

PROLOGUE

Moonlight leaks through the cracks of old stone like water from a decrepit, worm-infested wood. Three petty pillars of light seep into a small room shrouded in darkness, illuminating its few contents: some scattered hay and a half-full bucket of shit swarming with flies. Within the forsaken cage, two emerald eyes glisten. A long time ago, these were human eyes. But that was a long time ago.

The dungeon door opens with a loud creak. A short man with a grotesque hump holding a lit torch enters. He limps like a snail, momentarily pausing while the right leg catches up to the left. His torch illuminates the empty cells along the way until finally reaching the last one. He tries to exchange the unlit torch on the wall with the fresh one in his hand, but his left arm does not work so well. The hunchback groans in pain. He exchanges the torch from one hand to the other as he attempts the paltry deed again.

“AAAH!” the hunchback cries as he places his right hand on his hump trying to ease the surging pain.

“What's wrong, Pretty? Does it hurt?” a hoarse voice asks as the emerald eyes approach from the shadows. He turns to the only occupied cell.

The torchlight reveals a young, naked woman. In a civilized place, such a sight would be unbecoming of a lady. But this is a far cry from a civilized place. An overabundance of scars, bruises, and burns clad her petite, slender frame all the way from her throat to her ankles, like a dress made of misery. It hides her immodesty. White strands ornament her long, scruffy, and unkempt black hair. Somewhere hidden behind the hair lies an unblemished face. Why exactly was her face spared from years of abuse? That she doesn't know.

"Just a little bit," the hunchback says, caressing his hump.

"Come here, Pretty. I'll hold it for you," the woman says sensually, extending a hand with naturally colored black nails through the bars.

"Thank you, Amelia," Pretty responds.

"DON'T CALL ME THAT!" she snaps.

He would jump back if he could, but only manages a limp. The hunchback stares at the ground, not daring to make eye contact. The young woman coughs. Her throat isn't what it used to be. Years of forcefully swallowing boiling water can take a toll. She used to scream at first, so loudly she thought the entire world could hear. Then, in time, her screams turned softer and softer until no one could hear her anymore. She takes a deep breath to compose herself.

"I'm sorry, Pretty. You know I don't like that name. It makes me think of... those days," Amelia says.

"Are you mad at me?" Pretty asks, cowering and avoiding eye contact.

"Of course not, Pretty. You know you are my favorite torturer," she says, extending her hand again. Pretty smiles.

Through years of imprisonment inside this hellhole, she has developed a "relationship" with the hunchbacked torturer. Pretty is her pet name for him. He approaches and gives her the torch.

"Good boy," she says as she pets him on the head like a dog.

FORGED BY PAIN

With both hands free, he manages to remove the unlit torch from a sconce with only a brief groan of pain.

He returns for the fresh torch and mounts it on the wall.

“Thank you for the light, Pretty,” Amelia says as she playfully spins and bows.

The highly positioned light reveals hundreds of marked bricks behind the woman.

“How many days has it been?” Pretty asks, looking at them.

“One thousand four hundred and eighty-two,” Amelia says as she turns to the marked bricks, “ONE FUCKING THOUSAND FUCKING FOUR FUCKING HUNDRED FUCKING EIGHTY AND FUCKING TWO FUCKING DAYS!” she adds, bursting into brief manic laughter.

Amelia grabs her throat as she tries to calm the pain. With both hands on her throat, she pauses for a moment. She tightens her grip.

More and more. Tighter and tighter. Gripping as hard as she can.

Wouldn't it be great if I would just die? Amelia thinks.

The thought of death brings a smile to her suffocating face.

Just a little more, she encourages herself in her quiet voice.

Just a little more!

She lets go, gasping for air like a fish out of water.

“Fuck!” Amelia attempts to scream but only manages a whimper.

She falls to her knees. Tears come pouring out of her eyes. She laughs gently, not to overexert her larynx.

Why are you crying? She asks herself. *You cried for two whole years and what did it get you? Nothing but wasted water.*

“Please don't cry, my lady,” Pretty says as he approaches the bars and sits on the floor next to her. He uses the rusty bars to help himself down.

“I'm not a lady, Pretty. Although I once was. Now, I am... garbage,” Amelia responds as she turns to him with a

creepy smile drenched in tears.

“You are not garbage, my lady. Everyone else is. You are the only one that is pure,” Pretty says.

“How sweet of you. But alas, the two of us could never be,” Amelia says as she turns to the hunchback. “You know I absolutely abhor blonds,” she adds, pointing to his thin, blond hair.

Pretty giggles, sounding almost like he is choking.

“I’ve smuggled some things for you,” Pretty says as he glances at the entrance to double-check no one is there. He takes out a small loaf of bread and a pouch filled with water.

Amelia grabs the bread and devours it in seconds; she chugs the water in one fell swoop.

“I’ve also got you another book,” Pretty says as he hands her the book with the title ALL ABOUT POISONS Volume IV.

“Wait!” Amelia says as she goes to the hay. She rummages through it and takes out a book titled INTERMEDIATE SHORT BLADE ARTS OF KADAN.

Pretty hides the book on his person. Amelia opens the new book and starts reading it. The hunchback wants to say something, but he hesitates.

“My lady, I think I’ve found a way out to get you out,” Pretty says, finally gathering the courage.

“Oh really?” Amelia turns the page as she continues reading, uninterested in these insignificant talks of freedom.

“No, my lady, this time I think I’ve REALLY found a way,” Pretty says, adding confidence to his statement.

Amelia closes the book. She sighs loudly.

“Pretty, you’ve said you found a way to get me out fifty seven times now. And let me ask you, am I out?” Amelia poses a rhetorical inquiry. She reopens the book and continues reading.

The hunchback scratches his head. He can’t deny that statement even though he doesn’t know the exact number.

“I know I’ve failed before, my lady, but this time it’s going to be different. This time I have a BIG PLAN. I’ve

finally convinced my father to pull some strings. I've gotten promoted to a full-fledged Inquisitor," Pretty says.

"Going up in the world, aren't we, Pretty? Well, I can't say you don't deserve it. Your torture techniques have made great strides in the last four years," Amelia says as she turns another page, still lacking interest in his "big plan."

"Yes. And as an Inquisitor I get to have my own people. People who will obey my orders," Pretty says, smiling.

Amelia closes the book. She moves closer to him. He has her interest.

"I've pulled some strings, made some plans, bribed some people. Tomorrow I will come for you and we will take you, "A SPY FROM KADAN," to another location to be tortured for information," Pretty explains with an ear-to-ear smile.

Amelia thinks for a moment. Despite mentioning a way to escape six hundred and seven times, and leaving the matter there, this time it actually seems plausible.

Is it possible? Amelia thinks as she stands and turns to the one thousand four hundred and eighty-two marked bricks representing her last four years inside this windowless abyss. There used to be a window in her first three years here, but the creative torturers one day decided to seal it off. Everything just to break her. And she did break. She broke countless times. Insanity turned to madness. Madness turned to lunacy. Lunacy turned to psychosis. And so did the endless waltz of crazy go.

Maybe one day it will stop, Amelia wonders. She smirks at the absurd notion.

"Alright, Pretty, alright. Let's hear this BIG PLAN of yours," she says.

CHAPTER ONE

Two figures in black robes and faceless white masks drag a young girl bound by chains. Her pure satin dress is defiled by greasy rust and torn by violence. They push and pull her through the carnival of screams and pain. Every image is a different horror. Her tear-riddled face watches the men and women trapped inside the endless dungeons of the Black Tower. All of them broken. And she knows this is also her fate. Her heart trembles. And rightly so.

Long ago this place served as a reliquary of knowledge and art. And it was so for almost fifty years until the Great Farmer Revolt of eight hundred and eleven of the Imper's Calendar. In the revolt, the peasants stood against Imper James V. due to over taxation and rising famine. It took less than a year to brutally extinguish the revolt. Due to a large number of instigators, the demand for imprisonment and punishment rose drastically. Thus, the Black Tower, or as it was once known, the Tower of Roderick, was converted from a fine and dignified establishment into a place of horror. Ironically, the peasants who attempted to reduce taxation ended up making it higher.

If there was anything positive in their endeavor, it was that food supplies rose. But only because the demand

significantly decreased.

The masked figures throw the young girl into a cell.

A rat passes between her feet as she screams. Then, a second and a third rat. She screams again and again. The masked men laugh at her. She can't see their faces, but she can feel their vile sneers.

The Inquisition is an organization with a long and fruitful history. For the most part its influence and power were severely limited to propagating the Faith of the Saint, the dominant religion in the middle kingdoms, and punishing those who practiced pagan religions of other nations. But in its almost two-hundred-year history, there were not even ten cases where this punishment was enacted. However, after the transformation of the Tower of Roderick into the Black Tower, the Inquisition's power drastically rose and it more than made up for its two hundred years of leniency. Only in its first year did the Inquisition purge more than a thousand rebels and even eliminate a few noble families who were accused of instigation. Before the Inquisitors were nothing more than priests giving sermons, but now they are agents of the court. Every Inquisitor has masked servants under their command called Hands. Men and women taken from their families to be trained to unquestionably serve their masters.

“Well, well. What do we have here? Princess Amelia, the last blood heir of the noble Eastwick family.” A short, fat man with a large round hat approaches.

“W-w-who are you?” young Amelia asks, trembling in a corner.

“I am Inquisitor Dumas, at your service,” Dumas says as he bows.

“What are you going to do with me?” Amelia asks.

“I've been tasked by our illustrious sovereign, Imper Nicholas II., to keep you alive for a long, long time...” he says as he takes a step forth, “So you can suffer for a long, long time,” he adds with a vile smile.

“But I didn't do anything. I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING!” Amelia screams in protest.

“You poor girl, you didn't do anything, but unfortunately your father did,” Dumas says as he shrugs at the woes of life.

“My father? Where is my father?” Amelia yells.

The Inquisitor bursts out laughing.

“Your father has sadly passed away. He took the coward's way out,” Dumas informs, not bothering to hide his ear-to-ear smile.

Amelia turns white like her satin dress. She remembers. They stormed into her home. Many died. She can still smell the blood. Her father took her and her mother as they ran through the darkness with two Royal Guards. They ran through the darkness for hours. And when they came into the light, Duke Nicholas and his son were there with a hundred men. The two guards were no match for their numbers. The Duke's son approached and said something. But what was it?

“Such a pretty thing, I might make you my pet.”

Her father cut him down. The Duke cried out.

“I love you both so much,” her father said as he turned to his wife and daughter and stabbed them.

Before losing consciousness, she saw her father holding a blade next to his own neck.

“Father?” she cried out to him.

He smiled and cut his throat.

“My parents are dead,” Amelia whimpers. She falls to her knees, trembling as tears pour out.

“So you remembered. They died, but unfortunately you didn't. It took quite some time to nurse you back to health. The poor Doctor really worked hard,” Dumas explains.

“Why didn't you just let me die?” Amelia asks.

“Someone has to pay for the death of the former Duke's son. And sadly for you, your father and mother cannot contribute, so you must pay three times as much,” Dumas says as he inspects her, “My, my, your dress is ruined.

Hands, remove it and tender her up a little bit. But make sure to not touch the face," he adds.

The Hands enter the cell at the Inquisitor's command.

"No, no, no. Stay away. STAY AWAY!" Amelia screams. She wants to escape but there is nowhere to run. The Hands tear her dress. Amelia falls to the ground, holding her body and trying not to expose herself. But the ruthless men of the Inquisition wail at her; they kick her in the stomach until she spits blood, they stomp her delicate hands and smash her slender legs. She begs for mercy, but she receives none. Amelia tries to keep awake, but darkness shrouds her eyes. She lets out a voiceless plea before succumbing to the dark.

Amelia wakes up.

"Ah, the good old days," she says as she gets up and stretches.

An old woman places a bowl of stew and some water next to her cage.

"You look cheerful. A good dream?" the old woman asks as she bursts out laughing. There are no good dreams in the Black Tower.

"Yes. I dreamt when I first came to this place. Everything was so fresh and new and interesting. You know?" Amelia explains. "I've made so many memories," she adds, looking at her scars and bruises. Each one of them holds a story of its own. And she has so many stories.

The old woman smiles a toothless grin as she nods. She understands the nostalgia of the good old days.

"You getting tortured today?" the old woman asks.

Amelia pauses for a moment to think.

"No," Amelia says as she sadly sighs. "I think they've gotten bored with me. But how can that be when I am this much fun?" she says while playfully spinning around.

The old woman laughs and claps.

Amelia moves from one part of the cell to the other, jumping and turning like a very bad dancer. She finishes her little routine and bows.

“Encore! Encore!” the old woman yells while laughing.

“Well, between you and me, I've heard they said you developed a taste for torture,” the old woman explains.

“Maybe just a little. It's all there is to do here. But I always try my best to act the part. I go like ‘Oh no, please don't, it hurts so much.’” Amelia demonstrates her acting in an unnervingly sensual voice, “Please, I can't stand it anymore. Mercy please...” she continues.

“That's not how you do it! That is how you act when you want your marriage to last,” the old experienced woman explains as she shakes her head at the amateurish mistake.

“Really?” Amelia asks.

“Yes. I did that and was married for thirty-three happy years until the plague took my husband,” the old woman imparts her wisdom. “Anyway. They say since you developed a fancy for torture, the best torture for you is no torture. To keep you here bored in the dark,” she explains.

Amelia thinks for a moment.

The best torture is no torture? What a revolutionary concept. It is genius, she concludes.

“Send the Inquisitors my compliments. They are true artisans in their respective fields.” Amelia nods in acknowledgment.

The old woman waves to Amelia as she goes on her way. There are other poor souls to feed inside the Black Tower.

Amelia goes to a corner in her cell. She sits there reminiscing about the rats that once accompanied her in this lonely place. Then, using nothing but the power of her imagination she convinces herself there is a rat next to her. A small rat with fluffy brown fur, long whiskers, big pinkish ears, and eyes as black as the night. Unlike the first time she saw a rat in the cell, she does not scream but instead opts for a smile.

Why was I ever afraid of such cute little creatures? She wonders.

The answer eludes her. Amelia smiles at her past foolishness. She would do anything to have a rat or two in her cell. They could be her little friends. She tries to pet the

imaginary rat but the image fades.

This won't do, Amelia concludes.

She takes a bit of hay and neatly combines it into a small rat-like effigy. Then, she closes her eyes and tries to re-imagine the rat. With closed eyes, she pets the hay. She smiles.

"There, there, everything is going to be alright, little rat," Amelia says, petting the hay.

"Everything is going to be alright."

* * *

As the day turns to night, so do the rays of sunlight flowing through the stone walls change to moonlight. Inside the darkness, Amelia stands motionless while holding a piece of hay in her hands. She changes from one position to another like a graceful ballerina. Each movement is swift and yet soft, almost as if she is afraid to hurt the air around her. She stabs, rolls and cuts, jumps and slashes, pounces and lunges. The performance stops. The door of the dungeon opens with the same familiar screech. Amelia takes two steps back and throws herself into the haystack, not moving an inch.

Four figures enter. A hunchbacked Inquisitor in the company of three Hands. They make their way to Amelia's cell.

"Is she asleep?" the female Hand asks.

"I reckon she be dead by the looks of 'er," the fat Hand states.

"Enough talk. Get inside and get her," Pretty says as the Hands obey. "And, in the name of the Saint, put some clothes on her. The sight of her makes me sick," he adds.

The Hands enter Amelia's cell and lift her motionless body. She remains as limp as a corpse.

"Is she really alive? She looks too pale to be from Kadan," the female Hand wonders while holding her flaccid pale body. Amelia opens and closes her eyes as if one breath away from death. Looking at her, one would suspect she is.

"It's probably cos' of the torture. I mean look at 'er!" the

Fat Hand adds.

“CLOTHES!” Pretty impatiently voices.

They take out clothes similar to the black robes of the Hands as they dress her up like a child.

“She kinda looks like us,” the fat Hand concludes.

After they finish their dress-up, the male Hand arrives carrying a large bag on his shoulder. He empties the bag inside the cell. And inside the bag is the naked body of a young black-haired woman riddled with scars, bruises, and burns.

He then proceeds to place a hood on Amelia's face and a white faceless mask exactly like the ones they wear.

“Now she really looks like us,” the fat Hand adds.

“Come on, we are on a schedule,” Pretty says as he limps as fast as possible.

The Hands follow him while carrying the masked Amelia.

They head toward the stairway. Pretty urges haste, yet ironically takes the most time. His shoulders spin back and forth at one hundred and eighty degrees as if competing which one will take the lead. His hump acts up but he keeps the pain at bay. Somehow it makes it a little easier knowing he has a purpose.

Pretty grins a pretty painful and a painfully pretty grin.

No time to stop, he rallies himself. It's a long way to the bottom from the top.

Like roses are to a rose garden, so are screams to the Black Tower. Amelia slightly raises her head to better hear the symphony coming from the darkest crevices of this forsaken place.

What beautiful screams, Amelia says in her quiet voice as she smiles behind the mask.

She fights the urge to scream herself like wolves howling together. But unlike the tortured souls who wail in despair, Amelia wants to cry out in delight. It's been a long time since she was out of her cell. There are so many interesting things around her, like the staircase, different walls, and even new

faces despite the fact she can't actually see them behind their masks.

Like it's my birthday, Amelia thinks as she unintentionally giggles.

"Did she just laugh?" the fat Hand asks, confused. He saw her exposed but a moment ago. Someone with so many wounds would definitely not laugh.

"She's delirious from all the torture. Disgusting Kadan spy!" Pretty adds, dismissing the fat Hand's question.

After the descent, they reach the bottom level.

Amelia dozes off while being carried under the soothing screams of the hapless; ironically easing the burden of the Hands.

Specifically chosen nobles guard the entrance of the Black Tower. Only the best are fit for such a prestigious position. Their rigorous selection process demands only the highest quality. This, however, is only the case in theory. In reality, these positions are reserved for the children of

low-ranking noble families. And thus, the guards are not the most fit and able soldiers but, in truth, nothing more than spoiled children who lack even the most basic training.

They spend their time dilly-dallying with booze, food, and debauchery.

"Inquisitor Everet," says an older man with grey straggly hair and wearing Inquisitorial long black robes with a red cross in front and at the back as he approaches with two particularly tall and strong Hands. Their physique stands out despite their concealing garments.

"Inquisitor Alexander, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Pretty asks as he turns and bows, as much as his physique allows, to the senior.

"I wanted to congratulate you on your recent promotion. I know you've worked long and hard for it. I'm sure your FATHER must be proud," Inquisitor Alexander says, adding special emphasis to the word.

"I appreciate the sentiment, Inquisitor Alexander. I'm honored I can contribute to Imperium as YOUR FAMILY

has for many generations. How it managed to keep the same high positions through years and years despite the competition shows their excellence,” Pretty adds.

Both Inquisitors stare at each other with unwavering fake smiles.

“Is something wrong with one of your Hands, Inquisitor Everet?” Inquisitor Alexander glances at Pretty and then turns his gaze over to the masked Amelia.

“You know how it is, Inquisitor Alexander, sometimes HANDS have bad days,” Pretty says as he taps Alexander with his deformed left arm, slightly smirking.

You fucking cripple, Inquisitor Alexander says with his quiet voice.

You illegitimate bastard, Pretty says with his quiet voice.

Both still keep the same fake grin.

“Well, I would like to stay and chat, but you know how it is,” Pretty says as he turns and limps away. He, Amelia, and his Hands leave the Black Tower while Inquisitor Alexander watches.

As soon as Pretty leaves, Alexander's fake smile disappears as a lip corner on one side of his face raises in unadulterated contempt.

“Inquisitor Alexander, what do we do?” one of his Hands asks.

“We wait. It's an embarrassment to have such a freak hold the same title as me. His parents should have drowned him in the lake the moment he was born. But no matter, I shall soon correct this nuisance,” Inquisitor Alexander says as his eye twitches.

Somewhere outside the Black Tower, a man in a two-horse wagon waits.

The Hands toss Amelia inside. Pretty struggles to get inside while groaning and moaning; the fat Hand grabs him from the front while the female Hand grabs him from the back. They lift him inside like a piece of furniture.

“AAAHI!” Pretty exclaims.

The wagon master directs the horses forth with a swift

snap of the reins. Amelia opens her eyes to take one last look at the Black Tower. The illustrious structure makes people quiver at its mere

mention. Parents tell their children stories about it to keep them from misbehaving. And yet, it is somehow paltry. Somewhere about thirty meters tall it is without a doubt an impressive feat of engineering, but in Amelia's head it seemed like much more. She pictured the mighty tower piercing the heavens themselves and towering over the paltry city of Pathos like a man next to an ant. And her "throne" stood at its highest point, where she reigned like a queen.

But the reality is so... underwhelming.

Is this really the place I revered? Amelia wonders. I guess the old saying is true; never meet your heroes.

She watches the moon in the distant sky.

How long has it been since I last saw it? Amelia thinks.

Her eyes drift to the masked people next to her. The fat Hand has a mace by his side, the male Hand has a long sword in a sheath, and the female Hand has two daggers, one on each side.

The wagon stops at the city's entrance. Two guards take a look, but after taking a single glance at the Inquisitor inside, they dare not detain him for even a moment longer.

There is an old saying in the Imperium. If one road leads to an Inquisitor and the other to a den of snakes, it is best to choose the snakes, because they are much easier to reason with.

After leaving the city of Pathos, they enter the road inside the forest.

They abruptly stop.

"Why, in the name of the Saint, have we stopped?" Pretty asks as he heads toward the wagon master. But there is no one in the driver's seat. He sees their driver running to the forest.

"What the fuck?" Pretty blurts out. "Someone, take the reins," he orders. The male Hand jumps outside the wagon

as he goes to the driver seat.

Then, as he starts to climb up, Pretty comes flying outside.

He falls on his hump and screams in pain.

“What is the meaning of this?” Pretty barely utters, rolling in the dirt and his pain.

Unsure about what is happening, the male Hand draws his sword and rushes back.

“Victor, help me,” Pretty urges the male Hand.

“You best stop there,” the fat Hand interjects, holding his mace and tapping it, threateningly.

Victor raises his sword, unsure of what is transpiring.

Three horses approach. Inquisitor Alexander and his two Hands.

“Alexander?” Pretty blurts out as Alexander dismounts.

He stops for a moment to look at Pretty as one would look at a piece of crap on the road.

“Check inside,” Alexander orders as he points to the wagon.

His Hands head inside and bring out Amelia. They throw her limp body in front of the Inquisitor. He removes the mask.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here, Inquisitor Everet? It looks like you tried to break out the daughter of the former Imper. It looks like treason,” Inquisitor Alexander says, emphasizing the word treason as if making love to it.

“I don't understand,” Pretty blurts out, confused.

“It is very simple. I knew about your infatuation with the former princess. I hoped you would try something foolish, but to think you would try something SO FOOLISH.” Alexander laughs out loud.

“But how did you know?” Pretty asks.

“Well, you should have really taken your time in choosing Hands. Those two have been in my employ ever since I heard talks of your promotion,” Alexander explains.

“Nothing personal, Inquisitor, but you know what they

say. Money talks,” the Fat Hand says as he shrugs.

“There is a special place in the afterlife reserved for traitors like you,” Pretty says to the Fat Hand. “Alexander, if you knew all this from the start why didn't you stop me from escaping the Black Tower?” he asks.

“Because if I did you would just get reprimanded, demoted, or at best kicked out of the Inquisition, all because of your father's influence. And that's not what I want. I want you to suffer and die. You are a disease-ridden freak who should have been killed the moment you were born. To think you are supposed to be MY EQUAL!” Inquisitor Alexander yells as his eye twitches. He takes a moment to calm himself. Victor approaches, unsure of what to do.

Alexander's Hands drop Amelia as they draw their blades.

“You, stop! Just walk away if you value your life,” Alexander warns Victor.

Suddenly, Inquisitor Alexander feels an unnerving sensation like a hundred eyes are upon him. He turns to the forest expecting to see some sort of beast hidden in the shadows, but there is nothing.

Was it in my head? The Inquisitor wonders.

Then he feels the cold embrace of steel crawling up his skin like a snake.

The blade stops shy of his throat. Blood pours out from the tiny cut.

“Well, hello. I don't think we've had the pleasure,” Amelia says, embracing Alexander like a spider embraces a fly.

His Hands move in trying to protect their superior. As they take their first step, Alexander feels the blade burrowing into his throat.

“STOP!” Alexander orders. They stop.

Pretty swings left and right like a flipped turtle. Somehow, he manages to stand.

“Victor,” Pretty says as he turns to Victor. Victor nods.

Without hesitating, Victor slashes the unprepared fat

Hand deeply across the stomach.

The wounded man lets out a scream as he instinctively drops the mace and grabs the wound a moment too late to keep his guts from hurling out like a drunk vomiting after a long night of drinking. He tries to grab his intestines, but blood and slime make them too slippery.

Victor turns to the female Hand. She tries to draw her two daggers but realizes one is missing. The moment of carelessness costs her. Victor stabs her in the throat. She grabs the blade as if trying to pull it out while her body twitches. Blood pours down the steel coloring it a dark crimson in the moonlight.

Victor pulls out his sword and slashes her across the neck. The dull blade only pierces about halfway through, leaving the woman convulsing in her last few moments.

“This isn't fair,” Amelia murmurs. “THIS ISN'T FAIR!” she screams as the dagger on the Inquisitor's neck shakes.

“What?” Alexander asks unwittingly, caught in the bizarre moment.

“How come they can die so easily?” Amelia complains as the fat Hand convulses on the ground.

Alexander slightly turns, his gaze looking perplexed.

Pretty and Victor remain in a standoff against Inquisitor Alexander's Hands. Despite what little pride Pretty has, he is not so foolish as to not understand the gravity of their situation. The Hands he hired were nothing more than simple peasants, but Alexander's Hands are well-trained. Victor is a capable fighter, but he is alone. And Pretty knows he and Amelia will be of little help. He is a cripple and she is a woman who spent the last four years in a dungeon being tortured.

Fighting through this situation should only be a last resort.

“Inquisitor Alexander, it seems we are at an impasse,” Pretty says, keeping a brave front.

“It seems so,” Alexander snidely remarks through his teeth.

The two men stare at each other, trying to figure out the intricacies of resolving this stand-off.

“What's the problem? We kill them and off we go,” Amelia says, discarding all the potential intricacies.

“My lady, it is not that easy. His Hands are nothing like these TRASH,” Pretty explains as he glances at the two dead people on the ground and spits on them.

“It is good that you understand. Listen to me, Amelia, if you release me I promise to let you go. I will even...” Alexander says as Amelia slices his cheek.

“DON'T CALL ME AMELIA!” Amelia warns.

Deals scarcely work on her.

“Listen, you crazy woman, if you don't unhand me, I will make sure your days are filled with pain and suffering,” Alexander threatens.

Amelia laughs out loud. Threats scarcely work on her. Especially threats of pain.

“Look, if you release me, I will not only let you go, but I promise to help you find a new life and generously reimburse you for your troubles,” Alexander offers. “Just let me kill the cripple,” he adds.

“No. Pretty is mine to kill when I see fit,” Amelia says.

Bribes scarcely work on her.

“My lady!” Pretty blurts out as a tear drops from his eye.

“FUCK! What do you want then?” Inquisitor Alexander yells as he loses composure.

Amelia glances over at the two imposingly tall Hands.

“Are you sure we can't kill them?” Amelia asks.

“I would wager that the odds are stacked against us,” Pretty explains. She sighs.

“Fine. You will come with us. Your men will not follow. And when we are a good distance away, I will release you,” Amelia proposes.

“And what guarantees my safety?” Alexander asks.

“Fine,” Amelia sighs. “I vow in the name of my father Imper Florian III.”

“And you think a simple promise will reassure me?”

Alexander says, laughing at the absurd notion.

“FINE!” Amelia snaps. “Then we do it the hard way.”

She burrows the dagger deep into the side of his neck. And just as she is about to gut him like a pig,

“STOP! Just stop. We will do it your way,” Alexander concedes.

In a short while she managed to cut his face three times. There is no question in his mind that the crazy woman will not hesitate to kill him. In fact, if it wasn't for the cripple in front of him urging caution, he would be dead. In an ironic turn of events, he owes the cripple his life. The very same one he set out to kill.

Amelia, Alexander, and Pretty, with some help, board the wagon.

“The horses,” Pretty says to Victor.

Victor goes to the horses, removes their saddles, and smacks each of them on the rear. The horses run away. Victor goes to the driver's seat and snaps the reins.

Alexander's Hands watch as their superior, taken hostage, leaves.

Amelia energetically waves to them as if saying goodbye to old friends. She sits behind Alexander like a constrictor snake, and while waving loses some control over the dagger, accidentally cutting the Inquisitor a fourth time.

“Fuck!” Alexander blurts out in annoyance.

Half an hour later.

“Victor, stop,” Pretty orders. The wagon stops.

“I think this is far enough, my lady,” Pretty says. “We should kill him,” he adds as he glimpses at Alexander.

“You traitorous...”

“We can't kill him, Pretty. I made a vow,” Amelia explains.

Pretty and Alexander look at her. There is no question in their mind that anyone else would have broken the promise. After all, what good are mere words? So why, out of all people, would someone like her keep it?

She is an insane fool, Alexander concludes as he shakes his head with disgust.

She is the only one that is pure, Pretty concludes as his eyes glimmer with admiration.

But what can he do? If he leaves the Inquisitor alive, he will pose a threat to them, and if he kills him, he will break Amelia's vow. How can he choose between two unsatisfactory options?

"Don't rack your brain, Pretty," Amelia says, noticing Pretty's dilemma. "I've got an easy solution."

Sometime later a group of traveling merchants abruptly stop as they notice an older man with grey straggly hair wearing black robes with a red cross in front and at the back. Coming closer to him, they notice that there are no eyes in his bloodied eye sockets. They hear him scream as he aimlessly wonders.

"Fucking cripple! Fucking bitch!"