

VENATOR SAGA

BOOK 1: THE NEW AGE PART 1

EAMONN CONNOR TAYLOR



PROLOGUE

The late morning sky was a grey steel sheet that weighed heavy on the mountains, carrying with it promises of a torrential downpour. The pale mist hadn't yet retreated from the forests beneath the long ridge of dark hills either. The tell-tale signs of winter seemed eager to bring about the change in season and the trees were already beginning to wither, coating the sodden, grassless ground with a slightly lighter tint of brown. Aedric had given up on scraping the mud from his leathered boots. He was told the northern regions of Garvane were sometimes referred to as the 'Grim Lands'. It hadn't taken him long to understand why. Even his black stallion he purchased a few weeks back from a farmer, seemed to mirror his dull mood, its head down and its pace slow.

On his journey to the Grim Lands, he often compared himself to the horse for lack of human interaction. Its mane had a grey tinge to it just as his own dark hair did, despite only being in his thirties, and the beast always seemed irritated when its saddle and girth were removed. He couldn't help but smile whenever it happened. It was too like him. Aedric seldom went anywhere

without his armour: a specialised leather trench coat with plated steel on the shoulders, forearms and chest, accompanied by a separate set of plates on his shins.

Something he absolutely refused to part with, even when he slept, was his hat. An aged, wide brimmed, leather piece bent on the rims into the shape resembling a triangle, which sat comfortably just above his full brows. A memento from his father, he told himself over and over, but he had been in ownership of it for so long he had truly forgotten its origin. Of the few bandits he had the fortune of meeting over the years, only one had attempted to separate Aedric from his head piece. The thief had paid a steep price.

Scratching his throat idly, he found himself genuinely curious why, being on the road through such a gloomy climate, he had met no would-be brigands. *It's this weather*, he thought to himself, *Not even bandits can stand this gods forsaken place.*

Aedric led his gloomy stallion by the reins with one hand on his sword that hung from a belt. Going for so long without a hindrance only meant he was lucky, not that it wouldn't happen at all. He thumbed the pointed pommel, becoming increasingly annoyed he had not yet reached his destination. He did have a map but due to the persistent moisture, it quickly became spoiled and so he was forced to take directions from the man from whom he bought his horse. The man's instructions were vague.

Suddenly the smell of cooking meat over flame filled his nostrils, followed by the distant commotion of people going about their business, talking amongst themselves and laughing as if the blue sky were not hidden by sinister dark storm clouds. Aedric could even hear the faint sound of music, lutes and dulcimer, no less. Heartened by this confirmation of assumedly civilised settlement he smiled and pulled his mount onwards through the fine veil of mist that separated him from the possibility of finding

a bed, instead of dirt, to rest his weary body on.

The village was as he expected. Every building clustered side by side and made of the same dark coloured wood that showed prominent signs of decomposition, black-brown mould sprouting from corners and eaves. The roofs, meant to act as a barrier against the elements, were in no better condition than the walls supporting them. Wooden plates overlapped each other and collapsed inwards if but one was removed or, more likely, rotten.

I've seen dog houses in better condition, Aedric thought, at least a dog house has four walls and a roof.

Chickens roamed freely on the earthen pathways, scratching vigorously in hopes of finding a meal. Men and women alike didn't appear to have anything in their wardrobes aside from moth-eaten rags, though here and there an individual wearing a long jacket and tall boots could be spotted. Aedric assumed they were the upper class of this village that owned an appropriate title, possibly Earth-Wood, for nothing else seemed to be of the area but those two things.

He had seen worse settlements, it was true, but the road had been long and miserable and Aedric had hoped for more. He thought his own town, where he had spent most of his youth growing up, far to the western border, was a dull wreck of a place but it always had an air of welcoming warmth that made it worth it. This 'Earth-Wood' was not that village he had left behind. It did not hold its arms open in welcome. The very wind that chilled the flesh seemed to harbour ill intent and yet people were going about their business and composing joyous tunes. Grudgingly, Aedric trudged through mud towards the source of one of those songs.

The music led him to what, as far as he could discern from the slightly higher quality of repair, was an inn. A circular wooden sign hung from an extended timber piece that bore the words

Runner's Den in cursive letters and a simple image of a hare. The two storey building had windows on both levels, light emanated from all of those on the lower level. The door was situated in the middle of the facing wall and raised several feet above the ground with stone steps leading to it. It seemed the innkeeper liked to keep his inn clean. Perhaps there was hope yet. Like the other structures of the village, the inn was made out of timber and the door seemed to have a new layer of brown paint. Laughter could be heard from inside, along with other such merriment that pulled Aedric towards it. With a loud exhale, he tied his nameless horse to the short posts extruding from the ground, *perhaps a horse post, but who can tell in such a secluded place*, and prepared for his first social encounter in weeks.

Aedric clenched his jaw to forcefully stop himself from gasping. The condition of the room was clean and well-kept, even the corners of the ceilings were ridden of mould. A hearth sat in the far wall; the stuffed head of a great beast was situated above it. Aedric recognised it as a Dūrnin. Snake-like skull, pale grey scales, three eyes on each side and a mouth full of teeth that could reduce a man to bloody chunks within seconds. He knew such beasts well. Well enough to know they were not a cold climate beast and that this was most likely a bought piece of décor from some travelling tradesman. Tables were placed around the large room, each bearing four chairs and a lit candle in the middle. Most were occupied by folk with cups of drink that joked and bantered among themselves, so he made his way to the counter behind which were stacked large cases of various alcoholic beverages.

After he sat himself on a tall wooden stool, he finally turned his attention to the musicians. In the centre of the room was a makeshift stage comprised of numerous rectangular benches, atop which sat the three performers. One bald and long bearded

man bearing a lute, another younger boy with long blonde locks, making use of the dulcimer and the last was a girl with long, light brown hair that reached her lower back. She had deep, blue eyes like the ocean itself. She was a pretty girl, but young. No older than sixteen or seventeen, Aedric guessed.

The two musicians changed their tune after a short pause. The beat became slow and conveyed both sadness and joy. At the same time, the girl added her voice, a beautiful sound that shared the same emotions as the instruments, only they paled in comparison. Aedric could not decipher the language in which it was sung, *elven perhaps? Or even amphisian for that matter.* Regardless of dialect, the voice captured everyone in the room. Those that had been laughing at raucous jokes now sat in silence, not daring to interfere with the serene melodies.

Aedric pulled himself from the sad song that danced in his ears and turned to face the bartender, who he was surprised to see was an elf, tall and slender with dagger like ears and cheekbones that seemed to be carved from the smoothest stone. A handsome fellow with a smile that looked as if it could almost hide the bored expression set in those pale eyes. He wore a simple blue coat with a high collar and baggy pants held up by a length of rope. Aedric had not expected to see an elf this far north, or in such a place. Elves liked to keep to places where the stars could be seen.

‘How may I serve you, my good sir?’ the elf asked through his smile, his voice soft as to not disrupt the singing. ‘A strong drink? Or maybe a room for the night?’ Both sounded ideal.

‘Do you have any Joedweg wine?’

It was a longshot to hope for such a thing in this part of the world. The bitter-sweet concoction was produced far to the western side of the Stelforn continent, but there was no harm in asking. He would simply ask for ale if the elf had none. To his

pleasant surprise, the elf nodded and politely asked him to wait as he left through a back door, presumably to his stock of sales goods.

Aedric pulled a leather pouch of coins from his coat's inner pocket and began counting out how much he had left after purchasing his horse and rations for the road. Four gold and twelve silver pieces. He grimaced as he calculated how much the return journey would cost him. He would barely have enough, though he was sure gold would go a long way as he was not to use it for trivial things such as commodities. It was more for the use of bribery or 'purchase of information' as someone had once told him. The singing had ceased and the patrons resumed their conversations as if they had never paused, the sudden growth in noise somehow comforting after such an astounding performance.

The door to the inn opened and brought with it the chilling breath of the wind, followed by a short, stocky figure hidden by a deep hooded cloak. None at the tables paid the figure any heed as it closed the door and made its way toward Aedric. Aedric braced himself for this confrontation. He had been expecting it.

'You are late,' the figure stated in a voice lined with agitation. 'Three days late. Three *days* late.' The emphasis almost made Aedric wince. Almost.

Aedric turned to the dwarf, his hood now down, revealing an aged face with pale brown eyes, a large nose and a hefty black beard that threatened to sweep the floor.

'How are you Hyrrma? Well, I hope?' he responded as the elf returned with a tall, clay bottle and two mugs. *So that's why he'd taken so long.*

Hyrrma pulled up a stool beside him and sat uncomfortably close.

'Much better now that *we* cleaned up the mess *you* promised *you* would take care of Witch Hunter.'

The title was almost spat. Before Aedric could explain that he was delayed by the weather and his ineffective map, the dwarf kept going.

‘The day after you were meant to arrive, we found sufficient, more than sufficient, evidence to identify her.’ A sudden sadness crossed Hyrrma’s face. ‘Poor Una, she was such a gentle spirit.’ He paused and sighed solemnly. ‘And to think she made a pact with the Dark Gods. I just don’t understand why she would. Though darkness seeps into whatever it can get its claws in.’

The bartender nodded in grim agreement as he poured the wine into the mugs. Aedric said nothing and readied himself for the angry stares he was about to receive.

‘I would like to see the body,’ he said slowly and as forlornly as he could.

As he expected, both Hyrrma and the bartender struck him with icy, disdainful eyes. There was no way to soften the request. The entire room was quiet he realised; he could almost feel everyone’s eyes piercing him as good as any knife. The musicians had already left, it seemed. This Una was evidently well liked.

‘All-Father preserve me,’ he thought he heard the dwarf mutter as he drank from his cup.

No one spoke. The only sound to be heard was the harsh downpour that had been promised by those shadowed clouds. Finally, the silence broke with Hyrrma quietly obliging Aedric’s request and almost breaking the clay mug when he put it on the counter forcefully, his anger obvious. Aedric was motioned to follow the dwarf with a quick nod and was led into the unforgiving rain. Rest would have to wait; he needed to be sure.

Each drop of rain seemed to batter him like a hammer on an anvil, drenching him almost as soon as he stepped out the door. Hyrrma didn’t seem to be bothered by it; his mind was most

likely elsewhere. Aedric was led further into the centre of the decaying village, passing streets and buildings that all appeared the same unless you took note of puddle size and rot patches, and he found himself wondering if each house held the same surprise the inn had, decrepit on the outside, yet charming on the inside.

Abruptly, Hyrrma stopped his quick paced walk, holding up his arm and gesturing as if he were a merchant advertising his wares, though his face was hard and his eyes portrayed only resentment. Aedric looked up and understood why.

A tall building stood before them. It had ornate railings and coloured curtains hanging in the windows. The door itself was lavish with various metal-worked swirls and images depicting men on horseback chasing a boar. The mayor's house was the only building untouched by the wood rot. That was not what irked him, however. Several metres above the ground was a corpse hanging by its neck from an outstretched length of timber, swaying silently in the cold, wet wind. The body turned and Aedric saw its face, pale skin and empty eyes that might have once been charming in life, now a heap of flesh to be pointed at and feared in death. She would've been a young woman. He had seen the like before and it wrenched at his insides to witness it yet again.

'Had your fill yet, Witch Hunter?'

Sorrow wracked Hyrrma's voice. He then began to sob, hardly audible through the crashing of the rain. Why did this always happen? Why couldn't they just have waited for him to arrive? Knowing the truth already, Aedric drew a short knife from one of his coat's many pockets and threw it hard at the rope attached to the corpse. The rope cut silently and the limp body fell through the air with a doll-like grace before hitting the muddied earth with a wet *slap*.

‘I didn’t think you *venators* showed mercy to your prey, no matter how small,’ murmured the dwarf half to himself, his sudden outburst of emotion now kept in check.

Kneeling down over the body, Aedric pressed his forefinger and index finger to the dead girl’s forehead. Those who practiced the dark powers left behind an aura of malevolence that slowly decayed over a few weeks, something that anyone with enough patience could be trained to recognise. Anger forced his lips to quiver and he stared into the hollow eyes, unblinking.

‘Fool,’ he grated through clenched jaw.

He wasn’t sure if he meant his own foolery that delayed his arrival or the village folk who took matters into their own hands.

‘Tell me, Hyrrma, why did you even bother contacting The Order of Venator when you clearly could solve your witch problem yourself?’ he asked harshly.

The question was thick with sarcasm and ire, undeserving for this poor fellow who unmistakably held strong feelings for the deceased. *Didn’t stop you from assisting in her undeserving fate though, did it?* He stood and turned to glare at the dwarf, hoping he would understand the meaning behind the rhetorical question. Having to explain might cause Aedric to become infuriated. He could already see from Hyrrma’s furrowed brow he was trying to produce an answer.

‘It is common knowledge to report–’ Aedric cut off the dwarf’s failed attempt of understanding, with a loud voice that almost shut out the beating rain.

‘The whole reason The Order exists is to correctly locate, identify and slay any who would dare use the darker powers, not only to maintain order but to prevent the unnecessary deaths of innocents who have the blame thrown at their feet! To prevent this!’ He shot a rigid arm at the lifeless remains.

Now Hyrrma understood. His face contorted with anguish,

eyes widened with sudden shock at the realisation of the monstrous crime the townsfolk had committed, his mouth working soundlessly. That was how it always went, the sudden knowing and disbelief at stealing a life that was innocent even to the point of hanging. Aedric grasped his sword hilt firmly; he'd witnessed this too many times to go another moment without putting it right. Before the short fellow could begin weeping, he stepped forward and spoke in a voice without hostility, making an effort to console the dwarf.

'Hyrrma.' The dwarf responded by moving his gaze from the woman's face to Aedric's. 'You can still help me finish this.' He paused to allow for thought. 'There is still a witch in this village. You can help me kill it, but I'll need you to keep a clear mind.' This was only somewhat true. Aedric needed little help in his task, but the dwarf was going to need to think he helped in the destruction of the true witch. Regret was not easily healed, but things could be done to soothe its soul-eating influence. Hyrrma only gave the smallest of nods as acknowledgment of Aedric's proposal.

'Will you help me bury Una?' The request was almost pleaded, the way the dwarf's eyes began to water.

Aedric spoke in a soft voice and placed a hand on Hyrrma's shoulder.

'Did Una have a place she was fond of? A place she went to for peace?' Hyrrma nodded and began walking at a slow pace through the deluge. Aedric followed close behind.

They came across a simple farmer's cart that had been left out in the open for the elements to claim and delicately placed Una inside. Aedric offered to use his horse to pull the cart, but the dwarf insisted he tow it himself, most likely wanting to wipe away a small fraction of guilt. The two slogged through the rain to the outer reaches of the settlement, where it merged with the

surrounding woodland. Hyrrma stopped when they reached a small clearing in which sat a lonely stone, large enough to act as a seat beside an apparently dead bush with grey-brown leaves. He said nothing, only reached into the cart and produced two shovels.

It had been a few hours, Aedric was sure, before the makeshift grave was dug to an appropriate size and depth. The rain had ceased, though was replaced by thick, pale fog, that allowed them to dig without the hole filling with water, though the dwarf dug with such ferocity, Aedric was sure he'd just shovel that out as well. Mud and stray clods of earth, thrown by shovels, spotted the once shining armour of the Venator, but that mattered little. The dirty work was not yet done with. Hyrrma gently laid Una into the damp earth as if he were handling fine crockery and solemnly shovelled a lump of dirt into the grave. Aedric attempted to assist in the disheartening task, but received a furious glare that halted his action. The dwarf must have felt it was his burden to bear.

It was unclear what the relationship between Una and Hyrrma had been but it meant nothing now; she was dead and he was alive. The events always played out like this: one bearing the full weight of guilt and the one who died of false accusation. Aedric waited until the last of the earth had been set down before speaking. Too much time had passed and the *true* witch would have learned there was a Witch Hunter seeking her. *But this couldn't wait; she had remained unburied long enough.* Hyrrma said something in dwarvish, the dialect easily discernible from the others as it used hard 'g' sounds and rolled the 'i's, and turned away from the mound towards the cart.

'Urlgrajoor guide you to the eternal rest and may Orldris take pity on your unjust death.' He spoke the words slowly. He hadn't attended many funerals, as small as this one appeared, but

he hoped it appeased the God of death and the patron God of his order, the God of justice.

‘She can’t hear you, Hunter,’ a voice laughed from behind, too high pitched to come from any dwarf. *Odmati*. Aedric spun as he recognised the shrill cackle that followed. The creature he now faced was reminiscent of a human in body shape only, grotesquely formed, as if to be a horrific mockery of mankind. Its jaw harboured hooked teeth that twitched back and forth like some insect; one arm was lanky and thin with its hand possessing two meat hook sized claws, the other arm could have passed for human were it not pulsing with black veined muscle. It wore clothes torn at the shoulders and chest – likely from the spasm of movement of its mutation – that seemed too clean to belong to a ‘long-lived’ *Odmati*. Its head was bald save for what might have once been a beard, allowing a full view of its rust coloured skin that clung to its skull. The eyes were sunken, small, beady things that stared lidless into Aedric’s. Its elongated left arm held Hyrrma by the throat, tight enough to ensure he couldn’t call or even whisper for help. The dwarf beat helplessly against the beast that held him.

‘Release him!’ Aedric barked, violence working its way into his mind. ‘Your master sent you to kill me no doubt. Unhand the dwarf, slay me and kill him after as a reward.’

Hyrrma’s eyes bulged at that. Aedric hated the words he’d just spoken but he was relying on the *Odmati*’s mindless greed and bloodthirsty nature to free its grip.

It grinned. More bared teeth than a smile, and lazily tossed Hyrrma several metres behind itself, as if to forget a piece of discarded litter. The *Odmati* loped forward head first, bellowing and gurgling as it picked up speed, eyes suddenly alive with excitement. It was said *Odmati* completed their masters’ tasks by any means necessary to gain their favour. Fool creature.

Aedric drew his blade calmly; a long, single-edged blade with a flat point, giving the appearance of an enormous meat cleaver with engraved symbols that shone like the sun along the fuller of its length.

Holding the heavy blade with both hands, Aedric took a long breath then exhaled, waiting for the witch's monstrosity to rush him. *Seven metres.* Aedric took his stance: one leg in front of the other, both bent like springs ready to be released. *Three metres.* Both hands firmly clasping the hilt of *Shadow's Ruin*, held to the side with its flat tip towards the ground; the blade glistened in the moisture of the air. *One metre.* The Odmati leaped and swung its muscular arm over its head like a hammer with a gleeful glint in its tiny eyes. Aedric threw himself forward and swung *Shadow's Ruin* with honed elegance. The cutting edge met twisted flesh and severed it, met corrupted bone and sliced it. The monster crashed into the earth and roared in an amalgam of pain and fury, brackish saliva flew from its maw and its eyes darted in every direction. The brawny, black-veined arm jumped and twitched on the ground with the fingers working furiously in an attempt to claw its foe, not realising it was separated from its body. An inklike substance spat from the wound on the Odmati, mixed with the crimson red that rushed forth.

It gave a final bellow before it rushed forward again with a vengeance. It swung hard with its long claws but Aedric ducked beneath the angered attempt and returned with his own strike, opening the belly of the foul creature. The Odmati was quicker than he had anticipated and spun around with its only arm rigidly outstretched; the blow caught the side of Aedric's head and sent him sprawling. Lights twinkled and flashed in his vision but were shaken away by the thundering roar of the fiend as it lumbered forward for another blow. It straightened its claws into a position suited for impaling and drove its arm down in a

sword like motion. The attack barely missed as Aedric rolled, sword close to his chest. The arm struck the earth twice and both times scratched the plated armour, landing no more than glancing blows. Aedric tried to stand as quickly as he could but the beast slashed at his chest with its rigid talons that left deep gashes where his heart would've been, again forcing Aedric down to the mud breathless.

The Odmati's jaws cracked as it forced them wider than they should have gone and its teeth stopped twitching oddly and became stiff in an outward facing position. With a gurgle it dived on Aedric, its mouth aimed at his head. In a sudden reaction of adrenaline and shock, Aedric held his sword horizontal, edge facing the Odmati and the blade found its way through what remained of the beast's cheeks and into the jawbone that worked tirelessly to mangle the man's face. The jaws still snapped and crunched together inches above his face, despite the metal between them. It pressed in harder and Aedric could feel his muscles straining against the strength and weight the monster was forcing on him. Those eyes no longer dashed about in pain but focused intently on its prey whose death would bring great joy to its master. It edged closer now only a few centimetres from its target.

Aedric could feel his face tighten as all his strength went into holding the Odmati in place. Muscles now shook. Unable to see another way out of his peril, he slid *Shadow's Ruin* across the jawline with all the strength he could muster. The blade cut deeper into those snapping jaws, the monstrosity finally recoiled and was thrown. Taking the chance he provided himself, Aedric scrambled to his feet ready for the next assault. The being pulled itself upright and snarled through bloody jaws, blood and spittle dripped to the ground. It primed itself to leap. Aedric's arms trembled merely from holding his sword up. *How much more of this can I take before I make a stupid mistake that leaves me open?*

Abruptly, the beast howled and staggered. Its leg collapsed beneath it. Hyrrma was standing behind the Odmati with a bloodied shovel in his hands and was striking the monster in the legs.

‘What are ya waitin’ for, a bloody invitation?!’ he yelled.

The beast was getting to its knees. Aedric stepped forward and hefted his blade high, the runes shone brightly, leaving a trail of light as he swung down with great force, adding his remaining strength to the weight of the sword. The Odmati let out a guttural bark before the edge split its skull and became lodged in its lower torso. Blood fell freely and its body sagged limply as if the strings of its master were snipped.

Aedric and Hyrrma stood over the corpse and puffed heavily for what seemed to be a lifetime. Hyrrma’s panted words broke the silence.

‘What – in all – of Creation – was that – bloody *thing*?’ His face was a mix of confusion, exhaustion and horror.

‘That,’ Aedric puffed as he pulled the sword free, ‘was an Odmati.’

The dwarf’s expression didn’t change. Drawing a deep breath, Aedric explained.

‘An Odmati, or more commonly known as Wretch-Men, are the servants of witches and often act as bodyguards or spies.’

He wiped the bloodied blade on the torn clothes of the Odmati.

‘They are usually men who take the power the witch offers. Unbeknownst to them, they become slaves to her will and are *modified*,’ the word was spoken through clenched teeth but he continued calmly, ‘to better suit their tasks. They turn to greed and hate, which clouds their minds and consumes any humanity that might remain.’

Hyrrma simply nodded, as if caught in a trance while he eyed the dead creature.

‘The witch in Earth-Wood most likely sent this one to kill us, more likely me, probably aware that our path led to where no one would witness the scene,’ he continued. ‘She knows how to exploit a situation. I’ll grant her that but she isn’t very wise.’

‘Why is that?’ Hyrrma had lost his fear of the beast, but his voice portrayed more confusion.

‘Because she only sent the one Odmati.’

Aedric had encountered enough witches to know they always have more than one, usually a pair or, if the Witch was exceptionally skilled, up to twenty. A group of twenty was difficult to conceal as it required the constant concentration of the master to keep the Odmatis’ features normal, yet some Witches allowed their brutish slaves to run amuck, letting them indulge in their bloodletting. Such events were rare fortunately and swiftly dealt with by extreme prejudice. He himself had never witnessed such things and was thankful; he doubted he would have the stamina necessary to fight more than six at once given enough preparation time. The Masters of his Order would have little trouble with such an incursion, but they only accepted the contracts that demanded the expertise of a Master. Aedric himself was no Master, only a Hunter which was one step above Initiate and had been for the better part of nine years, though rumours circulated of a whispered promotion to the rank of Master for those who showed “the desired traits”.

‘Just my luck.’ Aedric was brought back from his memories of the Venator Cathedral and realised Hyrrma was speaking. ‘So I’ve got more fiends in my village.’ He sighed heavily. ‘How can we find this *witch* I so eagerly want to see on the end of your blade?’

The word ‘witch’ was spoken in spite and kindled a flame in the dwarf’s eyes.

‘That is where you come in, my friend.’ Aedric knelt and examined what remained of the Odmati’s gnarled face. Its features

danced on the edge of his memory and, unable to be grasped, flickered away. 'Did Una have close friends?' A foolish question. He already discerned she was liked but Darkness was patient and often took refuge in those closest to its target.

'Aye, that she did. I'll let them know where she's buried once we've caught this witch so the proper funeral rites can be done.' Hyrrma kicked the Odmati in the side with a hefty boot. *Good. Anger will serve better than despair.* 'She seemed to be in a relationship with the boy Ebda but he, fool-headed that he is, chose another to love.'

'Who was this other girl?' Aedric had the feeling he could predict the situation about to unfold.

'Shayla. She was the singer at Runner's Den. Popular with no one but the young fellows, likely due to her self-indulging nature, yet has the voice of angels.'

A split second of comprehension appeared on the dwarf's face but was gone faster than it made itself present.

'You suspect Shayla of being a cohort of Darkness?' There was no disbelief in the question or any shred of sarcasm which made Aedric think Hyrrma had also, at one time or another, been at least a little suspicious. Aedric didn't want Shayla to be the witch, but he had to be aware of the possibility.

'I'm not certain. Right now it could be anyone...' He trailed off. What if the other Odmati had been sent but its mission was to observe and report? Words would have to be spoken with caution to not reveal any gained knowledge. But given what he had already spoken aloud, the witch may now know and be prepared to leave. *Or set a trap.* The dwarf looked up at him expectantly with that rugged, worn face.

'The evidence against Una, where is it? Is it still intact?' If the townsfolk had destroyed the evidence, then hunting his mark would be multiplied tenfold, though he had managed

successful hunts before with no more than someone's handwriting as an indication. He held back a sigh of relief when Hyrrma nodded his head.

'We were too fearful to touch, let alone break anything, lest a curse be placed upon us.' Walking over to the cart, Hyrrma gave the burial site a glance and continued to talk. 'We boarded up her home so none may enter.' A brief pause as the stocky fellow began pulling the cart. 'What do we do about that?' He nodded towards the beastly corpse.

Aedric was tempted to leave it where it lay, in the mud in its own blood, a fate many others of his Order would do. It was safe. No witch could reanimate a corpse and they had no way to recover the power they spent on *modifying* their servants as well as that, they didn't care too deeply for them to even retrieve their dead body.

But he grasped the deceased Odmati by its clawed hand and dragged it; he would not leave anyone's body to rot in the damp. Not even one who'd sold their humanity. *You wouldn't do that to a rabid dog* was a phrase his father had used on so many occasions and one particular day would remain in his mind until the day he died. That day when his father and his fellow boar-hunters took him hunting with the family hound. What should have been the simplest of things became a gruesome affair with a pack of wolves. The wolves had caught them all off-guard and caused grievous wounds to legs and arms. The only one of the group to die was the family hound, who fought with all its strength and spirit, whatever a dog could muster. Aedric could remember its eyes, so full of fierce defiance.

When all the wolves had been slain or chased away, the party gave up on their expedition and made their way back to their village. A gruelling two day journey lay ahead with wolves that would undoubtedly return to finish their own hunt. His father

had held his loyal hound in his arms and started walking. The companions told him to leave it where it was, that it would only slow them down, become an unnecessary burden, among other statements that were true. His father had heard none of it. He arrived in the village three days later with the dog wrapped in his cloak and various flowers also within. He had buried it that day. Aedric didn't know why that was such a powerful memory, but it meant a lot to him, regardless.

When Aedric pulled himself from his remembrances, he was just outside the village of Earth-Wood alongside Hyrrma, where his present task lay before him. He still held the limb of the creature he'd killed. He situated the carcass in the back of the cart. If he hadn't daydreamed, he might have thought of doing so beforehand.

'Back in the land of the living I see,' Hyrrma grunted through his beard. 'If you went on like that for much longer, I'd have thought you'd been bewitched.'

There was a slight hint of relief in that remark. He let the cart rest where it was, stated for Aedric to follow, and trudged through the dampened streets, though now with an aura of purpose about his stature. They passed the inn. Music had begun again, a gentle hum through those timbered walls, only now the lute was no longer present. A thought bubbled into Aedric's mind and the conclusion he arrived at was not as shocking as it might have been if he were more awake and less deprived of rest. That Odmati he had slain could very well have been the lute player at Shayla's side, with that bald scalp and beard. He entertained the thought a little longer. He was the lute player. *Don't be hasty; the man could have very well just gone to the latrine or taking a rest. Gods know I would like to.* Still, he was sure to keep an open mind.

A minute of damp travel and scraping mud from clothing later

and Una's lonely looking house was before them, wooden like the others, rotten like the others, but without light illuminating the windows. Even if there were a light within, it would not be noticeable through the many planks of timber nailed over them. *Perhaps overdone*, Aedric thought to himself as he leaned back to peer at the chimney protruding from the plated roof.

'Odd,' he heard his companion mumble and so followed his gaze and looked at the door. The boards meant to stop any intruder, ill intent or otherwise, from entering, seemed loose, as if they had been removed and hurriedly replaced. *Shadow's Ruin* was in his hand before he realised it was drawn and Aedric cautiously took steps towards the door. He placed a hand on one plank and it fell at his touch. He grabbed another, but it too fell. Tapped, fell. He could now open the door, but he wasn't sure he wanted to. There was no telling what was on the other side. Yet the entrance creaked wide open anyway. Aedric was certain he heard a gulp from Hyrrma.

There was no great monstrosity lurking within, waiting for them, at least. It was a simple rectangular room with no additional walls that greeted them. A bed with a pale red sheet was positioned in the far corner, old floral wreaths intertwined along the ceiling beams, and a large woollen rug lay in the centre. The floor itself was an expanse of numerous grey rocks. None of that was what caught the two acquaintances' eyes. However, what they were transfixed on was a desk and two bookshelves converted into some kind of shrine that held a crudely carved statue of a woman in spiked armour. Aedric knew of it and it repulsed him each time he met with the blatant worship of the dark gods. Pieces of paper displaying blasphemous writings of praise to the darker powers were nailed to the desk and around the makeshift spectacle. Symbols were painted in white in circular patterns on the stone floor, each surrounding the other.

‘Those aren’t dangerous, are they?’ Hyrrma was wide eyed at the circled patterns, but Aedric guessed the dwarf was referring to the entire shrine itself.

‘No, they don’t bear any meaning. Merely scribbles that *look* dangerous,’ he told truthfully. *This was a decorative set up. Make it look bad enough so no one will doubt their misguided judgment.* ‘But this figure in armour is the long standing symbol of the dark god Visteera. Don’t be so scared Hyrrma, it is only a piece of wood.’

Visteera was the arch rival of Orldris, as tyranny and oppression needed to be combated with order and justice. Those who sought out evil powers often gained them from Visteera. Her path of power was easily accessed, making her the favoured one of the three dark gods that existed. That people were so accepting of such a ploy made his stomach turn. Hyrrma had taken it upon himself to wander around the vast room.

Aedric kneeled in closer for a more detailed inspection and wiped a finger across the surface of the simple shrine. The result did not surprise him in the slightest. A lack of dust meant one of two things; that either the furniture had been thoroughly cleaned or the shrine had not been in its current place for very long, an unlikely probability for a fervent believer. His doubts confirmed, he stood upright. It *was* a setup. It was put here to confirm any suspicion, but most importantly, to frame Una. Aedric rubbed his eyes with his forefinger and thumb. Someone had gone to a lot of trouble to make sure the girl was convicted of a wrong she didn’t commit.

‘Hey Hunter, what about this?’ Hyrrma’s voice sounded loud in such an enclosed space. ‘Does this bear meaning?’ Curiosity was mingled with anxiety.

Aedric suspected he’d found more worthless gibberish and so turned without much haste or enthusiasm. He wished he

had when he saw what Hyrrma was inspecting in the corner of the room; a small black sigil with sharp lines curving outwards and a red triangle in the centre. The dwarf moved aside a box that covered a small portion of the symbol. A thick, dark line Aedric hoped wasn't blood, linked to the sigil. His eyes followed its length and he stiffened when noticing it conjoined with another symbol at each wall. The door creaked in the gentle wind behind him, the thick stripe across its bottom width barely noticeable.

'Hyrrma get out!' Aedric shouted as he leapt to the door. The dwarf made no less effort to escape as he bounded from his position. *If the lines connect...* It moved so slowly it almost seemed to be taunting their fleet-minded panic, so slow yet so sure to seal their fate. He had been foolish to be so easily baited. He should've acted with more forethought. These thoughts vanished as he laid a hand on the doorknob, only inches from closing. He took a moment to let out an anxious breath, chuckled to himself and faced Hyrrma with his hand still firmly on the handle. The face Hyrrma wore was blank, but the eyes twitched nervously.

Aedric laughed again. 'If this door closed we-' he cut off abruptly as an unseen force began pulling at the door. There was no time to react. It slammed shut and any light that had been present, abandoned them, consuming them in utter darkness.

The only sound to be heard was the heart pumping blood through his head, drowning out the clanking sound of a panic-stricken hand struggling to turn the door knob. It would not open. It simply rattled in its wooden socket, like a shrill giggle on the verge of hysteria. Hyrrma's quick, short breaths were barely noticeable.

'If this door closes, we what?' The dwarf's voice came from the nearby darkness. He would not like the answer. Aedric himself didn't like the answer. *I've doomed us.* His body went

limp as he comprehended the sheer scale of what had unfolded.

Then a dull, red glow emanated from over his shoulder. And the sound of wood crackling in an intense flame filled the room. He turned. He would know what killed him, at least. The shrine was now aflame. Charred pieces of paper flapped wildly, sending glowing scrap twirling into the hot air and the desk bore red flickering flame that licked the ceiling. That did not faze Aedric in the slightest. What turned his iron will to bubbling jelly was what stood where the wooden statue had been. Instead of a crude wooden shape, stood a tall woman with seamless, creamy skin and blood red hair that hung down her back. Black steel plates covered her entire form except her face, that seemed too fine-looking to be natural. She had long twisted spikes on the shoulders, knees and elbows. Whatever beauty her face held was discarded when Aedric met her eyes. Those eyes that burned more fiercely than a furnace, if indeed two orbs of blazing inferno could be named eyes. When his gaze met hers, his body wanted to surrender, to bow, to grovel, to weep cries of praise and glory in this being's name. His body wanted these things, but his mind was now a dance of fury and sheer, dominating terror. Visteera herself stood before him.

'Afternoon,' she said with an almost playful tone, verging on the brink of friendliness. *What?* In his brief moment of bewilderment, he noticed his own body, arms and legs trembling uncontrollably. On the edge of his vision, Hyrrma was on his hands and knees, though visibly fighting his own body, but failing to regain control. He was crying, Aedric saw. He abandoned his attention of Hyrrma and returned it to the flame-eyed woman as she strutted indignantly towards him. *I won't kneel to you, beast!* She halted merely inches from his face, the heat of her eyes hot on his light skin.

'*Beast*, you say? I'll admit I've been named worse things.

Usually accompanied by a foul mouthed curse, you mortals seem to be so deeply fond of.’ She closed her eyes and sighed in such a way, she appeared exhausted. ‘Still, you insulted me.’ Was she *hurt* by his *thought*? ‘But you’ll do.’ Again, with a smile.

Her attitude perplexed him, but then he was struck heavily in the gut just below his chest plate. The blow caused his whole body to go rigid as he fell to the floor. He had never in his life, even with all the odd creatures and magical entities he’d seen in his time as a Venator, imagined he would be face-to-face with a god. Especially a dark god. But he knew the dark gods meddled in the lives of mortals as they did not appear unless summoned, and they were only ever summoned for one thing: sacrifice. Of all the things he had fought and overcome, dodging death and delaying the demise of himself as well as others, perhaps dying at the hands of such an immensely powerful being was not so bad. *Yes*, he thought, *let her guide you to your doom*. It was not so bad in the grand scheme of things. *Surrender your will to her*.

No, he told himself. No, not himself, Visteera. She must have some form of psychic abilities being an all-powerful deity, so he only had a meagre moment before she would respond to his action. Jerkily, but no less swiftly, he grabbed what he assumed was the dwarf, drew his blade and, not seeing the truly hateful expression set on Visteera’s face, hacked the simple wooden door. It all seemed to take so long; so much time was passing, enough time to be killed. That alone quickened his attempts at escape. His heart turned to a frozen rock as a hand closed around his sword arm. He didn’t know how, but he knew it was Visteera. Yet hope rekindled within him. A large piece of the door fell away, letting in a ray of grey sunlight. That was enough. Visteera’s furious roar was a furnace of disgust and outrage as Aedric threw his weight against the piece that held him captive. The roar became a scream.

Fresh air was in Aedric's lungs again, damp but so full of life compared to that room of flame and shadow. The object he had grabbed inside was indeed Hyrrma, who was face first in the mud. Something still held his arm. His eyes jumped to his arm and relief flooded through him. It was no longer Visteera, only a small, crude wooden replica. The face was the only aspect that was set in fine detail, a fine face contorted into unrestrained anger. Death dodged yet again. A sudden twist broke the figurine's grip and a hefty stomp of the heel broke the face.

Aedric decided to join Hyrrma, who was sitting in the earth, not clearing the muck from his face with a dull expression worn beneath. It wasn't surprising to see him reacting this way. Anyone with half a brain between them would. Even he felt like sitting and taking a rest.

'What happened in there?' Hyrrma's voice was quiet and without the tenacity he had shown earlier. The truth needed to be told. Aedric owed him that much.

'A trap was triggered by the witch, when it failed to trigger itself. We should have died. But we're alive.'

That was the truth, just not a very detailed version of it. His own tone of voice was reminiscent of Hyrrma's, he realised.

'And that woman, who, no, *what* was she?'

'A monster not at full strength, there because we were to be sacrificed to it. The figure was the only way it could be called but it was also the reason it was so... fragile.' Aedric expected a mortified look in the dwarf's eyes, but he only blinked.

Some minutes of silence passed and Una's house caught alight from the internal fire. A metal bell was rung from somewhere and more people than Aedric would have guessed lived in the area, swarmed the location, buckets in hand. Very few gave a second glance at Aedric and Hyrrma, their attention solely on the burning building. A cursed building by their line of thought, but

a fire, no matter what building it burned, was still a huge threat in a place comprised almost entirely of wood.

Aedric eyed the crowd, searching for the other threat that existed. Of course, Shayla was not present. He had had enough of this game of cat and mouse; he was tired and he was injured.

‘Hyrrma, I’m going for a walk.’

At this point, he didn’t really care if Hyrrma heard him, he would go anyway. He also didn’t think the dwarf was capable of taking a young woman’s life. He wasn’t even sure he was himself. If she was the witch, like he assumed, then she would be the youngest he’d ever slain, if he could bring himself to do it.

At first he stuck to the houses near the crowd, moving from one dilapidated building to the next, hoping he might catch the girl off-guard, but after a while he gave up on the area and chose another as a likely place. He went where he had first seen the girl at the inn.

The two storey building was still bustling with men that longed for another drink, the same raucous jokes and laughter as before but without the background music to accompany it. He stood with ear to door just in case, but could hear nothing over the rabble of patrons. Poking a head through the door was more than likely to get him seen if Shayla was actually inside. But it might be a risk he had to take if he were to find her; there was no telling what a cornered witch was capable of. *Let whatever was going to happen, happen*, he told himself as he put a hand to the doorknob.

He heard giggling nearby and not from inside. A female giggle to Aedric’s ears. Turning his back on the Inn’s door, he began planning the best course of action, whilst making his way around the side of the timber construction. There was an alleyway between the inn and another house, long and narrow, but not so narrow as to hinder any movement, and in the middle of its length

was where the giggling originated.

Shayla, in that fine dress, was snuggling with the blonde haired boy who had been playing an instrument on the stage. He was kissing her neck and whispering words and promises of love into her ear. That made Aedric uneasy, not only because it was awkward to watch, but because witches seldom made their love making, if they had any, public. As public as an alleyway was. Was he wrong? *No, this has to be her.*

‘Like what you see, old man?’ Shayla and the fair haired boy were now both staring at him with disdained expressions.

Aedric was at a loss what to do, so he simply drew his blade and waited to see their reaction. He hoped he was wrong about her. But his fear was confirmed when Shayla whispered in the boy’s ear and he smiled maliciously. The blonde boy stepped in front of Shayla and held out his left hand, fingers outstretched. Purple fire started to form, then the young man pulled it out of the air in a spiral formation towards the centre of his palm.

A male witch, Aedric discerned. They were a lot rarer than female witches, often choosing to become Odmati. The physical prowess granted them was pleasing and, although rarer, they were in no way stronger. In fact, they were significantly weaker. Women simply had a greater affinity for magic. But the boy had learned how to conceal the physical taint associated with darkness. Perhaps he was skilled. He would have to ask the chief librarian when he got back to the Cathedral, if he survived.

‘Stand still please, I don’t like missing.’

The boy’s left hand was now changing, the taint now resurfacing with the use of dark power. His skin turned to a dull metal colour and his nails became long and yellowed. The spiralling of the purple fire had ceased and formed a perfect sphere the size of an apple, twisting and writhing within itself like oil and water. The boy smiled that evil grin and the sphere

shot forth with blinding speed. Aedric had already moved by the time the male witch had grinned and sped forward with unnatural agility, the runes on *Shadow's Ruin* shining brightly.

A brief moment of shock showed on the boy's face, clearly unable to understand why his spell missed, and such a destructive spell at that. The sphere was lodged in a timber wall of a building opposite the alley with metre long purple spines extruding from its apple sized centre. If that had hit Aedric anywhere on the body, he would surely be a human shaped pincushion and most definitely dead. That brief moment of shock passed when the boy's head fell from his shoulders. *Too young*. His death was instant, Aedric made sure.

The runes inscribed on his blade only triggered when a source of dark power was within ten metres, granting him impossible reflexes for a short duration. The weapon was designed to ensure the job was done quickly. How you were supposed to tell when those runes were activated was anyone's guess.

He was about to explain why the boy's death was necessary to Shayla and wanted to truly apologise for taking her lover, but she cut in first.

'You are annoyingly hard to kill, Witch Hunter.' Her tone was devoid of any despair she may have felt but heavy with irritation. Did she truly feel nothing for this person with whom she had not a minute ago shared laughter and flesh?

'No matter,' she said and extended her hand the same way the boy had.

No. A weight pressed in on Aedric's chest and he knew it for dread. *No, not you too. Too young*. He was given no more time to think as the same purple flamed orb almost instantly materialised alongside two others. He barely dodged the first, but was well out of their line of trajectory as the other two followed the first. He would have to make it precise, a clean and instant

death. The blade was less than a millimetre from Shayla's throat when he spotted a glint on her cheek. A tear. The blade was beyond stopping. Even with his enhanced agility, all he would accomplish would be getting it stuck in her throat. He closed his eyes for the rest.

Rain had started to fall lightly as Aedric made his way back to his horse, head down and arms limp at his sides. *Did I become a Venator for this? To murder children?* Hyrrma was leaning on the doorway of the Inn, face now clear of muck, his eyes tracking Aedric.

'They're around the side,' was all he said. The dwarf nodded grimly and produced a pouch which clinked with the familiar sound of coin and held it out to the man. He ignored it; he would not accept payment for such a thing. Such a thing shouldn't even be done. He would leave this place, but he knew he would never be rid of that memory, that tear. Hyrrma undid the rope holding the nameless horse as Aedric saddled up. He would be rid of this place.

'There's no village for a few miles. Where are you going to spend the night? Why don't you at least rest for the night here?' the stocky fellow said from his low height. 'Free of charge of course,' he added, but without any recognisable emotion.

'I will find no rest here, Hyrrma.' He took a deep breath as he turned the horse and looked back at the dwarf. 'Hyrrma,' he began, but the fellow cut him off.

'Don't blame yourself Hunter,' he said solemnly, 'she chose her path to Darkness just as you chose yours to Orldris.'

He was being consoled, that brought the slightest of smiles. He clearly didn't know about the blonde haired boy. He soon would.

'Fortune favour you, Hyrrma.' And with that Aedric turned his back on the town and led his animal through the rains and

through the wild, back to return it to its rightful owner, a polite stableboy who had been kind enough to loan the stallion to him. The Cathedral was waiting and so was his next mission.