

Deadly Relics

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Starsin, an army cadet and minor member of the nobility, stumbles on the Imperial security forces performing oppressive acts and a murder in a peasant village. A suspect hands Starsin a mysterious object, and from then on his life becomes perilous.

The Plain Girl's Earrings:

Chapter 1: Spell-Hunters

I am not here. I am a shadow. I am watching. I am gathering threads, and when I tug them, hidden forces will stir.

(Secret Journal of Lannaira Hajan)

“What are you doing here, Estevan?”

Heavy drops of rain struck Starsin and made his horse twitch its ears. A uniformed rider trotted toward him, avoiding the cabbage and onion gardens outside the village. It was Rukan, a regular army officer who had supervised part of his cadet training.

“I was out riding,” Starsin said. “The rain--”

Behind Rukan, the peaked straw roofs rose, struck into gold by a ray of the fugitive sun. Above them, thunder rumbled.

Starsin glimpsed movement, and with a shock saw a group of riders in the village, part hidden behind the nearer huts. At their head rode two men clad in gaudy armour, painted in primary colours. They were Virnals, the armed face of the Empire. His stomach tightened. He had no cause to like the Vernal Order or their policies.

On this, his free day, he had hoped to buy up any collectible relics turned up by the villagers, but not now. It would be prudent to leave, but helmeted heads turned to him. He had been seen.

Heart thumping, he sketched a salute, and sat his horse.

It was summer in the Empire of Satine, and the day had dawned with the sun rising red-eyed to promise another incandescent day. By noon it had stood in a dust-laden sky like burning brass, baking the Plains earth and the city and throwing up a heat that made the air tremble.

Huts of rough wood, mud and straw huddled beside a single dirt track that bisected the hamlet. Animals wandered unchecked with rain beading their coats, and corn dollies fashioned to ward off evil swung from the straw eaves in the wind.

Rukan pointed a thumb to the troop behind him. “You shouldn’t be here,” he told Starsin.

“Why, what’s going on?”

“The Virnals are about to search the village for sorcerers.” He eyed Starsin with concern.

“You should leave.”

The Order had a reputation for brutality,

“It’s going to pour with rain. I won’t cause any trouble.” The heat had been enough to bake a man dry, despite the ever-present breeze of the Plains. But now black clouds roiled overhead charged with electricity and the threat of storm. He did not want a soaking, and his curiosity was piqued. With Rukan here, nothing bad should happen to him.

“Have it your own way then. But if they want you gone, then go.”

Further drops of rain fell, and thunder crackled. He’d risk staying. Earlier, he had been in high spirits as he threaded his way to the village, avoiding riding on the villagers’ scruffy fields.

The leading Vernal officers rode out from behind the huts, across the village vegetable gardens. One was wrinkle-faced, with straggling white hair and skin flushed by red blotches. The other had cropped hair that had been brown but was now greying and bore a scar on his left cheek.

“Who are they?” Starsin asked, nodding toward them.

“Lord Varnoth and Lord Kathan,” Rukan said.

Starsin’s stomach tightened. Something important must be going down, for two leaders of the Vernal Order to appear in person.

“You know what you’re supposed to do?” the scar-faced and more military looking of the two Vernal leaders asked in a harsh, loud voice. Starsin guessed this was Lord Kathan, a senior military commander. Kathan was addressing a young, blond Vernal officer, whom Starsin also recognised as Lieutenant Larash.

“Yes, sir. It’s on our list,” Larash said.

“On your list? So what about it?” Kathan fixed Lieutenant Larash with a stare that even Starsin felt disquieting.

“This is Swampfeld, sir.” Despite his aristocratic breeding, Larash’s voice stumbled. “I mean, it’s next on the list of locations we’re checking for signs of insurgents.”

Kathan gave a nod. “Proceed, then.”

A few women and older men cringed in front of the nearer huts. Unlike their masters, most of the peasants were dark-haired, darker-skinned, yellow-eyed. Starsin saw no children or able-bodied men. Where were they?

“You men!” Larash ordered, pointing. “Circle round the other side.” Soldiers spurred their horses away, past the huts.

The village looked inactive. Were the men working elsewhere, or hunting the vicious but edible lizards in the polluted marshes? Or were they hiding under cover? The villagers seemed afraid. Was this their normal response to the appearance of Virnals and soldiers, or were they fearful of some offence being discovered? Already Starsin was regretting his impulse to remain, but to leave now would look suspicious.

“Clear outside,” shouted the corporal of Larash’s squad from the other side of the double line of huts.

“Flush them out,” Larash ordered.

Soldiers dismounted and banged on the doors of several huts. “Come out, you field-vermin, and greet your lords!”

A sudden movement erupted, surprising Starsin. Several men with buckets and farm tools ran furtively between two huts.

“Halt!” a soldier shouted.

Rukan caught Starsin’s eye and signalled him not to move.

Doors opened and the people, cowed, came out to collect in a huddle, none wishing to be foremost. The soldiers herded them till all were gathered in sight of the high Vinal Lords and their entourage. A few soldiers remained out of sight, looking inside huts.

Larash was frowning as the peasants in front knelt on the damp ground. “Check inside the huts,” he shouted. Then the village hetman, distinguished by his felt hat, onyx badge and woollen cloak, came forward. The soldiers smirked as the peasants edged away from them, to Starsin’s disquiet.

The other high Vinal, evidently Lord Varnoth, wore an open-faced gilded helmet with upward projecting wings. He turned in his saddle with a slight scrape and clatter of metal. An expression of amusement and pleasure flitted across Varnoth’s lined features. The Vinal appeared to feast on the peasants’ terror as a mosquito feasts on human blood. In this muddy, untidy, dun-coloured village, he was as exalted as a god in his red, yellow and blue armour.

Meanwhile, the hetman prostrated himself in the rain-pocked dirt. To Starsin, the man’s pose was a cringing model of abject fear.

“How may we serve you, great Lords?” the man said.

The rain, previously a shower, increased to a downpour.

“While we shelter from this rain, we want food and drink,” said the other senior Vinal, scarred Lord Kathan. His voice was harsh. “Whatever you’ve got; don’t trouble with anything fancy.”

“Come to my house. It is dry there.” He gestured to the largest of the clay-walled dwellings.

Larash ordered his troop to dismount. The officers also dismounted and tethered their mounts to fencing. Starsin did likewise.

Larash stared in Starsin’s direction. Starsin looked around for a hut where he could shelter, away from the Vinal troop, but Rukan plucked at his sleeve.

“Stay with me.”

“Is it all right?” Starsin asked Rukan in a low voice. He wanted to stay at Rukan’s side, but as a lowly army cadet he preferred not to share a hut with any of the high Vinal leadership.

Rukan nodded.

The Vinal officers, with Starsin and several soldiers, ducked their heads into the hetman’s house. In the main room was a fireplace of mud brick against the side wall, a table, and a pole ladder leading to a sleeping platform overhead. The officers and men who got in first found sacks and bundles on which to sit. The hut was about ten paces by five, and the fifteen soldiers and officers together with several peasants crowded the space.

Starsin wrinkled his nose at a mixture of smells, the most prominent being animal dung. A gust of rain pattered on the thatch as the hetman’s woman and children produced flat beer, fruit and bread, and set these on the broad table. The children had skin sores, and one boy had an infected eye. The man whispered urgent orders, rebuking their clumsiness, evidently terrified lest they irritate or provoke the lords.

Lord Varnoth glanced around the interior. His gaze fixed on Rukan. “Lieutenant.”

The junior army officer appeared lost in private reverie and did not respond.

“Lieutenant!”

Rukan jerked his attention towards the senior Vinal.

“Milord?”

“You’re Rukan, aren’t you? I hope you have checked the discs? Make sure we have no evil miasma here. Better an age of icy rain than that!”

The junior officer shaded a greenish disc of mineral strapped to his wrist, and held it close to his eyes. His hands were shaking. “It does not sparkle, Milord,” Rukan said. “The place is safe.”

The men relaxed once more. Starsin knew the risk well. Everyone was afraid of the miasma emitted unseen from objects dug up by fools and careless treasure-seekers. In this hut, fetishes carved in wood hung from a ceiling constructed of poles, showing a certain skill in native art, but Starsin doubted such things could protect against the invisible horror.

Was something troubling Lieutenant Rukan? Since returning from his last mission, the formerly open and friendly man had appeared withdrawn, prone to moods and anger. Last time they met, Starsin had wanted to reach out and offer comfort, but had been unable to penetrate the other man's shell.

The visitors ate. Starsin found the bread quite pleasant till his teeth concussed on a piece of grit.

Rukan, watching him wince said, "If you must eat this muck, cadet, then bite slowly. That's the trick of it."

Starsin, too well-bred to speak with his mouth full, nodded.

"Cadet, fetch in the Master's hawk," Kathan said in a mild tone.

Starsin choked on a fragment of bread. "Yes, Milord." Being spoken to by a senior Vernal filled him with alarm.

Outside, the hawk cage hung untended from one of the timalts. The ordinary soldiers were usually issued with these low six-legged beasts while officers got horses. Hooves shuffled in the mud as he approached, and he caught a sour smell of wet horse. The hooded bird, large and tawny-coloured, made a discontented noise as Starsin untied the cage. He re-entered the hut, looking for a space to put down the cage in a hut full of damp people.

"Just put it here, cadet," Lord Kathan said, pointing.

Starsin did as he was told and put the uncovered cage on the crude table. The peasant children edged away from it, and the adults stared.

Starsin turned to Rukan and in a low voice asked a question. "Rukan, what's the hawk for?"

"It's supposed to detect sorcerers."

Kathan fixed him with a chilly blue-eyed stare, till Starsin looked away. "You'll see soon enough, boy."

He had been overheard. Starsin's stomach tightened, but the Vernal made no further remark. Regaining his composure, Starsin observed the two leading Vernals. Kathan, the Vernal military

leader, was powerful and accustomed to using violence to impose his will. He had never been handsome, and the scar on his left cheek did not improve his looks. He was a few years younger than Varnoth, hard and fit, but lines of ageing showed on his skin.

Lord Varnoth, the Grand Master, had the forbidding features of a man used to control. He had thrown a dead mouse to his hawk and now fed strips of raw meat to the caged bird. He smiled as the hooked beak tore the flesh.

The Virnals were an elitist Order, and they had several regiments of elite soldiers who served alongside the Army. Other Virnals, including Varnoth, held civilian posts in the Imperial administration.

The plain victuals consumed, Starsin asked himself how soon the Virnals would investigate the frightened villagers for sorcery. Not while the rain continued, it seemed. The leaders gave no orders, and the Virnals and officers betrayed their boredom by picking up the hetman's few possessions and making scornful remarks.

"We have no entertainment here!" the third Vernal, Larash, complained to the village hetman. "Provide some!"

The hetman fled, to reappear with another man, short, in a brown hessian smock. "A juggler, Lords!"

It was surprising the villagers had a juggler at all. Soldiers shuffled aside to give the man floor space.

He took out rudely carved balls of wood, and held them ready, two in each hand. Sweat stood out on his brow. Starsin hoped the man's act would appease the capricious visitors, and he would not fail by dropping a ball. Four-ball juggling wasn't so easy, yet the villager juggled with skill, making balls pass above his head, over his raised leg, even grazing the sleeping platform above.

Jewels glittered in an enamelled hilt as Larash raised a small knife of glinting steel. The young Vinal officer was extremely handsome, with ash-blond hair, long eyelashes and a smooth, hairless face, but Starsin had met Larash socially and found him obnoxious and arrogant.

Larash flicked his knife forward, and one of the juggler's balls spun away. The soldiers gasped and the juggler froze in fear, letting the remaining balls fall. A soldier knelt, armour creaking, and retrieved the ball from the straw, with the knife stuck fast in it. As he held it up, the two senior Vinals and the soldiers cheered and applauded Larash. Starsin concealed his disapproval as best he could, while the juggler, humiliated, got his remaining balls in motion to await his overlords' next jest. For the moment, they were in a good humour.

Starsin saw Larash's intent now fastened on the two young girls, as the young Vinal caught the hetman's attention and gestured towards them.

"They look half-ripe. Let's have them uncovered!" he said with a smirk.

Starsin chilled with unease, wondering what base act the Vinal had in mind.

The father hesitated, frozen with horror.

Lord Kathan took an interest in his empty ale mug.

"What, you disobey?" Larash drawled, with a vile grin.

Starsin, disgusted at this treatment of the unattractive girls, turned to Rukan to seek his response. He had been steadied on occasion by the officer's guidance.

Rukan, glassy-eyed, stared at the wall with fists clenched.

Starsin should have taken Rukan's advice to move on.

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