

## PROLOGUE: THE CARDINAL

June 1360.

The cleric crept through the rotting oak frame of the door, his eyes glistening in the setting sun. A cool breeze fluttered through the entryway, flowing through his black and crimson robes as his gaze fell upon the frail form on the bed. “My lady,” his voice resounded off the barren walls like a wave ripping through silent waters. Following the setting of the sun, the memories of life echoed through the evening and shadow – the setting of the sun upon an immortal soul.

A weak smile crept across the woman’s wrinkled face as she lay her eyes upon him.

“You called for me?” the cleric swallowed, blinking back a tear.

She nodded, the bones of her finger contorted as she motioned him to her side.

The cleric stepped forward, the wood floor creaking beneath his feet. His knees buckled as he collapsed to her side; a tear splashing to the floor. “Please,” he stared down at the swirling grain of the wood floor, dancing in unending beauty, while the woman’s life approached the final bow. “It is too soon,” he tore his eyes from the wooden rhapsody to gaze deep into her eyes. “Please...do not go.”

She sighed, placing her hand upon his. “Oh, Cardinal,” she whispered, her voice quivering, clutching his hand as tightly as she could. “I called you here, not to mourn for me.”

The Cardinal nodded, stinging droplets forming in his eyes. “I know,” his head dropped

once more to the floor. “But,” he stammered, “how can I not mourn?”

She nodded weakly, clasping the coat of arms sewn into the quilt cover and etched into her heart – her secrets that she had shared with him.

He pulled himself to his feet, brushing his fingers through his raven hair. “I joined the church so that I could fight this,” his voice dragged low as it cracked in sorrow. “Fight this pain,” a tear rolled down his cheek.

The old woman smiled. “Do not weep for me,” she clutched the great, blue *A* of the coat of arms. “Do not waste your tears on me.”

The Cardinal shook his head, falling to his knees beside her once more. “To not weep, is to not love. To not weep is to forget the joy of our friendship. To cast down what was once glorious,” He placed his hand upon hers as it clutched the coat of arms. “My lady your life is precious. You are precious.”

A smile fought its way through the grief upon her face.

“You are the last of them, my lady. You are the last of your family,” he clenched his teeth as he cast his eyes down again.

She placed her hand upon his cheek and shook her head; then opened her mouth to speak, but a raspy cough drained the strength from her.

“No,” the Cardinal stammered as his eyes narrowed and veins bulged from his temple. “No,” he pulled her up into his arms, cradling her like a child; a frail child, too weak even to cry. “Please, my lady, please. It is too soon.” He held her close, feeling the life slowly seep out of her.

Her eyes stared out at him and one last smile fought its way onto her face. “The line never ends,” she rasped, her lips quivering as her smile faded.

“No, it cannot,” he held her closer. “But please, do not go...” he pulled her tightly up

against him, rocking back and forth.

“Find him,” her voice was just audible. “Find...” the last two words faded in the air but echoed in the Cardinal’s mind – resonating back and forth.

“Thank you,” he whispered, brushing the hair out of her face as a smirk pulled at the edge of his lips. “Truly humorous, is it not though?” he chuckled, fingering a strand of her white hair. “Just how much the righteous give.”

Her eyes widened and her mouth opened as if to cry, only to be muffled by his hand. She reached up to fight his grasp, but he pulled her hand to his lips, laying upon it a small kiss. “Hush now,” he whispered. “You have unraveled so many mysteries for me,” she tried to cry again and struggled, but to no avail. “Wycliffe, the Lollards, your family.”

At last she froze, stung by the silence of death.

“There, there,” the Cardinal whispered. “Sleep now.”