

CATHARGO—A New Fantasy Novel by Mark Del Franco

First Chapter Preview



DALMEN

Despite the heat in the tent, Dalmen Forge adjusted his hood to hide his features from the gathered men. He wanted to watch Sebastille work, but did not see the sense in giving the chips around him a free show. The stale odor of unwashed bodies, mildewed canvas, and the ever-present vapor of manure that clung to farmer boots hung in the air. A few more men wandered in, the kerosene lamps turning their pasty skin sallow. Some knew each other, their eyes meeting and shifting away with a nod and a smile.

Conversation murmured, tired men with low voices that broke into soft, dry chuckles. Dalmen did not bother to eavesdrop. It was always the same in the outlands—weather, livestock, and the price of flax. He made no judgment of their interests. They were fine, hardworking people who happened to bore him to distraction sometimes.

Ontieg came through the back flap, his disheveled coat looking like a tent in the midst of collapsing. In his youth, he had been an oddity act, the Living Bone Man, until he tired of starving himself. He still retained a thin, gaunt aspect, and his spectacles magnified his eyes to the point of comical. Ontieg looked tired, and Dalmen didn't blame him. They had been on the road for two weeks. As they moved south, shorter distances separated the villages. They performed at every one. Not everyone did their show at every stop, but Ontieg did all the barking and talking.

He stepped onto a crate, adjusting his slouch cap and held his hands in a dramatic pose for silence. The men shuffled their feet, craning their necks to see.

"Ladies..." Ontieg began and was met by the sound of laughter. His face faltered into confusion before he realized not a woman was in sight. A sly grin creased his narrow face. "Ladies...would faint in fear should they see what you about to see. Not since Attolis spied Arton bathing in the forest of Nemia has anyone seen what you are about to see. From the lands of the burning south, far beyond the River Sedge, deep within the wilds of Cassinia and Verge, raised by savage orangapes as one of their own. Gentlemen, I present to you the strongest man to walk the earth since Duras himself bore the weight of the sky and some say does still. I give you, good sirs, Sebastille, the Strongest Man Alive!"

An overly enthusiastic clapping somewhere on the opposite side of the tent came from one of the scamps that found a home with the troupe in exchange for menial labor. The farmers followed suit in a tentative staccato as unseen hands pulled aside the tent flap at the back. Wrapped in an orange silk cape, Sebastille ducked his head to enter and paused at the threshold to let that first towering impression sink in. Soft, awed whispers rippled among the farmers as they bumped shoulders for a better look. From his vantage point, Dalmen noticed Sebastille's cape needed cleaning, and a new tear near the hem needed mending. The farmers would not care. Most of them had likely never seen real silk before and would overlook the shabbiness.

Sebastille stood a head taller than Ontieg did standing on the crate. He kept his face a stoic mask, his deep-set eyes reflecting a yellow gleam from the lamps. He had greased his hair back, a fine lacquered sheen sweeping from his wide forehead to fall in oiled black curls to his shoulders. The hair alone made him exotic in the northern lands where a hand-shorn stubble had satisfied what passed for fashion for generations.

Ontieg pitched his voice low. "Look at him, gentlemen. I have never seen such a measure of man as him. He strides across the lands while the rest of us scurry in his wake." Holding the cape closed, Sebastille paced along the front edge of the crowd, staring down at the upturned faces. Dalmen admired the knack Sebastille had for an aloof curiosity that provoked more amused nervousness than anxious challenge in the observers. Some shuffled back a step as if he generated a field of energy they dared not touch.

"In a small village hard by the Ezzacrom Desert, folks noticed things missing. First it was a few things—articles of clothing and such—which was bad enough down there where the sun never sets and the earth is baked like iron. But then food began to vanish from kitchen gardens and sills. People whispered of a giant orangape that swept through the village at night, knocking aside all in its path. A meeting of the council was called, and a plan was made. The townspeople would stop the rampage of the mad beast!"

Sebastille paused in his pacing and glared at Ontieg. Ontieg stared back in defiance that crumbled to bravado. The crowd held its collective breath, the silence palpable as the man before them seemed now no mere giant, but something wild and prone to murderous passion. Ontieg waved his hands, urging Sebastille away. With one more glare, Sebastille retreated across the front of the stage and resumed pacing.

An appreciative curl came to Dalmen's lips. As showmanship, the bit was one of his favorite moments. Ontieg played the confident yet uncertain narrator to perfection, and when Sebastille was in the mood, his murderous glare looked quite murderous. Tonight he had been in the mood. Shows every night in a different town for a week can do that to a man living in a cramped caravan.

“A net was created of the finest rope bound with iron weights that no normal man could bear. At dusk, the net was spread upon the main road to the village and disguised with brush and leaf. A table was set upon the center of it and on the table were piled all the delicacies that the people of the village could afford.” Sebastille moved to the back of the tent again, hunching his shoulders and lowering his head.

“They waited through dusk, hiding in their homes, waiting for the savage beast to emerge from the forest.” Ontieg had the crowd then, avid faces torn between watching him as he related the tale and keeping an eye on Sebastille.

“As midnight drew on, something moved in the dark shadows, a blur of motion. The townspeople held their breath as something dark entered the trap. With a crash!—“ someone clanged a set of cymbals behind the listeners that startled everyone—“the net snapped from the ground, trapping the beast inside. One by one, the townspeople crept closer until they could see their prize.”

Here, Ontieg’s face softened into a mask of sorrow. “They found a giant child, my friends, a poor, starving wretch who had lived a life of savagery, but a child all the same. And that child, that beast that had terrorified the village was none other than—Sebastille!”

Sebastille swept his arms out, thrusting open the orange cape with a dramatic flourish. Beneath the silken fabric, he wore nothing but snug black shorts that stopped at mid-thigh and tall black leather boots. The crowd shifted, some taking an involuntary step back. It was not the stark exposure of near nakedness that took them aback. Even in the hinterlands of the Iber, a bare-chested man was of no alarm. What brought surprise was the startling visual impact of Sebastille’s body, layered muscle upon muscle such as seen only in museum statuary. Sebastille had the physique that most thought only an idea of perfection, taut without the hint of fat, finely chiseled, and enormous beyond the result of mere farm labor.

Sebastille paced again, letting the crowd get a good look. Murmurs and nervous chuckles rippled through the men. Ontieg pointed out and named the muscle groups in anatomical terms unfamiliar to anyone without a formal education—meaning most of their customers. Sebastille flexed and turned, displaying the muscles in question, his cape swaying with his movements.

Having seen enough, Dalmen slipped out the front entrance of the tent. He strolled along the short row of tents that had been set up when the troupe rolled into town, the smaller carnival acts that did not require much space. The village was too small to make a longer stay worth it. With the travel season ending, most of the troupe wanted to get somewhere for the winter and rest.

The temperature had dropped with the setting sun. At the end of the row, a slight woman emerged from a weathered yellow tent, wrapping a plain dun-colored blanket around herself. She

wore a simple white gown cinched at the waste with a gold cord. A bright red lace shawl was draped over her head and gathered at the neck. The lace gave her an air of mystery and softened the age lines on her face.

Dalmen paused beside her. “G’deve, Nava. Slow trade tonight?”

She nodded, her eyes watching the few customers lingering in the lane. “No more than I expected. Farmers retire early.”

“Any interesting requests?”

She adjusted the shawl around her neck. “Farmers only worry about two things, Dalmen. Is my love faithful and did I plant enough?”

“And how does the magicka answer?”

Amused, she pursed her lips. “I don’t need the magicka for that. I tell them to work hard and stay home. That’s all they want to hear, and it’s enough. They leave happy.”

“Sound advice. Unfortunate that we don’t take it ourselves.”

She chuckled deep in her throat. “Yes, I noticed you didn’t set up tonight. Sebastille should do well. Working men are impressed by powerful men. They understand strength.”

“Yet, they come to a witch for their fortune.”

She nudged him with her elbow. “Devil.”

They stood in companionable silence as twilight settled. A few tents away, young men tumbled out of the last showing of the contortionist tent. They chattered with excitement, their faces flushed with the revelation of the woman, LaTulle, in an outfit that clung to her body like skin. Dalmen imagined it was the closest most would get to a nude woman until their marriage beds. “What whisper the Four?”

Nava shifted beside him, a soft muttering on her lips. She slipped off one shoe, and pressed her bare foot against the cold ground. The shawl hid her face, but Dalmen could feel the pull of the magicka as she touched it beside him. She slid her shoe back on. “The earth whispers with a faint rumble to the east. The air is agitated, pulling south. I might hear more when we reach the river.”

Dalmen guessed the rumble was soldiers returning home. They were days from the fighting in Gallia, but close enough to feel the tramp of feet and grinding of wheels. “Winter falls. Everyone moves south.”

Nava made a noncommittal hum in her throat. Dalmen appreciated her lack of curiosity, a mutual respect they accorded each other. They had met years earlier in the Aleman. He had needed information, and she had needed a way out of town. In the end, she stayed on and made a fortuitous addition to the troupe. He suspected a disgraced church situation in her past, a not unusual situation when a talented practitioner came up against powerful connections. The local Mares temples tended to go up in flames as the carnival left town, and Nava's mood rose with the smoke on the horizon behind them. He never mentioned the connection to anyone.

"I'll be staying in Cathargo myself this year. It will be nice to be in a city with friends," she said.

Dalmen noted she did not ask his plans. He found it ironic that they—a woman who advised on the future based on whispers of the present and a man who made his way by carefully planning several steps ahead—rarely spoke of their own futures. In the past, her lack of questioning made him wonder if Nava used the magicka to spy on him. He had laid a few minor traps to test the idea, but they had never triggered. He supposed she might be as skilled as he with the magicka—in fact, he was sure of it—but eventually decided she either was not interested in his doings or was truly indifferent. It amused him that in his line of work, he had come to trust someone about which he knew so little. "I'm staying through Winternight. After that, Sebastille and I might make the crossing and visit Maurentia."

Nava held her hand out. A moment later, delicate flakes of snow began to fall. She let several settle on her palm, then brushed her hand against her blanket. "I wish I could afford that. The cold comes early this year. You are wise to keep moving south."

He looked at her sharply, uncertain whether she was giving him a subtle portent or simply being conversational. In the darkness, her lace shawl hid any hint of her expression.