

## A Single Tear

Michael holds the picture between his two hands as a single tear slowly slips across its glossy coating. Allman Brothers, "ain't wastin no more time", blares in the background with the player on repeat. For a second the reflection of the beautiful woman is slightly magnified as a tear continues to trail down the photo and onto the wooden floor. He falls back on the bed and covers his eyes with the inner bend of his elbow, listening to the rain lightly smack against the window. The sound mixes with the heavy breathing of a man on the verge of breaking down. In his mind he can still picture his family and then all at once he is flooded with the visions of his past.

He can see the fire of her red hair as it flows down across her cheek and drapes over the newly born child nestled in her arms. Michael always thought she was beautiful without makeup, even though she tended to disagree, and he spent many a sleepless night watching her slowly breathe. He never hesitated to raise his eyes to the sky and thank God for making him the luckiest man in the world. This was especially true on that day, asleep and exhausted in the hospital bed of a birthing ward, she was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The big man lay in the dark weeping from the painful memories and only those familiar with the anguished and painful cries of a child would be able to discern the difference between the two. Confusion began to set in at the never ending madness of the view finder memory of his life flashing over and over in his mind.

He leans up and forces away the memories of the dead, focusing instead on the label of a half-empty bottle of whiskey. He slides the picture into his shirt pocket, letting the tears flow down his cheeks, and tries to pace his breathing. Michael reaches down, takes the bottle in his hand, and enjoys a long, slow, deep pull. He swallows and exhales slowly as he turns off the CD player, managing to stand up and amble over to look out the window. The rain is still heavy, but the moon is full tonight, casting a bright light on the grass in the compound as his eyes scan the property. He leans heavily against the window frame, placing his mouth so close to the glass it begins to fog, obscuring his vision.

In his peripheral he catches the light gleaming off the trigger of his 1911 and it dances across the custom Celtic cross engraved grips, begging him to pick it up. He sighs with slight disgust as he remembers that by holding the firearm in his hand, it gives him a sense of purpose and a feeling of hope he cannot find without it, one he has become dependent upon. The smell of gun powder, the crack of the .45, and the never ending sight of rotting flesh has become his new home. Death, chaos, and gore have become his new temple and there is no forgiveness or escape. What was once good and pure in his life has been replaced or tainted with a sickness that cannot be cured, and that sickness was manmade.

His mind lingers for a split second at the thought of using the gun on himself and he shakes it clear almost instantly, remembering the job he has left to do, the people he was responsible for, and the God he gave his oath. Michael is the head of a last resort battle unit for his order, one that requires his constant diligence and guidance. The thread of courage that holds the order together, is at least in part, held together by the strength of his soul. His men, like most that know him, love and would die for him should it be required. Michael has done things thought impossible and come unscathed out of situations

even the most battle conscious would have deemed imminent doom.

That is after all the purpose of his squad and it was from this necessity born. They are often referred to in silent circles as Gods suicide squad; however in public and for politically correct reasons, they are referred by an ancient name, the Hospitaller. For those that do not know him, they merely respect him out of sheer fear from the stories that fly like wild fire amongst the compound, for all know his life is a trial born by blood and fire. Where ever he walks a wide berth is given, even amongst the top officials of the clergy, and his dreams are haunted by the whispers of his passing.

It was a quarter past 6:00 in the evening and the coldness of the window glass against his forehead seems to slowly bring him back under control. He looks down at the old worn wooden planks of the floor before the window and takes another long pull from the bottle. He walks over to an old chest beside his bed and gently runs his fingers over the archaic markings. The chest is covered in Latin and scrawled with the pictures of 13th century battles depicting knightly honor and chivalry. He slides the lid open, reaches in, and begins to pull forth several weapons from its depths.

He takes each weapon softly in his hands and lays it on the floor at his feet. He shakes his head hard to clear his mind and begins the nightly ritual by reciting his personal prayer, that which many a Knight before him has uttered. He drops to his knees and pulls forth the symbol of his order, a large silver medal, the one of St. Benedict which normally adorns his neck. The man that earlier was consumed by anger and grief is now in total control and displays the look of a battle hardened warrior. His face suddenly begins to lighten and a sense of calm serenity and divine purpose fills him as he bows his head. He places the medal to his scarred chest and softly begins to whisper,

“Almighty God, Eternal Father, Lord of Lords, have mercy upon me, a humble knight in Thy Divine Service. Oh Lord, I pray for Thy indulgence and blessings. Forget not Thine servant in his trials, nor his Order of Knighthood. I pray that Thy Will be done in all things, both great and small.

Let me always be worthy of Thee, let me not forget Thee in good times nor bad. Armor me with the armor of Thy Righteousness, give me the sword of Truth that I shall confound Thine enemies and be unto Thee a true knight.

O Lord, in my hour of need, be with me. Let me never forget my sacred and holy vows unto Thee, that I should not be prey unto demons and devils nor the dark things of this world.

Let me always be a beacon unto those in distress; never allow me to forget my obligation unto the homeless nor the poor: let me serve Thee and Thine Eternal Throne all the days of my life. Let me always remember the obligations that I have taken upon me. Lord, if it is Thine Will, let me serve Thee forever! If ever, oh Lord, I turn from Thee and this Order, let my name forever be cursed, may my spurs be broken and my body given unto demons to dwell with them forever in that Lake of Fire which Thou hast prepared for the ungodly. Power beyond Power, Pillar of Strength, Refuge of the Homeless, let me serve Thee for all the days of my life! Amen.”

With that the 6’5 man places the medal around his neck and reaches down at the weapons placed at his

feet. Now he begins to bless this night's choice of modern day swords, one at a time. He picks up the M14 with both hands, bows his head, and lifts the rifle slowly up in the air.

"Hearken I beseech Thee, O Lord to my prayers and design to bless with the right hand of Thy Majesty this sword with which Thy servant desires to be girded. That it may be a defense of churches, women, orphans, and all Thy servants against the scourge of undead. That it may be the terror and dread of all evil and that it may be just in both attack and defense, Amen."

He soon fell into a slow methodical ritual, blessing individual weapons one at a time, a practice which all those of his order partook. When the weapons had been blessed, he rose to his feet and began to dress in the standard uniform of his order. Extremely thick and double stitched brown leather pants came first, followed by his steel toed boots. His undershirt was quickly followed by a thin layer of extremely light chain mail, which has a large leather piece sown around the lower neck portion. Once the leather neck piece is laced up it will provide cover from the bottom of the neck to the bottom of the chin. On top of the mail he places an extremely well made and thick cloth shirt which is dyed a deep black, except for the mid-front and mid-back, which consists of a large white cross. He cinches his belt tight, adorns his gear, and stands rigid and unwavering while he murmurs his last prayer.

As the last word of his prayer is uttered a light knock is heard upon the door and a smile appears on the face of newly dressed battle priest. Paul always makes an early visit on this day of days, the anniversary of the death of Michael's wife and child. The large man covers the ground to the door in only 4 strides and hesitates momentarily before opening. He had hand selected Paul as his second in command as they fought side by side in the last great battle.

Besides, Michael always enjoyed the light hearted comedic nature of the man. 10,000 knights strong had entered the fray and alas only a handful were left that day upon the blood ridden and burning piles of corpses. The sacrifices that were made ten years ago were almost too much for the order to survive, however they had managed to save and secure one of the last of the cities, the new and aptly named Constantinople. The large bear like hands envelope the door handle and with a single fluid motion the door was open.

The two men stare at one another, lost in reading facial pantomimes, in a way only men who have seen death together and lived are capable of. The men shake in the old warrior style fashion by locking the hand firmly on the inside of the forearm and squeezing.

"Come inside friend and speak with me." The large man says in a deep voice.

"You are done with your rituals and blessings?" Paul states inquisitively and murmuring softly, "and the infamous annual Jack Daniels?"

"Many a slip between a cup and a lip Paul, many indeed my friend, besides it is approved by the clergy."

“I doubt that even the Devil himself would deny such a venerable request made by the tiny man before me.” Paul states in jest as he stands on the tips of his toes. The top of his head barely reaching the mid of the large mans chest.

With the short briefing of friendly banter the men enter the room and sit in the dark at the table by the window. It was quite sometime before a word was spoken. In fact as ritualized as these two men are, so had this day become for the both of them. Paul always sits in silence as Michael recounts the dealings of that fateful day, the first day.

Paul became somber and spoke softly, “Shall we begin?”

## **Chapter 1**

### **Born of blood and fire**

Michael’s eyes become focused on a point behind Paul’s head and almost seem to peer through the man as the story began.

“Sara and I had only been home from the hospital for a week after the birthing and that’s when the first outbreak began. I never even had time to listen to the radio or watch the TV that week. Sara had been really weak and ill and so much still needed to be done at the house. She was such a fire brand though and would barely let me do anything, finally I had to put my foot down and force her to rest. I remember Sara and little Jocelyn were sound asleep in the master bedroom and I decided to make a quick dash for the local grocery store, the old store my papaw Jack had run since I was a young child. I have carried this 1911 every day of my adult life and that day was no exception.

I didn’t much pay attention to the small group of people gathered at the other end of the property as I simply figured it was neighbors out playing with their children, flying kites, picnicking and so forth. Besides I was so caught up at re-reading and double checking the list for the store I almost ran into the truck while studying it. The drive was uneventful but the second I made it to the edge of town I knew something was terribly wrong. I could see the fires burning from nearly a half mile out and I did the exact opposite of what most folks in that situation would do. I stepped on the gas.

I made it to the corner of Main Street when I realized it was the old gas station that was completely engulfed in flames. I saw Craig the attendant lying on his stomach beside one of the two pumps and it appeared he had taken a direct blast of gas like napalm, more than likely while attempting to reach the shut off valve. His head was tilted to the left and although his hair had been burnt off and his clothes mingled with the smoke of smoldering flesh, I was able to identify what was left of his charred and peeling corpse. I continued to coast down Main Street as my eyes took in the sights, something reminiscent of the LA riots.

People were running and screaming down the streets in panic, while others carried handfuls of goods or

electronic equipment. I couldn't deduce however what the cause of this new found madness was. The smoke from the burning gas station almost completely covered the road in an eerie fog like fashion, a dense fog that can only be produced from the burning of gasoline and oil. I lightly increased the speed of the truck and that was when I felt the first jolt of several large bumps, causing me to grip the steering wheel tightly.

I thought nothing of the deep bounce of the truck at first, partly because I had forgotten the road was repaved only a few months before and partly because of my state of shock. I slowed to a stop to investigate. Rolling down my window I was instantly hit with the blaring sounds of store alarms and wild cries of panic, I remember literally wincing in audible pain. I hung my head out and peered back, not sure what I was expecting to see, maybe damage or large potholes. However, what I saw was something else entirely.

The trucks movement had cut a pathway through the smoke like a Chevrolet Moses through the red sea and as the white toxin began to wisp back from whence it came, I caught my first glimpse of the rough ride culprit. Bodies seemed to litter the street indiscriminately and my eyes strained to focus on their faces and clothing. It was no sooner that I had gotten a good view of the closest corpse, when the smoke seemed to pour back over my tracks consuming the townsmen in the false illusion of iridescent smog.

I quickly rolled up the window, swallowing the small amount of vomitus bile that had risen in my throat and began to move the truck with more speed as the thought of my grandfather's safety began growing in my mind. With each passing bump that my truck seemed to endure, causal waves of nausea flooded through every fiber of my consciousness. My papaws store came into view and I was no longer capable of restraining the churning sensation in my stomach. I stopped the truck and flung open the door just in time for the quick-mix pancake breakfast I had that morning to make its impromptu exit. The view of my papaws store consumed in flames was more than even my strong stomach could withstand and with several bouts of hard heaves I was able to regain my composure.

I leaned back into the truck and closed my eyes sinking deeply into the seat. I remember resting my face into my hands and slowly sliding my fingers down across the stubble. The stench of the vomit reverberating from the breath in my cupped palms almost caused me to wretch again. I forced what was left of my breakfast back down and gently closed the truck door. It was the sight of the grocery list reflecting against the truck windshield that caused me to throw the truck in reverse and bark the tires as I swung the vehicle around. At that moment I felt a state of urgency unlike any other I have ever known and it beckoned me to return to the place of my hearts keeping. That place was home.

Pure unadulterated panic struck me as I neared the drive way and saw the front door to the house was wide open. Several people were stumbling around the front bushes under the main window awning. I slammed on the brakes so hard I had a bruise for two days across my chest from the seat belt. My neighbor Roger, from a couple of houses down, was in my front yard, which was odd as normally I detested the man. In fact he was a real piece of garbage and consistently managed to cheat on his wife, abuse and neglect his children, and was a heathen in the first class sense of the word. He was the first

“one” I saw up close. A real good glimpse at the pathway our egocentric nature had driven us down.

Roger was a vain and arrogant man. The reason I say so, is it struck me odd for him to be out in his pajama pants and a bathrobe. He was the type of guy that primped himself more than a noble woman and wouldn't even go to the mailbox without an Armani suit on. I yelled his name over and over as I leaped from the truck into the front yard, closing my distance to the house. As you know my friend, he has not been the last of the evil I have seen in my days, but he was certainly the first. I remember the staggering and stiff nature of which he moved and turned to my voice. It wasn't the fluid movement a man makes when he turns using his waist, legs, and feet. He moved only from the waist and seemed to twist like a contortionist with too many vertebrae. It was at that point when I noticed his face.

His right orbital socket had been totally crushed and his eye seemed to hang from his head like some cheap Halloween parlor gag. His lower mandible jutted to the left side unnaturally as if he had taken a bat directly to the chin. I had trained most of my life at that point for a self defense situation, but I prayed to God every day I would never have to use it. The first thought that crossed my mind was that he had been attacked or hit by a car, obviously having a concussion, and this prompted me to run directly towards him to see if I could help.

I grabbed him by the shoulder and lightly spun him the rest of the way around. I don't quite remember what I was saying, but I sure remember what I saw. In his left hand he had an arm, one that looked as if it had been gnawed off of a small child, maybe the age of 10 or 12. It was at that point I drew my pistol, sliding my support hand across my stomach as I had been taught. By the time I was out of retention and my grip was complete, I barely heard the bark of the .45 or felt the recoil dissipate through my arms. The only thing I felt were the droplets of blood landing on my face and arms. I saw the back side of Rogers head open up like a flap as he crumpled to the ground and again I was forced to wretch. Unfortunately there was nothing left in my stomach and all that came out was pure bile.

I stood there for what seemed like an eternity as I looked in disbelief at the action I had just committed, paying no attention to the other people milling around in my yard. It was not that I hadn't done the right thing; it was that my mind had not yet registered what had taken place. I am ashamed to this very day of the 45 seconds or so it took me to think of my wife and child, not that it would have mattered, but none the less it haunts me. I ran through the open front door and saw the most gruesome sight these eyes have ever seen, right at the foot of my staircase. Sitting on the bottom step was one of Rogers's children, 8 year old Nancy. I remember Nancy as I had attended her birthday party recently, after much badgering from Sara I might add.

Nancy was sitting on the bottom step of the stairs, covered in blood, which was accentuated by the white summer dress she was wearing.

Blood coated the knee-high white socks she was wearing and the one white shoe she had on. She was resting her head between her arms which were cocked on her knees. She appeared to be sobbing by the jerking movements of her shoulders and semi-guttural sounds. I was in the process of saying her name when she looked up and that is when I realized she was not sobbing, but rather chewing. She was using

her entire upper body to ....."

Michael stopped momentarily and seemed to be stroking the handle of the 1911, an often nervous habit of the big man, noticed only by those close to him. Paul gently places a hand on his forearm as a gesture of empathy, one which Michael does not appear to even notice. Nor does he appear to notice the tears that begin to flow freely from his eyes, not the type of tears that come with sorrow, but the kind that flow without warning when the soul has been torn. He continues to speak and the apparent anger begins to grow in his tone.

"She was using her entire upper body as leverage. When she raised her head I could see the small strips of flesh that clung to her teeth and the blood that was dripping down her chin. It was then I realized what was in her arms and it was the leg of a child, an infant child. To this day I cannot explain why, but I instantly realized that the tiny leg which had become the girls feast was that of my new daughter, as no other family in the neighborhood had a new baby. I lunged and grabbed Nancy by the throat, slammed her to the floor, and began to shake her violently. Nancy began to snap her jaws together like an alligator towards my forearms.

I rose up and put all of my weight into dropping my forearm and elbow on the upper portion of her face. I am not sure how long I continued this trance like beating, but by the time I realized what was happening Nancy no longer had a head. In my anger I had crushed the entire upper portion of her skull and my forearm was bleeding profusely from the fragments of bone that lodged under the skin as I had proceeded to pound hard calcium into the floor.

The pain seemed to bring me back to self awareness and I must have climbed the stairs leading to the bedroom door before I could take a breath. The door was shut and it appeared to be locked as I fumbled with the knob, screaming and crying Sara's name all the while in a mix of fear and anger.

I backed up and kicked the door open with one large thrust, literally tearing it from the hinges. My heart sank, as on the end of the bed sat Sara with the remains of what I could only guess was our daughter's mangled body.

Rogers's wife lay on her stomach at the side of the bed, on the floor, with several holes in her torso and an exit wound the size of an orange on the back of her skull. Sara was mumbling and one hand contained a blooded .357 magnum, the other hand was trying to figure out how to put the pieces of our daughter back together. I called her name, but she was lost in the organs, limbs, ripped flesh, and partial skull that lay in her lap. I am not sure what she was saying over and over but it appeared to be a nursery rhyme, the one about hush little baby don't say a word.

I called to her several times. She looked up, but didn't even seem to recognize me, and just went about humming. I noticed the hammer was back on the .357 and suddenly I became frightened at the possibility of being shot due to her shock, in fact I was on the verge of losing my own mind as well. I called her by her pet name, which we had made for one another. Almost at once she snapped back to reality, recognizing who I was, but the recognition in her eyes was one of confusion. She softly muttered my name and I was able to discern amongst her mumbling and sobbing three simple words. "I am

sorry.”

She held the pieces of our daughter up to me as a child would a broken toy, begging with her eyes for me to fix it. She looked down in her hands and realized at last that her fumbling was merely in vain. She dropped the small pieces into her lap and I saw a single tear roll down her cheek as she smiled and mouthed the words, I love you. That was when she put the barrel of the .357 magnum to her temple and pulled the trigger.”

## **Chapter 2**

### **Indiscriminate Justice**

Michael doesn't even attempt to wipe away the tears he now acknowledges are there and the last sentence was spoken so softly that Paul had to lean in close to hear it in its entirety. The big man stares blankly out the window and states with passionate conviction.

“God I miss them Paul, more than I thought possible, and it has been 15 years to the day. Not an hour goes by that I don't relive those images in my mind and hear the echo of her cries pounding through the chasm of my soul.”

Paul rises to his feet and places his hand on Michael's shoulder, this time the big man looks up into Paul's eyes as he begins to speak.

“Friend, do not look to the physical realm for the answers and justification that you seek. God dictates to us directly about such divine reverence through scripture. In Romans it is said, “The righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they that are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit mind the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.”.

When are you going to stop punishing yourself like this? Although sinful, have you not gained righteous retribution against the scourge of this Earth for that which you have lost? Do you not sit before me a Knight and protector of the last known place for those who seek God's refuge? You question with anger and confusion the death which befell your wife and child, yet you ignore the positive answers created forth from it. In Romans, again in the 8th chapter verse 18 it goes on to state that; “for I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us.”

It was not the hand of God which has taken your family from you old friend, but it is the hand of God that has blessed you every day of your life. Think of the things you have accomplished since that day and the peoples lives you have secured and saved. These are the memories you should dwell upon and be thankful. Yet you continue down this path of mourning and sadness, all-the-while seeking questions that

have no answers.”

Michael rises to his feet and walks back to the window peering out. He begins to speak loudly but without anger or disrespect.

“Paul this is not the inferno, I am not Dante and you are not Virgil. Thus I do not need lectures on biblical scripture nor living a righteous life. The pain I hold in my heart is my burden to bear and no one else’s. I am not yet ready to let it go dear friend, I can’t.”

Paul starts for the door, places his hand on the knob, and speaks without turning.

“I am truly sorry for your loss brother, may God light the path before you both physically and spiritually. David, Sean, and I will be waiting for you in the commons; they send their prayers and empathy. Do not forget that Cardinal Dawn expects our presence during tonight’s blessing and communion. Most of the Clergy and populous will be present, we need to attend.”

Michael nods to himself as Paul opens the door and silently leaves making sure the door is closed tightly behind him. Michael sighs softly and takes the picture of his wife out one last time, placing it gently to his lips and kissing it lightly. He places the picture into the old wooden chest beside his bed, in a special pouch made specifically for this purpose. He picks up the M14 and places it across his back using an old leather NM sling. Secondly he grabs the 1911 and places it into the IWB holster in his pants and follows that by adorning his spare magazine tiles converted from a hand made leather belt. Lastly he picks up the 16 inch, full tang bowie knife with an ivory tusk handle and slides it slowly into the sheath. After scanning the room for anything he might have forgotten, he nods in satisfaction and heads to the door, intent on meeting his comrades in arms.

He opens the door and the light of the torches in the hallway cast those all too familiar dancing shadows on the wall and floor before him. He stares at the shadows briefly, watching them dance and twirl as a draft blows through the stone hall. The shuffling of feet from a distance can be heard and he closes the door to his room, a chill rushing across his body causes him to slightly shiver. He is thinking of the blood-spilling work tonight will bring, the fiery speeches of the Cardinal, and the day of all days. In his mind he screams to himself.

“Tonight they will pay. Every filthy, ungodly one of them will pay, and indiscriminate justice will be had by my hands.” With that he heads to the commons to meet with his comrades.

### **Chapter 3**

#### **A Family Necessity Born**

The commons is in the central most part of the compound and is quite a magnificent sight to behold. The marble artwork that greets the corners of the court yard and the fountain piece are awe striking in skill and size. The commons was engineered in the shape of a large square, measuring roughly 70 yards by 70 yards, and centered with a gargantuan fountain. The outer edge of the fountain itself is a conglomerate of angels in half plate armor, wielding various martial weapons from swords to spears, and constructed entirely of marble. From the center of the fountain, there protrudes a marble hand containing a stone tablet.

Water pours forth from the hand and over the tablet, trickling down into the large circle base below. Right below the surface of the water, and master crafted from the bottom of the base, are various small village like scenes. The fountain was constructed by several artists and masons, at the Cardinals request, representing the righteous power possessed by God, the army of angels that cast Satan down, and the knowledge passed to the knights as the last physical protection of civilized man. The knights are represented by the stone tablet which contains several commandments of chivalry on one side and the Ten Commandments on the other.

At each of the four corners of the court yard, there is an individual marble statue, each one standing an enormous 40 feet tall and spanning an 8-10 foot breadth. The statues are of four Arch angels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, and Uriel. The base support for the room is large rounded pillars, between which fig trees are planted. In total there are 30 pillars on each side and thus 15 fig trees to match. The ceiling itself is open to the night sky and exposed to all weathering conditions. The floor is made of large square cuts of marble which are either etched with various quotations of biblical scripture or carved to depict various scenes of the bible and battle.

Michael nears the commons and can hear the loud clang of steel upon steel, mixed with various laughing and sounds of battle. He knows without looking that it has to be David and Sean as only those two are capable of constant practice, driven by the chastisement of Paul no doubt. Besides, amidst the glory of some of the finest surviving architecture and art, only children would have the lack of patience for it and instead find time to spar. Michael laughs to himself softly as he nears the entrance to the commons, raises his head to the heavens, and whispers softly.

“Thank you God for the depth of my patience as any less would certainly not match the mischievous nature of their youth.”

David and Sean were barely teenagers the day that Michael had found them. They were distraught, feral, and dehydrated in a small town to the South named Clearwater. Clearwater had been attacked without warning and without mercy. It is becoming more and more frequent that senseless death is not always brought from the foul wretchedness spit up by the dregs of hell, but also by those men still living who continue to worship mammon. A large band of scavengers and thieves had wandered upon the town by accident and decided to take the advantage which night-fall had provided.

They attacked the peaceful town of Clearwater without remorse and without restraint. They spent an

entire day and night murdering, raping, and pillaging the town nearly out of existence. The heathen barbarians had purposely set fire to large buildings in hopes of attracting the dark evil that plagues this land, hoping they would finish the job that the barbarians could not. However they had only succeeded in burning the majority of it to the ground. The two boys had spent nearly a week fending off their loved ones, neighbors, schoolmates, and kinsmen as their bodies returned from the dead in that soulless form all too familiar to me.

With the exception of the two boys, a few hundred town's people and hand full of buildings, all of Clearwater had been wiped out. Michael had not been sent there on duty, but rather personal business to barter for much needed ammunition and supplies. Unfortunately he had arrived a few days after the battle and upon seeing the damage, rushed immediately to his friend Gunter's house. Gunter had been a master weapons smith and head of his guild. With Gunter, Michael had not only shared many a barter, but many a night of good hearted cheer and friendship.

He had discovered the boys behind Gunter's house, finishing a grave for his old friend. Apparently he had been teaching the boys basic weaponry and smithy work. David was a large and stout lad, where as Sean was quite thin and agile. Their entire family had been murdered and the two had apparently fled to Gunter's house for arms and shelter, only to find the old man lying gutted on the floor with his entrails spread about.

The two spent the next several days helping the town fight, mourn, and bury the dead, coming back to deal with Gunter last. Out of respect the boys had trapped Gunter in his bedroom, as he was like a grandfather to the young lads, and they had not the heart to deal the final blow. In these dark times the dead seem to have a way of coming back to plague the living, and in more ways than one.

When Michael arrived at Gunter's, the lads had recognized his order by the clothing he wore and begged him to help them dispatch the late weapons master. Michael would do his duty without regret or hesitation, as to him it was a last show of respect for a much already missed friend. By eliminating the foul thing Gunter had now become, Michael would be able to take comfort in the knowledge that Gunter's soul was then free to travel on to judgment and his body capable of being laid to rest in peace.

Michael bade the two boys to wait outside, more than anything because he felt they had seen enough pain and death in the past several days to last a life time. The boys were all too happy and thankful for not having to participate in dispatching Gunter's living corpse. Michael opened the door to the two room, 1 story house, and entered slowly, not sure of what to expect. Light spilled through the cracks of the shutters that covered the windows and the large man closed the door tightly behind him.

Huge splintered pieces of wood littered the floor from broken tables and chairs. Michael smiled fondly as the room appeared to show the signs of heavy battle, bullet holes, splattered blood on the walls and floor, and large gashes in the support beams obviously made from martial weapons. He relished in the fact that the old man died with much honor and judging by the looks of the room, had taken at least a handful of the \*\*\*\*\*s with him. He expected none the less.

He carefully crossed the kitchen area, moving towards the back of the room, trying to remain as silent as possible. Soon he stood before the bedroom door and already the stench of rotting flesh and dried blood could be smelt from that which lay behind it. He dropped to one knee, drew the 1911 sword from its holster, made the sign of the cross on his chest, and murmured a small Celtic prayer.

“God to enfold me, God to surround me, God in my speaking, God in my thinking. God in my sleeping, God in my waking, God in my watching, God in my hoping. God in my life, God in my lips, God in my soul, God in my heart. God in my sufficing, God in my slumber, God in mine ever-living soul, God in mine eternity.”

With that the large man rose to his feet, took a single step back, and kicked open the bedroom door with one thrust. Light sprang forth from the bedroom window, momentarily blinding him, and then suddenly the light was choked off. His vision quickly settled and Gunter’s rotting corpse stood between him and the all too precious sun. Gunter had apparently taken a sword to the gullet as his intestines hung from a large gash in the midsection. The upper portion of his leg has been sliced open, revealing large hanging flaps of what were once his quadriceps.

The green and blue tone of the skin showed obvious signs of previous lividity and the body had already begun to bloat. Multi-colored fluid was leaking from the mouth, nose, eyes, and ears making the man almost unrecognizable. He searched hard to make eye contact with the foul creature, but the eyes had already begun to sink into the skull. Michael raised his sword slowly, aiming for the center of the forehead, and pulled the trigger. Gunter collapsed onto the floor and the large Knight quickly blessed the wretched body.

After the burial Michael spent the next several days feeding, looking after the boys, and taking a particular liking to their free spirit, hard work, and willingness to learn. David and Sean always seemed to hang on ever word that he spoke and every action that he took. What could one expect of young and rambunctious boys in the presence of a legendary Hospitaller warrior? Over those several days Michael had not only taken a deep liking of the boys, but an inherent trigger had been set off inside him, one that compelled him on a subconscious level to look after these lads full time.

The name of this phantom trigger was called fatherhood, and something he thought he had been robbed of long ago. For the past 7 years Michael has been personally training the young boys and they look to him as a father. Unfortunately for Paul, they view him as the grumpy and antagonistic grandfather. Five years into their training the boys had become excellent fighters in both body and mind, out matching any at the top of the regular training classes, including some of the instructors.

The boys did not have any taste for modern weapons and relied totally upon those of a martial nature for their offense and defense. David, being the larger of the two, prefers to battle with a large two handed great axe, spiked at the end, and wears full plate reinforced armor. Sean prefers to fight two handed as well, however wielding a short sword in one hand and a war hammer in the other. Sean

prefers the reinforced leather which provides his slender build more agility. Michael truly thinks of them like his sons and they bring forth joy, pain, and irritation in him that only ones child can. When people pass and see these four men together, the sense of family can be seen and even more so, it can be felt. Such is the strength and magnetism of their bond. It is not a family of relation, but much like their order, a family out of necessity was born.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Fallen From Grace**

“Lads!” Michael exclaims as he enters the commons.

The two boys seem to stop mid-stroke, staring deeply into one another’s eyes as their chests heave up and down, both putting their entire bodies behind leaning their weapon into one another. Michael can tell the boys have been sparring for some time as he notices the sweat and beginning stages of practice fatigue. Sean pushes his weapon hard off the edge of David’s battle axe, producing that all too familiar “scccching” sound.

Paul smacks both the boys on the back, in gratulatory fashion, as the three smile at one another. Michael closes the distance to the group, barely remembers to wipe the smile off of his face, and makes a mental note to give Paul a lengthy lashing for creating such a disturbance in this place of meditation.

Aside from the feel of their calloused hands on one another’s forearm and the look in their faces, these men are not what you would call fond of physical affection, more or less public displays of it. Michael was taken by surprise and nearly fell as the boys leaped upon him, squeezing him tightly. Not a word was spoken, however Paul’s heart began to lighten as he saw the big mans face change from that of shock and surprise, to that of eye closing acceptance.

“I am fine lads, just fine. Now get off me before I give you a practice session that you won’t soon forget.”  
The big man said in jest

As the two boys let go of the man, Michael placed a hand on each of their faces, exuding pride and happiness to them. With the speed of a striking snake, Michael slid his hand from their face to the back of their necks, pulling them both down into the bend of his shoulder in an ever infamous head lock. With every whine and struggle the boys make, the large man increases the pressure of the choke hold. Michael’s face changes to that of dead seriousness as he begins to speak lightly.

“Now Paul, being the eldest of the group, I assume that what I “SAW” was not encouragement from you, but rather a futile attempt to prevent the boys from continuing on with their rambunctious activity? One which they apparently ignored out of disrespect.”

Paul makes eye contact and bows his head slightly in apologies, smiling all the while. Michael places just the right amount of pressure on the boys as he again continues to speak.

“As for you two! I do not expect to ever see you sparring, yelling, fighting, pushing, hitting, jumping, running, or anything else that would disturb this place of meditation. Do you understand? How about it boys, let’s hear you promise.”

The boys suddenly seem to be 15 again as they push against the big mans elbow and forearms, trying to free themselves of the vice grip that was slightly tightening.

“Yes, we promise, we promise!” The boy’s exclaim in unison. Michael releases his grip on the lads and they quickly bolt a short and safe distance, just incase further reprisals were to be had. The three stare at each other sternly and each knew the facade could not hold for long. Sean was the first to break a smile, David was soon to follow, and coming closely in third was Michael.

David suddenly became serious. “What is our job going to be tonight?”

The big man became suddenly somber, leaning closer and speaking quietly. “I must say that for the first time in 10 years boys, I have absolutely no idea. I know that we are to make an appearance at communion tonight and afterwards we are to speak with the Cardinal in his office.”

Michael raises his hand to quiet the boys before they could retort; he already knew what they had to say. Any parental figure that does not expect groaning or protest at the announcement of attendance to long winded and fiery church sermons apparently has the children of Abraham.

“I don’t like this anymore than you guys do, but let us wait and see what the Cardinal has to say at the meeting. We all know the disdain he has for me personally, but I have to assume the job is of the utmost importance, thus requiring a high level of secrecy. Gather your gear and we shall head to the temple for the sermon. Hopefully the Cardinal will not make our ears bleed, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. We shall stand as always, in back of the congregation, and maintain our tradition. We bow and prostrate ourselves only before God, follow my lead and watch each others back.”

The boys shot a short glance to one another in confusion at the orders Michael had given, however they have learned over time not to question his judgment, but rather simply listen and do as they are told. The four men look at each other with understanding, Paul and the boys begin to gather and adorn their gear. Once the men had their necessary belongings, they immediately set out for the temple and the sermon.

The four men walk briskly, side by side, until they near the entrance to the temple and fall into single file. Michael immediately understood the magnitude of this sermon, as already there is what appears to be a great attendance. He is recognizing clergy, Templars, Hospitallers, guild masters, and people of all

working classes. A group of Templars pass by the four men, bowing in respect. Michael returns this gesture and speaks softly at mid-bend.

“God be with you pauvres chevaliers du temple (poor knights of the temple).”

Michael spoke out of the deepest respect, as the Templars make sacrificial vows of poverty, owning nothing but their weapons and armor. Their two sects have never seen eye to eye on code of conduct, battle strategy, mission necessity, or training. However they held great admiration for one another, unlike their previous brethren, and would die for one another if necessary.

The temple archway is protected by the Cardinals personal Praetorian Guard, as is the Cardinal. 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year they surround the man. The guard is notorious for harassing various members of the Templars and Hospitallers alike, simply because their cardinally granted powers make them arrogant and foolish. The Cardinal prefers the protection of the Praetorian to that of the orders, and for good reason, it provides him a sense of power, control, and separation.

Unfortunately the condescending \*\*\*\*\*s even dress in the garb of their Roman ancestors and serve similar functions in protection and law enforcement. There is one unit in the order that no one, including the Praetorian, dare to challenge or rebuke, and that unit was Michael's. Not only was it known that his unit was far superior in training and killing proficiency, but that their large leader did not respect the Cardinal or the institution of "his" church. Thus to the Hospitaller, the Praetorians power was as worthless as the paper the Cardinal had printed it on.

As the four men climb the steps to the temple, Michael notices Praetorian Guards roughing up several elderly Templar monks, the men must have been in their 70's. He was able to deduce that the guards were attempting to disarm the old men, apparently at their refusal. Michael turns his head around and shoots a glance to the men in single file behind him, one which was all too familiar. The three men behind him split off into an attack pattern, forming the head of a spear with their bodies.

As Michael reaches the top step, two things immediately take place. One, Sean and David stay several steps down, watching the flanks and rear. Paul turns completely backwards, following Michael's footsteps like a shadow, and then splits off to gain a position at the rear of the three Praetorian. Second, the eldest of the Templars recognizes the large man immediately, and their eyes lock. The old man was using his to express a dire need for assistance, and Michael was using his to express sympathy.

It never ceases to amaze people at how fast the big man can move, it is always a blur, and it is always for keeps. This day was no exception and sure to be added to the thousand stories told of him over and over again. There were three Praetorian in all, and the one up front was in desperate need of being made an example of. Michael steps behind the old men, and was hoping to use intimidation as a means of resolving this conflict peacefully. He peers at the Praetorian captain with a gaze that would make a priest say God Damn. Straightening his back and sticking out his chest, he was displaying all that his 6'5 giant-frame has to offer.

Apparently the Praetorian was not the brightest lad, more than likely why he was working the door to the temple, and obviously new to the job at that. He does not recognize Michael or the seal of his order; nor does he seem to be bothered by the large mans gaze and apparent anger.

The Praetorian captain smiles at Michael and starts to speak, definitely living up to every one of Michael's expectations.

"I suggest you move along Hospitaller before I breaaauuggghhhhh." This was all the captain had managed to say before it was replaced by a gasping and gurgling sound. It appears he had intended to break something of Michaels, of which the large man was apparently displeased. Michael always has a hot temper when it comes to threats, and this fool was no different. Michael's hands move with blinding speed between the old men, and catch the Praetorian by the throat. He slowly, and deliberately, begins to lift the man off the ground by his neck. The Praetorian wraps what he can of his hands around the big man's wrists and struggles in vain. It was routine, but in this case unnecessary, for the boys to protect the flanks or Paul to stealth in from the Praetorians rear.

The guard to the left of Michael simply moves back and watches the show; apparently he knew of this man and wisely made the decision he did not want any similar treatment to which his captain was now receiving. The guard to the right stumbles backwards a few steps and bumps directly into Paul. Paul quickly places the point of a Scottish dirk into the right side of the mans rib cage, just enough to cause a slight yelp. Apparently he was also more intelligent than his captain, as he did not attempt to squirm or move. Michael lifts the man he is choking to his eye level, a good foot off of the floor, pulling him close enough to smell his stench, a mix of fear and sweat. He is speaking so softly it is almost a whisper.

"Are you familiar with the bible Praetorian? There is a verse that comes to mind in dealing with men of your variety. I can tell by the way you are treating these old men that apparently your ignorance is only superseded by your charm. You think you possess knowledge, power, status, and ability? You are sadly mistaken Praetorian, I assure you. These men you are harassing, the ones that stand before you, are men who spent a life time serving God, Constantinople, and its people. Men who have spent their lives prostrating themselves before the all mighty, seeking only to spread good deeds. You think you have power Praetorian? True power is the fact that I might continue to let you breathe if I so decide it. If I ever see you so much as glance hard in the direction of ANY man of order, I assure you, I will inflict pain upon you long after you beg me for death."

With that, the large man let go of the Praetorians neck, and his body fell to the ground. The man gags and gasps for air as his face slowly begins to turn a color other than purple. Michael towers over the captain's body and notices out of his peripheral that Paul slowly eases his grip on the guard he has been threatening, and pushes him forward to the captain. Michael looks down at the man still gasping and speaks with angry fervor.

"Eo quod in multa sapientia multa sit indignatio et qui addit scientiam addat et laborem, Ecclesiastes

1:18, (For in much wisdom is much grief; and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.) Consider yourself properly educated in the ways of power and respect. I apologize for the sorrow and pain you now feel, having gained a truthful understanding of your place in this hierarchy and embarrassment in front of your men. I pray that you will remember this day, for it shall make you wiser. Knowledge often comes with a great price Praetorian, and some comes only by way of pain. Never forget captain, you are merely a lap dog to he who makes chains. Learn your place or I will learn it for you."

With that Michael turns to the old men, who are now almost frightened in awe, and bows to them out of respect. "Please allow us to escort you into the temple to avoid any other, "unnecessary", conflicts or misunderstandings." He says calmly

"H-h-how will you be able to explain this to the Cardinal? Will you not fall out of his good graces young man?" woefully asks the elder Templar

"One could say that I have fallen from the graces of the Cardinal quite some time ago friend. Fortunately for us however, I am still in the good graces of God." Michael retorts with a smile

He takes the old man by the arm, encourages the others to come, and begins to lead him through the temple doors. Following closely behind the other Templar elders, is Paul, David, and Sean, not a single weapon is sheathed until all were through the doors. The Praetorian never calls for help as they are too busy seeing to the much lessened health, and pride, of their Captain.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Tables Turned**

Michael leads the old men into the temple and past the last door into the auditorium. If any single area in Constantinople can rival the commons for beauty, it is definitely the inner sanctum of the temple. The temple is built of classical origins, containing huge stained glass windows, large statues of Christ, and a domed top. The old Templars bow and give their gratitude as they move towards the front of the auditorium. Michael and his group head to the Hospitaller section, in the very back of the room, shaking hands and greeting the others of their order. The auditorium is already reaching full capacity and the temple keepers are scrambling to find more pews and chairs to line the aisles.

A hush begins to fall over the congregation as several rows of Praetorian Guard file in and begin to line the front of the auditorium. They stand in the shape of a semi-circle around the podium, allegedly to provide total protection for the Cardinal. Amongst the juxtaposition of the Praetorian, a single man in a

white cassock, draped with purple vestments, begins to make his way to the podium. Almost in perfect unison the congregation knells at his entrance. There is only one exception to this show of so called respect and that was the Hospitallers, of which not a single knell or bow could be seen.

“Rise my children and be seated.” The Cardinal says with a wave of his hand as he continues to speak.

“Let us begin this evening’s service with a blessing, a blessing from one of our more predominant figures and leaders of the Hospitallers, Michael.”

Soft murmurs arise from the congregation as most turn to look at the large man in the back of the auditorium in full battle dress. Never before has the Cardinal allowed another to begin ceremony, but Michael never misses a beat, much to the surprise of his companions. It is not that Michael is prepared for such an incident to take place, but that he would rather be dead than seem uncomfortable or foolish in the eyes of the people; besides he is a master under pressure. He begins to speak with a booming voice.

“Greetings countrymen, clergy, and fellow brothers at arms, it does my heart good to see this room filled. I would like to thank the Cardinal for allowing me start the ceremony this evening and for the opportunity to pass my humble words to you all. It has been 10 long years since the great battle was fought to found this city, I know for I was there.”

The last line was a direct snub at the Cardinal who has only acquired his position in the last 5 years and was by no means part of the group of men who shed their blood and lost their lives to found Constantinople. The Cardinal had come from a noble family, one concerned with petty internal bickering and quick grabs for power after the fall. Michael leaves his position at the back of the auditorium and walks the isles as he continues to speak.

“As I walk these isles I see the backbone of this great city and it is I who am grateful to you. I see bakers and butchers, teachers and healers, scholars and priest, warriors and farmers. It replenishes my spirit to walk amongst you and see that families are being made and tended too, new generations being spawned.”

Michael stops beside what appears to be a peasant family with a young daughter and eyes her intently. Though he is a large man the child never exudes fear. Michael has an infectious smile. He reaches down and scoops the child up into his arms, tickling the girl for a moment as he continues to speak.

“The laughter of a child my friends, does more for this old warrior than a thousand slain in battle. This beautiful young girl is the future of Constantinople, as are you and all of your families.”

Michael places the small girl back down beside her mother and father, scuffing the top of her head and continues to walk the isles increasing the sound of his voice.

“I am not one that was given the gift of a poetic tongue and I am by no means as educated in scripture as the clergy. I am a warrior. My gifts are seen on the battlefield amongst the death and carnage that is

spawned there, not on the floor of a temple. I will however offer you scripture that my order and my self hold dearly to our hearts. I look at you and I see good hearted people of all walks of life. I care not what you have done in your past, so long as you live for good in the now. I know that some of you question your past sufferings, stamina, perseverance, and even your faith. I am going to speak from the book of 1st Peter chapter 3 versus 8-22.”

Michael speaks from memory and with the confidence of a man who has said these versus aloud to himself a thousand times.

“Finally, be all like-minded, compassionate, loving as brothers, tenderhearted, courteous, not rendering evil for evil, or reviling for reviling; but instead blessing; knowing that to this were you called, that you may inherit a blessing. He who would love life, and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil, and his lips from speaking deceit. Let him turn away from evil, and do good. Let him seek peace, and pursue it. For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears open to their prayer; but the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.

Now who is he who will harm you, if you become imitators of that which is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness sake, you are blessed. Don't fear what they fear, neither be troubled. But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts; and always be ready to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason concerning the hope that is in you, with humility and fear: having a good conscience; that, while you are spoken against as evildoers, they may be disappointed who curse your good manner of life in Christ. For it is better, if the will of God should so will, that you suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

Because Christ also suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring you to God; being put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which he also went and preached to the spirits in prison, who before were disobedient, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, while the ark was being built. In it, few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water. This is a symbol of baptism, which now saves you - not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, angels and authorities and powers being made subject to him.

Rejoice in the blessings we have been provided and the good fellowship of those who surround you now. This is the city of light! It is bright not because of the safety the soldiers provide or the spiritual guidance of the clergy. It is bright because it is made up of the hearts of men, the hearts of good and honest men. Do not doubt yourselves in these dark times and above all, be kind to one another. For in the end one another is all we have.”

Michael walks back to the rear of the room, designated for his order. The end of the speech silence is broken with a single unified battle cry from the Hospitallers. The Cardinal stands at a loss for words, more than likely due to the failure of his plan to embarrass the large man. He attempts to recover by leading the congregation in prayer. The cardinal speaks.

“Thank you Michael for your courageous and inspiring words, you are a continual testament to the best that Constantinople has to offer. Let us pray. Dear God, thank you for allowing us all to gather here today in safety, in your city, and in your name. Watch over this congregation in their lives and daily activities. May you continue to bless this city and its inhabitants. In your name I pray Amen.” The Cardinal continues to speak.

“I called this special session to inform the members of this city of a most grievous problem that has come to my attention. I received word today that our sister city of Tsargrad has come under a most vicious attack.”

The entire congregation erupts into a flurry of gasps, whispers, and verbal panic. The Cardinal raises his hand to quiet the chaos of the crowd and continues to speak.

“Tsargrad is currently under siege by the undead and I am unsure as to how long they can successfully hold out. It is possible, that as I speak, the city has already fallen to the hordes of the damned. I am making it adamantly clear that we will do anything within our power to not only aid our sister city, but save her from falling prey to the clutches of the dead. I am currently activating all military personnel and request the presence of the head of each order in my private chambers immediately.

Rest assured that there is no imminent threat to Constantinople, however we shall double the current guard and defense as well as restrict movement through out the country side and during evening hours. I ask for each and every one of you to pray for the orders who are about to go into battle and for the general citizenry of Tsargrad. Have no fear you shall all remain safe and God willing, we will be triumphant and victorious in battle. Orders please report to your heads. Guildsman please report to your masters, and as soon as possible, order heads please report to me. That is all.”