

## *Prelude*

In the realm of Rankor, outside the very bounds of reality. In a place that cannot truly be called a place, and at a time outside of time, a being sat, and watched. It stared into a world, as if through a window. Watching the ebbs and flows of time and space within this marvellous thing called existence.

It saw beings there, beings who “lived lives,” whatever that meant. The being didn’t truly understand the concept, but it wanted to. Oh, how it wanted to. It wanted so much, all it was, was desire. For when you are a being without reality, without time or matter themselves. All that remains is a craven need. A need to be, a need to feel, a need to understand.

From that need grew jealousy. Jealousy of the beings inside the many worlds of existence, the beings who were chosen by sheer luck to be gifted with this thing called “Life”. The thing the being so craved. And from that jealousy grew rage. It seethed at the edge of reality looking in, envious and enraged at the injustice of it all.

And so the being's entire existence was to sit, as all those of its jealous kind did, and watch and wait. Pressing itself against the fragile skin of reality, hoping to find a seam, a crack, or a gap through which it could slip. To press the smallest sliver of itself into the world, that it might feel, and see, and taste, and live as the beings inside did.

It found its crack. An imperfection in a seam. A spot where, for whatever reason, the beings of the truth had failed to close the stitch entirely. A space through which the being could not truly fit a piece of itself, but through which it could feed an echo, a whisper.

An idea.

And so the being whispered, it whispered from outside of time and space, into the world of Varethia, and its message was simple.

“Let me in.”

# 1

## *Bloodstains*

Brother Andrick was a hale man for having seen 76 winters. His bald pate caught the sun as he bent to work in the gardens of Yarwick Monastery. He had a lot on his mind. One boy of his congregation had come to him after classes, bringing accusations of abuse against his father. He spoke of beatings whenever the man drank, and of blame for his mother's passing in childbirth. Brother Andrick had comforted the boy and promised to help, but thus far prayer had given him no solutions.

His hands and robe were dirty with the honesty of his work, and beads of sweat rolled from his tonsure and down his brow. He pulled one last weed as he blinked the salty liquid from his eyes, sitting back on his haunches as he drew a black-robed sleeve across his forehead. As the blur of salt cleared from his sight, he noticed a figure approaching from the south along the road. The man was still a way off, but Andrick could make out the distinctive glint of steel even at this distance.

A knight then. He thought, standing up to brush himself off before making his way to the door, such a guest would require bed and board.

It took him no more than twenty and five minutes to prepare a section of the hall for a guest. He cleaned up and placed a simple sleeping mat over the rushes, and checked the contents of the stewpot on the fire. Finally, he added a simple copper kettle to the hearth and settled into his customary chair to await company.

He stared into the fire as he waited, his mind rolling over the problem of the abused boy and his father. They lived in Pendor, a poor hamlet two hours' walk west from the monastery. Pendor was primarily a farming settlement, as were most in the region. However, the boys' father, Goodman Harlow, made his living by distilling liquor in his small cot, an occupation that would surely be making the situation worse for the boy. Life was hard when your father was a mean drunk, never mind a mean drunk that lived in a house full of fire-whiskey.

Perhaps Brother Andrick could take news of the situation to Sire Meripham. As lord of Yarwick, he might see fit to retract the Goodmans' license to distil liquor. But would that help? Perhaps not. Men of that kind were known to take such frustrations out on their children, and the brother didn't want to make things worse.

He could perhaps call on the brothers at Landon Abbey in Horsidor, one barony over. But unfortunately, while it was morally abhorrent, the beating of one's own child wasn't actually against any of the laws of Luris. Apparently, the law-god didn't see anything wrong with blatant abuse. Andrick fumed as he considered. His knuckles turning white on the arm of his chair as he stared into the dancing flame.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Andrick started as the knock came and grumbled a complaint as he pushed himself to his feet. "Hold on" he shouted. "Coming!" The shuffle across the room was growing more and more difficult each year.

He pulled the door open to see a haggard knight standing in the arch. He was of middling years, blood staining his green tabard, the antler and arrow motif standing proud amidst the mess. And he sported more than a few bruises. Brother Andrick could tell from his stance that the man was wounded more severely beneath his armour. His eyes were the brightest hue of blue Andrick had ever seen. Most obvious of all though, the man bore a large and ugly scar. The mark was an inch thick at its widest point, and ran from his scalp above the right ear, where it showed as a lack of hair, down across the cheek in an angry streak, to where it bisected his beard as it joined the corner of his lip.

"Solyn's light upon you, sir," greeted the brother as he looked the stranger up and down. Noting the scar but not staring, to avoid rudeness.

"And may the light feed you as well, brother." Replied the knight. Using one hand, to make the sign of the sun-lord above his own heart. "My name is Sir Gareth, of Lan." His accent was refined, the mark of a well-educated man. It made Andrick's northern drawl seem backwards by comparison.

"Be welcome in this house of worship, sir." He said, stepping backwards to allow the man entry.

"My thanks, brother." The man said, stepping inside as he panned his azure gaze across the interior and pulled his cloak from his shoulders.

"Take a seat by the fire, milord." The brother instructed. "I'll pull some stew from the pot. Will you stay the night?" He asked, despite knowing the answer. Light would fade

soon, and no man would choose to be outside at night this close to the great wood.

“If refuge is available, brother. It would be appreciated.” He said, dropping himself into the wooden chair and removing his gloves to let the warmth of the fire fill his outstretched hands.

The priest walked over slowly, taking a wooden ladle from the hearth, along with two bowls. Both of which he filled slowly and deliberately from the boiling pot. The smell was incredible, and Gareth’s nostrils flared as it hit him. ‘Definitely meat,’ he thought. As he took the bowl from Andrick. “My thanks, brother.”

Andrick just nodded, taking his own bowl and sitting in a second chair, to the side of the first. They ate in silence for a while before the brother spoke.

“Your blood?” he asked. And the knight stiffened. Lying to a brother of the light would be pointless, and they both knew it. Solyn’s light always revealed the truth, and priests of the Light Father were not easily deceived.

“No. Not all of it at least.” He answered at length, staring into the bowl in his hands as he spoke.

“Speak it, if you like.” The brother said softly. “The ear of the gods has heard worse, I promise you.”

“Not worse than this, brother.” He said, his voice barely escaping the fell tomb of his throat. “Perhaps later.”

Andrick frowned, but let it pass. Truth, he could feel that it was the truth. But how could it be? What could a man have seen, or done, to truly believe that the gods themselves had never heard its like? He settled back into his chair, eating in silence as he pondered.

He understood more about truth than most, and more about the workings of men's minds and souls. He knew that a truth didn't have to be a fact to be true. The speaker simply needed to believe it with absolute clarity. If a man genuinely believed that he could fly, then to that man, that was truth. It wouldn't save him if he jumped from a cliff, but it was truth none the less.

For that boy in Pendrador, the belief that his father loved him. The truth of that statement didn't remove the welts and belt-marks from the scarred flesh of his back.

Brother Andrick finished his meal before the knight and stood. He rubbed the bowl down with a cloth he kept on the mantle-piece and replaced both bowl and cloth when he was finished.

"I'll get some supplies for those wounds. Best doff the armour, milord." Andrick said as he shuffled from the room.

The man took the last bite from his own bowl and placed it on the ground next to his chair, not bothering with the ritual of cleaning and replacing the bowl as the priest had. He grunted his assent and began to unclasp the various straps connecting pauldron to chest plate.

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"This is deep, milord. Looks like the blade was serrated on one side," Andrick said as he carefully fingered the wound in the knight's side.

Gareth said nothing. He simply winced slightly as the priest pressed the palm of his hand firmly over the wound, causing pain to lance up the knight's side.

"Sun-father," the priest whispered. Closing his eyes. "Let the life in your light fill this man."

Gareth felt a warmth spread through his side and looked down to see the soft glow of daylight shining through the flesh of the man's hand. Giving the flesh a pink translucency as the magic worked.

The priest's hand came away to reveal the vicious looking cut still there, although the bleeding had stopped.

"I couldn't close it completely, milord," Andrick apologised, "but the internal damage is gone. And I should be able to stitch it closed now, and you won't bleed into your insides."

"Thanks." The knight replied, a sudden weariness filling his face and voice. "I'm sorry if I've been rude, brother."

"We all go through hard times," the priest shrugged. "Don't think on it, lad."

The sudden familiarity with which he said it surprised Gareth. Silence stretched as Andrick prepared his needle and thread, he pulled a taper from a pile on the mantle and lit it in the fire, holding the flame over the needle for a time to sterilise it as he spoke. "Do you feel ready to tell yet?"

"I think I do, just let me smoke while I speak." Gareth pulled a pouch of tobacco, and a pile of leaves from his belt, rolling himself a cigarette as the priest threaded the now sterile needle.

Once he was done, and once Andrick had held out a taper for him to light with, the knight sat back in the chair. The sweat, bruises and dirt giving his bare torso a mottled pattern. He let off a steady stream of smoke that wove between the grand pillars of the temple hall as the priest went to work.

Pain seared up his side as the needle dug home. He winced, but did not pull away. That was OK. He deserved a

little pain for what he'd done. And the wound needed to be stitched. There would be more fighting soon.

"So. You wanted to know the story." He said simply.

"No," replied the priest. "But I think you might want to tell it."

"I don't." That was truth, Andrick could tell. "But I think I need to." Truth again.

"Then speak, lad, and speak true."

And so he did.