

Chapter 1



Eight days out of Brussels, along the eastern bank of the river, the bulk of Cologne Cathedral grew upon the horizon. A steady drizzle shivered Elisha's skin with a hint of pain, his first sign of the mancers he had travelled across the Channel to find—and destroy. The vessel's captain strode back and forth while his men moved with efficiency, sometimes swinging outside the rails to judge the distance between their boat and the numerous others travelling or preparing to moor at the busy dockside. Smaller vessels shoved up onto the shingle to load and unload over the sides with a cacophony of shouting and gestures. Elisha leaned over the rail, then dodged sailors and scrambled to the far side as they came about to dock. Raindrops glazed his hands, the contact bringing that sense of a stranger's hurt. His awareness showed the presence of a magus, at least, and likely a mancer, given the excitement that accompanied the pain. Elisha needed to reach Emperor Ludwig, the father of King Thomas's slain first wife, to warn him about the mancers who stalked the crowns of Europe. After Ludwig's excommunication, a rival emperor, Charles, had been raised in opposition to Ludwig, perhaps by the mancers themselves. This inadvertent contact through the rain could be his chance to start uncovering their plan for the Holy Roman Empire, and give Ludwig what he needed in order to stop them.

He spun about. "Captain! Is there time to go ashore?"

The captain tipped his head back, squinting at the gloom that settled over both city and river. "We'll be off at Nones—that's maybe a couple of hours. Best you stay with the boat, if you don't know the city."

Elisha hesitated. The city wall stretched in both directions along the river, punctuated by towers and gates. It had to be two or three times as vast as London. Even the cathedral, though its spire stood unfinished, towered large enough to encompass St. Paul's and Westminster both. The boat pushed between a dozen others, making for a gate directly below the bulk of the church. "I think that is landmark enough," he answered, and the captain looked up again at the city this time before he grunted.

"Brace!" he shouted and each man caught hold of some fixed object while the oarsmen strained and shoved the boat aground.

Elisha swayed with the jolt, then stepped up on a chest near the rail and swung himself down to the shore.

"Are you going to see the magi, then?"

He turned back, startled, to find his fellow traveler Brother Gilles leaning on the rail above him.

Slipping back his velvet hat, Elisha was about to speak when the hat flew away, twirling in the breeze. He snatched after it too late and glared as it landed on the water with a ripple of burgundy silk, only to plunge beneath the keel of a passing boat. Really, the hat was just as well gone. After years of cheap woolens and bloody linen, the velvet had felt absurd and extravagant, a guise he had taken on—along with the title of "doctor"—when he had been granted the office of King Thomas's personal physician. He was no longer a king and still not a noble, but it should be enough to gain him an audience with the Holy Roman Emperor.

"Alas, my dear sir, you have misplaced your hat. What misfortune!" The round friar clucked his tongue, beaming down at him, hands hidden in the folds of his weighty robe. "But perhaps I have dismissed you too quickly, my good doctor, if you desire so fervently to view the holy shrine." The relics dealer had ignored him since their embarkation, when he learned Elisha had little respect

for the bits of bone and other remnants he claimed to be from saints—and no inclination to pay for them.

But then, Elisha carried his own remnants, the talismans that gave him access to his magic. He wore only one talisman openly, the golden ring given him by King Thomas, and more precious than mere metal. Beneath his robes and tunic, he carried a stronger talisman: a vial of earth from the ground where his brother died. Like the other talismans among his things, this one strengthened the reach of magic, amplifying it like the belly of a drum making a single hide sound like thunder. And unlike the others, this talisman offered him a direct connection to the dirt floor of the workshop where his brother cut his own throat. If he needed to, Elisha could reach back through the tainted soil he carried and open the passage of his brother's death, the passage he thought of as the Valley of the Shadow. Elisha could summon himself to England through that howling place of pain and fear, and go home. If only he could summon himself to the Emperor Ludwig's side so readily, but no magic could be made where he had neither contact nor knowledge, and so the river remained the fastest way.

"You mentioned a holy shrine, the magi," Elisha prompted.

"Indeed. The three kings who witnessed the birth of our Lord"—Brother Gilles crossed himself—"have been translated here, their holy bones gathered into a magnificent shrine of gold."

Magi. Wise men. Brigit told Elisha the Biblical magi claimed that title to harken back to the wisdom of old. "I wouldn't miss it."

"I shall accompany you," the friar said grandly, heaving himself up and nearly falling as he jumped to the ground, his sandals squelching in the mud as Elisha caught him.

"Thank you, Brother, but I'm sure—"

"Nonsense! I, too, should like to pay my respects to such a holy place."

If need be, he could outpace the friar. For the moment, they moved on together, slogging up the muddy stones to

the pavement that edged the wall and passing beneath the hard gaze of city guards. The gate cut off the rain, and he lost the sensation that drew him, then emerged again to find it stronger, coming from the direction of the cathedral itself. The friar stuck at Elisha's elbow, chattering about the other great relics of the area, lamenting the fact that he hadn't time to reach Aachen to venerate the dress of the Virgin and the Loincloth of Christ, not that these notable items were displayed, of course, but still the sense of their holiness lingered, did it not?

Elisha frowned, listening. Of course things worn or used by these holy figures would retain their connection—it was one of the basic principles of magic—and their bones or dust must be closer still, allowing ordinary people contact with the saints, as if they, too, understood the heart of magic.

A broad square opened out before them, with a few steps up to join it to another. Market stalls stood at the sides, while jugglers, tumblers and a dancing bear attracted small crowds in the steady drizzle. Up ahead, adjacent to the church entrance, the crowds cleared a large ring, and a man wailed in pain to the sound of whips slapping flesh. Elisha's jaw set, his own back, once beaten, tensed with the memory as he quickened his steps.

Within the ring of citizens a second ring of people shuffled, one after another, their garments torn down from their shoulders, each bearing a whip of many tails to lash the back of the one before him in the circle. Welts stood out against their shivering flesh, some struck so often that they bled, a thin stream of crimson trailing down to mingle with the rain. They moaned and shouted incoherently, lashing each other onward.

At the center of these miserable wretches a tall man loomed, wearing his tunic one-shouldered, the drape revealing his own beaten back. "Hear us, Almighty Lord! Let our suffering reach your ears as we drive out our mortal weakness!"

"Yes!" and "Amen!" cried some in the circle, and some of their audience as well. The lashes fell again and Elisha

flinched. Faith so often drove men to madness. He looked away as they struck again, but their blood swirled into the water, and he gave thanks for his boots to defend him from feeling their pain. Even the sense of it in the stinging rain distracted him. A trained magus could control his presence, containing his emotion beneath the skin, but these *desolati*, those without magic, had no such skill. Blood drifted in pink eddies around the friar's sandals and moved in lazy circles inward. Elisha blinked and focused. His left eye overlaid the scene with shades, the residue of those who had died here, endlessly shadowing the moment of their deaths.

“Yea, Lord, from the deeps we call to Thee! From our hearts, we call to Thee! We mortify this earthly flesh and deny all earthly comforts for Thee!”

Extending his magical senses to understand what was happening, Elisha also traced the paths of blood with his eyes. The apparently ordinary ripples, disturbed by the shuffling feet of the flagellants, swirled inexorably inward to lap the naked toes of their leader, as if he sucked their pain through his bare skin. Withdrawing his awareness, Elisha backed out of the circle.

“Indeed, good doctor, it is disturbing—”

“Hear me, ye sinners all!” the leader thundered, swinging about to face them, and power sparked in the rain on Elisha's skin. “The Lord knows your hearts! The Lord knows your sins! The Lord knows where you are, He knows who you are! Fall upon your knees ye sinners and despair!”

Dozens in the circle dropped to their knees. Over their heads, the wild eyes of the flagellant leader caught Elisha's glance. The leader raised his own lash and smiled grimly. “Come, sinner,” he pointed the whip at Elisha. “Do you not kneel in the presence of the Lord?”

“It is not God who spurs you on,” Elisha answered.

The leader swung his lash over his shoulder, the dozen tails striping his own back. As they fell, the rain slapped Elisha with the force of a hundred lashes, every blow that fell upon the flagellants gathered and reflected by their leader, the necromancer.

Elisha staggered and cried out, wiping the water from his face, cursing the loss of his stupid hat — ludicrous as it was, it had shielded him from this contact. His presence, felt through the rain, must have exposed him as a magus to the mancer who now struck at him. The lashes fell again, and Elisha's face and hands burned with pain. He stumbled and fled toward the nearest building. As long as he stayed in the rain, the mancer could make contact, delighting in the wanton use of his power. As long as the mancer stoked the agony of his followers, and they devoted their hearts and flesh to him, like living talismans, he commanded more power than Elisha could muster, lost as he was in a foreign land. The rain stopped abruptly as a lintel intervened overhead. Tripping over the threshold, Elisha fell headlong into the cathedral.

He rolled over, breathing hard, wiping his face and hands on his robe to dry off the tainted rain.

Concerned churchgoers leaned over him, and Elisha shook his head to fend them off, answering briefly in English, then recalling the German he had learned on the weeks-long voyage from England. A priest loomed in, then Brother Gilles patting his shoulder.

Pushing back, Elisha sat against the wall and finally caught his breath.

"My good doctor, you seem quite overcome," Gilles said, the heat of his hand soothing Elisha's damp confusion. "Are you then caught in sinning, or can you be so sensitive to the suffering of others?"

"Some of each, Brother." The murky depths of the church around them slowly clarified, its vast arches reaching upward, every surface of the ribs elaborately carved, framing slices of stained glass impossibly tall. How was such a building able to stand with so little stone in its walls? Incense lingered in the transept where he sat, and people shuffled by, many stopping to gawk at the rainbow walls and far-away ceiling. Workmen clattered at one end and stone dust lingered in the air.

"You seemed sensitive to my relics as well, sir." The friar pursed his lips. "Perhaps you would be willing to look them over with me. I do like to be certain of their

authenticity, especially since I must present items suitable to the Emperor Ludwig and perhaps to the Holy Father himself. The rival emperor, Charles, is to meet with Ludwig at Trier to discuss terms and I know he is a very devout man. God willing, this journey could do much to enrich the coffers of my humble priory." A quick crossing of his chest followed this avowal. "Have you recovered sufficiently to visit the shrine of the Magi?"

"I think so," Elisha murmured, rising to his feet and allowing himself to be drawn into the shuffling line of pilgrims. They passed through bands of color shining down from the windows and came up to the rounded end of the circuit where the sudden glory of the golden shrine gleamed against dark wood. It rose on an altar high enough to pass beneath, and several men and women reached upward, pressing their fingertips to the underside as they prayed. The wealth of a city stood over his head, the holy bones of the Three Kings resting there. As he passed beneath, Elisha prayed for a way out of this cathedral. As long as the rain fell, as long as the mancer led his flagellants to beat themselves for his power, Elisha could be pinned here.

Bardolph, the German mancer who escaped the battle in England when Elisha saved Thomas, might have gone anywhere through the Valley of the Shadow, any place where he knew the dead and could make contact through a talisman. Had Bardolph spread word of Elisha's coming? Elisha could not know if the mancer flagellant recognized him as one who stood against them, or merely as a sensitive magus, to be scorned for his rejection of stronger magic, but he could not wait to be sure—he had to get back to the boat. Their journey would soon diverge from the Rhine and he could not navigate to Trier and the emperor on his own.

A rattling box was pushed in front of him by a smiling priest, and Elisha dropped in a coin to win his right to pass away.

"We do not have much time, sir, and should be going," Brother Gilles pointed out, leading the way toward the door where they had come in, but Elisha hesitated,

seeing the rain and the crowds. He might cloak himself in death—would he be able to project a presence so unlike himself as to pass beneath the notice of the mancer?

When the friar turned to him with raised brows, Elisha said, “I can’t go without a hat.” He sounded like a vain fool, like just the kind of man he’d always hated.

“Ah, your unfortunate hat, I remember.” The friar cocked his head. “We might exchange robes, sir. Mine has a hood.”

“It’s asking much of you, Brother.”

“Nonsense. When we return to our vessel, you shall return the favor by examining my relics. I shouldn’t like the emperors themselves to find my offerings wanting.” The friar untied his belt and began wriggling out of his long woolen habit.

Elisha followed suit, smoothing down the layers of tunic and undershirt his supposed position as a royal physician required and shivering as he handed over his own wet robe.

“Do be careful, there are relics stitched in at the cuffs and collar.” Brother Gilles, holding the robe given Elisha by the king himself, clearly considered his own bits of bone to be more valuable.

Mindful of the garment’s saintly cargo, Elisha drew it on over his head and pulled up the hood. It hid his face and the ample sleeves gave him room to tuck in his hands. More than that, the garment hummed with fragments of the dead. It felt like a musical consort tuning up, a dozen different presences tingling against his skin, some chilly in the ordinary way of death, a few stinging with the cold of betrayal, murder, torture. Elisha took a deep breath to brace himself and opened to their touch, their influence mingling with his own. There could be no finer disguise than this, especially for a man who knew death. Elisha smiled grimly. “Thank you, Brother. Lead on.”

With this web of relics draped over him, Elisha followed the friar out into the rain. He kept his own awareness thinly stretched, the pain and power of the flagellants’ circle numbed by Gilles’s robe. Cries of hurt and devotion echoed as they passed, and Elisha felt the

tingle of the mancer's interest reaching toward the friar who wore his own robe, but it faded back again, then they moved beyond its reach and hurried down the steps.

By the time they reached the foreshore, the bells rang out behind them and the captain frowned as he heaved them both into the boat, men standing ready to push it back into the river.

Before they reached Trier a few days later, Elisha had acquired a handful of bone shards from the friar and carefully stitched them into his own clothing. He selected them based upon their different presences, arranging these fragments of death as an artist arranges his paints. Several of the friar's other offerings showed signs of medical intervention including saw marks and even wounds from the bombards at Dunbury. The friar's description of the ugly monk he had received them from matched Morag himself: apparently the mancer had a sideline in passing off parts of soldiers as relics of saints. Without participating in the death himself, Morag couldn't use these as talismans, so he seemed to have found another way to profit by them.

Many items in the collection sent the shock of murder straight to Elisha's center, and the friar did not even need to ask if they were genuine. They might not be the bones of the saints, but they were surely martyred. The supposed Arm of Saint Brendan, which Brother Gilles hoped to offer to the Emperor Ludwig, showed the marks of Elisha's own saw, but the friar merely mourned the sad circumstances of the monastery forced to let go of any part of their fabled saint, even if it must be by cutting.

Both men arrived at Trier the happier for having met—and the more prepared for what they must meet next: the Holy Roman Emperors. One emperor needed a relic to appease a pope, the other might well keep a retinue of necromancers to control the throne.

Chapter 2



After it diverged from the heavy traffic of the Rhine, the Mosel River flowed between high sloped vineyards with castles every hundred yards, or so it seemed, and backed by hills thick with dark trees. Despite the heavy scent of grapes in the air, the entire land lay too quiet, waiting for war between the rival emperors. Unsettled by Emperor Ludwig's excommunication, the group of powerful nobles and churchmen who made such decisions had recently elected Charles in opposition to Ludwig. So far, Charles had apparently been patient, waiting for Ludwig to give up the throne of his own accord—or, Elisha suspected, under from the influence of the mancers. Curious that the mancers, who so enjoyed the horrors of battle, would be so patient as well. This was another movement in a dance whose pattern Elisha had not yet discerned.

When the valley widened at Trier, Elisha breathed more freely without those castles and the deep forest overshadowing his passage. The broad gray wall of the city stretched along the river toward an ancient bridge. The captain pointed out a cluster of pennants snapping over a brick tower just visible within the walls. "The Emperor Ludwig's banner flies. You're in luck."

Along the river stood a few squat round towers with cranes poking out of their rooftops. The vessel pushed in next to one of these, longshoremen making fast their bowline. With a groan and squeal, the roof of the round

building rotated, the crane's lines lowering toward them, and the crew leapt to work tying off Brother Gilles's crate to be lifted ashore to a waiting oxcart. Elisha took up his own small chest and waited as a plank was laid from the gunwale to the base of the crane.

"Is that all?" Gilles asked, shaking his head. "My dear doctor, I don't know how you expect to make an imperial impression with such limited options."

"I'm not looking to be hired, Brother."

"No?" Gilles waited, but Elisha said no more, and the friar shrugged. "Perhaps we shall meet again in the emperor's halls."

Bidding him farewell, Elisha swayed across the plank to the solid shore. He crunched his way over the tiny clamshells that decked the muddy foreshore, the smoke of iron smelters clogging his throat until he coughed. From the shape and size of the wall, he expected Trier to be as vast and dense as Cologne, but once inside, found houses clustered on a few streets and separated by fields of grain where farmers wielded their scythes and flails. He walked steadily into town where the houses finally closed out the fields, and it started to feel more like home, with shops at the street level and two or three stories of living space above them. Here, the stone-built houses rose smoothly without the jutting levels of those in London, allowing broad bands of sky to show through. Layers of brick separated some floors while other houses were painted pink, orange, or red, with round-arched windows that seemed to smile down onto the streets.

The high red tower the captain had pointed out proved to be one end of a huge brick building that looked like half a church, round where the tower rose up a level higher than the rest. Smaller windows had been built into the large red-stone frames as if the current occupants took over an earlier structure. At the flat end of the building, where it joined with a lower cloister, stood a peaked wooden door cut into the brick. Elisha presented his travel documents—a letter dangling with the seals of King Thomas—to a guard who eyed him from the slit in his helmet, then took the parchment inside. Elisha set

down his chest, shaking out his hands, and extended his senses in every direction.

A shiver of interest reached back to him, and he sensed a presence retreating from the gallery above.

At length, the soldier returned, this time sliding the bar to open the door beside him. "Leave that here," he directed, gesturing to the chest. Then he ushered Elisha inside—only to lead him through an opposite door until, disconcertingly, they were outdoors again. The old building's brick frame stood open to the sky while smaller workshops and stables lined its interior up to an elevated walkway patrolled by a few soldiers. A row of old windows gaped open between the rooftops of the new construction and the wooden supports of the soldier's walk as if the occupiers were not quite bold enough to fill this grand place. At the base of the tower, another soldier scrutinized him, then motioned them into a gap in the wall where a staircase spiraled upward inside its thickness. The dark forest, the city gates, the brick walls of this inside-out place, now this mouse hole of a staircase enclosed him, and a prickling unease tightened Elisha's shoulders. Soon, he would find Emperor Ludwig, deliver Thomas's greetings, and warn him about the mancer threat. After the encounter in Cologne, he expected the mancers to try to stop him—but perhaps they did not anticipate his mission after all.

The door swung open, soldiers bowing him through, and a happy voice called out, "So here is the emissary of our brother monarch, King Thomas. No, do not stand on ceremony, but tell us how things fare in England?"

Elisha straightened from his bow to find a man of about his own age, smiling broadly, arms open in welcome. It took a moment to realize the man had spoken in English, with a recognizably French accent. "Well, your—" But Elisha hesitated, frowning. This friendly blond fellow was far too young to be Ludwig, Thomas's father-in-law.

"Your Majesty will do." He continued to smile, a capelet of purple swishing at his knees as he rocked slightly. "You were expecting a different greeting, I presume. Or

a different sovereign?" With this last, he switched to German, turning his hand to indicate his surroundings.

A chuckle swept the little gathering of soldiers and courtiers arrayed about a pair of tall chairs. A few dogs lounged around the first while a lovely woman clad in satin occupied the second chair, looking peevish. An older man with tonsured hair and a golden robe leaned to whisper to her. An archbishop. He straightened up and stalked nearer Elisha, looking him up and down. "Come, Charles, do not taunt the man. It is you who have chosen to raise the pennant of your enemy alongside your own."

The blond man—Emperor Charles IV—sighed. "Any day now, we expect the man who claims my crown, and we do wish him to feel welcome. His wife is pregnant—very much so—and they travel slowly. They have come so far as Heidelberg, but that is still a few days' journey away."

The archbishop took over as Charles resumed his throne. "His Majesty enjoys greeting foreigners because he delights to speak in other tongues." The old man did not smile, but maintained his air of appraisal. "We are preparing for our luncheon, and you shall join us, of course."

Elisha gave another bow. By rights, he had wandered into the enemy camp, yet they received him as a friend. Tension gathered in his neck, but he forced himself to smile. "Of course, Your Majesty, thank you." Already servants bustled about setting trestle tables and bringing up benches and chairs. "I expected to find—Duke Ludwig here," he began, employing a title Ludwig held undisputed.

"And so he should have been," Charles said, lounging in his throne as platters of food were placed before him. "If it were not for Margaret's pregnancy, I should guess that he is punishing me. Last time we arranged for such a meeting, it was I who was detained." He popped a handful of almonds in his mouth and crunched them down. "No matter. Baldwin is an excellent host." He tipped his head to the archbishop, who gave an almost

imperceptible sigh. Hosting an emperor could not be any easier than hosting a king, especially under the present circumstances. Archbishop Baldwin. Elisha searched his memory for the information he'd been given before leaving England, and placed the name: Baldwin was not only the archbishop, but also Charles's uncle. A man to be reckoned with.

The lady let out a stream of elegant French, plucking at Charles's sleeve to draw him nearer. He gestured toward Elisha, answering in the same language, and Elisha caught a few words. "My wife, Blanche," Charles supplied with a note of apology. "She speaks no English, and little German, though she is learning." He smiled at her fondly. "But come, you must tell us the events in England. It has been a difficult year, has it not?"

Sinking into the offered chair, Elisha nearly laughed. A difficult year—and none could know it better. He chose his words with care, hoping he sounded a neutral party in the events of the past summer. "King Hugh died in June, at the battle of Dunbury, against a duke he considered to be in revolt." Elisha had killed the king, but this did not need to be shared. "We had believed that Prince Thomas turned traitor, but this proved false, so he succeeded his father, but his younger brother was killed."

"His brother and heir, if I am not mistaken," Charles mused. "Pity."

Elisha expanded his awareness through the room, the table and the floor. He let his left eye unfocus, distracted by the curving bits of shadow that clung to the relics he wore, bits of death forever stained by the shades of the living people they once had been. A mass of similar shadows rose and shifted in the corner where an ornate cabinet stood—likely some sort of travelling altar—tended by a pair of hooded monks.

Elisha had been too close to all of it to think in such political terms. It had never before been his world to understand, now he must at least try. He came here because he knew the mancers—not because this world made any sense to him. He brought his attention back to Charles and replied, "We found that his eldest daughter,

Alfleda, survived the attack that killed her mother. She had been taken as a hostage, but she has been restored to him.”

“Hmm. Interesting. Has he spoken yet of her marriage prospects?”

Marriage? Alfleda was eight. Before Elisha could form an appropriate response, Charles continued, “Or perhaps, his own? Surely he shall be seeking a new wife, especially now that his heir has passed.” Charles crossed himself with a languid grace.

The duke’s daughter, Rosalynn, had married Thomas and been killed by a necromancer once she became pregnant with his child. She died believing that Elisha had killed her. Elisha took a swallow of the wine poured for him, letting it warm his throat before he answered, “King Thomas has recently re-married, but his wife is . . . not well. She may not recover.” Brigit. Thomas married her at the depths of his grief, to give his realm an heir in the form of the child she already carried. His brother’s child, so most believed. Elisha’s chest tightened. Not merely his own child, also the heir to the crown of England. If it survived, if its mother’s unwaking sleep could be prolonged until the baby could be delivered. And there was the matter of Thomas’s confession, the hot, confusing weight of the king’s admiration. Elisha took another drink—longer this time—and wished he knew how to change the subject.

“Pity,” Charles repeated. “I have a sister of marriageable age who is being raised at court in Paris. The alliances could be quite valuable. But of course I wish his wife a swift recovery.” He raised his goblet and cried, “To the health of the king of England, and of his bride!”

The gathering raised their goblets, echoed the blessing and drank.

“But you have not spoken of sorcery,” Charles prompted, setting down his goblet and snapping for it to be refilled.

A sense of heightened awareness passed through the room, and Elisha resisted the urge to look around. Someone else wanted the answer to that question, someone in

contact with this floor or this table. "There have been rumors, Your Majesty," Elisha said. "There are always rumors."

"Rumors only? My foster father, King Philippe of France, has lately been plagued by witches. He has set about a program to remove their taint completely, and he has been given to understand that England was already infested with diabolical magic."

"Hence his attempt at invasion." Elisha set down his goblet and met the gaze of the would-be emperor. "Which was firmly repelled."

Archbishop Baldwin tapped his knife upon his silver plate. "Please, gentlemen. We seek only polite conversation at meals. Surely such matters can wait a better time."

Charles, the affable emperor, was raised by the king of France, a king who was killing all of his magi—likely at the behest of the mancers. Charles himself might be under their influence; it behooved Elisha to tread carefully and quickly in the opposite direction. "I do appreciate your hospitality, Your Grace, and Your Majesty, but if Duke Ludwig is at Heidelberg, then I should make haste to see him there."

"You have only just arrived, and surely are tired from your journey. You must be our guest tonight, at least," Charles protested. "I promise I shall speak no more of France. There is bad blood between your great sovereigns, and it is not for us to resolve."

The archbishop gave an approving nod. "But you have told us nothing of yourself, sir. You are a doctor? An unusual choice for a messenger."

The rich food did not sit well in Elisha's stomach—or it might have been the conversation, fraught with dimensions he did not fully grasp—but he felt a little sour as he sought to explain why he had come, and realized that he had already given a reason. "We are concerned for King Thomas's queen, Your Grace. When I have discharged my duty to Duke Ludwig, I am to inquire of the local doctors about her condition."

Baldwin inclined his head gravely while Charles explained to Blanche. The pretty queen finally showed

some color and spoke animatedly, something about a famous doctor. After a moment, Charles said, "My wife suggests that you must contact Guy de Chauliac, the personal physician of the Holy Father. I can, of course, give you letters of introduction should you wish to travel to Avignon to consult him. Also the university at Heidelberg may be of use to you." Charles toyed with a pheasant leg as he spoke, then glanced again at Elisha. "I myself shall found a university on my return to Prague. We shall be looking for the finest professors . . . if you know anyone you would recommend."

"I shall think on it, Your Majesty."

Charles pointed the bone at him, leaning forward. "You know that my competitor is under excommunication. You are not his subject—you have no obligation to speak with him at all—and in fact, as a Christian, you are obliged not to speak to him, to give him no comfort. Does your king not understand this?" He flung the bone away to be snapped up by a dog. In English, he said, "Ludwig is a despicable, unholy man. The Holy Father cannot abide him, nor can we. I hate to see you walk into such a meeting."

"What do you want from me, Your Majesty? If you wish me to betray my king's trust, it will not happen. If you think Thomas will abandon his father-in-law to support yourself, then you don't know how much he loved his wife."

Baldwin's brow furrowed, and Blanche drew back at Elisha's vehemence, her plaintive voice clearly asking for translation.

"Your Majesty," Elisha continued. "I am no diplomat. I cannot negotiate for King Thomas. Neither will I set aside his commands. Whatever offers you wish to make, I will take them back with me, but please ask no more of me than that."

"As a good Christian, it was my duty to warn you." Charles turned up his palms. "When you come to Ludwig, you shall see what you shall see, and perhaps then you shall carry my good wishes back to your king. We should like to offer you our hospitality, but we understand you

may not accept. Please at least take a horse from my stable by the Southeast Gate.” He gestured to a young man waiting on a stool nearby. “Clerk? A writ of safe passage. Add a note about the horse.” He waved his hand and the clerk scurried up with the document, shaking, drying sand off the fresh ink of the amendment.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Elisha said, tucking the document into the water-proof packet he carried beneath his robe.

“If this man reaches Ludwig, Your Majesty, there will be war,” said a low, rough voice. The shadows parted by the corner cabinet, and Elisha stiffened. One of the monks approached, bowing, trailing the chill shade of death, a woman’s tortured presence that draped the shoulders of her killer.

Chapter 3



Charles cocked his head, watching the monk. “There has been war, there will be war again, and I shall win it. Have you not seen as much, Brother Henry?”

“I have seen many things, my liege. I have seen that this man is a liar.” Brother Henry gestured, his hand still hidden beneath the coarse brown cloth of his habit. “His queen, the queen of England, ask him what he did to her.”

Elisha rose from the table, the tingling sense of his own talismans swelled against his skin as he drew upon them, letting his flesh go cold. “Your Majesty—”

But Charles put up his hand for silence, his fair face troubled. “Tell me what you have seen, Brother.” He pressed his hands together as if at prayer.

“I have seen the flames of a witch’s pyre. I have seen a woman bathed in blood and crying for mercy. I see this man take her in his arms to kill her—all of this have I seen, my liege.” The hooded figure shuddered, shoulders drawn up. “God revealed this woman to me in glory, crowned and clad as a bride for her marriage. She lies now as if for her funeral and witchcraft keeps her so.”

“The queen went mad, Your Majesty. It was her mother who died upon that stake.” Elisha’s breath misted just a little. Magical assault he was prepared for, but this game of visions was a new weapon and a deadly one if it fell upon credulous ears.

Charles’s dark eyes flared. “And you, doctor? What did you do to her?”

“I induced her to sleep, Your Majesty.” This was near enough the truth.

“You claimed to come here seeking a cure.” Charles pushed himself up.

“A cure for her madness, Your Majesty. You have my oath I do not wish her dead.” He could assail the mancer with magic, but fifteen innocents shared the room with himself and the mancer—including an archbishop and a queen. Even if they were not harmed, if he manifested any magic, they would seize him or die trying. He had imagined the mancers controlled their monarchs as they had tried with Prince Alaric—openly offering power at a terrible cost. Yet Charles seemed truly driven by his faith: he may not know he was the tool of evil. Could Elisha twist the mancer’s vision to reveal the truth? “God has granted you clear sight, but He may not have revealed all. Tell me, Brother, what else have you seen?”

The shade stirred at the mancer’s back as he drew upon his power.

Elisha’s palms grew damp as he waited for the reply.

“I have seen you steal the crown—taking it with your false-scarred hands!” The monk revealed his own hands at last, knobbed with age as if he clutched at power in Elisha’s stead.

“Then you have seen, too, that I returned it, Brother. Or I should hardly be standing here as the king’s messenger.”

“It seems that the gaps in your news are larger than the news itself,” Charles observed. “You dared to wear the crown of England?”

“It was given to me by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the prelate of the realm. Thomas had been taken by magic, and my regency was the only way to hold the kingdom until we brought him home.”

Charles’s eyes narrowed, and Elisha realized his mistake: he used the king’s name without his title.

“He claims to you, my liege, that he cannot negotiate for England, he who wore that crown, who is the dearest companion of that king. Such visions I have seen! He is

not to be trusted.” Brother Henry loomed in a wavering of brown wool and deathly shadow.

Archbishop Baldwin cleared his throat, rubbing his neck with one hand. “You say, Brother, that this doctor usurped the crown, and in the next breath, that he is a boon companion of the king. It seems to me, that at least he speaks the truth when he says that God has not shown you all.”

A thrill of hope strengthened Elisha’s stance as the monk’s hood twitched in the direction of the archbishop. The air chilled between the two religious men. The monk should apologize to his superior, yet the archbishop’s hands trembled.

Charles resumed his easy smile. “I trust him neither more nor less than any other foreigner, Brother, but his explanations match what you have seen.” He fit the ideal of the Christian king: martial intensity, high spirits, and unshakeable faith. People would be proud to follow him—no matter the cause. If the mancers could shape that faith to their ends, the empire would be lost. Elisha imagined a new crusade, led by an idealistic emperor with the deepest faith, and backed by the darkest power. Could this be the mancer’s true plan, not merely controlling the thrones of the nations, but shepherding a new age of violence?

“My liege, did you not feel that chill that passed the room when I challenged him?” The monk moved sideways, retreating from Elisha, lifting from the folds of his habit a wooden cross embellished with roundels. He stood now as if sheltering behind the throne of the queen. “The scars, my liege, those false stigmata upon his hands—he knows more of magic than he says!”

“Stigmata?” Charles took a few steps closer. “May we see them, doctor? Do they bleed?”

“Look to your wife, Your Majesty,” Elisha said in a low voice. “This man is no true monk. Beware false prophets.”

Baldwin made a soft sound of approval.

“Brother Henry has been in our retinue for years, doctor, and his visions have always proven true,” Charles

said. "But you have not answered me. Do you indeed bear the wounds of Christ?"

"They are the brands of punishment, my liege," said the false monk. "'tis true that King Hugh died, but it was this man who slew him—I have seen it! Praise the lord!"

The mancer damned him not with lies but with the truth. Charles caught Elisha's wrist in a firm grip, drawing up his arm, then running his fingers over Elisha's hand, his gaze flashing back up. "His skin is cold as snow!"

"Look to your wife, he said! His hatred for the French drives him to her, Your Majesty! Just as he ruined the fleets of your father, he shall ruin her." Brother Henry raised his cross, his other hand gripping the queen's shoulder as if to defend her from Elisha's ill-will. Blackness roiled in the glass at the cross's center as the mancer prepared to strike in a way that only Elisha could see.

"No! Let her go," Elisha cried, twisting against Charles's grasp.

The soldiers started forward as he struggled with their king. Save the queen from the mancer's assault and reveal himself for a witch, or let her be lost—and be damned for it. Taunted by a mancer whose face he could not even see.

"Guards!" the emperor shouted.

A door at the side banged open, more soldiers clattering overhead, two emerging through the door. Elisha sent a snap of cold down his wrist. The emperor cried out and released him, stumbling back. Elisha mounted the table and launched himself toward the monk even as the queen wailed in pain. He seized the cross and the monk's fingers wrapping it, staggering them both. The throne fell, the queen tumbling out across his feet, her body quaking.

Cold, pain, and terror from the tainted cross stabbed into Elisha's left hand. Drawing up the strength of his talismans, he sought the grain of the wood and the gleam of the glass. The cross shattered and the monk shouted as the shred of skin, bone and hair—the talisman hidden at its center—fell away.

With his right hand, Elisha touched the queen, turning cold to heat, fear to strength, pain to healing. His flesh tensed and his heart felt torn—the cold rush of death gathered at his left and forced to serve life, his every bone and muscle for a moment embodying the doctrine of opposites and he screamed.

The woman stared up at him, clear-eyed and peaceful. Above, the monk rocked away, tearing free his hand, crabbed with cold and stung with slivers. Pinpricks of heat marked Elisha's palm, flecks of blood and not all of them his own. When the cross shattered, Brother Henry had been cut.

Shouts and contradictory orders flew around them. The mancer's blood gave him contact as well. Elisha let go of the queen, shaking off the hand she stretched up toward him lest she be caught in the mancer's counter-attack. Swords plunged toward him, and he let himself fall dodging beneath them, scrambling on hands and knees, snatching for the monk's habit.

A shock of horror broke the room with a howling blast of cold as if winter tore through a gap in the air. Brother Henry opened the Valley wide, and conjured at the same time—but what? “No!” shrieked the mancer-monk, silhouetted against a backdrop of gold and red, a dancing wave of spirits: the Valley of the Shadow, the pathway through evil that would carry him away. He projected its fear and horrors, his flecks of blood carrying the vision beyond him to anyone who had been spattered, letting them see, through his contact, the realm normally only visible to necromancers—and to Elisha. “Do not threaten me with Hell! The Lord is my Shepherd—” he shrieked in Latin as he stepped away into the rift. Just for a moment, Elisha glimpsed beneath the hood, and saw the mancer's smile. Then the rift snapped shut and he was gone.