

SUMMONER
BOOK TWO

The
Inquisition
TARAN MATHARU

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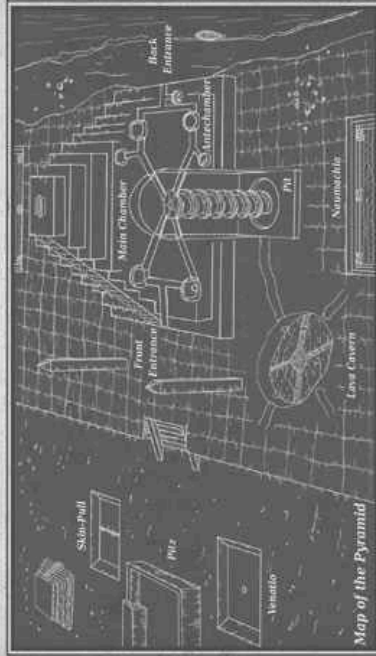
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TARAN MATHARU



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Map of Lemnium





Fletcher opened his eyes, but all he saw was darkness. He groaned and nudged Ignatius, whose claw was splayed across his chin. The demon complained with a sleepy mewl, before tumbling on to the cold stone beneath them.

‘Good morning. Or whatever time it is,’ Fletcher mumbled, flaring a wyrdlight into existence. It hung in the air like a miniature sun, spinning gently.

The room was bathed in cold, blue light, revealing the cramped, windowless cell that was paved with smooth flagstones. In the corner lay a latrine, a simple hole in the ground that was covered by a jagged piece of slate. Fletcher stared at the large iron door embedded in the wall opposite him.

As if on cue, there was a rattle as the small flap at the bottom of the door eased back and a mailed hand pushed through the gap. It groped around for the empty bucket that sat beside the door. The sound of gurgling followed and the bucket was replaced, sloshing with water. Fletcher watched the flap expectantly, then groaned as he heard the echo of footsteps walking away.

‘No food again, buddy,’ Fletcher said, rubbing a crestfallen Ignatius under his chin.

It wasn’t unusual; sometimes the gaoler just didn’t bother bringing food. Fletcher’s stomach growled, but he ignored it and reached for the loose stone he kept beside his bed to scratch another notch in the wall. Though it was hard to tell the time with no natural light, he assumed that he received food and water – or sometimes, like today, just water – once a day. He didn’t need to count the hundreds of notches on the wall to know how long he had been imprisoned – he knew them by heart now.

‘One year,’ Fletcher sighed, settling back into the straw. ‘Happy anniversary.’

He lay there contemplating the reason for his imprisonment. It had all

started that one night, when his childhood nemesis, Didric, had cornered him in a crypt and tried to murder him, gloating about his father's plans to turn the entire village of Pelt into a prison.

And then came Ignatius, from out of nowhere, burning Didric as he advanced, giving Fletcher time to escape. The little demon had risked his own life to save Fletcher's, even in the first moments of their bond. In the aftermath, Fletcher had become a fugitive, for he knew Didric's family would lie through their teeth to frame him for attempted murder. His only consolation was that if it hadn't happened, he might never have made it to Vocans Academy.

Had it really been two whole years since Ignatius entered his life, and he first set foot in that ancient castle? He could remember his last moments there so clearly. His best friend Othello had earned the respect of the generals and convinced his fellow dwarves not to rebel against the Hominum Empire. Sylva had cemented the peace between their races and had proven herself and the other elves worthy allies. Even Seraph, the first commoner to be elevated to nobility in over a thousand years, had impressed his fellow nobles during the Tournament. Perhaps most satisfying of all, the Forsyth plot to create a new war with the elves and dwarves, in order to profit their weapons business, had been foiled completely. It had all been so perfect.

Until Fletcher's past came back to haunt him.

Ignatius gave Fletcher an owlish blink from his amber eyes, sensing his master's despondency. He nudged Fletcher's hand with the end of his snout. Fletcher gave him a halfhearted swipe, but the demon dodged out of the way and nipped the tip of his finger.

'All right, all right.' Fletcher grinned at the boisterous demon, the pain distracting him from his misery. 'Let's get back to training. I wonder what spell we should practise today?'

He reached under the pile of straw that was his bedding and removed the two books that had kept him sane over the past year. He didn't know who had hidden them there for him, only that they had taken a great risk in doing so. Fletcher was eternally grateful to his mysterious benefactor; without the

books he would have been driven mad with boredom. There were only so many games that he and Ignatius could play in the tight confines of the cell.

The first was the standard book of spellcraft, the same one they had all used in Arcturus's lessons. It was slim, for it contained only a few hundred symbols and the proper techniques for etching them. Before, Fletcher had only been vaguely familiar with them, so he could pass his exams – preferring to focus on perfecting the four main battle-spells. Now, he was able to picture every single symbol from memory, and could etch them in his sleep.

The second book was thick, so much so that whoever had hidden it had removed the leather cover to make it more easily concealable in the straw. It was James Baker's journal, the book that had started Fletcher on his path to becoming a trained battlemage. Within its pages, Fletcher had found a dozen new spells, diligently copied by the late summoner from the walls of ancient orcish ruins. Moreover, Baker had studied scores of orcish demons, detailing their relative power, abilities and statistics. Now Fletcher was an expert too. Perhaps most fascinating of all, Baker had compiled all of his knowledge of orcish culture, including their strategies and their weapons, in the journal. It was a veritable treasure trove of knowledge, which Fletcher had devoured in a few days, only to immediately begin again and hunt for details he might have missed.

These two volumes were all that distracted him from the deafening silence of the outside world. Every night, he dreamed of his friends, wondering where they might be. Did they battle on the front lines while he rotted in the bowels of the earth? Had they been killed by an orcish javelin or a Forsyth dagger?

But the most torturous thought of all was knowing that his adoptive father Berdon was close by, in the village above him. He remembered when the prison transport had brought him back to Pelt in the dead of night. He had peered through the cracks in the armoured wagon, desperate to catch a glimpse of his childhood home. But before he could get a proper look, the gaolers threw a sack over his head and dragged him away.

As Fletcher lapsed into miserable silence once more, Ignatius growled restlessly before snorting a tongue of flame that singed the straw beneath them.

‘Wow, we are impatient today!’ Fletcher exclaimed, powering up a tattooed finger with a blast of mana. ‘OK, you asked for it. Let’s see how you like the telekinesis spell.’

He allowed a thin stream of mana through his fingertip, the spiral symbol glowing violet until a strip of air shimmered above it. Ignatius began to back away, but Fletcher whipped his hand at the mischievous demon, curling the ribbon of energy around his belly and flinging him upwards. The demon splayed his claws and dug them into the ceiling, showering Fletcher with a trickle of dust. Before Fletcher had time to react, Ignatius hurled himself down, twisting in midair like a cat with his claws and tailspike pointed at Fletcher’s face. It was only through a desperate roll that Fletcher avoided it, then spun on his heels to find the room cast in darkness. Ignatius had slashed the wyrdlight during his attack, snuffing it out like a candle.

‘So, that’s how you want to play it,’ Fletcher said, powering up his index finger, the one without a tattoo. This time, he etched in the air, using one of the rarer symbols he had learned from Baker’s journal. He twisted his finger so it was pointed directly at his face.

The cat’s-eye symbol looked almost exactly like its namesake, a thin oval within a circle. Through trial and error, Fletcher had learned the spell had no effect until its light was shined into his retinas.

The glowing symbol gave away his position, as did the flash of yellow that soon followed, but Fletcher rolled to the side so Ignatius would lose him in the darkness. He could feel his eyes slowly changing, his pupils elongating into feline slits. It was not long before Fletcher’s vision brightened and he could make out Ignatius’s figure, crawling towards his previous position like a lion stalking a gazelle. Though Ignatius had far better night-vision than Fletcher did, in the pitch black of the cell even the demon was struggling to navigate.

‘Gotcha!’ Fletcher yelled, diving across the room and bundling the demon

into his arms. They tumbled back into the straw, and Fletcher laughed uproariously at the demon's barks of protest.

The door burst open and the room filled with light, blinding Fletcher's sensitive eyes. He scrabbled to hide the books beneath the straw, but a boot kicked out, slamming into the side of his head and throwing him against the wall.

'Not so fast,' a voice rasped.

There was the tell-tale click of a flintlock being pulled back and Fletcher felt the cold metal of the weapon's barrel pushed against his forehead. As the effects of the spell faded, he could make out a hazy, hooded figure crouched beside him, holding an elegant pistol.

'One twitch from you, and I blast you into oblivion,' said the voice. It was hoarse, like a man dying of thirst.

'OK,' Fletcher said, slowly raising his hands.

'Ah-ah,' the figure tutted, pressing the muzzle harder against his temple. 'Are you deaf? I've heard of what you can do with those tattooed fingers. Keep your hands by your side.'

Fletcher hesitated, aware that this would probably be his best chance of escape. The gunman gave Fletcher a husky sigh of exasperation.

'Rubens, give him a little taste of your sting.'

Fletcher caught a flutter from the depths of the man's hood, then a bright red Mite buzzed out and alighted on his neck. He felt a sharp pain, then a cold sensation spreading through his body.

'Now I know you won't be playing any tricks,' the figure croaked, standing up so he was silhouetted against the torchlight from the open doorway. 'Speaking of which, where is that Salamander of yours?'

Fletcher tried to twist his head, but it seemed locked in place. At the mention of the word Salamander, Ignatius stirred from beneath him, and Fletcher knew that the demon was preparing to attack. He quelled Ignatius's intentions with a stern pulse through their mental link. Even if they managed to overpower the man, Fletcher wouldn't be able to crawl out of the cell door, let alone pull off an escape.

‘Ah, he’s in the straw there. Well, keep him quiet, if you want to keep your brains inside your skull. It would be such a shame to kill you, after all the preparations we have made.’

‘Pr-pr-preparations?’ Fletcher managed to stutter, his tongue clumsy and numb from the Mite’s venom.

‘For your trial,’ the figure replied, holding out a hand for Rubens to perch on. ‘We delayed it as long as we could, but it seems your friends have been very persistent in their petitions to the king. A shame.’

The figure stowed the Mite within the confines of his hood once more, as if he could not bear to be apart from him. The skin of his hand was smooth, almost feminine, with carefully manicured fingernails. The man’s boots were made from hand-stitched calfskin, with fashionable, figure-hugging trousers above them. Even the hooded jacket was made from black leather of the finest quality. Fletcher could tell the stranger was a wealthy young man, most likely the firstborn son of a noble.

‘I will allow you one more question, then I must take you to the courtroom. Take your time, so the paralysis can wear off. I don’t want to have to carry you there.’

Fletcher’s mind flashed to his friends, to Berdon, and to the state of the war. But he had no way of knowing if the stranger would have the answers he sought. Did they know each other? He pictured the other summoners that he had met at Vocans, but none of them had a hoarse voice. Could it be Tarquin, playing a cruel trick on him? One thing was for sure: his opponent would keep the upper hand as long as he remained anonymous.

‘Who. Are. You?’ Fletcher asked, forcing each word out through numbed lips.

The fact that he could speak at all meant that Rubens had pricked him with only a low dose of venom. He still had a fighting chance.

‘Haven’t you worked it out yet?’ the stranger rasped. ‘That is disappointing. I thought you would have guessed by now. Still, I do look quite different than when we last spoke, so you are hardly to blame.’

The figure crouched again, leaning forward until Fletcher’s vision was

filled with the dark confines of his hood. Slowly, the man pulled it back, revealing his face.

‘Recognise me now, Fletcher?’ Didric hissed.



2

Didric leered with a lopsided smile, leaning back so his face would catch the light. The right side was waxy and mottled red, with the edge of his lip burned away to reveal a flash of white teeth. His eyebrows and lashes were gone, leaving him with a wide-eyed appearance, as if he were constantly alarmed. Patches of his scalp were almost bald, covered only by a sparse scattering of hair that pushed through the melted flesh beneath.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ Didric said, stroking the ruined skin with a long, tapered finger. ‘The night you did this to me, my father paid through the nose for a summoner to be brought in to perform the healing spell. Lord Faversham, as a matter of fact. Funny that he was unknowingly cleaning up his own son’s mess, wouldn’t you agree?’

Fletcher was dumbstruck, though whether it was the paralysis, or shock, he didn’t know. How had Didric heard about Fletcher’s supposed relationship to the Favershams? A lot had changed in a year.

‘In truth, I should probably thank you,’ Didric said, brushing the long hair on the unburned side of his head to cover the melted scalp. ‘You are the reason for both the best and the worst things that have happened to me this past year.’

‘How?’ Fletcher choked, watching Rubens crawl on to Didric’s chest. Didric wasn’t a summoner ... was someone else controlling the Mite, to trick him?

‘It’s all thanks to you, Fletcher.’ Didric gave him a lopsided smile and flared a wyrdlight into existence, casting the room in electric blue light. ‘It is a phenomenon that has occurred only once before in recorded history, though legends of it have always pervaded the summoning world. A magical attack that brings the victim close to death will occasionally pass the gift on to them. Something about the way the demon’s mana interacts with the body. Your Salamander’s flames may have charred my vocal cords and ruined my face, but they imparted a priceless gift as well. For that, I thank

you.'

'There's no way.' Fletcher's mind reeled from the implication.

'It is true,' Didric stated, stroking Rubens's carapace. 'It happened with another noble family, centuries ago, in a sibling argument gone wrong. Manticore venom, straight into the younger brother's bloodstream. A lethal dose that should have killed him. Instead, he inherited the gift.'

Didric grinned at the horror on Fletcher's face. He was enjoying this.

'Come, it is time for your trial. Don't worry, you'll be back in your squalid hole soon enough. I can't wait to lock you back in here and throw away the key.'

Fletcher staggered to his feet, swaying slightly as his muscles shivered and tensed from the venom. A trial ... justice, finally? He felt the faintest glimmer of hope, for the first time in what felt like a lifetime.

He pointed his tattooed palm at the straw, where Ignatius was hiding. The pentacle on his skin burned violet, and the demon dissolved into threads of white light that glided into his hand. It was best to keep the demon infused within him, so nobody could separate them. He didn't want to imagine being imprisoned without his little companion.

'You first,' Didric said, jerking the pistol towards the open doorway.

Fletcher stumbled out of the cell. For a moment he delighted in his newfound freedom, enjoying the feeling of walking more than a few paces in one direction. Then the cold tip of the pistol's muzzle was pressed into the back of his neck.

'Try not to make any sudden movements. I wouldn't want to blow your head off before the fun begins,' Didric snarled, as they walked down a long, stony corridor. Doors identical to Fletcher's own cell were embedded in the walls. It was deathly quiet, the silence broken only by the echo of their footsteps.

Didric halted him at a staircase also built into the wall. On either side, the corridor stretched for hundreds of feet, before disappearing into gloomy darkness.

'We keep the most dangerous prisoners here, people like you – rebels,

murderers, rapists. The king pays us handsomely to keep them here, against the cost of a bucket of water and one meal a day. It's a beautiful thing.'

Fletcher shuddered, imagining what it would be like being alone in the cell, with no Ignatius, books or spells to keep himself sane, and the knowledge that he would never leave there again. He felt a flash of pity for the lost souls trapped inside, horrendous though their crimes might be. Then he realised that he could very well be joining them soon, forever entombed in the deep bowels of the earth. Icy tendrils of fear gripped his heart.

'Keep moving,' Didric spat, prodding him up the stairs. They spiralled upwards as they did on the inside of a dwarven home, though at intervals there were barred doors, with a guard holding them open. On and on they went, until Fletcher's knees ached under the strain. He had tried his best to exercise in the confines of the cell, but so many months without walking or enough food had left him weak and malnourished. He did not know if he could survive another year in such conditions, let alone a lifetime.

Didric pushed him through a large set of doors at the top of the staircase and into a crowded courtyard. Around them, guards formed up in rows, performing musket and bayonet drills. Their uniform was a wasp-like black and yellow, a mix of chainmail and light leather. There were enough of them to be Didric's own private army.

Fletcher gulped in deep breaths of fresh air. He revelled in the light of the open sky once more, feeling the gentle warmth of the sun on his face. His head spun with vertigo at the expanse above him, but he opened his arms wide and felt the cool breeze on his skin. It was heavenly.

Didric shoved Fletcher ahead of him and they made their way through a large set of iron gates and on to the street. Fletcher was surprised to find that he knew where they were. He turned and took in the prison behind him, recognising some of the features built around it. It was Didric's former mansion.

'Love what you've done with the place,' Fletcher said drily.

'Yes, the old stomping ground. It was time for an upgrade, what with my new station in life. What do you think of our new quarters?'

Didric pointed upwards. The village of Pelt was built at the base of the Beartooth Mountains' largest peak. It shadowed the village at sunset, towering over them like a vast monolith. Fletcher followed Didric's finger and saw that the tip of the peak no longer existed. Instead, a castle had been built in its place, all crenellations, towers and arrow slits. Cannons lined the walls, the black holes of their barrels menacing the village, as if they might open fire at any moment. It was more a fortress than a home.

'The safest place in Hominum, stocked with enough supplies to endure a siege of ten years. The elves could betray us, the orcs could invade Hominum – the prisoners could even take over the village, and it wouldn't matter. The greatest army in the world couldn't breach those walls, even if they could climb the sheer cliffs on either side.'

'You sound paranoid, Didric,' Fletcher replied, though Didric's words had taken him off guard. 'Like you have something to hide.'

'Only our immense wealth, Fletcher. My father doesn't trust the banks. He should know, he used to be a banker.'

'A crooked moneylender does not a banker make,' Fletcher replied. The boy stiffened but prodded him on, ignoring the jibe.

As they walked down the deserted streets, Fletcher saw poverty everywhere.

Many of the houses and shops were empty shells, while others had been converted into jails. Rough, dirty faces were pressed against the bars, silently watching Didric's strutting figure with hatred in their eyes. The entire place stank of misery and desperation; it was a far throw from the industrious little village Fletcher had grown up in.

Didric's father, Caspar Cavell, had become the richest man in the village by lending to the needy and the desperate, tricking them into signing ironclad contracts that would end up costing them far more than they borrowed. It looked as if the Cavells had called in all that was owed, taking their debtors' savings and kicking most of the citizens of Pelt out of their homes in order to build the prison.

Disgusted, Fletcher slowed and flexed his fingers, fighting the temptation

to punch Didric's face in.

'Move,' Didric snarled, slapping Fletcher across the back of the head with his free hand.

Fletcher burned with anger, but his hands were still numb. The paralysis was dulling his reactions. Even if he were at his best, he doubted his chances at wrestling away the gun pressed into the small of his back. He would have to wait.

They reached the front gates which led out of the village, and Fletcher's stomach lurched. Berdon's hut was gone! But that was not the only thing unusual about the scene. The area around the front gates had been flattened, with racks of pikes, bayonets and swords replacing the houses. Stranger still, there seemed to be a queue of men lining up by the gates in front of a long, low table piled with red uniforms.

No. Not men.

'Dwarves!' Fletcher breathed.

Hundreds of them, even more than he had seen at the dwarven war council. They wore traditional dwarven garb – heavy leathers with canvas shirts. They seemed rougher than the dwarves Fletcher had encountered before, their braids loose and uneven, the clothing stained with mud, grime and sweat. Their faces were dark and brooding, and they talked among themselves with low, angry voices.

'They've just marched over Beartooth to collect their new gear,' Didric said, smiling, 'after two years of keeping the northern front safe from the elves. It's taken a long time for the elven war to end, though I wish it was longer. The peace talks were delayed when the elven clan leaders saw the state of that she-elf after the Tournament at Vocans. She was your friend, wasn't she?'

Images of the broken and bruised figure of Sylva came unbidden to Fletcher's mind, but he held his tongue. He knew that he couldn't trust anything Didric told him about her.

'My lord!' a guard shouted, bringing Fletcher back to reality. 'This reprobate tried to murder you. It isn't safe. Let us escort him for you.'

‘Did I ask for your opinion, bootlicker?’ Didric spat, brandishing the pistol. ‘Do not presume to speak to me unless spoken to first. Get back to work.’

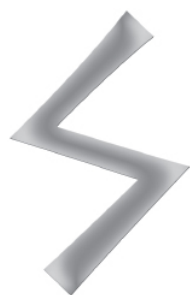
‘As you wish, my lord,’ the man said, bowing low. Didric shoved him away with his boot, sending the man sprawling in the mud.

Fletcher was disgusted by the way his nemesis held himself, as if he were above them all. He turned on Didric as the final vestiges of paralysis left him.

‘You have the guards calling you lord?’ Fletcher said, layering his voice with contempt. ‘I bet they laugh at you behind your back. You’re nothing more than a jumped-up gaoler, you pompous arse.’

For a moment Didric stared at him, his face slowly turning red. Fletcher suspected nobody had spoken to him like that for a long time. Then, to his surprise, Didric burst out laughing. The hoarse cackle echoed across the courtyard, turning heads as Didric heaved with mirth.

‘Do you know why they call me lord, Fletchy?’ Didric gasped, wiping a tear from his eye. ‘It’s because I *am* a lord. Lord Cavell.’



3

Fletcher stared at Didric in horror. Suddenly, small details he had overlooked came into focus. The heavy signet ring on Didric's little finger. The uniforms of the guards, so specifically coloured and heavily armoured; they *were* Didric's private army – a privilege the king afforded only to the nobility.

There was even a coat of arms sewn on to the chest of Didric's jacket, depicting the bars of a jail, with two crossed swords behind them, emblazoned in the same yellow and black that his soldiers wore. A fitting emblem.

Didric cocked his head, obviously taking pleasure in Fletcher's dismay. Fletcher, in turn, tried to remain expressionless, though it was almost impossible. He was overcome with disgust.

'While you have been rotting away in a prison cell, I have been at Vocans, in my very own luxurious suite. No commoners' quarters for me,' Didric boasted, his lopsided smile widening. 'Lord Forsyth was kind enough to give me Rubens, a demon that had been in his family for generations. Of course, it is not my only demon, but it got me started. In fact, you might be interested to know that the Tournament is in just a few days' time. I really should be training, but I couldn't miss this – not for all the world.'

'Let's just get it over with,' Fletcher snarled, looking around for the courthouse. 'You talk too much.'

'Oh very well. I'm surprised you're in such a hurry to get back to your prison cell. If I were you, I would savour the next few hours of fresh air and natural sunlight, Fletcher. It will be your last.' Didric pointed the way, before pressing the pistol into Fletcher's back.

The courthouse had been converted from the old village hall, a large oval-shaped building complete with a steeple and large oak doors. Its walls were freshly painted in white and the sigil of the Judges was emblazoned over the door – a black gavel and block that loomed ominously as Didric led him