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Two days later, a windship rode the air currents toward Bekontor Hill, Norostein's windport. Dozens of windships of all shapes and sizes were tethered among the forest of platforms and towers, while beneath them hundreds of porters serviced the mass of wagons and carts hauling goods and people to and fro.

The vessel that swept up the valley that afternoon was a rare visitor. Its timbers were shaped as much for artistry as functionality and decorated with ornamental carvings; the sails were tasseled, and emblazoned banners displayed the Sacred Heart, bright sigil of the Church's darkest sons. The Inquisition had arrived.

The windshipmen were common sailors, and they were careful to avoid disturbing their white-robed passengers, who were gathered in the forecastle. The three-decker had lavish quarters below, but today everyone was on deck to see Norostein reveal itself below. Beyond the city the eternal snow of the Alpine peaks glistened in the afternoon sun.

The ten Inquisitors were all magi of Pallas: eight men and two women armored in steel chain mail beneath fur-lined cloaks. The Sacred Heart glowed in red and gold on their chests. Straight swords hung from their left hips. Their leather gauntlets and boots gleamed. Collectively they were a Fist: one Commandant and nine Acolytes.

This Fist had an additional member, appointed to advise this particular mission. The Kore Crozier was an effeminate-looking man with a mane of curling black hair and full lips. As the vessel approached its landing site, he deigned to speak to one of the Acolytes. "This must be a kind of homecoming for you, Brother Malevorn."

"Yes, my lord Crozier," Malevorn Andevarion replied respectfully. "I spent seven years in this pit."

The other man snorted softly. "You did not come to love it then?" He was known as Adamus; though he had forsaken his family name on taking the title, the tradition that was observed to the letter was also subtly ignored. Everyone knew Adamus Crozier was related to the Sacrecours.

"I am Palacian," Malevorn said proudly. "My family is pure-blood. Even the nobility of this dung-heap are only half-bloods. If it wasn't for my uncle's posting to the occupation force, I'd have been educated in Pallas, as I'd expected." The fall of the Andevarions, whose patriarch, Malevorn's father, had committed suicide in disgrace after his legions had been annihilated by Noros rebels during the Revolt, was a humiliation that drove Malevorn every second of every day.

The Crozier nodded sympathetically. "You had some company, I understand? Kaltus Korion's son, and the Dorobon heir?"

"My lord is well informed," Malevorn replied. He could feel the way the Crozier watched him, and had been regarding him ever since he'd been assigned to his squad. He knew his own looks: he was handsome in a way that made him seem older, with a finely chiseled, rakish face

and voluminous dark hair. He knew the way his sensuous smile could make a girl wet. Some men were just as susceptible, and rumor had it this Crozier was one such.

The Crozier smiled indulgently. "I like to take an interest in the most promising of our brethren."

Malevorn gave a small bow of acknowledgment, and saw his fellow Acolytes glaring enviously. None of them had yet managed to exchange pleasantries with the Crozier. He saw their eyes flicker from the Crozier to himself, saw conclusions drawn.

The first of you to suggest what you're thinking is going to regret it, he promised them all.

"Did you meet Governor Vult?" Adamus Crozier asked.

"I did, my lord. At my graduation— and socially, from time to time."

"Society?" The Fist Commandant, Inquisitor Lanfyr Vordan, sniffed. "Is there such a thing here?"

"I was asking Acolyte Malevorn about the governor," Adamus Crozier observed mildly. Inquisitor Vordan flushed and fell silent, but Malevorn kept his amusement hidden. When this mission was over, the Crozier would go home and Vordan would still be there.

"The governor was not popular with his people, my lord," Malevorn told Adamus.

"Traitors seldom are," Adamus replied, a lilt of humor in his voice. "I too have met him, in Pallas last year. He has a high opinion of himself."

Malevorn smiled dutifully. "So it is said, my lord."

He knew little of their mission, but there was plenty of gossip among the Fist. He glanced at them, neatly arrayed in their little factions: Brothers Jonas and Seldon stood with dark and sour Sister Raine. All three were half- bloods, illegitimate children of pure- bloods with a talent for theology and connivance. Raine was screwing Vordan, a sound career move, or so she seemed to imagine.

The older men were above all that: Brothers Dranid and Alain were gray- haired veterans whose youthful urges had been purged by years of self- flagellation and prayer. Malevorn envied their skill, but found them utterly boring company.

Then there was Brother Dominic, who was born to follow. He'd latched onto Malevorn immediately, like a puppy seeking a master. He was a competent enough mage and warrior, but he had no head for conspiracy and he knew that made him vulnerable, so he invariably sought a protector, the most alpha of the group. Malevorn, despite his youth, was that person.

Finally, his eye strayed to Brother Filius and Sister Virginia, the fanatics. Every Fist seemed to have them: people who believed utterly in the Kore and its right to dismember, torture and pillage for its own good. Filius was a dull, balding young man with snake eyes and Malevorn couldn't stand him, but Virginia was another matter. She'd taken that name when she'd joined the Inquisition, ostentatiously vowing to remain chaste in the service of Kore. Such vows were rare— magi bloodlines were valuable— but it was her right. She was a pure- blood like Filius, Dranid, and Malevorn, and used her gnosis with vicious efficiency, and she knew her way around a sword. Her face was that of an angel; her hair was a halo of gold, but her single- minded devotion drained all femininity from her. Something perverse in Malevorn wished to ruin her vow, though not from desire. He just resented perfection that wasn't his own.

Inquisitor Vordan made an abrupt gesture with his thumb, dismissing Malevorn peremptorily. "We must discuss the mission, my lord," he said to Adamus, who made a small, almost apologetic duck of the head and allowed Vordan to draw him away.

Dominic accosted Malevorn immediately. "What did he say, Mal? Did he say why we're here?" Dominic was from the country, near the Hollenia border, and it colored his speech, his slow way of talking, and his rolling gait, not to mention his simplistic worldview. Sometimes it made Malevorn want to slap him, but he put up with it. It was good to have someone at his back, because there were plenty here who'd stick the knife in, given half a chance. Inquisitorial Fists were supposed to be bands of brothers, but he'd quickly learned that they were as vicious as any gang of thieves.

"We spoke of the governor."

"Belonius Vult," Dominic exclaimed. The whole Fist was listening, hanging on every word. They knew that they were being sent to question someone, and that their Fist had been specifically chosen; anything else was pure conjecture.

"Vult's only a half- blood," Filius sneered. "I'm amazed he has the wit for the role." Filius judged people's worth purely by their bloodlines and devotion to Kore; Malevorn, pure- blood though he was, knew there was much, much more to furthering oneself than that. *Thank Kore!*

The windship descended upon the mooring towers like a great bird of prey. Ropes snaked through the air and bound the vessel and it quivered and jerked to a halt like some insect snared in a web. As they gathered their belongings and prepared to disembark, Brother Jonas, who resented him most, made a cocksucker gesture at him, flicking his eyes between him and the Crozier.

Malevorn eyeballed him back stonily.

<Hope you like the taste of semen,> Jonas sent.

<Why, do you?>

Jonas made a gobbling face, and he and Raine convulsed in silent mockery. No matter: they'd regret their little jokes when next they trained.

An officious little man who gave his name as Clement met them off the landing platform. Wringing his hands, he drew Inquisitor Vordan and Adamus Crozier aside. Malevorn let his eyes trail over the city basking in the cool sunshine. This high up, even the summer days were chilly if the wind was blowing off the mountains.

Norostein . . . Names and faces came back to him, the boys of Turm Zauberin mostly: Francis Dorobon and Seth Korion. Gron Koll. Boron Funt. That imbecile Alaron Mercer and his lowlife friend Ramon Sensini. And the teachers: Fyrell and Yune and the rest. Principal Gavius. Then his mind roved on to the tavern girls he'd screwed, and the Arcanum girls he'd had too. The two guardsmen he'd almost killed in a tavern fight. There'd been a few fun times, but mostly it'd been dourness, rain, and boredom. He'd hoped to never see it again.

They descended to the ground by a pulley- elevator and Brother Alain, a poor flyer, touched the ground reverently. The rest eyed Vordan, who was looking grim. There was no affection for their Commandant, but there was a certain justified fear: Lanfyr Vordan was known for executing Acolytes who failed him in the field.

"Gather," Vordan growled, before making a grudging gesture toward Adamus Crozier. "The Crozier will address you." Clearly having a churchman installed above him for this mission rankled.

Adamus inclined his head in acknowledgment. "Hearken. This is the situation: last month, Governor Vult was on a diplomatic mission in Hebusalim when he sensed an attack on the security wards of his offices here in Norostein. He immediately returned here to hunt the perpetrators."

Malevorn raised an eyebrow, wondering how the governor's domestic security outweighed his ambassadorial duties.

"When he returned, he sought the thieves," Adamus went on, "but he did not discuss the theft widely. Master Clement here tells us that only three others knew fully what was going on. The Watch were not involved in the hunt."

The Acolytes looked at each other, all wondering the same thing: what had been stolen that the governor would not use the full resources of his office to recover? *Something illegal, obviously.* Malevorn glanced about him, saw Filius and Raine draw the same conclusion. The rest just looked puzzled. Conspiracy required a certain type of mind.

"Subsequently," Adamus continued, "a midnight skirmish began in the mercantile quarter, which split into two separate chases: one south to the mountains and the other north to Lake Tucerle. There was fighting at the lake and the Watch got involved, but the only bodies found were several construct creatures, and one young Council aide." Adamus looked at Malevorn. "The aide was one Gron Koll."

Malevorn blinked. *Gron Koll? Dead?* An acne-ridden face flashed before his eyes. Gron Koll had been a loathsome toad, but his cruel imagination had been amusing. That someone might murder him was not entirely unexpected. *Is this why I'm here: because I knew Koll?*

"The other pursuit involved the governor himself. Clement only learned of it the next morning, when the watch captain took a detachment south into the foothills and returned with the governor as his captive. He also brought back two more bodies: a councilman called Eli Besko and a pilot-mage named Olyd Krussyn. Whoever they were pursuing appears to have escaped."

Malevorn recalled Grand-Magister Besko— he'd been senior in the council. Fat, obsequious, ambitious— and one of Vult's. He'd never heard of Krussyn.

"This brings us to the crucial point: we were assigned this mission three days ago, when word finally reached Pallas of these events. At that time, the governor was in prison, awaiting our arrival and questioning. But two days ago, while we were still in the air, someone went into his cell and murdered him."

Kore's Blood! Vult's dead?

Everyone stiffened, and their focus intensified. Virginia and Filius ostentatiously crossed their Sacred Heart badges.

"The last man believed to have seen Belonius Vult alive was Jeris Muhren, the Watch Captain. He has since left the city." Adamus glanced at Vordan. "He is our chief suspect."

Malevorn recalled Muhren: a highhanded prick he'd clashed with sometimes while out drinking. Muhren was a Revolt veteran who'd probably hated Vult's guts since Lukhazan.

"There is another man missing who is also probably involved," Adamus continued. This time his look at Malevorn was even more pointed. "His name is Darius Fyrell. You know him also, Brother Malevorn?"

Fyrell too? Incredible! "I do, my lord Crozier," he said aloud. "He was a teacher at Turm Zauberin."

“And a young man Vult had been observing is also missing. Clement knows the name, but not the reason. Alaron Mercer.”

Alaron Mercer. Malevorn almost choked. Earnest, naïve, obstreperous, self- righteous, pig- ignorant Alaron fucking Mercer, the boy he’d relentlessly pummeled and pounded through seven years of the Arcanum. A quarter- blood scum who’d never known his place. The last he’d seen of him was being dragged screaming from the graduation hall, condemned as a failed mage: a fate Mercer so richly deserved that Malevorn’d felt like celebrating for days afterward.

“Mercer is an imbecile, my lord. This type of intrigue is beyond his ken.” *Tying his own laces is beyond Mercer’s ken.* “It must be coincidence.”

“Keep an open mind,” Vordan admonished him. “We have no preconceptions here.” Malevorn ducked his head. Vordan looked about the circle. “We will commence our questioning of those involved. Firstly, to the Governor’s Palace. After that, we shall see.” He glanced at Adamus. “With your permission, my lord?”

“Proceed.” Adamus Crozier licked his lips, and raised a finger. “There is something important at stake here. A man like Jeris Muhren does not commit murder for anything as petty as revenge. He was Watch Captain for almost a decade.”

Horses were waiting, saddled and ready. Malevorn shouldered Seldon away from a fiery- looking chestnut stallion, quelled its disquiet with animism- gnosis, and swung himself onto it. As Vordan pushed his own mount into a trot, the Fist fell in behind him, jostling for position.
