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Chapter One

The Quiet Before Matins

It was good weather for a riot.

Deacon Sorcha Faris breathed out the last smoke from her cigar, twisted the remains against the stone parapet and sighed. Perhaps that was only her wishful thinking; a riot was almost as unlikely as an unliving attack. But it was her duty to check, so she closed her eyes and let her Center fall away.

Under the gray and altered veil of her geist-Sight, the gathering of humans below her at the Vermillion Palace's gate smelled of nothing more than desperation and dull resignation. However, there was certainly a good crowd of them; perhaps five hundred dispossessed milled about in the snow covered square.

Straining her preternatural senses as far as she could, Sorcha still found no tang of the unliving amongst them. Falling sleet was cooling their anger and they huddled against the southern wall because they had nowhere else to go. Their protest at her Emperor's presence was subdued; they knew full well he'd been invited by the princes to rule Arkaym, their continent, but they needed someone to blame for their own misery. The majority of the citizens of the City of Vermillion loved the Emperor, but these people had filtered in from the outlying towns for one reason—they were hungry.

There was, however, nothing supernatural about them. Pamphleteers had been spreading discontent since autumn, and now their efforts were bearing fruit. Not all of the princes agreed—they seldom ever did on much, and there were still a couple that disapproved of her Emperor. This likely would not come to much. Still, guarding against the signs of uprising was her job; more than that, her calling.

When she reeled back her Center, the feeling of disorientation passed quickly. For a novice it would have been a strain, but Sorcha had been eighteen years a Deacon. This minor use of her powers was now as simple as breathing. Sorcha might not be a Sensitive, but she had enough rank to sign this one off.

The recent spate of possessions in Brickmaker's Lane on the very edge of Vermillion had made everyone nervous, but another team of Deacons had dealt with those last week. It was as she suspected: there was nothing to Sergeant Gent's worries. The palace was built far out in a shallow lagoon. Surrounded on all sides by water, the royal residence was almost impossible for the unliving to enter; excellent planning by the previous owners.

This particular gathering was now officially the preserve of the Imperial Legion—let them decide how best to deal with the rag-tag protestors. Sergeant Gent was once again seeing geists in every corner. Sorcha thought, not for the first time, that he should have at least tried to join the Deacons—it might have taught him a thing or two.

She briskly pinned back some of the bronze curls that had escaped her severe bun, and was about to leave her chilly spot on the wall when she caught a glimpse of a familiar back moving into the crowd.

After eight years of marriage she could instantly recognize Kolya, even if she couldn't see his face. What she couldn't understand was what he was doing down there. He hadn't told her that he was planning to do this—but that was the way of things between them—and had been for some time now.

“Sergeant,” Sorcha barked as she picked up her leather helmet from the parapet, “get your men ready.” Running to the door, she buckled the helm on tightly.

Kolya might be a Sensitive, but if he took matters into his hands he could be surprisingly dogged. Once it had been an admirable trait, but his wife now found it overwhelmingly irritating. However, if he thought there was something going on down there, he was better equipped to find it than she—a mere Active—was.

Sorcha led the platoon down the stairs. At the bottom, she silently gestured for them to hang back inside the tower. Muskets and bayonets would be of little use if the unliving walked, and in fact any bloodletting would only benefit a geist.

A quick check of her Center again revealed nothing new, yet through the iron railings Sorcha could make out Kolya's emerald cloak surrounded by the gleam of his own Center in the grayness of the mob. Sensitive and Active, they usually worked as a team, but they'd argued again this morning. For a year they had been living in icy silence, but lately she had begun to crack under the pressure. She was starting to bite back, enraged at his own lack of emotion. So when the report had come in that morning, and she'd been unable to find her husband, she'd decided her Sensitivity was enough for a simple detection.

Kolya obviously thought differently.

“Idiot.” Sorcha tugged on her thick Deacon Gauntlets while trying to ram down her surging anger.

“Are we going in, ma'am?” Sergeant Gent, always too eager, was nearly standing on her toes. The usual reserve most people had around Deacons wasn't

evident in this particular Imperial Guardsman.

“Only if my husband is right.” She paused, choosing her words carefully. “So most likely, yes. At my signal, get those people clear and out beyond the gates.”

Gent saluted, but the gleam of excitement in his eye boded ill. Young men, guns and geists were a potent combination. “Sergeant,” Sorcha shot him her best cutting-down-to-size look, “you’ve got it straight that any—*any*—bloodshed here could bring a rain of disaster down on the Emperor’s doorstep?”

He might have been an ambitious young soldier, but even he had to take a Deacon’s warning seriously. With a nod Gent turned back to his men to pass on the word, and Sorcha watched the soldiers’ faces reflect disdain. Apparently crowd control was not what the Imperial Guard was famous for; it didn’t make the ladies swoon or provide for good stories in the barracks afterward.

She saw Kolya’s back stiffen as her Center leapt towards him. Sorcha might still be angry, but she was not about to let him endanger his own life. *The other Actives would never let her hear the end of it.*

Kolya’s wry observation spilled into her mind. Such leaking was the negative side of working together for so long. It also made marriage that much more difficult.

Ignoring it as best she could, Sorcha lent him her minor Sensitivity while keeping her inner eye open for trouble. The merged vision opened wide like a supernatural searchlight. Their combined strength was unmatched in the Abbey, and now Sorcha could taste what had drawn her husband into the midst of the discontented citizens. The faint tang of the unliving was far too small for her senses alone to detect. So far it was only manifesting as a bitter taste on her tongue.

To the shambling group of ungifted there was nothing different about the air, yet; only the usual stench of the early morning emptying of chamber pots. But to talented and trained senses, it was like the odor of something rotting in the sun.

The faint whiff of the unliving disturbed her enjoyment of the morning. Deacon Faris hated disruption. She also hated being wrong. Today had started badly and looked to be going downhill; watery surrounds should have meant safety for her Emperor. After all it was the sole reason Vermillion had always been the capital city—building on a lagoon was not the easiest thing. It shouldn’t have mattered that the top surface was ice when the protective tides still moved below.

All those suppositions vanished, however, when the geist burst through the surrounding flagstones and erupted into the crowd. Sorcha envisioned some clerk in

the Abbey working overtime to do a rewrite of the textbooks—this geist seemed not to care that its presence was breaking all their rules.

“Now, Gent!” Sorcha barked as she vaulted the railings to where her husband was just turning to face the threat. “Get these people back!” Shoving her way through the still unaware protesters, she flexed her fingers within her leather Gauntlets—letting the crowd become aware of just what they were dealing with.

Each leather finger was carved with one of the ten Runes of Dominion. Sorcha called on Aydien, and blue fire chased itself widdershins around her hands to finish with a surge on each palm where her sigil was carved.

Actives were sometimes accused by Sensitive Deacons of being overly flashy. Sorcha did find it somewhat embarrassing; all the lights and surges of energy that even the ungifted could see. However, it did clear the space around her rather effectively. Those not yet possessed stumbled out of her way, screaming in shock. After three years the locals had developed a healthy respect for the dangers of a Deacon wearing Gauntlets.

Aydien was the rune of repulsion and worked well on both mortals and lower level unliving. The crowd was scattering in a most satisfactory way, yet the geist was still pouring out of the ground, ready to possess anyone it could. It would obviously require a more powerful rune to affect it.

Letting the first rune flicker out, Sorcha reached for Shayst. The green surge of energy trickled into her palm. With it she touched the essence of the geist, drawing some of it for herself—much safer than taking from the Otherside. Ten faces in the mob turned toward her immediately, pale and slack. The sheen of sweat was already on them; geists could seldom manage the fine mechanics of the human body.

Behind them Kolya’s green cloak billowed, standing out brightly against the snow and gray paving stones. He had, as their training had taught them, refrained from the natural impulse; his saber remained sheathed. It was a weapon of last resort and of very little use against a geist. Wind sprang up and whipped his fair hair about him, but his expression remained calm even though this geist was acting as no other the Deacons had ever recorded. With Sorcha now on the scene it was unlikely to threaten him. Actives blazed in the ether when they wore the Gauntlets, while Sensitives barely disturbed it as long as they did not wear their equivalent, the Strop.

The geist-possessed stumbled about, drool falling down their chins, eyes rolling in their heads and wordless groans squeezed from their chests. Already Sorcha could

smell the faint odor of shit; another faculty that geists could not control. Overall, being possessed, if one survived it, was an unpleasant and embarrassing experience. Old thin women, pigeon-chested boys and rag-tag men were now the geist's weapons in this world.

“Unacceptable,” the Deacon muttered to herself. *Watch yourself.* Kolya's unneeded warning leaked across their Bond. His confidence in her abilities, even after all these years, was so reassuring. Through the enhanced Sight Kolya fed her, Sorcha could make out the swirling vortex of the geist as it embraced the humans. It was growing larger rather than smaller. The power required to control even this many people was immense—in fact, off the scale. Once again, the paper shufflers were going to get a headache over this.

With so many geist-possessed advancing on her, Sorcha decided to draw more power away from the vortex and hopefully release a few of them. With her second Gauntlet she called on Shayst once more.

She bucked backwards as the power slammed into her spread hands and raced up her arms. Biting down an involuntary groan of pleasure, the Deacon tried to get past the intoxicating sensation. It was like the euphoria of being slightly drunk without the lack of coordination. Her vision sharpened while her limbs filled with strength. Nothing seemed impossible. It was this rush of confidence that could bring down an inexperienced Deacon.

Sorcha held the power lightly; letting it wash over her but never take control. Shayst had drawn a lot of energy, but the vortex was still growing. And the air was getting colder around her, so cold that her face was numb and her teeth ached. It was impressive that she could be aware of such sensations, wrapped as she was in geist-power.

“Unholy Bones,” she swore and, unlike Kolya, she drew her saber. The possessed were now only ten feet away. They had nearly the whole Square to themselves. Gent's men had done their job. In the time it had taken them to clear the crowd, however, another dozen had been touched by the geist. Still, it could have been worse. A crowd of five hundred controlled by the unliving didn't bear thinking about.

Her husband's Sensitivity held her to the ground, sharpened her vision and senses enough to make the right choices. Without him she would be blind.

At this thought her husband smiled slightly; certainly there had been precious

few kindly words spoken in recent months. He opened his Center wider so that she could now see right into the swirling mass of the geist. The vortex was large, but she could make out its tail, apparently rooted to one spot on the ground.

Sorcha barely had time to register this odd feature among odd features before the geist shifted its attention. The possessed raised their heads, eyes now gleaming pits of blackness. She could have almost thought there were sly smiles on their slack faces. Then the expanded funnel of power rushed out once more—but not toward Sorcha.

Without him she would be blind. She blinked in astonishment, her throat abruptly dry and raw.

Geists were mindless things. They were intent on their own purposes, which generally involved wreaking havoc on the real world. They only reacted to Actives, never Sensitives, because Actives engaged them. A Sensitive remained almost invisible unless he did something foolish, like trying to use his lesser Active power. Kolya was too well seasoned for that.

Certainly he had seen the geist turn on him, but he must have not quite believed it. Sorcha shot him a warning as well, but there was nothing in the training of a Deacon for this eventuality. In three hundred years of the Order, no Sensitive had ever been attacked. Even in the battle for the Heights of Mathris, when Sorcha had been just newly ordained, there had never been such an event.

She couldn't reach him. Desperation and helplessness welled up inside her. The possessed were pressing in on her; hands grasping, mouths-turned-weapons stretched wide to bite. The geist filled them with as much strength as Sorcha had received, yet she could not afford to spill their blood. Instead she deflected their blows, sliding out of the way of their attacks in the fluid Abbey style of defense. Rolling away as best she could, she felt their fingernails rake her face and hands. Her mind was full of Kolya. She could not see him beyond the ruckus of the possessed, but in horror she realized that he had gone Active. Her heart hammered while her mind shot desperate queries across their bond. A Sensitive relying on their lesser power was like a fine swordsman resorting to clumsily wielding an axe.

Unlike her husband's Sensitivity, her Active power could not be shared with him to boost his own. That was another thing Sensitives accused her kind of: selfishness. At this point, she couldn't help but agree.

Unholy Bones, he wasn't answering. Gent's men would be still busy with the

people—besides, she had warned them about bloodshed. Blood and souls would only feed the geist. The soldiers would be standing well back with their hands full of a terrified crowd.

Her own smaller mob had reoriented itself on her. Catching one of the possessed old women in a shoulder lock, Sorcha managed to pitch her backwards into the swarm. This brief respite allowed her to catch a glimpse of her husband.

The vortex was around Kolya. He was turning blue with the inhuman cold, and she could feel a great weight on him. The geist was crushing him like a bug against a window.

Her professional veneer cracked; Sorcha screamed in rage. The world abruptly snapped back to color, leaving her reeling. The Bond was broken, and she was suddenly the sole Deacon standing—yet completely blinded.

Unable to feel if Kolya was alive or dead, or indeed what the geist was now doing, she stumbled backwards. Her scrambled brain searched through all her training for a solution. What it came up with was unpleasant: she only had one choice. Deacon Sorcha Faris activated Teisyat, the tenth Rune of Dominion.

Far off in the Abbey, heads would rise from their daily work and turn in the direction of the palace. A Conclave of Deacons would be sent rushing to her position. It would be too late.

Teisyat had that effect. Teisyat needed an Episcopal enquiry afterwards, followed by months of investigation and “recommended counseling.” Teisyat was so dangerous that only the highest level Actives had it engraved on their Gauntlets, and only after many tests. Even with all Sorcha’s years in the Abbey, only two had passed since this last rune had been carved into her Gauntlets.

None of that mattered to Sorcha. Kolya needed her.

A window opened between the Otherside and the real world—it was no tiny pinprick like that brought by Tryrei. Her Gauntlets burned red like lava now, describing the dimensions of a gateway that Gent could have marched his men through side by side. The ground beneath the Square shook. All these things, Sorcha could observe even without her husband because they were happening in her world. Right before the Emperor’s walls, the Otherside was making its presence felt.

All other concerns were of secondary importance to Deacon Sorcha Faris. She was deeply occupied in holding that presence back as best she could. The Abbey had good reason to fear the last rune. Teisyat opened the gates to the Otherside, and once

they were open anything could come through.

The gaping void, white and hungry, was sucking at the real world. Only Sorcha was stopping it from letting forth its nightmares.

She stood right at the edge of the gateway and screamed into it. The Otherside was howling back, loud and hungry. It burned her eyes and tore her hair loose. Her skin felt flayed while her voice was ripped away in the rushing winds.

Yet she held on. Her training and talent diverted the power away from the real world towards the geist. While she acted as the shield, the Otherside demanded something for being summoned. Through streaming eyes Sorcha watched as the possessed were ripped away from all around her. A glimpse of slack faces tumbling into nothingness should have caused her a twinge of remorse, but holding out against the pull of the void was all she could manage.

The physical pain stole the breath from her body, but it was the mind that the Otherside attacked the most terribly. Every fear, every terrible moment in her life was brought bubbling to the surface and thrown against her like a missile.

It wanted her to crack and allow it in. Breaking Sorcha was its path into the real world, so it threw all it could against her. Mistakes she had almost managed to forget resurfaced, and dark thoughts she'd suppressed barraged her brain until she could have shattered. *Why did you marry him?* a voice asked, as sharp as a blade against the most unexplored parts of her consciousness.

Sorcha held out her Gauntlets with Teisyat burning like red anger on them. Without Kolya she couldn't tell if the geist had succumbed to the Otherside or not. Yet she couldn't hold out against its pull for much longer. Summoning the last of her energy, she closed her fist around the rune and bent all of her talent to closing the gate.

The Otherside struggled against her, twisting away like a fish on a line, yearning to be free. For an instant Sorcha felt it slipping, evading her strength. Then her deepest training kicked in. The mind puzzles and control exercises, the ones she had thought boring while a novice, the ones that had been repeated until they seemed foolish, were now her final outpost.

Repeating the phrases, following the numeric puzzles, tangled the Otherside's attempts to pull her mind down. It was just enough time for Sorcha to close Teisyat. The Otherside howled, like a great beast finally brought down, and then closed.

Sorcha found herself on her knees. Her hands, wrapped around the flagstones,

were aching as though a horse had stood on them. Inside the Gauntlets, blood was beginning to seep. She didn't dare pull them off. Instead she staggered to her feet and towards where Kolya lay crumpled on the ground.

Numbed inside and out, Sorcha rolled him over, her bloodied Gauntlets staining his emerald cloak. Hers was not the only blood. Plenty of his was pooling among the white snow, shocking in its contrast.

The geist had wrought terrible vengeance on her husband and partner. He was broken, bleeding and lying like a cast-off doll in the spot where he'd been thrown. He was her Sensitive, her responsibility, and this was her fault. She should have protected him. She should have been at his side. Had she made this happen?

"Gent," she bellowed across the suddenly quiet Square. "Gent! Summon the physician. Now!"

Kolya was still breathing; broken and pained though it sounded, he was breathing. Sorcha held him as gently as she could, but knew there was no rune of healing in the Gauntlets. Deacons were not meant for anything but battle. "Hang on," she whispered to him. "Hang on, you foolish man."