

THE EYE OF

Verishten

BEHIND THE MASK EDITION

K.E. Barron



The Eye of Verishten: Behind the Mask Edition

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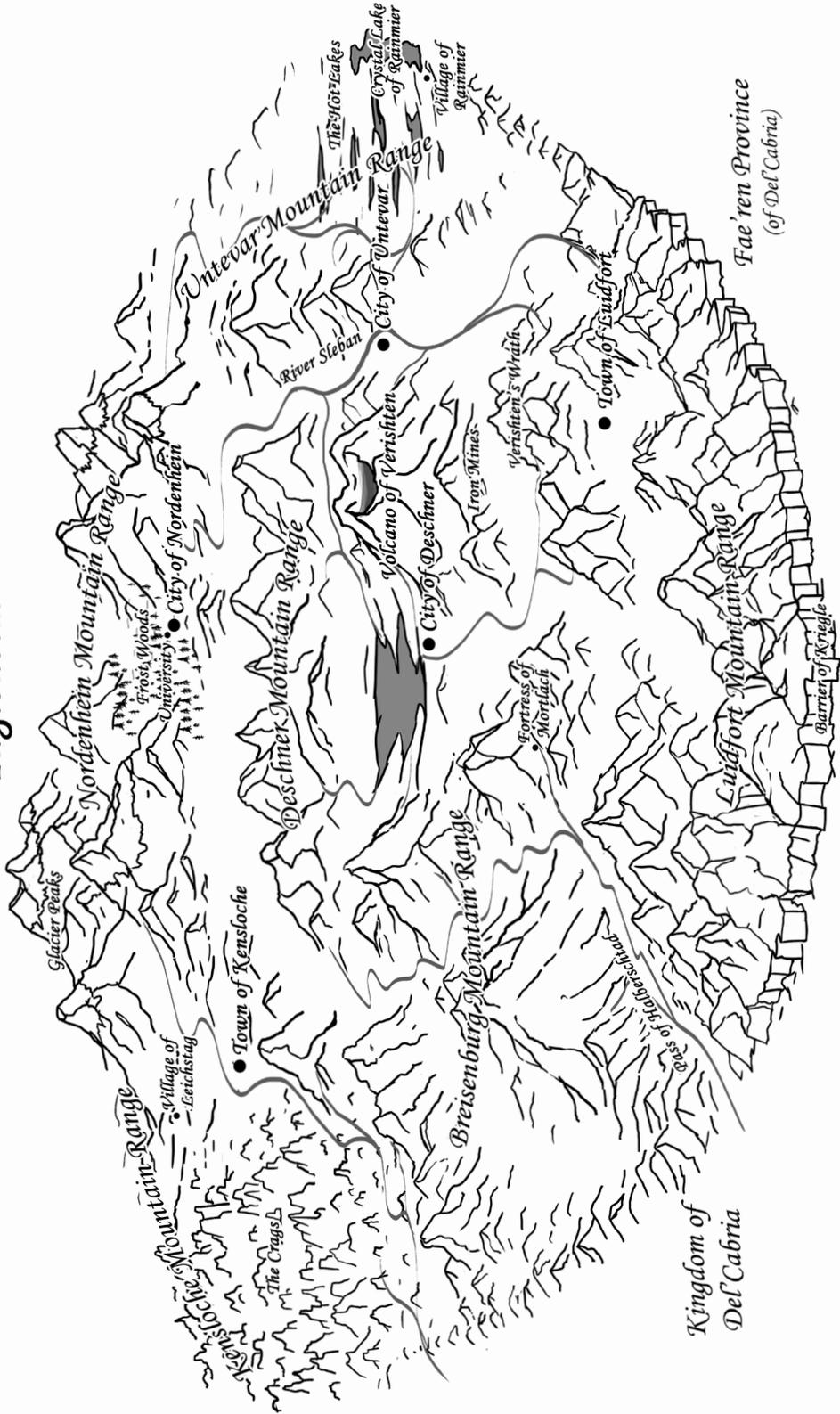
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For Tyson

*Were it not for you, all of my books would be in the
Cloud where no one could find them*

Ingleheim



The Steinkamp Mantra

To fight means to kill; to kill is mercy



The Steinkamp Pledge

We hereby pledge to uphold the Steinkamp mantra at all times. We pledge to never waver and never retreat; to defend the defenseless and punish the wicked; to never cause undue suffering to our enemies and to leave no trace of ourselves behind. From the darkness we are born, in the shadows we fight, in the name of justice we kill, and in obscurity we die. We are the faceless and the nameless; we devote our lives, our blood, and our spirit to Ingleheim and the Mighty Führer as one heart, one mind, and one force.

We are Steinkamp.



Ode to Golems

Golem, take me to your land
Spare me from your powerful hand
Give yourself to me, then we shall be free
Golem, find me, here I stand.
Golem, your eye, I see through
Let me show you what we can do
Blessed by Verishten, you are of my kin
Golem, hear me, I am you.



1

PERSONS OF INTEREST

Kommandeur Wolfram and his two comrades came upon the old farm property a few miles north of the Craggs. *This is it*, Wolfram thought. *This is where the Earl of Kensloche is hiding, the last Golem Mage in Ingleheim besides the Führer.* The kommandeur dismounted from his steed and tied the reins to the old wooden fence post. His comrades followed suit.

Wolfram pushed aside the gate and took one purposeful step onto the dirt path that led to a quaint little farmhouse. He stood still for a moment with his hands folded in front of him. His comrades, in full black armor and all their specialized weaponry strapped to their hips, back, and legs, waited behind him. With a deep breath, he took in all the scents of Ingleheim pastures. Wolfram had been born and raised in the high-end Eastside of the City of Deschner where the smell of sheep and their refuse was nonexistent. The smells of the countryside tended to nauseate him. Despite that, he did enjoy the lower-altitude, ash-free air of the Kensloche Mountain Range. He was going to miss the clarity and vigor it had provided during his last month on assignment.

With a short sigh and a lick of his lips, the kommandeur began his trek up the long, dusty path with his comrades tailing behind.

“Wait for me, Kristoff!” called a small child from the sheep fields to his left.

“Don’t call me that!” chastised another boy just as all three soldiers snapped their heads in the direction of the children’s voices.

A lanky boy, appearing around eight or nine, sprinted from the herd

of heavily woolen sheep with a playful shepherd dog prancing at his heels. Following behind the child and his dog was a much younger boy, about five or six years of age, who struggled to catch up to his older playmate.

One of the boys we seek is also named Kristoff, Wolfram thought, becoming ever more confident that he found the right place. Yet, Kristoff was a common name. Wolfram couldn't let himself get too excited.

The boys ran across the path of the three soldiers and halted their sprint upon taking notice of the looming figures approaching. They gazed in dreadful awe at the two shapeless and faceless figures at Wolfram's side. Their eyes dilated, trying to discern an identifiable facial feature within the soldier's protective masks, fashioned from thin yet durable metallic mesh and enchanted by a light-absorbing magic. As a kommandeur, Wolfram no longer had to wear the mask and belted uniform of his comrades, although he too was dressed head to toe in black to convey the dominance of the Steinkamp soldier.

Wolfram tipped his square military hat, "Greetings, young herrs. I can appreciate how startled you must be to see Steinkamp soldiers in the daylight, but we will not be here long. I don't suppose your father is home. We have come a long way to speak with him."

There was no need for the boys to fetch their father, for he had already left his house and made his way down the path. Dust billowed into the air with each step he took toward the soldiers. His dark hair was slick with sweat, his beard and mustache wiry and unkempt. His dirt-stained wool smock was worn loose at the neck and rolled up at the sleeves, revealing the muscular forearms of a laboring man. There was nothing to distinguish the man of the house from the rest of the shepherds Wolfram had observed on his mission—a far cry from a highborn, much less an earl.

"Good day, herr," Wolfram said with a subtle melodiousness in his voice to help keep the sheep-shearer at ease for the time being. The two men shook hands, and the kommandeur continued, "Please do not be alarmed by our unannounced visit. I am Kommandeur Wolfram, and these are my comrades. We have come on behalf of the kanzler of this range, Herr Waldemar, in service to our Mighty Führer. If we could take a few minutes of your time, you will be able to return to your work momentarily."

The sheep herder's steel gaze only left the kommandeur for a brief moment to look at his boys. Wolfram caught a flash of concern behind the man's eyes as he would expect to see when Steinkamp soldiers came

sniffing around. The sheep herder nodded and allowed the kommandeur to continue.

“We have come all this way in search of persons of interest to the Regime, and we were hoping that perhaps you might have some information.” The kommandeur concluded with a warm smile.

Unlike the Steinkamp foot-soldiers he brought with him, Wolfram’s specialized training went beyond the battlefield. He was a man talented in the fine arts of persuasion, intimidation, and subterfuge, all for the purposes of gathering information. Moreover, he knew that a friendly grin often went further than a well-aimed crossbow bolt.

“Boys, get inside now,” the father said without removing his eyes from the soldiers.

“What is going on, Father?” the oldest boy asked.

The younger boy hid behind his brother, chewing on one of his dirt-stained fingers as he stared up at the daunting strangers.

“Do as I say—go help your mother.”

The two masked comrades stepped in front of the children so that they couldn’t go anywhere.

Wolfram interjected, “There’s no need for the children to be absent. We only want a few moments of your time.”

Past the bearded shepherd, a fair-haired woman in a plain dress stood at the doorway of the house.

“Ah, and that must be their lovely mother. I would like for her to join us as well if you don’t mind.” Wolfram waved her over with a warm smile on his face.

Upon noticing the Steinkamp Kommandeur and his masked comrades, her posture became rigid. She hesitated as she looked to her husband and the boys. The husband gave her a curt nod, and she slowly walked along the path to join them.

“Is there anything we can help you with, offiziers?” the woman asked, keeping her arms crossed and then stepping just behind her husband.

Wolfram removed his hat and placed it on his chest while extending a hand to her in greeting. Wolfram was sure to rub his thumb across the top of the woman’s hand, as was the customary greeting of respect among ladies of high status. She curtsied in response, yet her smile was quick and tight-lipped. *She could easily be the wife of an earl, perhaps Frau Anja herself*, Wolfram thought. If they were the last Golem Mage family on Wolfram’s list, then the coveted promotion to Kapitän of the Steinkamp force would

finally be his.

Formal introductions were made, revealing the names of the husband and wife to be Ferdinand and Frieda. Wolfram turned to the boys and asked them for their names, but they looked up to their father with large, questioning eyes. Their father nodded.

“My name is Ernst,” the eldest boy said, placing his arm around his little brother’s shoulder, “and he is Hans.”

“Ernst and Hans, strong names for soon to be strong men,” Wolfram said.

He eyed Ernst carefully. It was common that the eldest son inherited the Eye of Verishten, the mark that indicated the abilities of a Golem Mage. Usually, the Eye manifested in the oldest son when he reached ten; then it was a year later before he would learn to control golems. Occasionally the Eye appeared on more than one son. On the rarest of occasions, a daughter may bear it. Sometimes it wouldn’t manifest in any child only to reappear in a future generation. Such abnormalities were the reasons why the Führer ordered the entire Mage family to be executed lest any member left alive grow up to challenge him.

Turning back to the parents, Wolfram got right down to business. “The Regime is in search of particular persons of interest—a family of five. The husband and wife would be middle-aged like yourselves, the man with dark hair and gray eyes, and the woman with light brown hair and brown eyes, although they may have taken measures to change their appearances. They would be traveling with two boys, years eight and five, and a girl of thirteen.”

“What is this family guilty of, Kommandeur?” asked Ferdinand.

“I am not at liberty to divulge that information, I’m afraid,” Wolfram replied without pause.

The couple looked thoughtfully at each other again then looked back at the kommandeur. Ferdinand’s eyes remained cold and severe.

“I don’t know what to say, Kommandeur, but we have not seen this family of five—at least nobody who sticks out in our minds . . . Dear?”

Ferdinand nudged his wife, and she responded with a shake of the head. Their answers did not surprise the kommandeur in the least. He knew he was not about to get a confession out of them, and he didn’t need it. The Kanzler of Kensloche gave him all the authority required in this mountain range. Wolfram’s strategy was to gauge Ferdinand and Frieda’s reactions when he described the similarities between them and his persons of interest.

As they stood in silence, beads of sweat began to form on Ferdinand's forehead.

In the past, other Steinkamp Kommandeurs used more stringent methods in hunting down Golem Mages. It was easier, in the beginning, to kick down doors and storm estates without question or warning, but those tactics only worked so well for so long. The Mages grew more careful. They went deep into hiding and often used decoys to help them escape. The Regime could no longer rely on brute force to bring the Führer's enemies to their knees. Instead, it would rely on the honed skills of its most methodical and vigilant officers. Absolute certainty was a necessity for Wolfram in hunting and bringing down enemies of the Regime.

"Very well." Wolfram sighed. "If I may review your identification papers quickly before I go, that would be much appreciated."

"May we ask why?"

Wolfram adjusted the sleeves of his long, black military jacket. "For me to ascertain that you are who you say you are, and to provide evidence for my superiors that you have been questioned."

"Yes, of course, Kommandeur." Frieda nodded and went back to the house to fetch the papers.

"And documents for your children as well, if you please," Wolfram called after her. She nodded and disappeared inside the house. "Our Führer is quite fond of his checks and balances," the kommandeur commented with a smile. Ferdinand strained one of his own, nodded, and scratched at his thinning hair.

Wolfram could hardly contain his excitement at the possibility that he was standing before Earl Sigmund of Kensloche. Wolfram wondered where on his body he bore the Eye of Verishten. It was commonly known that Earl Sigmund had it; the only question was if Ferdinand was that same man.

Soon enough, Frieda returned and handed a bundle of papers to Wolfram. He unraveled the ties that held the documents together and unfolded them. Reaching into his inside coat pocket, he pulled out his reading spectacles. He was a man in his prime and hardly required lenses to read, but he quite enjoyed the duality of being a kommandeur in the deadliest military force in the world while appearing as a harmless intellectual at the same time.

The identification papers for the husband and wife read as expected. A middle-aged married couple named Ferdinand and Frieda, both born and raised in the Village of Leichstag in northern Kensloche Range.

It was the children's papers Wolfram was most curious about. When Herrscher Heinrich took power as Führer, he had enacted a law that required children of the same family to be registered on a single document to keep parents from hiding sons required for military service. It came in handy for times such as this.

"I see a Yolanda listed here. She is your daughter, yes? Is she in the house?" Wolfram asked.

"Yes, she is in the kitchen helping me prepare for tonight's meal," said Frieda.

"You've reared her well, I see," Wolfram commented. "My little Kriemia is just a babe. I can only hope she will be as helpful as Yolanda is when she gets to be that age."

"Congratulations to you," Frieda said.

"Thank you, frau," replied Wolfram. "When I am finished here, I may get to finally return to my wife and child. I have been stationed all over Ingleheim so long, I missed the birth"

Wolfram honed in on the names of the children: Yolanda, Ernst and Hans. They were the same age and genders as Rosalinde, Kristoff, and Siegfried, the children belonging to the Earl of Kensloche. *This is no coincidence.*

Handing the papers to Ferdinand, Wolfram said, "Thank you for your time, herr, everything appears to be in order. We will not bother you any longer."

Wolfram shook the hands of the couple and turned to leave while his comrades remained planted for a moment. Before the family made their way back to the house, Wolfram called out a name.

"Siegfried?"

He looked back just as the youngest boy whipped his head around in response to his true name.

"Herr Ferdinand, I ask that you remove your clothing," Wolfram said.

"If it's the Eye of Verishten you seek, Kommandeur, you will not find it. If I were a Mage, I'd have legions of golems upon you before you three had a chance to dismount from your horses!" Ferdinand's top lip quivered, but his steel-gray eyes were severe.

"In that case, what is about to happen will work out in your favor." Wolfram's voice took an icy tone that contrasted strongly with the friendly one he had been using up until now.

The kommandeur signaled for his black-clad comrades to approach, one

to restrain the wife and the other to subdue the husband. Wolfram stepped toward the boys and placed a hand on each of their shoulders to keep them from running away.

Pulling them closer to him, he whispered, "You boys should look away now."

Ferdinand reflexively moved to attack the soldier whose intent was to grab hold of his wife. The other Steinkamp, anticipating the husband's reaction, had already drawn a cudgel from his belt and drove it hard into Ferdinand's abdomen. Frieda screamed and struggled as the Steinkamp pushed her face-first against the western wall of the farmhouse. The other comrade shoved her husband against the wall alongside her.

In rapid fashion, they bound the couple's hands.

"Strip him!" Wolfram ordered.

The boys screamed as Wolfram held them in place.

He crouched down to offer them some comfort under the circumstances. "If your parents are truthful, they will be just fine. But if they lied . . . well, you should both look away, as I've suggested."

Wolfram and the boys watched the soldiers slash away Ferdinand's shirt and slacks. Wolfram's spine tingled with anticipation, coupled with a slight fear of what he would or would not find. If somehow his hunch were wrong and this man was not a Golem Mage, Kanzler Waldemar would severely reprimand him. Furthermore, news of what happened to the poor sheep herders would spread throughout the range, possibly driving the real earl and his family deeper underground. However, the ramifications of leaving the farmhouse without being absolutely sure would be far worse for his future under the Heinrich Regime. His hunches had never been wrong before. All he needed now was to view the undeniable proof somewhere on the earl's body.

"Shall I strip the wife as well, Kommandeur?" asked the comrade holding onto Frieda.

"There is no point," replied Wolfram. "The husband is the only Mage in the family. We have to execute her regardless, so it makes no difference if she were to bear the Eye as well."

"Please, you can't—" Frieda cried as the other Steinkamp cut away the last of her husband's clothing.

"Kommandeur, I found it!"

The Steinkamp pointed down towards the man's leg.

At the back of Ferdinand's hairy calf was a circle, surrounded by three

triangular burn-like marks. Wolfram exhaled euphoric relief. *It is finally over.*

With the side of his bearded face still pressed against the stone wall, Ferdinand started to beg, “Please understand that I have never acted against the Führer. We just want to live out the rest of our days in peace—show mercy for the sake of our children!”

“I’m afraid it is outside of my jurisdiction to offer such, Earl Sigmund of Kensloche. If you had come forward, the kanzler might have arranged an alternative for you and your family, but you chose to flee, to position yourselves as enemies of the Regime. I am under a strict directive to bring you in, dead or alive . . . preferably the former.”

“Sigmund . . .” Frau Anja sputtered before the kommandeur gave the order to dispose of them both.

Anja was the first to meet her end by a Steinkamp skewer knife through the base of her skull. Her death was over in an instant. Sigmund and his sons screamed upon watching their mother’s lifeless body hit the soft earth. The dog’s shrieking barks came soon afterward.

Wolfram swallowed hard as he kept his grip on the boys. It was not ideal to kill parents in front of their children, but the alternative of killing the children in front of the parents was unusually cruel, even if the parents’ end would follow shortly thereafter. The Steinkamp mantra was not about cruelty; it was about mercy.

“Go into the house and find the girl.” the kommandeur ordered the Steinkamp, wiping Anja’s blood from his blade.

The herding dog continued to yelp. Wolfram looked around briefly, eye twitching, but couldn’t locate the animal. Nonetheless, the barking eventually ceased.

The other Steinkamp executed Sigmund in the same manner as his wife, and he was on the ground a second later. Wolfram pushed the oldest boy ahead. “Kill this one first.”

“Yes, Kommandeur.”

As the Steinkamp soldier approached the eight-year-old, the elusive dog lunged at Wolfram from behind, taking his arm into its jaws and violently pulling it down. Kristoff managed to squirm out of Wolfram’s grasp, duck behind him, and snatch the younger boy away. The kommandeur cursed while taking his skewer knife and driving it hard and fast through the canine’s eye. It died as quickly as the earl and his wife, not having enough time to puncture Wolfram’s thick leather sleeve.

The boys ran several feet into the pasture and stopped at a rock cluster

in the grass, much to Wolfram's surprise. Kristoff picked up the loose stones and threw them at the advancing soldier. The small rocks deflected off of the Steinkamp's armored chest.

"Get to Rosy, Siegfried!" Kristoff yelled.

Little Siegfried's face was red from crying, his vigorous trembling keeping him in place.

At that moment, the rock cluster near the boys suddenly moved on its own. A humanoid figure made of stone stood up in guard of Siegfried and Kristoff. The creature was over seven feet tall, its misshapen arms nearly dragging on the ground. It had short and stumpy legs with bits of moss and dirt lodged in the cracks between the boulders that formed its massive torso. A crag golem, native to Kensloche. It was of the smaller, man-sized variety, but still dangerous in its own right.

This is preposterous—surely Kristoff is too young to control golems, Wolfram thought.

The golem swung its long limbs at the soldier, only to miss on account of the soldier's superb reflexes. Having had no luck in finding the daughter inside the house, the other comrade ran out to assist.

"Kill the boy, and the golem will be released from its command!" shouted Wolfram.

The golem protected Kristoff unshakably and neither of the Steinkamp soldiers could get past its massive reach, its solitary eye shining with a green light from the middle of its lopsided head of rock.

Siegfried finally found it in himself to run away. One of the Steinkamp ducked the golem and ran after him only to be met by another, even larger. As it rose from the long grasses, the golem knocked Siegfried onto his hands and knees and the Steinkamp onto his backside. The golem raised one stone leg, caked with dirt and moss, and brought it down hard on top of the man lying on the ground. The snapping of the bone in his leg was loud enough for Wolfram to hear from where he stood a dozen feet away.

His other comrade fared better. The Steinkamp managed to duck the golem's next swing and catch up to Kristoff, who was running for Siegfried. Kristoff and the Steinkamp were now between the two crag golems. The Steinkamp drove his blade clean through the boy's chest, much to Wolfram's relief.

Kristoff's lifeless body hit the ground, but the golems did not fall into two dormant rock piles as expected. They still had the lone Steinkamp surrounded and were ready to pummel him into the earth alongside the

earl's eldest son.

He is not the one controlling the golems!

Looking around frantically, Wolfram's eyes soon fell upon a small figure at the base of the Crag to the south. A young girl no older than thirteen stood still, her ashen braids and white apron flapping in the breeze. The girl stared at the golems protecting her brother, her eyes red, raw with rage that Wolfram could see even at such a distance.

"It's the daughter—kill the girl!" Wolfram bellowed while pointing across the field. He felt a pang of guilt as he thought of the comment he made earlier when he'd hoped his own little girl would grow up to be like the one he had just ordered his men to eliminate.

The Steinkamp left standing took out his small dispenser of blast gel. He rolled toward the golem to avoid the swing of its arm and sprayed the clear gel all over the golem's torso and legs. Diving to the side, the Steinkamp clenched his gloved fist to activate the fire magic infused in the gel. It ignited rapidly and exploded. The sound of splitting rock shook the air, and the golem dropped to the ground, absent its legs.

The larger golem, rather than engaging the Steinkamp, turned, scooped up the fallen Siegfried and bounded toward its master. The Steinkamp jumped to his feet and began to give chase while Wolfram jogged over to his injured comrade.

"Can you get up?"

"No . . ." the comrade grunted, holding onto his left leg, bent unnaturally at the knee.

Wolfram clenched his fists, arms stiff at his sides. "Find something to bind that leg."

There was no time to help the Steinkamp mend his broken knee. The golem and Siegfried had already made it to the Crag. The stone creature raised Siegfried above its head, while Rosalinde reached down and pulled her brother up by the arms onto the rocky ledge to join her. If Wolfram and his last standing comrade didn't catch up to them, they could chance to lose the children in those rigid shale cliffs forever.

The kommandeur growled in frustration. Leaving the injured comrade behind, Wolfram ran to the base of the Crag where Rosalinde had been standing just a moment before. The other comrade had already sprayed the second golem with more blast gel and detonated it, blowing its stone body apart.

The Steinkamp leaped off a large boulder that had once been part of

the golem's torso and grabbed hold of the ledge above. Pulling himself up with ease, he turned to assist his kommandeur onto the ledge with him. The two men continued their rapid climb up the treacherous shale inclines, their footing increasingly uncertain the farther they went. The girl and her brother were nowhere in sight.

Adrenaline pumped through Wolfram's veins as worrisome thoughts played out in his mind. *We have to find them before the girl summons any more golems or, Verishten forbid, Cragmen find them first.* Cragmen were lawless men and parentless whelps who lived in the Crag to avoid Regime authorities. They made their living pillaging the surrounding villages. *Perhaps if the children do run into a clan of them, the commotion could help us locate them easier,* Wolfram then thought.

Once the soldiers turned up the rocky path, they heard the faintest of squeaks. He halted and held out his arm for his comrade to do the same. The two men stood still and silent. A muffled cry came from behind an outcropping on the path above. Wolfram pointed it out, and his comrade went to investigate.

The Steinkamp stealthily climbed the outcropping, crouched on top of it, and peered down the other side. Wolfram watched as he pulled out his retractable sword from the short sheath strapped to his back and slowly extended the thin steel without making a sound. In the blink of an eye, the comrade reached down, and a shrill scream bounced off the shale cliffs. Rosalinde kicked and shrieked furiously in the Steinkamp's grasp right before his blade silenced her permanently. Blood sprayed from her throat as her arms and legs ceased to move. Wolfram winced, wishing they could have arranged a cleaner death for the girl.

Continuing up the path, Wolfram arrived at the outcropping. What he found was a mess of blood soaking into the dirt and amassing between the cracks in the shale. Rosalinde's body was wedged between two large rocks that had served as her hiding spot.

"Where is the boy?" Wolfram asked his comrade.

"He was here, but he ran when I grabbed the girl," he replied.

"Ran where?"

"Your orders were to kill the last Mage and now it is done. What does it matter if the youngest boy escapes?"

"Because *my* orders are to make sure every last Mage, including their kin, are disposed of. Our Führer will accept nothing less," said Wolfram.

The soldiers split up to cover more of the most logical paths. The

echoing sound of shattering shale led Wolfram down an incline where he came to a lengthy chasm in the ground. Siegfried was there, clinging to a ledge as if trying to climb into it.

If he falls into that crevasse, it will take hours to get his body out. Wolfram approached carefully to keep from startling the boy.

“Little one?” called Wolfram.

Siegfried looked up from where he hung on for his life, his eyes red and swollen from crying.

“There you are . . . Siegfried.” The kommandeur bent down and offered the boy his hand. “I know that after what you have witnessed you must be very scared, but I urge you now to take my hand.”

Siegfried shook his head, quietly sobbing. Small pieces of shale below his feet came loose and shattered off the crevasse walls as they fell. With his tiny hands, Siegfried tried to edge further away. The masked soldier, suddenly appearing beside Wolfram, startled the boy. He attempted to move again. His right foothold fell away, and his high-pitched screams echoed down into the crevasse.

The Steinkamp reached for the crossbow strapped to his back, but Wolfram put out his hand to stop him. “Not until we get him away from this chasm,” he whispered sharply to his comrade.

Siegfried pressed his little body harder against the rocks.

“Don’t be foolish now.” Wolfram stretched his arm even farther toward him. “Attempt to flee this way, and you will surely perish.”

Siegfried shook his head again.

“You might think me a monster, but I assure you, I am not. What was done to your parents, your brother, and your sister was an act of mercy. It was not our intention to do it in front of you, but it had to be done.”

“Mercy?” Siegfried sobbed.

“Yes, my boy, mercy is precisely what it was. If you take my hand now, I promise, you will not suffer. I can take you anywhere you want to go.”

“I want to go home,” Siegfried murmured through whimpers.

“Then that is exactly where we will go.”

The boy didn’t move a muscle.

“Tell me, little one, do you like running and climbing? I know lots of little boys who love to climb.”

Siegfried sniffed back tears and nodded.

“I happen to know a place where boys like you can run for miles and miles and never get tired. You will be able to run faster than Kristoff. There

you can climb the highest cliffs and never fall. If you come with me, you will be able to do all those things, but if you don't, your little legs will surely break at the bottom of this chasm, and you will never be able to run or climb ever again. I know you don't want that to happen. Take my hand, child, and I promise you will be able to run faster and climb higher than anyone. Wouldn't you like that?"

The boy remained stationary. Realizing his persuasion tactics were not going to work, Wolfram motioned for his comrade to circle around the rock that Siegfried clung to. The Steinkamp lunged for him, but Siegfried reacted without thought. His left foothold broke off, and he was holding on by only his little arms. Siegfried's five-year-old hands were too weak to support his weight and he lost his grip.

"Shit!" Wolfram's curses echoed off the chasm walls, joining Siegfried's high-pitched shrieks as he fell into the blackness.

"Comrade!" Wolfram barked. "Go after him!"

Before the Steinkamp could follow his kommandeur's orders, the entire crags began to quake. Both men fell to their knees. Large chunks of shale cracked off the cliff sides and slid into the crevasse. Rocks and dirt flew toward Wolfram as he tried to get out of the way before it buried him alive.

"Comrade!" he bellowed.

The Steinkamp was nowhere to be seen. The shuddering crags separated them. Wolfram was determined to see his new daughter and held no interest in losing his life for the sake of a five-year-old boy—one who would likely never grow to bear the Eye anyway.

Kommandeur Wolfram struggled to his feet and ran for his life.

2

ODE TO GOLEMS

(Twenty years later)



“Why again, Professor, are we freezing our danglers off to study golems outside that we already have in the laboratory?” Klemens complained.

“Not all of us have danglers to freeze off,” muttered Katja as she trudged ahead of him.

Klemens pushed his spectacles up his nose. “I should be back in the library.”

“It would do you some good to get your head out of those dusty, old books every now and again,” Katja rejoined.

“It is important that we study these creatures in their natural habitats,” said Professor Ignatius, trudging up the snow-laden path with his two best students in tow.

“Then why must their natural habitat be in the thick of Frost Woods?” Klemens said.

Ignatius chuckled. “These woods are close enough to the university to make a day’s trip and happen to be teeming with golems, most of them still untouched by the Führer. If we are ever going to conclude that people like you and I can communicate with golems, we best figure out how with the ones found out here.”

He stopped at a fork in the road and checked his map. Lightly falling snow sank into his white mustache and bushy sideburns that stuck out from his fur cap. It seemed to Katja like yesterday that his whiskers had been dark brown and his thick eyebrows even more so. She could not decide if Ignatius was a young man who was graying before his time or an old man

finally starting to look his age.

“So you really believe that the golems out here have never been dominated by the Führer?” Klemens asked.

“The Führer can dominate any golem anywhere,” Katja added. “Or so they say.”

“Perhaps his power cannot stretch as far as these woods,” Ignatius surmised. “More likely though, it can, but he just hasn’t bothered. He’d have no use for them this far north.” He rolled his map back up and headed east. “There is a clearing up this way where I believe we will find some man-sized golems to study. If we are extremely lucky, maybe even a giant one.” Ignatius looked back to his students, his brown eyes sparkling.

Katja adjusted her wool scarf to keep out the frigid breeze and followed the professor up the icy incline. Unlike Klemens, Katja treasured any time spent away from the lab or the library—rather, any time spent outside of four walls. Her whole life, she had lived within the confines of one castle or another. Her few brushes with nature had been within gated and locked gardens where no outside eye could ever catch sight of her. Such was the lot in life for many young highborn women like Katja.

Klemens jogged ahead of her. “It’s slippery here, Kat. Feel free to take my arm if you wish.”

Just as he turned to offer Katja his hand, his left foot slid out from beneath him. Klemens sat in the snow, grumbling at his own clumsiness. Katja gave a wry chortle while stepping past her wet and cold classmate.

Turning back to Klemens, she offered him her hand. “I’ll take that arm now.”

Klemens grabbed hold and hoisted himself to his feet. “Well, at the very least you could crack a smile. Some laughter would be fitting.”

Katja gave Klemens half a smirk. “I’m laughing on the inside, Klem, always on the inside.”

It was a running jest between the two of them that Klemens would make her smile before the year was up. To him, Katja’s passing grins or sarcastic smirks didn’t count. All throughout adolescence and into adulthood, people commented on her sour face, saying that she would be so much prettier if she just smiled more. More often, she would politely tell those people to shove it in some fashion.

When you smile, all I see is how Verishten has blessed you, for he’s given you intelligence beyond your years and beauty beyond measure. The memory of those words made it seem as if the man who had once spoken them whispered them now into

Katja's ear, sending shivers up and down her spine.

As the group continued up the snowy mountain trail, the path widened enough for Klemens to walk next to her. Before he could utter a word, Katja said, "Hope that fall didn't break your flute."

He took the long wooden wind instrument from his bag to make sure it was intact. "Still good, although I doubt it will matter much. I know you said the golems in the lab responded to the noise, but I just don't think these flutes are going to work."

They had both read corroborating historical references that people thousands of years ago used flutes and other such instruments to communicate with golems. They theorized that regular folk used them to subtly influence the ones not under Golem Mage control. Once a Mage had a golem under his or her command, no other Mage could take it over until it was released. After the Golem Studies team had uncovered the ancient texts alluding to regular people communicating with golems, it offered a potential opportunity for humanity to share a little in the power that now only the Führer possessed.

"I'm with you, Klem. That's why we're out here. The answers are clearly not in the texts, so we take our hypothesis, however negligible, and experiment until something works."

"Katja is right," Ignatius joined in, still walking ahead. "We know the flutes have some effect on golems. We find out what effect it has on the untouched variety, and if it's the same or stronger, then we direct our research accordingly. If there is minimal to no effect, then we go back to the texts and find a new lead."

The research team finally reached the top of the hill. A small creek bisected the snow-filled clearing, trickling softly against the silence of winter. Katja frowned. This was her last year in Nordenhein before she earned her doctorate and set off for home. If she were in Deschner, the pure, white snow that fell around her now would be replaced with gray volcanic ash raining down from the Volcano of Verishten.

"Well then, shall we start playing?" Ignatius said.

"Are there even any golems here, Professor?" Klemens wondered. "It's far too quiet."

"No matter. Dormant golems are no different from stone and ice in these parts. There's only one way to know if they're here. We wake them."

Ignatius blew three sharp notes into his flute that cut cleanly through the crisp winter air. Nothing stirred in the wilderness. Katja and Klemens

joined their flute songs with Ignatius, but still no sign of the scores of golems he claimed were there.

“Perhaps we should fan out a bit more,” Ignatius suggested.

“Come with me, Kat. There might be some this way.” Klemens beckoned as he made his way toward the stream.

Katja couldn’t help but be a little annoyed by Klemens’s attempts to be alone with her. The two had studied closely together for the last two years after Klemens transferred from Military Studies with the Führer’s approval. Since then he was hardly ever far from her sight. Earlier that day, Klemens had requested to stay behind and catch up on his historical readings—until Katja expressed a keen interest in accompanying Ignatius, and suddenly a winter stroll didn’t seem so bad anymore.

There was nothing she found particularly unattractive about Klemens. He was clearly from good highborn stock—polite, well-spoken, and his intellect was unrivalled among scholars at his level. With his spectacles, wavy brown hair, sideburns trimmed short, and a clean-shaven face of friendly features, a highborn lady like Katja could do much worse than him. However, she held no interest in marriage or starting a family. Only golems mattered to her; colossal, powerful, and ageless wonders of Verishten’s creation that had served mankind for millennia.

“I think the professor meant that we *each* fan out.” Katja waved her hands in a fanning motion.

Not waiting for a response, she ducked through a thicket and slid carefully down a snowhill to find a peaceful clearing cut off from the rest of the team. She held onto her thick woven skirt with one hand while steadying her descent through the deep snow with the other. To Katja’s relief, Klemens didn’t follow. She felt sorry for the way she’d dismissed him, but today she needed some distance, not just from Klemens, but from the professor as well.

She had an experiment of her own to conduct, but she was afraid to let the others in on it, especially if it happened to work. Klemens had a point that playing randomly on musical instruments to communicate with golems was not enough. The people in the Age of Man had to be playing a specific song, and Katja thought she might already know that song.

When she was a girl, she had stumbled upon an old book of sheet music in one of her father’s libraries. She had learned to play each and every song on her cello until they were second nature. Her favorite was the *Ode to Golems*. Eventually her father had found the sheet music left out

in her music room and chastised her for taking it from the library without permission. He informed her that those songs were forbidden under the Regime, and she should never play them where outside ears might hear.

Katja walked until the others' flutes were whispers through the leafless birch trees surrounding her. There, she began to play the *Ode to Golems*. She loved the simplicity of it, yet its hauntingly dark melody filled her with both solace and sorrow. It was sad, yet hopeful—such were the ancient songs of the Age of Man. She became lost in a melody she hadn't played since she was twelve until she caught a shadow in her periphery.

Startled, she spun around to find nothing but a mess of trees and snow-covered rocks with icicle fingers connecting to the ground. She carefully inspected a cluster of soapstone, finding nothing unusual. She continued to play the *Ode* again while wandering around the clearing. When the song finished for the second time, the formation she had just inspected moved. The icicles shattered as one of the snow-covered soapstone boulders rose up and stood on two legs.

Katja gasped in both shock and delight. There, just a dozen feet away, was a frost golem. It was an inch or two taller than her, about six feet in height. Sweat formed under her woolen scarf. She stood mystified. This frost golem was leaner than the others of its type in the laboratory. The soapstone that made up its shape was darker in the areas not covered with snow and bits of ice. Its elliptical eye shone blue like a glowing icicle between its rigid shoulder blades. The light flashed bright, dimmed, and lit up again.

The golems in the lab do a similar thing when interacting with each other, Katja thought. This one was trying to communicate with her, but like in the lab, she couldn't figure out how to communicate back. The golem turned away.

"Wait, come back," she squeaked. She tried to play her flute again, but her mouth was suddenly too dry.

The creature of ice-tipped soapstone bounded away through the pine trees and disappeared more stealthily than anything of its size should be allowed. It took her breath away to watch it move so effortlessly for having a body made entirely of rock. *These beings should be respected in fellowship with man, not dominated by them.*

She let out a defeated sigh. Then the shadow returned to her periphery from her other side. She spun around to find nothing yet again. The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end.

"Is someone there?" Katja called out. Her shivering voice billowed as

a white mist into the frigid air. *Could there be wolves this close to the university?*

“Is that you, Kat?” called Klemens from afar.

Katja stared into the white stillness for a time, but without another golem to jump out at her, she decided she no longer wanted distance from her research team. “Yes. Wait there, I’m coming to find you!”

When Katja climbed back through the thicket she was met with Klemens’s smiling face, his spectacles dotted with fallen snow.

“Find any?” he asked.

Katja wanted to jump for joy with a resounding *yes*, but she would have to explain how she managed to awaken it with a forbidden melody of the Regime. “No. How about you?”

Ignatius, approaching from the north, chimed in, “Thought maybe for a moment I’d seen one, but it turned out to be a collapsing snowdrift.”

“Either this experiment was a failure, or there just aren’t any golems around here,” Klemens said, taking off his spectacles to wipe his lenses.

“Oh, there are,” Ignatius said. “I’ve snuck up on an entire group of them before. I know they lie here in dormancy during the winter months. If we didn’t see them, it means these blasted flutes don’t awaken golems in their natural habitat.”

“Then what’s our next step, Professor?” Katja asked.

“You two return to the library and find another clue in the history books, and I’ll see what I can discover in the lab.”

Ignatius placed his flute back in his satchel and led the team down the mountain trail with every bit the spring in his step he’d had on the way up. The professor never seemed to get discouraged, and Klemens lit up as well with the prospect of reading more history books. Katja, on the other hand, couldn’t decide how she felt after this excursion. She may have just discovered the secret behind the flutes, but it was a secret she could not divulge without bringing undue suspicion onto herself as to how she found the forbidden melody . . . although, she considered, it may have been a coincidence that the golem awakened right after she played it. Maybe it was the shadow in the woods that stirred it.

I have to come back and try again on my own, she thought.



Upon their return, the three researchers parted ways in the university atrium. The University of Nordenhein was an ancient stone structure built

with the assistance of golems in the Age of Man, and then modified during modernization efforts in the Age of Kings. The more recent upgrades, within the last twenty years, made the university now resemble a small fortified city to keep out enemies of the Regime.

The atrium was one of the few places where remnants of the old architecture were displayed in breathtaking force. Massive marble pillars presented each hallway, giving Katja a glimpse into the Age of Man. The elongated green and violet stained glass windows built into the grand vaulted ceilings depicted the likenesses of renowned scholars of old and dressed the atrium in the light of the Age of Kings. The university was the perfect example of what the City of Nordenheim was known for. It was Ingleheim's center for education and culture, and that fact was showcased through countless paintings and sculptures on every wall and in every great hall. Not even in her father's castle back in Deschner could Katja marvel at such artistic and architectural grandiosity.

Katja walked through the green and violet beams of light made by the stained-glass windows on her way to the information desk. She checked with the clerk for any confidential messages.

"No messages have been left for you, Fraulein Katja, but you do have a visitors notice. In fact, your guest arrived thirty minutes ago and has been escorted to the Brendt meeting room, down the hall, two doors to your right." The kind older woman handed Katja a key.

All visitors had to come in secret and wait in guarded meeting rooms for security purposes. The process kept rebel abductors from walking into the university, asking to visit a student, and making off with that student unseen. Many things had changed since Katja's parents attended the same institution. None of the students enrolled with their true names anymore, and their family ties remained hidden from all other students and staff to lessen the risk of kidnapping.

Who would visit me here without prior warning? Katja wondered. Surely *Father would never risk such an appearance.*

Then she thought of another man—one not as well-known, but who possessed almost as much power. Her insides began to curdle at the thought of Meister Melikheil coming to see her again. He had left her father's service to offer magical aid to the Kingdom of Del'Cabria in the Desert War. It had been almost two years since he visited her last, and she'd hoped that she would never see him again. Could he have returned from the desert already?

Katja removed her scarf and hat as she walked down the marble hallway. After smoothing out her wavy brown hair and refastening it with a clip, she inserted her key into the lock. She took a deep breath, silently praying that it would not be Melikheil behind the door. Her heart almost leaped out of her chest as she opened the door and entered the meeting room. It flopped instead upon seeing that the Spirit Mage waiting for her was not the darkly handsome one she'd expected, but another just as dangerous.