she'd agree to help him. It didn't make sense that he'd try to please her. He was a member of the Sucra, the King's secret police, charged with protecting the King and the Kingdom from all threats. His superiors were right, he didn't need evidence. He didn't have to prove that the threat existed. The mere possibility that there was a threat was sufficient. And if someone who was pulled in actually turned out to be innocent (it sometimes happened) then their experience became a warning to the others to never step out of line. Not even a little bit.

Instead of doing his job, he was risking his own career and position within the Sucra to try to please Reva. *Hells, Reva hasn't even shown up the last three times that I'd requested we meet.*

He watched Sulwynd and his partner dodge the night soil dropped from a chamber pot, then laugh and continue their patrol. Despite the laughter and the bravado between the two constables, Amalaki could tell that Sulwynd was bored. He was just going through the motions. It was clear

that his mind was on other things.

A familiar feeling began to twist in Amalaki's gut. He knew that Sulwynd was up to something, but there was no way that idiot was the mastermind. If there really was a threat to the King, then Sulwynd was just a small cog in the plan. Bringing him in wouldn't give them the information they needed to stop the threat. Those behind it would just find another Sulwynd, another lackey who would take orders and carry out the plan. It would also prove to Reva that he did things differently—that he wasn't just another Malvaceä.

Amalaki watched as the pair of constables took loaves of bread from a baker's stall and continued their meandering patrol. He had to slow down when the pair stopped. Then he noticed a change in Sulwynd. The constable was now alert, excited, bouncing up slightly on the balls of his feet. He handed his bread to his partner, and then took off, quickly breaking into a run as a halpbloed saw him and fled.

Shit.

† † †

Halpbloeden and humans jerked away from Constable Sulwynd as he ran and yelled for his target to stop. The halpbloed kept running, naturally, and pulled away from Sulwynd, using the crowded street to his advantage. Sulwynd dodged around a cart pulled by a decrepit old donkey, and then had to jump over a stack of firewood. He spat a curse as the halpbloed made a quick turn to his right and headed down a narrow alley. Sulwynd shoved somebody to the ground, and then ran down the alley after his quarry.

The halpbloed turned to look behind him, and then tripped over his own feet and staggered, nearly falling, before regaining his footing. Sulwynd gained several paces on the halpbloed, but still wasn't close enough.

His target exited the alley into a cloistered close set between several buildings. At one time, there had been a tree growing in the middle of the small space, when sunlight gave

life to it. But the buildings surrounding the close had grown taller and blocked out all but only the most daring noon-day light, so now only a dead trunk and bare branches remained. At this time of day, the close was cloaked in thick shadows and was quiet—save for the halpbloed's hurried steps—as nobody else was in the space. The halpbloed ran around the dead tree and then tripped over a fallen branch. This time he fell and slid across the dirt. Sulwynd gave a feral grin as he slowed up, approaching the halpbloed. The halpbloed was trying to get to his feet, but Sulwynd gave a swift kick to his stomach. There was a satisfying sound of air being expelled, and the halpbloed rolled toward a door.

Sulwynd gave another swift kick, "That's for making me run. I hate running."

The halpbloed moaned and tried to roll away, but was stopped by the closed door. Sulwynd bent down and grabbed the halpbloed, hauling him to his feet. He leaned into the halpbloed's face, wrinkling his nose at the stench. "I'm gonna make you pay for making me run."

He shoved the halpbloed back into the door, which opened upon the impact, and the halpbloed fell into the dark space. Sulwynd followed, kicking the halpbloed further inside and closing the door behind them.

† † †

Nul Pfeta's horrible street layout and haphazard planning made following Constable Sulwynd relatively easy for Amalaki—at least, for the first hundred paces or so. The constable's path through the crowded street was easy to track, as he left a trail of fallen market goods, sprawled bodies, and flying curses. It was a risk for Amalaki to be following so closely, but he stayed in the shadows, and most of the halpbloeden were too preoccupied with the constable and his prey to notice Amalaki. But he couldn't risk getting any closer, as that would be noticed, by the halpbloeden and by Sulwynd.

He saw Sulwynd dodge around a cart and then jump

a pile of firewood. Sulwynd's attention was entirely on his target, and his partner—Amalaki took a quick look behind him—hadn't given chase and was continuing his leisurely pace. *Why is that?* If this was a criminal being chased, both constables should have been in pursuit. *So why is his partner acting like he doesn't care what happens?*

Amalaki moved around the same cart and saw the halpbloed make a sharp turn into a hidden alley. Constable Sulwynd was maybe twenty paces behind and made the same turn. Amalaki had to slow down as he approached the corner, and then he stopped in a shadow and looked down the dark alley. It was more like a tunnel than an alley, as the upper stories of the buildings on either side covered the space. It was dank, and smelled of urine and rotting cabbage. He heard someone stumble, and then heard the sound of running feet. Amalaki slid from his shadow into the darker depths of the alley.

The space magnified the sounds as they echoed off of the walls. Ahead, he could see a lightening of the blackness that filled the alley, as well as the sound of someone falling. More running feet, then a clear sound of someone being kicked. *The halpbloed made a critical error and is going to pay for that.*

Amalaki held back, finding a spot—an old bricked up doorway—where he could fade into the background. Once Constable Sulwynd had caught his quarry, Amalaki was certain that he'd lead the halpbloed back this way and rejoin his partner. He heard more grunts, and Sulwynd complaining about having to run. Then, after a few more breaths, there was no more noise.

Amalaki instinctively pulled his green cloak around him tighter, even though he was already a dark shadow in a black well. He started counting slowly, waiting for Constable Sulwynd and his prisoner to pass by. When he got to thirty, he strained to listen, to determine if the constable was still there, maybe talking quietly. He heard nothing.

When he got to sixty, panic started to creep into

Amalaki's thoughts. *Could there be another exit that Sulwynd used? Why chase this halpbloed if he wasn't in trouble for something?* Constables in Nul Pfeta were petty, vindictive bullies, but they were also lazy and didn't just chase halpbloeden for the fun of it. If they gave chase, and the halpbloed was stupid enough to run, it was because they wanted to make an arrest.

After reaching one hundred, Amalaki slipped from his hiding spot and crept slowly toward the back of the alley. It opened upon a small square, a close surrounded by buildings on all sides. He could see the sorry remains of a tree that once had grown in the center of the close, but it was apparently too pitiful now to even be used as firewood. He saw a couple of other alleys heading off in different directions, and four or five doors that opened onto the close, but he didn't see Constable Sulwynd or his quarry.

"Shit."

† † †

When the door closed, Constable Sulwynd leaned down and offered his hand to the halpbloed laying on the dirt floor. For the briefest of moments, he saw anger and hatred flicker in the halpbloed's eyes, but then he grabbed Sulwynd's hand. Sulwynd pulled him up.

"You didn't have to make it so real," the halpbloed complained, as he rubbed his stomach.

"Well maybe next time, Cedres, you won't make me run so hard. I hate running."

"I was only making it look convincing for the others."

"Convincing is me giving you a shiner to show to your worthless friends, not me hurling up my breakfast from chasing you."

Cedres gave a small shrug, and Sulwynd could tell that he was proud of himself for this tiny victory. He wanted to give Cedres another kick for that, but he had other things to discuss, and little time to do it. Spending too much time here would make even Gallwynn suspicious of what really

happened.

“Have you completed your task?” Sulwynd asked.

Cedres Vanda took a step back, and then held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m trying, but it’s hard to find others.”

Sulwynd snorted, *how typical*, he thought. *Halpbloeden are the laziest creatures on Ados. You can only motivate them with money or force.* Aloud, he said, “Why are they so reluctant when they are treated like this?” He made a sweep of his arm that took in all of Nul Pfeta and the halpbloed’s situation. “They are treated as though they are less than elven because of a few indiscretions made by a long-dead ancestor. Doesn’t that make them angry?”

“They *are* angry,” Cedres spat, and Sulwynd knew that what Cedres really meant was that *he* was angry. “But they are also afraid.” Sulwynd could tell from his tone that Cedres didn’t include himself that time.

“Why are they afraid?”

“Why?” Cedres gave a bitter laugh. “We’ve been thrown out of our homes and lost our jobs. Many of us have lost wives or husbands, all because you fear us.” He pointed a finger at Sulwynd. “You mark us as being different because you need someone to blame for all that goes wrong in the land. The King and his lackeys declared halpbloeden to be their scapegoat, and then he needed more, so he changed the rules to make more of us. He rules because he can distract his people with fear and scare them with the halpbloed ‘threat.’”

Sulwynd kept his face impassive; he’d heard this rant from Cedres before, though he wasn’t too far off the mark. Of course, Cedres didn’t know the whole truth, but that didn’t matter. “So, you’d rather cower than do something about it? To right these wrongs?”

Cedres jerked and stood up a bit. “I am not a coward, and I am not like these other halpbloed. I am an elf, despite these stupid laws. The King is wrong. He’s been misled, and he needs to be shown the truth.”

“And what is the truth?”

“That I’m just as elven as you are. That’s not determined by some stupid law, or by who my great-grandfather slept with. I’ve done more to prove my elvenness than half the elves living outside these walls.” Cedres made a slashing gesture with one arm. He then pointed at Sulwynd. “I stood up to the traitor that killed Lady Ochroma. I protected her. I am owed something for that. No other *elves* did that. That was *me*. I nearly gave my life for a noble, and I got *nothing!*”

Sulwynd couldn’t keep the surprise from his face. He had heard about Lady Ochroma’s death—everyone in the city had—and he’d known that Constable Inspector Lunaria had a witness to Ochroma’s murder, but he’d never been able to find out who that witness was. It was all just leaves on the wind now. He said, “Then you know why it is important to do this. You’ve already proven that you are an elf, despite the stupid law. Aren’t there others like you? *Elves*,” he purposely used the term, “like you willing to fight for who they are?”

“There are a few of us,” Cedres admitted. “And they may be afraid, but that’s bred from an abundance of caution. There is great risk to join a group to fight for our rights when we risk everything and don’t know what the fight is about, or what the outcome will be. You constables or the Green Cloaks will happily stretch our necks if we are caught. If you tell me what we will do, I will find you elves that will support you.”

Sulwynd couldn’t tell Cedres that, since he himself didn’t know. It had taken him time to feel out potential halpbloed for this mission. Too many of them had accepted their fate, and they had no interest in fighting back. Others were too dwarf-headed, and were itching for a fight, which was just as dangerous. He knew that the timing for this mission, no matter what the actual target was, was critical. Patience was needed, in addition to passion. He’d come across Cedres Vanda about a month ago, and he had been taking his time recruiting Cedres for this mission. Cedres was filled with anger, but he wasn’t a raving lunatic. He was convinced that he was in the right and had been falsely lumped in with the

other halpbloeden. But only one halpbloed wouldn't work for this plan, Sulwynd knew that much.

"I can't tell you what is being planned," Sulwynd said, drawing a frown from Cedres. Sulwynd bristled at that; no matter what Cedres believed, he was still a damn halpbloed. He pointed a finger at Cedres. "That's for everyone's protection. I've been asked to find *elves* willing to fight for their rights. My patron needs to know of your commitment before risking his own position by giving you any information about what will happen."

"I am committed," Cedres said, and Sulwynd could see the fire of burning desire in his eyes. "I am owed my life back for what I have done for the King. I am due recognition. I was promised that after protecting Lady Ochroma."

Maybe you'd have gotten the recognition you seek if you'd kept her alive, you idiot, Sulwynd thought. "We need more than just you. We need others who are as committed as you are. There are other elves like my patron. They think the King has gone too far with the Purity Laws. They've lost friends, employees, and other good elves who didn't deserve to be punished. But you need to understand their position. If they move too quickly, the damn Green Cloaks will sniff them out, and then *you*," he pointed at Cedres, "won't have any chance to get your old life back. They need to know that there are elves *here*," he pointed to the ground, "ready to act. Show us that you can recruit others, and my patron will be willing to give you more."

Cedres was slowly nodding his head, and Sulwynd knew that he'd sunk the hook firmly. Cedres would bring others in on this mission. "Be sure to let them know that what they do will change everything in Tenyl. Those who wronged them will be punished, and they will reap the rewards."

"I will find others and have them ready."

"Good," Sulwynd nodded. "But I can't be running all of your asses down to give you the information. We will meet in three days at your apartment."

Cedres paled a bit. "Is that safe?"

"I'll make it safe. We'll meet before sundown. That way there will be no other constables around to spy on us."

Cedres nodded. "Three days. I will be ready." He slipped past Sulwynd and headed out the door into the close. Sulwynd waited until he counted to sixty, and then he left as well.

† † †

Amalaki had retreated from the alley, mad at himself for losing contact with Sulwynd. It was a novice mistake, and he considered waiting at the alley entrance for the constable to reappear, but there was no guarantee that Sulwynd would return to this road. Amalaki had waited for five minutes, but there was also no guarantee that Sulwynd was even still in the area. He might have hauled the halpbloed down one of the other alleys and taken him to the Victory Bridge gatehouse and tossed him in a cell there. Just doing his job.

Unlike me, he bitterly said to himself. He'd finally given up, and headed back toward what he thought was the way to the bridge.

But while he'd waited, he became sure that Sulwynd was up to something. The whole scenario felt contrived to make people think that a constable was chasing down another criminal. But Sulwynd's partner hadn't given chase. Amalaki had seen the constable waddle past the alley carrying two loaves of bread, completely unconcerned about what Sulwynd was doing. That meant that this chase had been a performance, as if this street in Nul Pfeta was the stage at Pfenestra's Playhouse. So why the act? Why put on a show for others? Amalaki supposed that the halpbloed could be an informant that Sulwynd used to learn about other criminal activity. He'd want to keep such a person safe from retribution. That was a possibility. But there were other reasons, too. It could have been a chance at payback for a previous slight or insult, although in that case, the other constable would have wanted to get in on the action. It could have been a shake-down for pfen or other goods, and it would make sense that

Sulwynd would want to keep any treasure for himself.

But as he walked, Amalaki kept coming back to the nagging suspicion that there was more to this encounter. *Why the secluded location?* If it was for payback or to collect money, any place would do, and no halpbloeden would have lifted a finger against the constable. Not in broad daylight, anyway. Amalaki supposed that it could have been a sexual tryst, which would certainly explain the desire for a quiet spot, but Amalaki didn't think that was the case. It was a possibility that he had to consider, but it just didn't feel right. That only left one possibility; that Sulwynd and the halploed needed to meet where others wouldn't know what they'd discussed, or that they'd even met at all. Again, that could just be Sulwynd meeting an informant, but there were also other reasons to meet in secret. Those reasons were usually to plot something illegal.

He could just arrest Sulwynd now, and bring him into the Red Keep. It would make his superiors happy, and he'd be able to find out why the meeting happened. If it was for sex, they'd let him go. If he was meeting an informant, there could be pushback from the constabulary, but that was nothing that couldn't be explained and washed over. But if it was for some other reason, then Amalaki would have done his duty to his King.

And what about those that ordered Sulwynd to turn traitor? A nagging voice said in his head. To his surprise, it sounded a lot like Reva. *This isn't just about evidence now; it's about seeing how deep these roots go and who else is involved.*

Amalaki shook his head, trying to get Reva out of his thoughts. He stopped in the shadow of an herbalist's shop and tried to get his bearings. Nul Pfeta was a maze in the best of times, and Amalaki realized that he'd gotten turned around as he'd been thinking. As he looked around, trying to find a landmark that would point him in the right direction, he spotted Constable Sulwynd. The constable was walking along, with a bit of a jaunty spring in his step, and he was whistling. This was clearly a change in his demeanor from

earlier. But he was walking alone, with no sign of the halpbloed that he'd been chasing. Something good had happened, but what, exactly?

Amalaki had collected too many other small coincidences around Constable Sulwynd in the past month. He was sure that the constable was up to something. This latest event was yet another bud on the flower and, taken as a whole, it suggested that Sulwynd was up to no good.

He let the constable pass, staying hidden in the shadows. Sulwynd's plan, whatever it was, had taken a step forward, but if Amalaki brought him in now, he'd lose any others who were involved. There had to be elves who were giving Sulwynd his orders. Amalaki wanted them, too.