

## Chapter 1

It all began on a day soaked in blood.

A terrible storm brewed off the coast of Rogwallow in Wessex, turning the skies in the south black and everything else a twisted, roiling grey. Heavy winds buffeted the small church house I ministered to, causing the soggy roof timbers to shudder under their force and the unlatched wooden door to slam shut over and over again. The faint scent of incense had long ago given way to the pungent stench of warm blood and entrails spilled across the coarse stone floor. And the knife at my neck was cold, sharp and desperate for another victim.

The raiders came shortly after dawn, bringing death and destruction on a day meant for joy. They were mercenaries from Kent, mostly, though they'd been hired by a Frank whose name I didn't know and whose motivations I didn't understand at the time. Even though the weather delayed their attack briefly, we were still caught by surprise, and most of the men in town barely had the time or the wits to defend themselves. Too many of us were dulled by the celebration the night before, and that was to be our undoing.

The young girl next to me, forced to her knees and wearing nothing more than her shift, sobbed uncontrollably, shivering from the cold and no doubt her abject fear about what would happen next. Her name was Aedre, she was fifteen years of age, and she should have been married that midday. Instead, she'd watched her family, who'd sought refuge in the church when the raiders came, brutally murdered right in front of her. Then her meager jewelry was stolen and her clothes were stripped from her body as the four men holding us laughed. They hadn't despoiled her yet, although I could tell by their tone that would happen soon. And there I sat, a young man dressed only in priestly garb, weak and helpless, barely past twenty years old, forced to watch while my adopted village was destroyed and its people ravaged. For all I knew at the time, Aedre and myself were the only people from Rogwallow still alive. But even though I thought I'd seen the worst these raiders could show me, I was to be horrified yet again when Caenwyld arrived.

I didn't know him at the time – I learned his name a little bit later – but when the door opened and he walked in to that church, I knew without a doubt he was a wolf in sheep's clothing. Under a heavy fur-lined cloak, he wore a simple brown robe with a heavy gold cross

necklace, and he presumed that made him a priest. He was old, well past forty, and thin, with a gaunt face and a long nose. But his dark, deep-set eyes made me remember the cold in the air and I shivered uncontrollably.

“God’s glory surrounds us today,” he said grandly as he approached us with a limp. He didn’t seem injured, so I suspected it was something he already suffered from. “We have done His work here in Rogwallow, and we have done it well. He favors us all.” He gave me a cursory glance, sizing me up immediately as someone to be ignored, at least for the moment. His lust for the girl, however, was obvious. His eyes never left Aedre as he approached and roughly caressed her face, ignoring her cringing and wiping the tears from her cheek in what he must have thought was a caring gesture.

Please Lord, I prayed, spare her what’s about to come. Had I a harder soul in my youth I would have wished death upon her just then, because that would have been merciful compared to what Caenwyld had in mind.

"She is quite beautiful for someone born of this hovel," he continued. "Perhaps we should give thanks to God for letting us look upon an angel such as her." His caressing suddenly turned into a rigid grasp under her chin. "What is your name?"

She continued to sob, and avoided looking at him but he lifted her chin, forcing her gaze up.

"Your name, girl." His tone became harsh. "I like to know the name of those whom I judge."

She cried even harder, and I could see Caenwyld losing patience.

"Her name is Aedre," I said, my voice dry and raspy. "She was to be married today."

He turned to me, and I cowered because I saw the devil in his black eyes.

"Why is he still alive?" Caenwyld asked, every word laced with venom.

The raiders looked uncomfortable at this question and didn't answer right away.

"Answer me!"

Finally, one spoke.

"No one wanted to kill a priest, m'lord."

Caenwyld stared at them furiously, and I thought for sure he'd order my neck slit and be done with it. But then his gaze softened and he looked me over, his eyes stopping on the crude leather crucifix I wore around my neck. I thought at the time that his thoughtful expression meant he'd decided to take pity on me. Nowadays, though, I think he was only being prudent for a man in his position.

"As well you shouldn't," he told them. "He is a man of God, and killing a man of God without good cause would destroy the favor He has bestowed upon us today. But that doesn't mean we let him roam free." His eyes took hold of mine, and so help me, I couldn't look away. "God saw fit to see your followers destroyed for their crimes today, boy, so I wouldn't presume to take any chances with your life. The only thing a priest truly needs in this world is his tongue. So keep your mouth shut and you may get through this with everything else on your body as it still is."

I wasn't a priest, not a real one, but there was no sense in explaining that to these men. Regardless, I believed his threat completely. I'd heard stories in Rome about men like this, who amused themselves through suffering. I'd seen beggars in that great city with their eyes pierced, or their hands and feet cut or burned or mutilated beyond use, all for the sake of cruelty. There were moments in my youth, when I'd thought myself a true Christian, where I imagined being ready to sacrifice myself for God. But at that moment I knew I was too weak to give my life for anyone. I would stay quiet, and I would keep my limbs.

"For now, though," he turned to Aedre, "I shall see if this girl is as pure as she claims. You do know, Aedre, that it's a sin to marry if you're not clean?" Caenwyld leaned in close and lifted the bottom of her shift, showing her legs. I don't know how much more of her he revealed because I looked away. "How many other men have known you?"

"None," I heard her whisper between gulping sobs. No one spoke right away, and the only other sound in the church was the patter of raindrops on the roof. Everyone surely ogled the girl, but I kept my eyes fixed on a clump of blood-stained tulips and ribbon laying on the floor to my left, ashamed at my uselessness.

"We shall see. Take her out back," he said to the lout holding her by the arm. "I will test her myself, and we'll see if God's glory favors me today as well." Someone chuckled and I turned back to see the raider lift her up effortlessly, and drag her out the back door. Aedre kicked and struggled the whole way but it made no difference against a man twice her size.

"As for you," Caenwyld glared at me, and my body became numb with fear. "Perhaps if you behave through all of this, you can have her when the rest of us are done." The other three raiders laughed, but I barely heard them over Aedre's screaming as her captor dragged her to the goat pen behind the church.

I'd prayed countless times that morning, but all of them had been from fear and panic – an

instinctual reaction to seeing your death approach. This time, though, I truly prayed for God to intervene, to ignore my past transgressions and right these wrongs. And even though I didn't believe he would answer my call, not after everything I'd just witnessed, I had to try. It was the only weapon I had.

*Be strong and courageous, do not be afraid or tremble...for the Lord, your God is the one who goes with you. He WILL NOT fail you or forsake you.*

Caenwyld walked out after them, and when that door closed behind him I'd never felt more helpless, worthless or alone in my life.

*Please, Lord! Do not forsake us! Do not forsake her!*

I began to cry. I don't know why it took so long, but the realization that I could do nothing, or would do nothing, caused me to break down into tears. Despair filled my soul, and I wondered why I expected anything different. This was the way of the world. Perhaps Caenwyld had been right. Perhaps God's glory really was with him that day.

But then I heard a scream. A man's scream.

It came from just outside the front door, and the room immediately became still and hushed. The raiders with me listened carefully for another sound, but none came. They started to smile then, probably thinking that some unlucky villager trying to reach the church had fallen, and my hopes fell even further.

Then the door flew open, and a man walked in. He wore a long, brown woolen coat, a wet, mud-smearred linen tunic and brown wool trousers with worn leather boots. His straight black hair fell down past his shoulders, and a thin beard covered his grim face. He was tall, with a warrior's hearty build and the steady gait of a prince, but nothing else marked him as regal save for one thing. In his right hand he held a brilliantly decorated and polished long sword, covered with streaks of blood.

"Who tha' hell are you?" one of the raiders shouted.

The man walked halfway across the room and stopped, staring at each of them in turn. He looked my way last, the knife at my throat capturing his attention. I didn't think much of it at the time, but he barely glanced at the bodies scattered about the floor except to step around the ones that had fallen in his path. If he did notice them, he didn't show it in his cold, distant eyes.

"I am called Arkael," he said, his voice clear and deliberate. "You have brought darkness to a holy place. By my oath, I will see it cleansed."

At first, no one spoke. Then one chuckled, and another laughed. Even the brute holding me down give a few hoots.

"Cleansed?" The first raider spoke again, a huge smile on his square, bearded face. He took a few steps forward. "Now wouldn't that be a pretty sight. The one o' you and the three o' us. How about instead, I gut you, cut off your hands, stick out your eyes, and then make off with that pretty little sword a' yours?"

Arkael watched them without a hint of emotion. If he was afraid, worried, cautious, or even amused, he didn't show it. If anything, I'd have guessed he looked bored.

"I've no doubt that your soul is damaged," he said, with an air of disinterest, "but you are not the one who brought me here today. Free that man," he glanced at me, "and leave this place, and I will spare you."

I watched him in awe, staring like a love-struck child. I had prayed to God for help, and this man, Arkael, appeared. I didn't know if he could save us, or if he even had a chance against these three mercenaries, but for a moment at least, I believed.

Aedre screamed again, muffled this time.

"Help her!" I shouted, hoping I hadn't put my faith into a madman. I was rewarded for my outburst with a solid thump to the top of my head.

"Shut up!" the brute said, no longer amused.

The first raider also tired of the game. "Grab his hand! He loses a finger for every word he speaks from here on," he told my captor, who pushed my face into the wet floor and pulled my left arm up behind me, grabbing my palm in one meaty hand and pressing the knife against my pinky. I grunted in pain but I didn't dare speak. The raider turned to Arkael. "And you, if you don't toss that sword over here and leave, we'll pry it from your dead hands. And we won't be gentle."

"So be it," Arkael said, with a hint of disappointment. He held his weapon ready. "The sword is yours if you can take it."

The other two raiders stepped forward cautiously. They were arrogant, but they weren't stupid. Men who carried swords like the one Arkael had in his possession usually knew how to use them. But their caution made little difference. The first raider lunged forward, and so help me God the only thing my eyes saw was Arkael's sword plunged into his gullet. I never saw the parry, or the counter-thrust, although I think I heard the echo of blades clanging together, but to

this day I'm not convinced I didn't make that sound up only because I expected to hear it. Arkael pulled the sword free and the raider fell to the ground, his eyes bulging, his body twitching, and blood pouring out from his wound.

It took several moments for anyone else in the room to realize what happened, myself included. But as soon as I was able to convince myself that I'd just seen that man die, I watched Arkael step forward and do exactly the same to the second. I was ready for it this time, though, and I witnessed what could only be described as the will of God. His arm struck forward with the speed of a snake, like those I saw in Rome who could snatch a mouse in their jaws faster than the eye could follow. The same happened here. I only saw him as a blur.

The second raider fell to his knees, and then collapsed to the ground, and Arkael turned, fixing his gaze on the brute holding me down. I felt his strength wane, and he let go of my hand, and then the dagger fell to the ground, clanging off the stone.

Arkael motioned to the front door with his sword.

"Leave," he said. "Now."

The brute fled, and truth be told, I wished I could run away with him, because I was now alone with a man I suddenly feared more than the raiders. I'd imagined him to be a champion of God, but something in me wondered if that was what I really wanted. I'd just seen him kill two seasoned mercenaries without so much as a breath of exertion, but now I wasn't sure he wouldn't do the same to me. They'd deserved to die, but couldn't I say the same of myself? Had I not failed in my duty by letting these men kill everyone in the church? I let Caenwyld walk out that back door with Aedre, and I never raised a hand to help her because I feared I might lose it. He'd never even threatened my life. That's how weak I was in the face of this ordeal. Perhaps this was my punishment, for today and for all my other sins.

Fear paralyzed me as he approached, and even though he walked past without a word or a glance, I still expected him to turn around and plunge that sword into my back. I didn't relax until I heard the back door open, followed by his soft footsteps on the grass outside. I sat there, unsure if I should wait or follow him out, so I just listened, hoping he'd at least arrived in time to save Aedre's honor, and do that which I'd been unable. I heard a crash, and the sound of wood cracking. That was followed by a loud grunt, a cry of surprise, another crash, and then a scream. Aedre's scream. I hurried outside, and what I saw lifted my spirit from the depths.

Caenwyld lay in a heap in the corner of the goat pen, not dead, just winded. The other raider

sat in the opposite corner, knocked on his backside, fumbling for his sword. Aedre covered herself with her ripped shift, her face red and swollen from being struck several times. She scooted back, away from the others. And Arkael stood in the center of the pen, his sword ready, facing Caenwyld.

"Stand up," he said, and Caenwyld looked up at him with a fury I'd never before seen in a man.

"How dare you," Caenwyld growled, his face red. "How dare you! I will have you burned alive for this!"

"I know what you are." Arkael took a step closer, and Caenwyld recoiled. His eyes shifted, too, from anger to fear. He grabbed hold of the wooden post next to him and pulled himself back onto his feet.

"Who do you think you are? Do you know the penalty for striking me?"

"I am Arkael. I've come to send the darkness in you back where it belongs."

"Kill him," Caenwyld barked to the raider. "Kill him now!"

The raider had his sword out, but Arkael turned his head sideways, just enough to see him from the corner of his eye, and the raider hesitated. I don't know what held him back, but he made no move to attack.

"Why are you waiting? Do it! You saw what he did to me!"

He lowered his weapon meekly, and Arkael turned back toward Caenwyld, confident that he'd won that battle.

"You have no recourse," Arkael said.

"No," Caenwyld replied, breathlessly. He was cornered, alone, and terrified. I had no sympathy.

"You are touched by the demon. Your soul is tainted, and it cannot be saved. Not by me."

"No." Louder, this time.

"But through your death, another will be free. It is my path, not to repentance, but to forgiveness."

"NO!" he screamed. It was the last word he ever spoke.

## Chapter 2

Arkael pulled his sword free from the priest's narrow chest, revealing a thin, red-stained hole in his brown woolen robe, the only evidence of a wound that penetrated straight to the heart. Caenwyld's body slumped to the ground, his hand grasping his chest, but he made no sound. He didn't grunt, or scream, or even whimper. He just fell, slowly, onto a thin stack of hay in the corner of the goat pen, his mouth still open in protest and his deep, hateful eyes locked on the valiant figure standing over him.

I stared at him far longer than was proper, caught at first by the surreal mystery of the scene, but it was Caenwyld's eyes that held my gaze firm. I'd seen a wretched, foul evil in those eyes, enough to frighten me into terrified obedience. But when I looked at them now, they were sullen and lifeless. In fact, Caenwyld's entire face seemed drawn and thin, and as his final breaths escaped his lips I wondered shamefully how I'd ever been afraid of such a weak old man.

I closed my eyes, only for an instant, but when they opened again I realized how quiet and still the world had become, as if God himself ground everything to a halt so that He could ponder the death of this terrible man. The sluggish silence lasted only long enough for me to know it was there, though, and almost immediately after, the world returned to life with a start and the sounds of the village assaulted me with stunning clarity. The wind gusting around the corners of the church and rustling the timbers and hay. Dogs barking and chickens cackling in the distance. The screams and wailing of women and children. The roars and grunts of the raiders. My own shallow breaths. I heard clearly the sounds of murder, rapine and destruction coming from the unseen village on the other side of the church, and each cry of anguish lingered about me, a brutal reminder that we were far from safe.

"Take her inside." The sound of Arkael's voice snapped me back to reality, like waking from an incredibly vivid dream, and like waking from a dream, the details seemed to fade just out of my grasp as the real world flooded back in. I remembered Aedre and I moved to help her stand, ignoring the nauseating dizziness that briefly washed through me, as if I'd stood too fast. She sat almost completely naked on the ground nearby, shivering from the chilled air, clutching the ripped remains of her shift around her torso. I tried not to look directly at her, pretending instead to watch the last remaining raider, who stood docile in the corner of the goat pen, somehow

aware that his life hung at Arkael's discretion. Arkael noticed him too, and waved him away with his sword. The raider obliged, hopped the short fence and ran away in the direction of his fellows. He deserved far worse, I thought.

"This way," I said, hurrying to open the back door for her. Aedre wasn't crying anymore, and as she passed Caenwyld's body she spat on him. Her foot twitched, and I think for a moment she contemplated kicking him, but she held back. He would have deserved it, though. The man was a monster and he would find himself in a special place in Hell.

The church still stank of wanton murder, only it was worse now after having left and come back. I wanted to cover my nose, but that seemed disrespectful to Aedre so I tried to ignore the stench while fighting back the urge to retch. I surveyed the scene, and remorse filled my soul. Bodies littered the floor, most of them women related to Aedre or to her betrothed, all of whom had been cut down mercilessly. The raiders never even made an attempt to kidnap any of them. Selling the women as slaves at markets in Frankia would net them a small fortune, but that thought never seemed to enter their heads. They'd just swarmed in with their weapons ready, cutting down everyone who dared to be offended by them. It was almost as if they came into the church specifically to defile it.

Aedre's clothes, the ones the raiders delighted in removing, lie scattered on the floor, and I helped her round them up. She took her dress and a brown woolen shawl she'd been wearing, both of them stained with blood, and moved to the back corner to slip them on, while I looked away. I avoided the question of what happened outside. Truthfully, I hoped I wouldn't have to broach the subject, as it wasn't my place to ask. Her mother should deal with that, but her mother was dead. Her father, too. She had no family left to comfort her, or counsel her about any of this madness. I shook my head, just now understanding the tragedy she had endured. This morning, she was to be married, surrounded by her old family and her new in a joyous celebration. Now, she was completely alone in the world.

Arkael followed us inside and strode to the front of the stone altar, which was still draped in white ribbons and covered in lilies and tulips for the wedding. He waited there, unmoving, holding his sword tight in his hand, his eyes locked on the front door, which shuddered from the wind. The sounds outside were muffled, but hearing them made me feel guilty, like I was a child hiding under a bed to avoid facing my fears. My fingers trembled, anticipating the carnage still to come. Thirty or forty raiders still roamed freely outside, and there was little doubt they were now

hearing all about the bold swordsman who dared to defy them at the church. That wouldn't sit well with men used to taking what they wanted. They would be here soon to see just what this swordsman was made of. A question I wondered about, too.

I examined Arkael's features, looking for a clue as to where he came from, thinking that may tell me something more about him. My gut told me he wasn't from these isles. He didn't look like a Briton, a Saxon, an Angle or even a Scot. His jet black hair and tan complexion weren't common here, and neither was his style of dress. I could see some Roman in his expression, though, and enough of their progeny still remained that I could believe he came from them, but my instincts said otherwise. His words, as short as they were, had the tinge of another language in them, one I didn't recognize. I would have asked him about all of this but at the time my mind was in such disarray that I couldn't formulate any proper sentences. It was all I could do to keep from spouting gibberish and sounding like a drunken lout. So I just gaped at him and said nothing. Fortunately, he spoke instead.

"What is your name?" he asked. It took me a moment to remember that crucial piece of information.

"Daniel," I said, then cleared my throat. "Daniel, sire."

"Stay in the church, Daniel, and you will be protected." His eyes never left the door. "This building is your sanctuary."

I nodded. Vigorously.

"Thank you," Aedre said, her soft voice shaking the stillness within the church. I turned to see her clothed again, although she hadn't managed to fasten all the laces on her dress yet. Caenwyld had been right about one thing. Her beauty was right out of a dream. Even though her long blond hair was wet and matted and her face red and puffy, she still looked as beautiful as she had when her parents brought her to the church this morning. She would have made a fine bride. I chased that thought away, though. Not because it was inappropriate, but because it was another reminder of the nightmare we'd just survived.

As if to reinforce that stark realization, Aedre walked with hesitating steps to the center of the church, toward the bodies lying on the ground. The anger in her eyes was gone, replaced by misery as she crouched down next to her mother, Liova, who'd been gutted several times. She lay still on the floor, clutching her midsection, her eyes and mouth still open in silent agony. Aedre caressed her face, ignoring the blood covering her mother's body, and she cried again, but