

Compiler's Note

For the most part, what follows comprises the firsthand accounts of Finnius Hinley—or Toma Bracken—but both names have been forgotten by historical record. Though saying that is a mistruth of sorts. But then I ever was an avid fan of such roundabout deception.

I have taken the liberty of including relevant events and scenes to provide information, for colour or clarity, that was omitted or simply inaccessible to the original author. This I gathered by means of temporal scrying, as indirect witness, or—where such materials were available—in the outright theft of recordings originally made by The Watcher.

It is also worth noting that Finnius lost his journals on a multitude of occasions. Which meant some scenes were rewritten up to a dozen times. In such cases I have included that which I personally considered the most entertaining. Or, if feeling sentimental, which I thought best reflected the truest experience of the erstwhile Torchbearer.

One might rightly ask why a man such as I—brilliant, important, short of time—would commit himself to such a work. But the answer is better stated by Finnius himself.

Turn the page.

Introduction

Forgive me, dear reader. I have tried so many times to make this account-fully and truly-but each effort feels a different kind of failure.

Too false or too true. Too swift or too slow. Too much of myself or not near enough.

And on those rare occasions where I might write it all right, I would lose a journal, spill a well of ink, or else find myself sodden or drowning.

Yet I always start here. When I do bring myself to begin again. On this night, better forgotten, which I could never forget. I fear that this is not a happy tale. And so I thank you, dear reader, for however long you stay with me.

Though a part of me hopes you do not tarry overlong.

My name is Finnius Hinley. But that was not always my name.

The men before me had other names too. But now they're all dead and I'm the last standing. So I write this book for better men. Because they were better men than me.

Part One

Fool's Luck

I had wandered for two or three days through the Lady's Forest. Until found — blood covered and confused — by the son of an alderman. Despite my appearance, he seemed very eager to meet a Torchbearer. He was keen to learn whether I might intercede on his behalf and travel to his village, where a man had murdered his wife. He hoped I might prove that the killer had been possessed by a demon, and so absolve him of his actions.

This, of course, I could not do. The Goddess Most Fair might forgive all sins, but Her church was not nearly as merciful. Death was almost always answered with death.

The alderman's son had shared his food, fire and water. He had even made pleasant conversation. Then later, when he considered me asleep, he tried to bludgeon me with a rock.

He was the first man I ever killed. And yet I had seen so much death in my short life, that fact passed me by without notice.

It had not rained in days, so the forest floor lay bone dry, but nevertheless I dug as deep a grave as I could before marking the mounded earth with braced branches.

He had worn an iron pendant bearing a crest, which I hung from the grave marker, while the blood crusted rings of silver and gold I left on his person. The former I hoped might aid to identify him if any member of his father's village passed by there, while the rest would have only encouraged thieves to desecrate the grave.

From there, I had followed the main trader's road until I reached this tavern — The Fool's Luck, as I recall — where I waited, harrowed and restless, in the moonlit silence.

I sat staring at the cracked pane of a single squat window to make sure that each scratch and rattle was only the windswept branch of a nearby tree.

Never in my life had I felt so tired.

Yet the last time I had slept, a stranger tried to crack open my skull. While before that I had awoke instead to the screams of men being eaten alive. I felt trapped, frozen in place, while my thoughts hurried from one to another: from bad memories to those much worse, from fear to terror, from lingering regrets to all consuming grief.

It was a terrible reverie where I began to fear that all my life had been one great string of mistakes and I had yet more to make.

Swift steps then echoed from the adjoining hall. Until they stopped beyond my door.

The wavering glow of candlelight seeped beneath the frame.

Silence lingered.

The footfalls tracked back before pausing, and slowly returning. Three forceful strikes sounded out as a knock.

“Torchbearer?” a man’s voice ventured. As though he had come to see me, specifically. Which might not concern most folk. Certainly not a Torchbearer. But then my family had long since passed—Lady bless their souls. My friends along with them. And only nights ago, all the other brothers had been hunted and devoured by a savage horde of weir.

I was, yet again, a sole survivor. Though this second time I could not remember the how or the why. So I glanced at my moonlit dagger, considered my scabbarded sword.

Knuckles rapped thrice more.

“Torchbearer?” The man more assuredly repeated. “I did not mean to wake you, but I’ve—” He reconsidered. “I am looking for a priest by name of Finnius Hinley, who is lodging in this room for the night. It is a matter of the utmost importance, relating to the execution of his duties as—”

I had not given my name at the tavern. None had even been awake to greet me, so I found the room that all establishments left open for members of The Holy Church.

“Who are you?” I asked, forcefully enough to give him pause.

I still sat pondering my dagger on the nearby desk. But I was not a violent man, not without cause. I simply stared at the battered blade because it reminded me of myself.

“If you would just open the door,” he continued, his voice authoritative despite being youthful and high.

I pushed up from my chair, wood screeching in answer, and loudly checked my scabbard before marching forwards.

“If I’ve bothered—” he began, before I swung open the door. A wide eyed look of fear soon gave way to furrowed brows and doubtful confusion. “Thank you,” he began, somewhat breathlessly. “You are Finnius Hinley? The Torchbearer?”

He was a well dressed lad. Tall yet slender. His pale skin offering stark contrast to fine felt clothes dyed black. The ornate brooch shaped like a feather marked him as a messenger. By candlelight, the metal used for forging was hard to tell, but by cleanliness alone he must have worked for a man of considerable wealth. He matched my imagination nicely, while he’d plainly expected to find a far more imposing man.

“Who gave you that name?” I demanded.

He paid me no mind. Messengers were to be afforded a protected status regardless of employer, and no doubt the young man put great faith in that fact. “I’ve been sent on behalf of Magistrate Varo, who requests that you accompany me—”

I inched my sword from the scabbard. “I have no great desire to hurt you, messenger. But—” I glared when he tried to speak. “But I do need to know where you got that name. And then you can explain how it is you came to find me here—of all places—when I have only just arrived by chance in the middle of the night. Because I find that... troubling.”

“Oh.” The pale lad looked askance before offering a meek smile. As though he had remembered he’d sought out a Torchbearer. Those warrior priests who were tasked to fight evil in service of the Lady Most Fair, but who were just as infamous for slaying godly folk, even messengers, as they were for battling monsters. “Well, I-” He began, before taking a step back. “The Magistrate,” he offered. “He told me where to find you, of course. I cannot say how—or why—he knew who—”

“That’s answer enough, messenger.” I did not wish to needlessly worry the young man. I could only guess that this was a plot to kill any surviving Torchbearers or else an uncanny request from a stranger in dire need. In that moment, I could claim that I decided, clear eyed, that I might find vengeance or redemption in either case. But in truth I was driven by a singular desire to outrace my own mind. “This Magistrate Varo,” I calmly asked, “he wishes to see me this very night?”

The messenger straightened, and managed a hopeful smile. “He does, Torchbearer.”

Midnight Ride

Varo's Estate had loomed lofty and proud in the distance — gloomy and unappealing in the dark — as we wound our way up a serpentine road that was little more than damp dirt pocked with paving stones. Torches burned along the twin gate towers of the fenced enclosure, as if to remind the world that here lay life.

Firelight held a romanticized appeal to some, offering warmth and illumination, but to me it had a far less happy effect. Flames made me feel all the more alone.

Yet I had company of sorts. I sat with the messenger at the back of the cart, among what appeared to be crates and sacks from a grocer, while a stern old man with a face wind-whipped by years of driving horses cracked a whip of his own.

We were running late, the messenger had explained, and so we were making up time. But by my own estimation we must've been early, because the sky had begun to hold the muted purple of a sun about to rise. Despite that, a grim chill reigned. Bayed only by the swift fading mist of our breaths.

Neither one of us three seemed in any mood to talk. I did not ask why I was needed, and we spoke of no small things. But in those days I was often lost in my own morbid thoughts, so any further travel escaped my notice until the wheels drew to an abrupt and grinding halt.

"You found him?" asked a portly guard at the estate's entrance.

"Of course," the messenger answered. "Now open the gate."

"The Magistrate will be sleeping," grumbled the other guard.

"We will wait," the messenger assured.

"Hurry up!" the old driver shouted. "I need to see to the horses," he muttered more to himself. He noticed me watching him and whatever momentary affection had glimmered in his eyes for the animals soon shifted to a sharp scowl. "What's with him?" he asked the messenger. "Sits down and doesn't speak a word. Rude? Or stupid?" he asked of me.

"The latter I cannot answer. If the first, unintended."

"Queer way of speaking," was all the man said in reply. He spat onto the road.

The messenger leaned out of the cart, ignoring us both. "What is the damned hold up?"

"The hinges!" a guard shot back. "This place is falling apart. Here, hold on. This could take a while. We just need—"

Hinges gave amid a surprised grunt and a harsh scream of metal. The gate then groaned open. Both halves swung back to their limits and nearly returned to a close.

The two guards pushed them back out, barely managing to get clear of the horses before the driver urged the cart forwards. Swearing in answer, the pair stayed to close the gate.

I was watching the messenger. I thought he might laugh at the struggles with the gate, but he appeared deeply troubled instead: mouth moving silently as if mirroring mute concerns.

We drew to a juddering stop amid a courtyard of cracked paving stones now the gate behind us rattled closed. Shrubs, flowers and decorative hedges lay ahead, colourless and beyond reach of the fledgling dawn. To our left squatted wooden buildings, most likely for those in employ, while the stone walls of Magistrate Varo's mansion reared to our right.

"So why am I here?" I finally asked.

The messenger looked up as if only then remembering me. "There's been troubles."

"With the gate?"

"With everything," the driver put in. "You should have seen what happened to Elizabeth," he started, trailing off. "This estate is cursed. Cursed," he said again. "I'm sure—"

"You're not sure of anything," the messenger rebuked. "Go tend to the horses and remember your place."

"This is my place, boy," the driver growled. "Been here longer than Varo himself. And you can be damned sure I've been here longer than you. So don't you snap at me when you're the one who's got us up in the middle of the night. And for what? Just to cart out this mute fool before the Magistrate's even awake."

"This man is important," the messenger insisted.

"Is he?" the driver asked before I could ask the same. "Well he better be," he muttered.

"Cause the gates and the buildings ain't the only things coming apart round here."

He waved us to the road before any more could be said. The driver then cracked his whip, wheeled the cart carefully around, and led the horses off to the stable.

"Elizabeth was his wife or his daughter?" I asked, distracted by a cloying smell of rot that brought both comfort and fear.

The messenger gave me a queer look. "His prized horse." He frowned. "Or she was."

"Dead?"

"Most certainly so." He shook his head as if to ward away any recollection. "I preferred you quiet, priest."

I simply nodded as if I fully understood. He sighed, smiled slightly, then led me up the mansion's large stone steps.

The main doors were enormously wrought and iron banded. A large wolf head had been affixed as part of a knocker, which the messenger did not use. He instead opened a postern door to the right side, and we both ducked through to enter.

No torches burned. No braziers. Darkness had a hold on the place. Only half light sliced here and there to give a hint to the enormity of the entrance hall.

“Please. Take a seat.” He gestured to the opulent marble fountain at the room’s center, then headed towards a twin stairway in the distance. “I may be a while, but I will return when the Magistrate is ready to see you.”

“What happened to urgency?” I asked, half in jest.

“Now that you are here,” he said, without looking back, “the matter is less urgent.” He had spoken in a hushed tone, as if he feared waking someone, but his last words still echoed in a manner most unusual. Not as if his voice bounced from wall to wall. But as if the claim had been absorbed by the shadows, which whispered back in a mocking chorus.

Shivering slightly, I walked over to the statue standing amid the fountain. The Lady Most Fair herself stared down in answer.

She had been masterfully carved of the same pale marble as the brickwork beneath. Years ago, her imperious visage might well have aided to assure me. But here and now, amid the cold and gloom, she cut a forlorn figure. And the dampness of the night had gathered just so beneath her eyes to make it seem as though she were silently weeping. Part of me wondered if her illusory grief was for all the loss I’d suffered. But, of course, if it was ever an omen at all then it surely heralded the sorrows yet to come.

The Girl and the Ghost

You would not think that an inanimate object could so rouse a man. But a glimmer of recognition had taken me from my familiar nightmares to standing bolt upright in the amid the entrance hall. I had fallen asleep on the fountain, but now stood staring at a wooden figure in the corner of the room.

My interest was tinged by a fear of madness. Then I drew closer and I began to wrest with understanding. Standing there, a thing I had forgotten but could never truly forget, was a lifelike carving of a man I knew. So detailed and well worked that I thought I had seen a ghost. Not in the literal sense, but in the sense that I was losing my wits.

The dawn sun sliced in from the high windows behind me, casting hazy shafts of golden light.

“Hello,” a small voice said beside me.

“Hello,” I said by habit.

“Who are you?”

I eventually glanced to the right, then down when I realised she was a child. “My name is Finnius Hinley.”

“That’s a funny name.”

I was back to staring at the statue. The sight filled me with a bitter mix of happiness, sorrow and fledgling anger.

“My name is Sophie.” She waited a moment for a reply. “Prince says you know him.”

“Know who?” I asked, now slightly curious.

She pointed forthrightly at the statue. “Him, of course.”

“I do.”

“Who is he?”

“He... was my father by law. But for only a brief moment.”

“He then decided not to be?” she reasoned.

I managed a helpless smile. “Yes. I suppose that must have been it.” I swallowed, and tried to steady my thoughts.” The girl wore a tattered dress: once white, now paint stained; and she had lively eyes and a kind, curious face. Her dark red hair had been tied back into pig tails. She stood only as tall as my elbow. I remembered her words. “Who is Prince?”

“He’s my friend,” she said a little warily. “But you can’t see him. No one can. But it’s not his fault, you see. He’d show himself if they were kinder.”

“Will he show himself to me?”

“That depends.” She peered up at me. “Are you kind?”

“I used to be,” I answered as truthfully as I could.

“Hm.” She paused, head cocked, as if she were listening to someone, and then simply shook her head. “He says no. He said he doesn’t like you. But not in the way he usually says it. He sounded a little afraid. Maybe he is—” She winced. “Ow!” She shook herself. “He’s not afraid. He just doesn’t like you.”

I thought she might be the child of a maid or kitchen hand. “Do you work here?”

“Of course,” she declared. “I do all the work around here.”

“Does Prince help you?”

“Not at all,” she complained. “He makes all the messes and all sorts of trouble. He’s a devil!”

“I see.” The sentiment set me ill at ease. I had already lost most my faith in the Lady Most Fair but I knew demons were all too real. “Though I wouldn’t use that word for just anyone.”

“I don’t,” she insisted indignantly. “Only for him, I swear it! By the Lady—” She cut herself short, eyes widening in fear. “I do swear it, Mister Finnius.”

I felt bad for scaring her. “I believe you,” I said as kindly as I could. “No need to worry on my account.”

“On your account?” she asked in confusion. Then she smiled as if she understood and was about to speak.

“Sophie!” The messenger’s voice. “Stay away from him. And you, stay away from her!” There was a force in his words that had not been there before and the young man looked at me with a glimmer of violence. But when I held his gaze, the flame of rage flared out. He then approached, eyes downcast and head low. “The Magistrate is ready to see you, Torchbearer.”

“I need to get back to work,” Sophie said, so far only having taken one single step away from me. “Good talking with you, Mister Finnius. I do hope that man changes his mind about being your father. He seems a jolly fellow.”

I remembered the laughing, boisterous merchant. “He was,” I answered, wrenching my thoughts from the past before my mind could conjure up his terrible death.

“The Magistrate is ready to see you,” the messenger repeated.

When the girl departed down a corridor, my visage must have changed to a terrible set.

There was rage in me: for the way he told me to stay away from the girl, as if I posed a threat to any child, and a misplaced vengeful fury that this carving from my past might find itself in a stranger’s entrance hall.

Nothing more than decoration.

The messenger did not speak again. Nor press me to do so. He simply looked everywhere but my eyes. Finally, he swallowed. "I meant no offense, Torchbearer. The girl—" he began, but stopped himself. "You will understand in due time. The Magistrate will explain everything."

"Where," I grated, "did you find this?"

He looked at me in panicked confusion. Recognition flickered when he glanced to the wooden figure. "The statue?" he asked. "I'm not entirely sure. Does it offend you in some way? I could have it covered, removed. I do swear I had never even imagined that this work might so rile you, Torchbearer. Did it belong to the church?" he ventured. "Have we purchased stolen goods?"

I was not truly listening. When I regained my senses, I felt only shame and regret. But I could not or would not explain to him why or what I felt, so I simply repeated his earlier statement as a question. "The Magistrate is ready to see me?"

Detail

The much touted readiness of the Magistrate proved ill advertised.

I had been led to a narrow antechamber, marble floored and stone walled, with finely varnished seats and matching side tables, which held white vases full of rotting bouquets.

The dying flowers betrayed the otherwise polished appearance of the space, while the hanging paintings of family, ships, and hunting spoke to a wealthy lineage stretching long into the past. Likely one extending before the founding of New Karland. Yet times had clearly changed by the state of the grounds.

Magistrate Varo had sought out a Torchbearer, which meant he must consider himself in the direst of circumstance or else he could ask any priest or common guard. But there was always the chance that this was a simple matter that loomed large only in the Magistrate's imagination. I dearly hoped so, because if he was rightly afraid, then I would likely be no avail at all.

So I sat smiling bleakly to myself when the young messenger came back through a set of old, oak doors. He scowled at me as if to suggest my mirth was entirely unwanted.

To my surprise, he did not tell me the Magistrate was ready to see me. He simply bowed his head instead before waving me in.

I stood up, stepped forward, and had to wait for my eyes to adjust after the door behind groaned to a close.

The manor before had been lit by windows and morning light, but this room lay dark and stifling. The smoke of a dozen sagging candles twisted up into the gloom while meager flames cast shadows from the wicks. By the many bookshelves and a small ladder to reach higher tiers, I realized that this was not a private office but a personal library.

The pallid man before me wore a heavy hooded robe threaded through with glimmering gold. He had sat crouched over a table laden with varied texts but he now raised his lambent gaze. Magistrate Varo had a proud face. When he spoke I was not expecting such a note of raw desperation. "Finnius Hinley?"

"Yes."

"Lady's Mercy," he muttered under his breath. He idly waved me forward. "Come, come. Take a seat."

I approached but the chairs around the table lay stacked with books. He moved to clear them, but I stayed him with a hand. "It is no bother."

He was not so old as I thought: pale face shadow-riddled and weighed by exhaustion, but his dark hair still bold with color; his eyes haunted, but not wise with years.

I studied the books idly while he pulled a few aside, stacking others, closing one or two, as if to hide them.

Yet he smiled as if there were no cause for concern. “We won’t be needing these anymore.”

“I should hope no man ever has need of such works.” Through the haze of wavering candlelight, I had glimpsed enough. “Interest in ghosts I could dismiss readily enough, but resurrection and demonology? Are such works not outlawed for good reason?”

He did not seem perturbed. Though his ownership would’ve been enough to warrant death for some priests. Perhaps for most.

“Does your church’s library not contain similar tomes?” he countered in a conversational tone.

“Of course.”

“Of course,” he seized. “Because we must understand that which we chose to face.”

“And what do you face, Magistrate? A ghost or a demon?” I asked. “I cannot help in the latter case.”

Hopelessness flashed through his eyes. He opened his mouth to speak, wordless for a long moment, then shook his head in disbelief. “But you must help!”

“I mustn’t do anything. I came here as a courtesy. And do you a good turn besides by ignoring your personal collection.”

He slammed his hand onto the table, upsetting a candle which I caught and righted. He began to look frantically all about him, scanning words, searching my face, and then staring off at the shadows. Before finally looking up at me with tears in his eyes. “Please,” he whispered. “It is a demon. And you... you are the only man who can help. You are Finnius Hinley. You are going—” he began, voice trembling. “You are going to save us from all of this. You are going to right my wrong.”

I was curious. “What have you done wrong?”

“Nothing so wrong as to deserve this. The demon has attached itself to my household,” he lamented. “To my own blood. Death stalks these halls. There is nought for us now but misery — and you must spare us of this! By the Lady’s Grace—by all that is good in this realm—you must save us from this evil!”

I would’ve helped him. Driven by that instinct which screams in your heart to act when you see another drowning. Even if you yourself cannot swim. Yet another part of me knew well enough that demons did not simply arise in the lives of good people. That might be the way of ghosts, who lingered beyond their body’s limit. But demons had to be lured from their hellish planes. So there was every chance that Varo did deserve this.

“Please. Brother Hinley,” he went on. “I beg of you. I will do anything you ask. I will—”

“Brighthold Cathedral is not an hour’s ride from her,” I interjected. “I recommend you seek them out and—”

“No!” He violently shook his head. “No,” he said again. “They will not help me. They have already been here and they refused to help. I had almost given up hope when—”

“—you were told to seek me out?” I guessed.

“Yes.”

I frowned. “Do you even know who I am?”

“Finnius Hinley,” he repeated, as if the name meant something glorious. “You are a Torchbearer of Our Lady’s Holy Church. Capable of dispatching any manner of evil.”

“I might’ve been,” I conceded, “many years from now. Had I continued my training.”

He peered up in confusion, despair, anger, and then finally settled on a keen thoughtful look. “Then you must know other Torchbearers? Perhaps it is them that I was meant to find. First you, then them. They are reclusive are they not? How else would I have found them.” He phrased the last words as a statement. Quite sure of himself and seemingly relieved.

“I knew Torchbearers,” was all I replied.

“So you are estranged? What of it?” he hissed. “Find them and make peace and explain—”

I stopped listening. He rambled on. When he finally realized I wasn’t paying attention, I spoke in a lifeless tone. “They are all fallen, Varo. There is no one left to train me. I joined two seasons ago. So all I know of demonology is that I should string up and burn those who are better read than I am.” I did not say this as a threat, but as the moments passed he had begun to look at me less like a shining figure of divine deliverance and more as a man - a priest - who had been taught little more than to enforce religious laws. “So you see, I cannot help you, Varo. Even if I wished. Nor will I punish you either.”

Varo stared at a wavering candlewick, soon to drown in a puddle of molten wax. “But he told me,” he muttered. “The Alchemist told me that you were the only one who could save my girl.”

“Alchemy is a fable trade,” I explained as kindly as I could. “Or the real work of cheats and thieves. This man has no right to my name and no reason to believe I can help anyone. I am afraid that someone has played an unduly cruel trick on you.”

“But you must be mistaken.” Magistrate Varo reached under the table and produced a yellowed envelope, which shook in his outstretched hands. “Here. He left this. For you. If you read his hand, if you read his words, perhaps you will remember.”

I did not care what was in the letter. But I wished for all this to be done. So I broke the gold wax symbol of a flask.

The letter was written in a fine script on finer paper. Both at odds with the tattered envelope.

‘Dear Finnius,

We have yet to meet but I already know a great deal about you. And I believe that you are a promising man, who will do much good in the world. But this first thing will be most difficult. For neither one of us are talented exorcists. And even if we were, our prey is most powerful. But I do know of a way.

Meet me at The Grove Apart. Meet me there and we will cleanse this evil together.

The place is not well known in the city, but if you head North by East from Brighthold then you should surely find further guidance from any herbalist or hunter.

Your soon to be trusted friend,

The Alchemist.'

I returned the letter to the envelope and placed both into a pocket. I did not speak for a long while. I could not fathom why this stranger would offer Magistrate Varo this false hope.

"What does it say, Finnius?"

"A private matter," I answered, having almost forgotten I was not alone. "I am afraid even with the letter, I cannot be moved on this, Varo. My inexperience would only lead us all to ruin. Go directly to the Bishop of Brighthold and offer a sizable donation. Throw whatever wealth you can spare at him."

"I have already done that!" Varo roared. "I have done it. And still, no. He promised me that he would help her and he lied. He took everything for nothing!" He slammed a fist into the cluttered table. "And then he had the gall to tell me he was doing me a favour! That I was being unreasonable. And now I find you equally useful," he muttered with venom.

"Why?"

"Why?" His dark eyes widened. "Because you refuse to help me!"

"Why did he refuse?"

Magistrate Varo looked off at shadowed bookshelves, unable to muster his indignation. "He said that it was too dangerous."

"Too dangerous for a congregation of priests?"

"Yes." Varo reluctantly met my gaze. "I am not lying to you."

"Then what good do you think I'll be?" I asked. "Even their least able pupil is twice as capable as I."

The Magistrate simply threw out his arms. "Your alchemist friend was sure. He was sure - and I know when a man is sure."

"He is not my friend," I rebuked. "He has never met me. And there is not a secret in this world that will make me equivalent, or in excess, of Brighthold Cathedral."

This was the truth. If the Bishop considered this a task too dangerous to undertake then I had no chance at all.

"I am sorry, Magistrate Varo," I stressed. "If I could have helped you, I would."

"Won't you even try?" he pleaded. "Can't you at least speak to my daughter?"

I did not look back as he followed.

"She needs your help, Finnius," he insisted. "We both do. Please! Can't you at least try and imagine how you might feel if you were in my position? If your family were at risk?"

When I faced him, he took a step back. "I need not imagine," I assured with barely restrained anger. "I entirely understand."

He said no more while I opened the door, but another voice did greet me as my eyes adjusted from the darkness to the daylight.

"Mister Finnius," greeted the young girl from before.

Sophie stood amid the polished ante chamber. I had not noticed before but the family portraits hanging at either side of her were stained with a strange rot.

"Prince wants me to tell you something," she added.

I tried to smile as I stepped out into the light. "Does he?"

"He says you should hurry up and leave. Because you'll be as much use here as you were at your wedding night."

I remembered the squat church crowded by beloved corpses. The horrid crunch as a white dressed woman snapped at the neck.

Time shifted.

Magistrate Varo had hooked my arms, desperately holding me back. Sophie stared up at me with wide, tearful eyes. Then I realized, as shame replaced rage, that I had tried to hit her.

I had very nearly beaten her to the ground.

"I didn't know," she spoke in a hysteric sob. "I didn't know it was a bad thing, Mister Finnius. Or else I wouldn't — I wouldn't have said it, I swear!"

"Let me go," I growled, struggling against the unduly strong Varo. "I will not harm her. Or you, or anyone. Let me go!"

When I turned his pallid face had come alive with the flush of anger. "I ought to kill you, priest," he snarled. "For a jibe about your wedding? For that you would strike my girl?"

I finally understood. "She is the one possessed?"

"Of course," Magistrate Varo answered, still wroth. "Yes," more evenly. "She is the one possessed."

I studied the girl. Her eyes raw with sorrow, cheeks wet with tears, yet a dark sparkle in her gaze. "I will need coin," I decided.

The Magistrate simply stared.

"For a horse and for supplies," I explained. "I intend to set out in search of The Alchemist. Perhaps he truly can help."

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[If you'd like to beta read the full novel, feel free to contact me at jasonrsmith.nz@gmail.com]