



CHAPTER II: UNDEATH

Garron

A chill swept over the village of Erlan that night, peculiar and alive.

At a small round table in a small stone hovel, Father Garron Latimer sat, sipping tea from a small tin cup. His blue eyes, lit in the pale light of the Earth's moons, affixed on the sky through a cracked window, caked in dust. Outside, winds whipped past, blowing the trees and grass, battering the house's thatched rooftop and rough grey exterior. Scattered clouds drifted overhead.

This hovel resembled most in the village, its thick stone walls outfitted with a window at the front and a wooden entrance door, too heavy for fewer than three people to mount. Inside, candles and an open hearth illuminated plank flooring, a single room with a bed atop a handcrafted oak frame, crude stools, tables, chairs, a chest. During severe winters, those who kept modest animals often brought them inside, to the detriment of their sanitation.

Most nights, the smells of worldly living and aromas of lesser beasts suffused the air. This evening, however, there drifted a hint of decay, a pungency as in a house of the dying. Rotted flesh, like

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pounds of fouled meat nearby, offensive to the senses. In a village of so few, such a stench aroused curiosity.

A foreboding crept up his neck, frigid and prickling, pins of ice. His breath became visible, puffing in white mists before his face. He clutched the lunar tear beads at his wrist.

“Father.” The voice of Aefethla, his charge that night. Her words tremored. “I’m so cold.”

He made his way to her bedside, knelt, and placed a hand on her forearm. Crusted at the edges, her green eyes had gone pink as a sunset sky. Her lips split like parched earth, and a paleness around her mouth set it apart from her flushed cheeks and chin. A marker of thirst.

Aefethla coughed, then inhaled, her lungs wheezing and gurgling. The cooling weeks had laid her low.

Despite Garron’s labors, death marched steady in pursuit. The air held it in sight, touch, taste. Death spread through Aefethla’s visage as weeds in a garden, rooting and chilling her outward from deep in the flesh, strangling her speech and ailing her motions. Garron had read these signs many times. Nonetheless, he would spend his greatest effort to save her. The Mother’s children were precious in life, even when that life fought to be free.

He held the water pouch at his waist, removed the cap, and pressed the spout to her mouth. She sucked down the liquid in gulps. “Easy,” he said, tilting the container away and brushing her tangled brown hair aside.

Aefethla ceased drinking and nodded.

“Rest.” He plugged the pouch and stood. “I’ll fetch firewood and return to tend the hearth.” He pulled her bed’s blanket up over her shoulders.

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She shook her head again, weaker this time, and shut her eyes.

Garron made his way to the hovel's front door and opened it with restrained effort, its hinges corroded and begrimed. Vicious air from outside rushed in, gushing past him like water through a boat's leak. Shuddering, he stepped out and closed the door.

He headed for the firewood shed near the edge of the village. The shared storage arose after a vengeful frost ages prior had killed members of the community who lacked kindling and heat. Never again, he had vowed, would winter's song lure his flock from their beds, so long as he stood as guardian.

Yet this night, whether one would remain gnawed at his mind.

Aefethla.

May she live when I return.

Darkness hid the forest path to the shed. The glow of the moons through overhanging branches and twigs provided his only vision. His steps seemed loud against a soundless night, save the irregular rush of a breeze.

He paused and surveyed the area around him. *A still evening, this is.* Brown and barren tree limbs crept upward above him in twisting, interwoven patterns. Icy fangs angled downward in shapes with curls and patterns of perforation, unlike any icicles he had ever seen.

In the air, neither a tune of cricket nor bird, nor a toad's croak or cicada's shriek; not a swinging branch from a creature's leap or a broken stick at its step. Ice, without snow or rain.

An angry howl tore across the timberland, slicing through folds of cloth and hide and sending him in aching quakes. The day before had been warm. *Too warm for this sort of night.*

Then came a cry in the distance, dispersing the dense

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emptiness around him, yet not even this roused life deeper in the woods. Next, shouting and screams. Face ruddy, Garron ran, as hurried as he could in a priest's garb, no longer thinking of the kindling he had intended to gather.

He carried himself with the quickness of one driven by unspoken duty. Honor bound him in the service of Gohheia to protect Her daughters and sons here, and he would. His steps had taken him far. Despite the cold, sweat streamed down his forehead and stung at his eyes. He wiped a marching line of perspiration away with his sleeve. "I must hurry," he said to himself between labored breaths.

As he broke through the trees, he came upon a man's body in a pool of blood, stomach and chest opened and shredded down to scraped bone, muscle, and organ. The air dragged the stench of the corpse to his nostrils. Dead, and already soured. Too soured, too soon, and brutalized beyond recognition. At the ends of the man's limbs, ragged stumps; hands and feet, ripped away, but nowhere in sight.

No mere animal could have done this.

He masked his nose with his arm. His eyes danced across the faces of village homes and the gaps among them, his insides painted in frantic hues of yellow and red. No figures made their presence known.

The sky, once sparse, had gone dark with thunderheads, black as soot and churning. Bolts of lightning crackled. Waves of thunder bellowed in their wake. Another chorus of screams arose, a few at first. These crescendoed into a cacophony of harrowing wails. As swift as they had come, the cries ended. Beyond these sounds, a dull murmur of groans and strained hissing, like a far-off pit of snakes.

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Garron moved in long-legged strides. “Mother, protect me,” he whispered, heading toward the source of the commotion. The ground blurred beneath him, and the air bit at his skin, growing colder the further he flew. Soon, ice had formed around his face in clear crystals at the tips of his peppered beard and hair. It mattered little, for he could not relent until he uncovered the catalyst of this distress.

Someone killed his flock. Not his flock alone, but the Mother’s. His Mother, their Mother. The Mother of all mothers. The murder of Her children rendered one beyond absolution. Gohheia’s greatest regret. Those who let it happen, who stood by, attendant the slaughter of Her children, were second-most.

Isolated and aware, Garron sprinted, like a wolf on the hunt, but feeling hunted.

“Father!” came a voice to his right.

He halted and turned, in the small market now.

A girl of the village called out.

Alina.

He knew their names, having lived there for over ten ages. She came to him, blonde hair disheveled, brown eyes inflamed, bedcloths torn and spattered in dusky red.

Blood, all over her. “What is it?” He took her in his arms. Her body shook with such a fierceness that not even his embrace fixed her. His hands quivered, too, but not for the same purpose. A brooding, consuming rage skulked through him. His chest sank with anger, making it hard to breathe.

He contained his fury for the girl’s sake.

“Father!” she cried. “They kill us all! Please, please help!”

He buried her face against him to comfort her, and to muffle

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her squalls. *Her tears may draw them.* He draped his robes around her shoulders to warm her. Her skin chilled his palms, so cold it burned.

“Who is, Alina? Where are they?”

“Monsters! A woman. A monster. Horned. Grey skin.” She struggled to speak through heaves. “Everyone’s gone!” Her sobs reverberated off the walls of the surrounding buildings.

Garron knelt and met her face to face.

“Where is Emmelina?” she asked. “Can I go to her?”

Officer Emmelina. Her dwelling resided across the village, and the furor he heard sounded nearer. *If she hasn’t stumbled upon it yet, I’ll likely run through it before I find her.*

“I’ve not seen her, but I’m gone to look.”

“I—is she dead?”

“Nay. Flee.” He changed the subject. “Escape to the forest, to the wood shed by the well, down the eastern track. You know it.” He took her face in his hands, his thumbs wiping the tears which hadn’t frozen at her cheeks. “The chill bites, but it won’t be long. I’ll come for you when this is over. Until then, hide beneath the logs, and do not come out until you hear my voice.”

The girl’s eyes were puffy from crying, the circles beneath them accentuated.

He removed the water pouch from his side and passed it to her, placing a hand on her cheek again. “The magic of the Mother charms this carrier. It will protect you. Drink as you like, for it never empties when needed. Be not afraid. Gohheia is with you, and watches over you.” He did his best to reassure her. In truth, certainty eluded him. *I may not survive this night.* If he did not live, she would freeze to death.

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He had to survive, for her.

For all of them.

She fled, leaving him alone once more in the blackness and the hazy shimmer of the moons, his body encumbered by the weight of his task. Then manifested that awful sound anew. So many screams, deep and high, varied in unrestrained terror. They were as the calls of a hundred melted into a single horrific roar, the noise of struggling survival and impending demise.

Garron returned to his race over the village, past stone hovels, wooden stables, leaning fences, bloated and cracked and warped from the sun and rain. He found emptiness and abandonment, except traces of the village's residents in the forms of cloth from tunics and gowns and blood in sprays. Some of the houses appeared to have burned, as if long ago they had been set ablaze and had their flames extinguished.

Impossible, for he had taken a stroll upon this street two hours earlier.

He turned a corner at the end of a road. As he did, a voice entered his mind, slithering and hissing like a serpent through the air. "*Father*," it whispered in a woman's pitch, loud, as if risen from his own lips.

Stiff and uncoordinated by the frost, he lost his footing, crashing down to his hands and knees.

Jarred, he groaned, fighting to regain his senses.

The grunts and rumbles of quarreling met his ears.

One tone stood out.

"Father Latimer!" someone called, accompanying the shuffle of feet traveling nearer.

Rising to one knee, he lifted his head.

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Emmelina.

A familiar face and companion in authority brought him a jolt of relief, but fleeting. As they convened there without another spirit to witness, something sinister lay beyond. Something which brought the grey sky, the unforgiving cold, and death. Savage, merciless death.

He pushed himself to his feet, countenance twisting at the pain in his knees, hips, and back. The ground had become ice, inhospitable to his eldred frame in its descent. To his gratitude, Emmelina lived. He had expected to discover her slain. Her youthfulness afforded her a greater ability to deal with unsavory sorts and situations.

A snowflake floated down in front of his face, catching his eye. "What comes?"

They peered up. Beneath dark, swirling clouds, the sky had flooded with a great salt sea. Snowfall, below a net of lightning, ridden by claps of thunder. Flickers of white cascaded from every direction until they fell in veils. Faint through the flurry and overcast sky, the light of the moons continued to reach, casting a luminous aura. Any other time, he would've appreciated such an ethereal vision as this.

"Undeath, Father."

"Undeath?"

"The dark magic of the Patron of the Undead has come about us. Those dead rise, ravenous, wild. Most of the village is slaughtered, or worse." Terror filled her face and eyes. Fright laced her voice. Her hands trembled.

Garron had never witnessed Emmelina so disquieted. In all their ages together, he had known her as a pillar of strength,

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a seasoned warrior, a hale woman who had bested many a strong opponent.

A sheet of snow had formed on the ground, so shallow it barely left a tread. Reflections in the ice magnified each flash of lightning high beyond. No normal weather surrounded them, but a sign of malevolent forces. Emmelina spoke the truth. The servants of a dark god lay siege to a mortal village, to Gohheia's children. Had he not lives in need of saving, he would have collapsed and wept.

"We—we must—" His speech trailed off. "Anyone who lives, Emmelina. If there is anyone." He swallowed. Sand and fire set his throat ablaze and his nostrils burned. He feared his insides might freeze over as he drew in the air around them, cold and dry.

Emmelina approached him, her gaze downcast. "Anyone who lives, Father." She placed a hand on his neck. "If we die here, it has been an honor."

He smiled, thin-lipped, tears welling in his sight. The drops ran down his cheeks and hardened, the ice stopping short of his eyes. "And to you."

The pair were off, shifting closer to the chorus of cries, rising in frequency and volume at every yard. Death and sulfur consumed the air. The village road became the remnants of a path. This route grew rugged and steepened as they descended the valley to the overgrown western edge, the deepest point of the Vale.

A tree wall composed the decline, leaning and swaying, their naked branches shading the ground. The grass shifted from a coarse yellow to a scorched black, ripped and uprooted by overturned oaks and cedars, and melded with accumulating snow which soaked up ash and turned a watery grey. A light bled

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through the open scars between the darkness of the trees, playing like fire.

Another scream punctured the air, nearby this time.

Garron and Emmelina lowered themselves down the last few feet of hillside and made their way toward the newest calamity. Though the night's chill grew with every step, he dripped with sweat which continued to form into crystals on his skin, hairs upright over his arms and the back of his neck. The abnormal frigidness froze liquid against his flesh with atypical quickness, but did not kill him.

As they moved through the brush, another girl—teen-year-old—appeared at their flank. What sounded like a low growl escaped her lips, loud in the eerie calm that followed, as if the world had gone silent at her command.

“Please,” she said. “Can you help me?”

Snow fell harder.

“Speak your name.” Garron had never seen this girl.

Emmelina placed a hand at the hilt of her sword.

The girl tugged with a feigned nervousness at the lower hem of her threadbare rags. Her eyes flashed an amusement. She smiled, a grin of faint, reserved malice. A cursed smile.

He gripped the lunar tears at his wrist, fingers aching against the strand. “Emmelina,” he said.

“Please, these creatures.” The girl's voice sounded airy and small. “Wait,” she paused and let her eyes drift between them without aim, “it's already here.”

Garron revolved as Emmelina shouted, the glint of her blade catching his eye in the shimmer of the moons. A woman attacked them, unnoticed until she neared, soaked in blood, flesh torn,