

# **DARK BROTHERS OF THE LIGHT BOOK 02 - BLOOD HERESY**

**JANRAE FRANK**

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A Renaissance E Books publication

ISBN 1-58873-634-2

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PageTurner Editions/Futures-Past Fantasy

First Book Edition

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## **DARK BROTHERS OF THE LIGHT**

I. Blood Rites

II. Blood Heresy

III. Blood Dawn

Dedication: To the Folks at the Corner

Andreas Black, Lord of Chaos

Daniel Arenson, the Summoner of Peers

Debbie Moorhouse, the Evil Squirrel

Dr. Tim Fisher, Growling Bear

Jean-Loup Benet, Lord of Wolves

Karen E. Taylor, The Candlelight Queen.

Kyle Kucek, The Infamous One

Lena Sawyer, Sims Queen

Luna Black, Sadistic Mistress of Crits,

Morgan Sylvia, Her Royal Spookiness

Niwi the Dungeon Master

In addition, I would like to dedicate this to the memory of D.G.K. "Kelly" Goldberg. We miss you.

*"The Darkness hunts us and the Light does not want us. Better to step willingly into the fires than to live undead. Better to die with honor than to take a life in the rites. Let each man go to his own path, but these are ours. And these will always be ours, for this is what we were born to. This is the path the gods have given us, for we are the Dark Brothers of the Light. We are the walking dead who live, for our lives were forfeit with our birth. Forfeit twice over for our choice to live as men, not monsters, though we are forced to dwell among the monsters. Set yourself apart in your words, in your deeds, in your silence-always in your silence, for silence is your castle. Be as still as the deer in the forest, and if you are fortunate the predators will not notice you. For when they notice you, they will eat you."*

-Creed of the Dark Brothers

*Once there were three brothers, Brandrahoon the vampire, Isranon called the Dawnhand, speaker to spirits, and Waejonan the Accursed, first of sa'necari. Isranon defied his brothers and was destroyed, his descendants forced into the darkness.*

-St. Tarmus of Lorendon

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## CHAPTER One

### plots and betrayals

The pool chamber glittered in reflected light from the skylights to the mirror tiles covering the walls to the intricate floor mosaic of inhuman dancers, rainbow hues against pure white. A hot artesian spring fed the pool, making it comfortable year round. Zyne sat beside it, her legs curled beneath her. Her eyes traced the pale, intricate tiling.

"Where is Anksha?"

Hoon studied her from the couch opposite the pool, dabbing blood from his lips with a handkerchief. A small, nude body lay on the floor at his feet, crumpled in the final stillness. The little nibari had been delicious. Timon would be unhappy to learn that he had killed another one. Timon had a strange set of ethics for a vampire. "With Timon."

"And where is Timon?" Zyne probed, rising and walking to the edge of the pool. She squatted with her wings fanned out behind her and stirred the water with her foot.

Hoon frowned, returning the handkerchief to his sleeve. "On one of my estates."

"Which one?" Zyne eyed him coldly. "I want to know as I may want to go there."

"You do not need to go there. Our concerns are in Minnoras."

*--Anksha is a threat, Zyne. When she sees how much power and beauty you have she will be jealous. You must make Hoon bring her here so we can destroy her, --*whispered the voice in Zyne's mind.

"I am lonely," Zyne wheedled, leaving the pool to pace. "I miss Anksha and Timon."

Hoon's head tilted and his eyes narrowed. "When the work here is done, I will send for them."

Zyne sighed heavily. Once Hoon would have embraced her, but he had held his distance since her rising. She no longer shared his bed. Instead, nibari warmed it. Was he afraid? The voice in her head kept telling her that she was more powerful than Hoon. "When do we start the work?"

"Tomorrow night in the Poor Quarter."

"Can I at least get some air?"

"So long as you do not leave the manor grounds, yes."

Zyne stretched her wings, flexing them. She craved flight as she had once craved the ocean's depths. She left Hoon and soon found herself standing alone on the rooftop in the night shadowed silence, above the peacefully sleeping city that could not imagine her existence. Standing there felt as right as darting among the fishes with her spear had once been. A craving for solitude had laid hold of her and dragged her out. Hoon did not trust her, did not want her to have any time alone for her own devices--she did not trust him.

The chill breezes swirled her hair; but she did not feel the cold. The coolness rose from the nearby Idar River and settled over Minnoras with wisps of silver fog. She studied the city from her perch: the palace with its spires at the center; wooden houses pressed tightly together, sharing walls in the Poor Quarter; the stone and brick mansions of the wealthy along the north end with their gardens; and then she spied the abandoned wizard's tower, damaged over twenty years past in the Great War when Zol invaded northward. That building would fit her needs nicely.

*--I am the Mother of Power,--* whispered the voice in her mind as if reciting a practiced cant. *--I am the ancient queen. I am the dark eternal Queen of Night. Destroy me a thousand times and I will always return. Night always returns no matter how often it is banished by the day. I will rise from my box. My box, which anciently my worshippers kept upon my altar in sacred places until I was thrown down in petty jealous wars with Bellocar's other wives, the ones who perished at the hands of Tala and Aroana in the early days of conflict. My worshippers hid my box and released me in secret. But I had been damaged. And Willodarus hurt me further. Will you help me regain myself, Zyne? Will you help me become a god again?--*

Zyne wavered before the seductive voice. Her own people worshipped a banished god from before the coming of the foreign gods, the young Gods of Light, who had answered Ishla the Tinkerer's call and crossed the void with their legions.

Galee sensed this: Zyne could conceal nothing from her. *--I have sought to build or seize a kingdom to gain enough power to crack open the Gate of the Hellgod, to release my mate and his surviving wives. One of these is the god of your people.--*

Zyne sank to her knees, wrapping her wings around herself, shaking. Except for that slight movement, she might have been a crouching gargoyle. "I am no longer seiryne. I am something else."

*--You would belong to me. I would love you. I would be your god. The sa'nekaryiane. As I was meant to be. As I was for the nekaryiane in centuries past.--*

"We sent her power with our prayers and sacrifices so she would be freed."

*--She will be free. I swear it.--*

Zyne had gotten a child from Josiah Abelard to steal his genes for her parasitical race and produce a

generation of powerful mages. The tritons had captured her after the abortive assault on the Sacred King, forced the unborn from her body, and prepared to execute her the next day in a rite to Nerindalori, God of the Waves. Hoon and Anksha had rescued her. Standing there, listening to promises of greatness from the voice in her head, she felt no obligation to either of them. "I am yours."

*--Hoon wishes to use you to gain a kingdom. I will have a kingdom instead.--*

She shivered. "What is it you wish?"

*--A body. I must be reborn as sa'nekaryiane.--*

"How?"

*--Find a woman, close to term. I must build a body from that of an unborn child to house my soul. There is a tower on the far side where those who wait for me gather. I have heard their prayers, sensed their offerings. Tell no one. Especially Hoon. Take four or five men to help subdue and handle her. We will eat them afterward.--*

\* \* \* \*

As the short winter days lengthened toward spring, the estate began to blossom with activity. The horses were already beginning to shed their winter coats and Anksha had chosen to send her blood-slaves to help in brushing them down and combing them out. Bodramet stood half in shadow, attempting to deal with the last animal they had assigned to him. The proud-cut gelding, a difficult beast with a stallion's instincts, kept shoving into Bodramet as he attempted to brush him. Bodramet snarled at the animal, baring his fangs. At least they had not put him to mucking out stalls like Gareth and Petros. Nor would they so long as he continued to do a superior job with the nasty creatures. This was a nibari's work or servant's--not a sa'nevari's. He resented it.

Satisfied with his efforts, Bodramet stepped back from the horse, and saw Timon and Ephry enter the stables with Nevin. They headed for Isranon who was leading a fine chestnut mare towards the doors. *Isranon. Isranon. Always Isranon.* They were courting the lowborn half-a-mon, he was certain of it. Bodramet strained his ears to hear what they were saying. The horse crowded him again. Bodramet slapped it on the rump, and then exited the stall. He closed the door and slipped nearer to the four myn, pretending an interest in the tack hanging from some of the supports.

Timon had wooden practice blades under his arm. "Nevin tells me you are good with a blade."

Isranon paused and his expression brightened. "He trained me. My skills are good enough that they have kept me alive."

Ephry laughed. "Considering the world you have survived in, you must be good indeed. Ask him, lover," he told Timon.

Timon smiled, caressing Isranon with his eyes. "We thought you might go a few rounds with us in the salle."

Isranon shook his head. "I am not finished here. Anksha said--"

Ephry's lips spread in a sensuous expression of delight. "I have already asked her. She says if you wish to, you may."

Isranon glanced from one to the other. "I wish to."

Bodramet ground his teeth in frustration. If they had to pick a favorite, why pick the half-a-mon? And then, again, why not? He had been trying to get Isranon into his own bed for five years. Isranon, with his broad shoulders, narrow hips and handsome face, had always stirred Bodramet's appetites. Isranon had refused him even the smallest taste of his body or his blood. The single time he had come close to forcing Isranon, Mephistis had arrived and attacked him. Then, to add insult to injury, Anksha had disciplined him for breaking the estate's rules concerning non-consensual sex. He would never forget how badly she had torn him that day. Yet, his hate had not been enough to shield him from her power in Charas, to prevent her taking him as a blood-slave.

Bodramet started for the double-doors. He reeked of horses and sweat.

"Where are you going?" called the nibari hostler.

Bodramet's lips curled in a grimace of irritation. These nibari were always getting above themselves with him. "I am finished. I wish to eat."

"Go on, then. But if that last horse has not been done proper, I'll have you back out here."

Bodramet gave him a tiny bow. "I'm sure you will."

He strode briskly across the courtyard and down the broad cobblestone walk toward the mansion. Only one of his four companions had finished in the stable: Yoris glanced back at Bodramet before stepping into the foyer. Bodramet's tongue flicked across his fangs as they came down. He was hungry, but not for slop on a plate, he wanted blood and a body writhing beneath him. The nibari who fed him a small drink from their veins in the evenings refused him sex. They allowed the sa'nevari blood only once a day. "Once a day is not enough," Bodramet growled.

Bodramet overtook Yoris at the far end of the foyer. The mon had paused to stare through the doorway into the Great Hall with longing eyes. Only the guests, vampires, and lycans fed there on the multitude of couches in all the little stylistic alcoves. Nibari, wearing soft, accessible garments that easily opened to facilitate sating their master's appetites, served food on the scattered tables for those who ate such things and knelt with wrists crossed behind them to serve the blood from their veins to the others. Standing there and watching the vampires feed, twisted a knife of bitter resentment in Bodramet's gut. He and his companions had been forbidden to do more than pass through the room without pausing on their way to the rear gardens--unless invited and they had not been. However, he had caught sight of Isranon there on more than one occasion, sitting with Haig and his exquisite nibari, Nainee, talking about philosophy.

He clamped his hand round Yoris' wrist, startling him. "Since I cannot have a nibari for my nibble games, I will have you."

Yoris whined for an instant at Bodramet's roughness, which earned him a shake.

"My rooms, Yoris. Don't make me unhappy."

Once upstairs in his rooms, Bodramet dragged Yoris through the sitting room and tumbled him onto the bed. "Undress."

Bodramet regarded Yoris' effeminate, flabby body with distaste made worse by the spreading signs of withering, the red splotches marring the skin. Yoris' blood had begun to taste more acrid and sharp, less of copper; but it was still blood. This was not what he wanted at all. A firm young female or a hard muscled young male would be more to his preference, someone whose blood had a full-bodied flavor like fine wine.

He missed his father's estates in Waejontor, and his privileges: the table set with everything he could possibly wish for; the sycophants and nubile youths so willing to warm his bed and his veins with their flesh and blood. But the estates were laid waste by the Sharani; his father and brothers either slain or fled during the months that Bodramet had followed Mephistis south to conquer new lands. Now here he was a blood-slave with nothing to his name, watching a lowborn half-a-mon stealing all the favors.

"Isranon," he growled softly to himself. "I'd like to put a blade in your ribs and my cock up your ass."

Stretched out on Bodramet's bed, Yoris glanced up at him. "What did you say?"

"If you didn't hear, I'm not going to repeat it," Bodramet growled as he shrugged out of his dirty robes and dropped them on the floor before joining Yoris on the bed.

Yoris levered himself onto his side. "I want to help you. I have always been willing to help you. What did you say?"

Bodramet shoved Yoris' face into the coarse black thatch between his legs. "Shut up and suck me. I will tell you when I'm ready. Otherwise you'll be tattling to someone." He allowed his thoughts to drift enough to imagine it was Isranon's lips around his cock.

Soon after Bodramet finished with him, Yoris fell asleep, exhausted by the rough handling.

The Presence Pain roared up in Bodramet and he could sense Anksha's nearness as she walked down the hallway despite the walls between them. Part of him wanted to go to her and beg her to feed and relieve it. He stifled that.

"I hate you," Bodramet groaned. He needed more freedom, less watching. He examined Yoris' wither marks without waking him.

Then he stroked his side with a tiny touch of his power, too subtle to be detected. Red welts and streaks appeared. Bodramet grazed the surface with his fingers and they disappeared. Then he brought them back again and left them.

Nibari still did the household chores in his chamber, changing linens, sweeping, dusting, and filling his bath. Bodramet left Yoris drowsing in his bed and went off to select the nibari he wished to discover his "condition." He chose those in charge of bathing supplies and requested that a bath be drawn. When he returned to his suite, he settled on the window seat and considered his performance. Two nibari appeared with buckets of steaming water and he stood observing them, waiting for the right moment.

One of them turned toward him. Bodramet grabbed his side, swayed, and crumpled to the floor. A nibari's eyes saucered and she dropped to her knees beside him. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Dizzy," Bodramet gasped. "I hurt." He indicated the place along his ribs where he had placed the false marks.

The nibari opened his robe and checked. "You're withering. It looks advanced."

"No. Nooooooo!" Bodramet screamed, doubling over and clutching at his ribs and stomach. "I'm not ready.... I'm too strong. This can't be happening now."

"Anksha can quicken the withering if she wishes. No one is too strong," said the second one as he joined the first.

Yoris, awakened by Bodramet's scream, stood blinking in the doorway. He stepped aside as the second

nibari helped Bodramet to rise, and with Bodramet staggering hunched over, got him into his bedroom and laid him down. Yoris followed, his eyes narrow and considering. Bodramet lay with his robe open and the covers folded away from the marks on his body. It looked worse and more progressed than Yoris' own.

The first nibari went for help. Pippa, the elderly nibari who had diagnosed the withering in Yoris, arrived and did the same for Bodramet. "I am surprised it came on this fast and sudden, unless Anksha did it deliberately. But I have seen several go this way. I will ask Timon to give you a few days rest before putting you to work again."

"I am sick," Bodramet protested. "I cannot work."

"Timon will work you till you die," Pippa said. "I'll buy you a few days to get used to it, but only because of the severity and speed with which it came on you."

Pippa poured him a cup of tea and left him a small steaming pot of it on the nightstand, then departed the rooms.

"Bodramet...." Yoris started to speak.

"Go away," Bodramet growled, his voice strained like rage drained through a sieve of anguish. "I want to sleep."

Once Yoris had gone, Bodramet folded his hands behind his head and smiled. Yoris believed it every bit as much as the nibari; hence he would spread it around, probably starting with Gareth, maybe a message to Hoon, and possibly one of Isranon's people. Yoris would play all the angles to see what he could gain from this, and he would gain far less than he expected when Bodramet made his next moves.

If the foolish Lemyari here thought they were all half-dead from the withering, they would let their guards down further. He would talk to the others.

\* \* \* \*

Zyne sang, standing on the wooden, gambrel roof of a house in the Poor Quarter. She sang softly, wanting it to carry only a few blocks. Her voice rose and fell, weaving a summons in the eerie notes of a minor key. It would only affect the males, but there were other ways to bind the females to her in worship. The sound spoke of promise, of hunger and need, laden with a seiryne's compelling eroticism. Only Anksha could match her in allure. But Anksha could only take one at a time, while Zyne could take many.

"Give up your will to me," she sang and the human males answered.

Throughout the Poor Quarter, they put aside their meals; put down their tools and ceased to work; ceased their rutting; ceased their songs and drinking in the taverns: all things, all tasks, all needs and desires went forgotten. They emerged from the buildings, gathering below her, their eyes drawn in solemn worship of their new dark god. Zyne felt intoxicated, inhaling the vibrant energies of their adoration. Zyne was meant to be served; her god was meant to be worshipped. She was the embodiment of her god, waiting to birth her back into living existence.

"Males, give up your will to me. Poor weak sex. Tomorrow at this hour, bring me your women." She flew down, choosing a young carpenter. She pulled him into her arms. "The rest of you, go." She carried him off to the roof of the mage tower and let him scream deliciously as he died. Then she lay atop the corpse for a long time, licking the dried-out, withered face with her sharp pointed tongue.

*--Reach out, Zyne, reach out with your thoughts for the lesser bloods, the Ylesgaire. We must summon my minions from the north and the east. Those who are scattered in far realms such as Creeya and the remnants of Waejontor.--*

There came a scratching like a thousand rats. Zyne rose and peered over the edge, looking down into the hungry faces of dozens of lesser bloods. The Ylesgaire looked upon her with adoration in their twisted faces, travesties of what they had been in life. Most wore the rotted remnants of their grave clothes hanging in tattered shreds upon their cadaverous forms. Their huge tearing fangs overlapped their lower lips. These had already been in the city. They had belonged to Hoon, controlled by him and his necromancers. But that was no more. The Queen had come.

"Mine," she said. "You are all mine."

\* \* \* \*

Throughout the city people emerged from their homes and businesses their eyes drawn to the abandoned mage-tower and listened to the screaming like an omen of death and desolation. It should never have carried so far, yet it had.

"What is going on, Mama?" a young girl asked, clutching at her mother's arm. She wore a patched brown dress with gingham edgings; the hem brushed her calves and clung to her black stockings, which descended into worn brown shoes. Her eyes were large in a narrow face and her dark brown hair hung in twin braids down her back.

"I don't know, Seri. I don't want to know." She grabbed her daughter and retreated into her house to close her windows and lock everything.

A gaunt, old priest, in the forest green and sienna of the Temple to Davera, who had been standing near Seri and her mother, turned to the two younger men at his sides. "It has started. We must leave."

"But Father Levis--" Cyril protested, shaking his dark hair back.

"We must pack tonight." Father Levis's tone was firm.

For weeks, the priest, like many in the other temples had been warning the populace of the city-states to flee, but few listened. The citizens' lives were bound up in their cities. Most thought the walls would protect them; or their armies and their kings. It was unimaginable to them that anything could be worse than what had happened during the Great War and they had weathered that--so they did not heed their priests. Many children had come of age in the peaceful years after the war ended and, therefore, had no sense of danger--the sense of immortality of the young bounded their existence.

"I should order you all away," Father Levis said. "My warnings fall on deaf ears."

"Don't be foolish," one of the younger priests said. "It cannot possibly be as bad as you've predicted. Waejontor has fallen. No more dark realms exist."

"There can always be another one," Father Levis said, his voice going low and dark. "I fear that it is our city that the dark ones have chosen for it."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon thought about the rose garden, which was thick with fresh spring growth, delighted at having the sheltering green at last. It had been difficult to find any privacy during the height of winter. Nevin and Olin always found him when he took refuge beneath a pine or other evergreens. Now the tanglewoods that

were Anksha's haunts would become a veiling sanctuary. He had always had time to himself growing up, the entire valley of the Claw's people had been his to roam with no one at his back or shoulder. The constant supervision had been driving him crazy.

He dreamed of laying on his back alone in the grass, watching the languid clouds drifting by with no one to interrupt his thought, no constant checking on him, or asking if he was all right. To achieve that he would have to outwit and out run his mentor. Nevin would be on his trail the minute he vanished. It would be fun to try outwitting Nevin. He had never managed to do that as a boy. To steal a few hours alone would be a treat.

Nevin had gone down to see about some lunch and would be returning soon. He would, doubtless, be using the kitchen stairs that most of the servants used. Therefore Isranon ran down to the main stairs through the great hall and slowed only slightly as he crossed, so as not to draw people's attention. He reached the gardens and sauntered into the rose gardens. He found a bower that was not in use and climbed through it.

Once on the other side, Isranon darted into Anksha's thickets. He moved at a walk to deal with the dense vegetation in various places, the tangles of trees and vines that Anksha loved to slither through. Looking it over, it was no wonder she always had leaves and twigs in her hair.

The soft padding of feet alerted Isranon that he was close to being found, so he dashed through a thicket to the fountain, slipped into the fountain and waded across it with such finesse that he made no noise: Nevin had trained him well. Then he ran into a dense cluster of trees.

He found a tree that had fallen in the winter and rolled underneath it, where he remained for several minutes. Nevin's legs stalked past him and disappeared. Isranon stifled a sound of triumph.

If Nevin could not find him, then no one could.

The air blew chill across the latest mark Anksha had left upon his neck and teased along his slave collar chilling it against his skin. Isranon shivered and considered going back after a cloak. He doubted he would elude the lycans twice in the same day, so he relaxed in his hiding place. When he was certain that they had gone somewhere else to look for him, Isranon rolled from beneath the tree and stole through the thickets to his favorite spot: a boulder by Anksha's Gate. It was the only unguarded gate on the estate and that was because only Anksha could open it.

He ran his hands over the gate's wrought iron lions as he always did, feeling the wildness of her spirit in them, the cleanness of a predator that killed from instinct, rather than for pleasure. Stretching out on the ground, Isranon began to cloud watch and tell stories in his mind to match the images he saw there. Perhaps he would write a song for Anksha. Something new that the clouds inspired.

He spent the day enjoying the aloneness and returned in the evening, grinning.

"So where have you been?" Nevin demanded as he trotted back into the rear gardens behind the manor house.

Isranon decided to make a game of it. "It's for me to know and you to find out."

\* \* \* \*

Yoris rushed to the third floor, ignoring the inquiring looks he received from those he passed. It had taken him weeks to gain the nerve to come here. When he reached the corridor of Lord Hoon's wing, he saw no one: nearly all of Hoon's retainers, nibari, and other servants had gone with him. Those that dwelled

here rarely left this wing, because Timon's folk gave them short shrift whenever Lord Hoon was absent. Three doors before reaching Lord Hoon's presently unoccupied suite, Yoris stopped and knocked loudly.

The door opened and a slender, female Lemyari named Zinzi stood there, brushing her wheaten hair. "Hoon's little rat in the walls. What do you want?"

Yoris glanced back down the way he had come as if he feared he had been followed. "Can I come in?"

"I suppose." She stepped aside and let him enter, motioning him to a sofa. "This had better be important or I'll rip a piece out of you. I was preparing to feed."

Yoris' eyes scanned the room, taking it in in a single sweep. The sitting room was twice the size of his own. A writing desk stood in the corner near the window where there was also a broad window seat with brocaded satin pillows and cushions. Two equally elegant and opulently upholstered sofas and four chairs surrounded a long, low table.

Settling on a sofa, Yoris wondered how she merited it. She must be held in high regard by Lord Hoon, and that made him nervous. His hands writhed over each other in a washing motion. "I must send a message to Lord Hoon. He said I was to come to you."

Zinzi strolled over to the low table and dropped her brush on it. She gave her long hair a quick twist and shoved a large, sharp pin with a sapphire head through it to hold the twist in place. "I have several of his birds. I warn you, it had better be important. Lord Hoon does not suffer fools and cravens lightly."

"It is. I assure you, it is."

She nodded and patted the desk in the corner near the window. "Everything you need is here." She opened the center drawer and took out several small pieces of paper that she casually placed on top of several sheets of stationery. "Write it on this. I've given you more in case you're shaking too much to write clearly."

Yoris rose and stalked to the desk, feeling belittled and angry.

Zinzi backed away to give him privacy and watched how hard he bore down on the quill in his irritation at her. When Yoris had finished, she let him follow her into the next room, where there were huge cages of various large birds. She chose out a moonhawk and slipped the message into the tiny canister on its leg band. "Lord Hoon will have it by nightfall. If this has proved to be a trifle...."

"I know," Yoris said wretchedly. "I'll be punished. It isn't."

"A nibari will be sent to you tonight. Try not to make as much of a mess of her as you did the last one. We had to place coercions in the last one's mind to stop her panics."

"I will try."

"Now, get out."

Yoris ran into the corridor and past several doors. He stopped and leaned against a wall, recovering himself a bit. When he started moving again, his walk had taken on the tiniest swagger. He passed people in the outer hallways without wincing from them and headed down the backswept stairway to the second floor where his rooms were. Gareth, dirty and bedraggled from working on the estate's latrine, stared at him. Yoris went to him and whispered in his ear, "Bodramet is withering."

Gareth grabbed his arm as Yoris started to go on. "The hell you say."

Yoris stopped in his tracks. He was not as afraid of Gareth as he was of Bodramet, yet caution was his nature. "Anksha can quicken it early."

Gareth stroked his chin. "If Bodramet goes down first, I rule our brotherhood of the winepress."

"I assure you, Gareth, that I will help you as I may."

\* \* \* \*

Zinzi went back to the desk, opened the drawer, and took out a piece of charcoal. The stationery, which she had deliberately left on the desk, was thin onionskin and easily took an imprint. She held a sheet up to the light and saw Yoris' message to Lord Hoon was mostly there. The charcoal drew out the words as Zinzi brushed it across the imprint.

"Bodramet and I withering. Isranon not. Potions preventing it."

She sighed and followed it with a snort. This would get Timon in trouble with Hoon. Zinzi knew how Lord Hoon felt about Isranon's extras: he wanted him dead. Only Anksha prevented it. She suspected Timon of being as fond of Isranon as the nibari were.

"I don't owe you anything, Timon," she muttered, folding the paper and walking out. "So why in hell's name, am I going to warn you?"

Zinzi remained true to Hoon in his absence because of old business between her and Timon. During a time when Timon had turned away from love, Zinzi had fallen in love with him and pursued him, only to discover that Timon was homosexual. For the first century afterward, she had hated him, betraying him to his father at every turn. But Zinzi had mellowed toward him.

She found him in his office, reading one of those new books printed on a dwarven contraption. Eventually that would put their nibari copiers out of business and cost them a large measure of income. Fortunately the printers were not widespread yet. Zinzi only knew of three of them in the outlands.

"Zinzi, what are you doing here?" Timon asked, marking his place with an attached bit of ribbon and laying the book aside.

She extended the paper to him. "I don't owe you. But here. This went to your father today."

"Zinzi, I never meant to--"

She cut him off. "Don't start. I thought about it all the way down. I always do. The centuries aren't going to change it."

Timon gave a nod and accepted the paper. He stiffened as he read. "My father will be angry."

Zinzi shrugged. "That's what I thought."

"Thank you."

Zinzi gave a snort. "Hmpf. Don't thank me. I don't do you any favors. Call it my good deed of the century."

Timon's expression turned considering. "I haven't been giving him extras."

"Then you've been turning your back while Anksha has. I am certain of it."

"Guilty."

"You know that if your father orders me to visit him in the night, I will. I don't care what you feel toward him." She flexed her hand and brought forth her claws with their venom. "It will be over very fast and there is nothing you can do to stop me."

"Go away, Zinzi. I have had enough of this. I never meant to hurt you."

Timon sat with the paper in his hands for a long time after Zinzi left. Finally, he crumpled it up and tossed it in a woven basket beside the desk to be added to a buried trash pile beyond the walls. Now he had more to worry about and he had not even had time to verify what Anksha had told him concerning the purity of Isranon. He could not wait much longer on that. It had to be done soon. If it proved true, then he would have more reasons to offer for preserving Isranon. *Reasons, justifications? What were they really?* Timon wondered.

He rang a bell and a nibari appeared. Timon sent him running to summon several people. Haig arrived first and Jun soon after. Ephry sauntered in looking like a wolf that had bagged a rabbit and folded himself into his favorite chair. Zulaika and Amiri appeared last, moving with a precise military stride to the remaining chairs. Timon had begun to trust the two Ymraudes who seemed to have a vested interest of some kind in Isranon. He would inquire more deeply about that another time.

"Sit down all of you," Timon said with a sweep of his hand. His hands were large and broad, unlike his father's, for he took after his dead mother's side of the family. "I have had some disturbing news."

"What?" Ephry asked. "I'm always here for you."

Timon smiled at his mate and nodded. "Zinzi was here. Apparently my father has at least one spy in the castle."

Haig sat slightly forward as if contending with the chair that could barely hold his massive frame. "That's your father for you," said Haig in his growly voice. "We've had that talk before. You can't trust him."

Timon ignored Haig's comment, going straight to the source. "A message was sent out today. By nightfall, he'll know that Isranon is not withering due to your intervention, Amiri."

Amiri went still. After a pause, she leaned forward in her chair, and spoke with a deadly softness like a blade wrapped in velvet. "Was my name mentioned?"

"No. They think I'm doing it." Timon pushed his chair back and drew one leg up, bracing his knee against the desk. "Bodramet and Yoris are withering. It said that also. So the spy is someone who has concourse with the blood slaves."

Amiri blinked. "Withering? So soon? What did Anksha do to provoke it?"

Timon shook his head at her. "I have no idea. She has many ways. There's more. My father wants Isranon dead."

Haig's face twisted up in a grimace of distaste. "We already knew that."

Timon exhaled heavily when he got to the next part of his revelations. "There is more to it. He wanted me to prevent Isranon from getting extras. I was to hasten his death in ways Anksha would be unable to detect. She's fiercely protective of Isranon."

The room remained silent, waiting for Timon to say more. So after a pause, Timon spoke again. "Zinzi just told me that if my father gives the order she will kill Isranon. Most likely using her venom. That is her preferred way to kill. She likes the taste of it in their blood. The sanguiner makes bottles of envenomed blood for her."

Amiri stared at her hands in her lap, listening and considering, reading the voices alone and focusing on them. "How soon can she get the order?"

"A day. The birds fly fast and Minnoras is just across the Idar River from us," Timon replied.

"Do you think your father will order it?" Haig asked.

Timon ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't know. It depends on two things. One how much he still prefers discretion to expediency in this matter. And two, whether he thinks having the nekaryiane will make up for losing Anksha."

"And he will lose Anksha, if he kills Isranon," Amiri said in a midnight velvet tone.

Jun straightened his tall, rangy frame and spoke for the first time, an edge to his baritone voice. "Can we kill her?"

"No. My father would make an example of half my estate if we killed her out of hand." *And I don't think I could make myself order it.* "Ephry, she listens to you. Go talk to her. Find out which way the wind blows on my father and her. I want to know what the likelihood is that my father will order Isranon's death."

Ephry rose. "I'll take care of it now before she has too much time to consider."

"Thanks." As Ephry left, Timon turned to Jun and Haig. "We need to assign people to keep an eye on Zinzi and all the likely angles she might come at Isranon from if she does decide to take him out."

"That's going to be stretching us awfully thin," said Jun. "We're already watching Isranon and the five blood-slaves. Especially with Isranon playing this little hiding game of his. There are easily a dozen ways that Zinzi could reach him."

"We must try, Jun," said Timon. "We simply must try."

"We'll see what we can do," Haig answered for himself and Jun. "And we must warn Isranon."

"I'll take care of that," said Timon, adding, "discreetly."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon slept with dreams and flashbacks out of hell swirling in shifting patterns through his mind. A nibari had carried a message to him and Nevin that one of Hoon's minions, who had been left behind, might make a try for him and set them off. The nibari had refused to say where the information had come from. It weighed on his mind whether to tell Anksha. The last thing he wanted to do was to cause trouble on the estate. Anksha was as cruel as she was gentle and the innocent would die as well as the guilty if she flew into an unthinking rage.

He gripped Nevin tightly, one arm thrown over the lycan's shaggy shoulders.

*Isranon sat in a chair beside his prince, Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan, in Hoon's mansion in Timbren, on the western coast flanked by Hoon's royals. Haig stood back, shifting uncomfortably*

*as if he were aware of what was about to happen and could do nothing for it. Anksha sat nude upon a table, dangling her feet, swinging them from time to time like an impatient child.*

Hoon had come into Timbren with only six myn in addition to Mephistis, Isranon, and Anksha, leaving most of their forces in the ruins of Aubrudrin. The room was small and cozy. A fire burned in the hearth. Hoon was gathering an army of undead to strike at Rowanhart in reprisal for the Sacred King's breaking of his citadel in Waejontor, building it primarily from revenants and zombies raised by the sa'necari.

Isranon had grown steadily more suspicious of Hoon and Anksha as the days and weeks wore on. He knew these "nibble games", as Mephistis labeled them were rough and he had seen how badly she tore Bodramet up.

He watched Hoon sitting before his full-length mirror. A gesture from Hoon set the surface swirling in patterns of black and silver. When it cleared, Isranon could see a mon in another room reflected there. He did not wish to be here and only half listened to the conversation, missing most of it until Hoon said her name.

*"Galee, I have anticipated you. All those long talks about those infuriating twin yuwenghau, Dynarien and Dynanna. I am in striking distance of the female right now."*

*Galee? Gylorean Galee? Isranon felt icy nails scratch their way up his spine. The mentor of Waejonan still lived? She had created both the vampires and the sa'necari. If Hoon was allied with Galee, then they were in far more danger than he had dreamed possible. Terror gathered in Isranon's stomach, spreading through his muscles. Would she recognize the blood of his ancestor in him and order him slain out of hand?*

"Are you?" Galee purred. "Well, let me inform you of the date and the time. Then we will kill them both. It must be done simultaneously so they cannot Jump to each other's aid. And how is our young prince managing?"

"Quite well, I assure you. He has made the acquaintance of my little pet and they like each other very well."

Isranon heard the honeyed poison in the vampire's words and flicked a glance at Mephistis. The prince's hands were tightening on the arms of his chair to the extent that his knuckles whitened.

"You always were my favorite, Hoon," Galee smirked.

"I suppose that is a compliment, Galee," Hoon observed, dryly.

Isranon grew more concerned, more certain that something was about to happen here. He suspected that both Mephistis and Haig knew what that was. He stopped listening to Hoon, turning his attention back and forth between his prince and Haig.

"Dynarien is in Creeya," Galee said. "I intend to kill him and this time he will stay dead. I will see that there are no pieces of his soul left for his divine father to gather up. Just be certain that you get his sister."

"I shall, Galee. I shall."

The mirror went blank and Hoon rose. Walking to the middle of the room, he turned to Isranon. "You are the only sa'necari who is truly the prince's mon, Isranon."

"Where is this going, Hoon?" Mephistis asked.

"As your mon, he should know who truly rules. Anksha, play with the prince."

Isranon started to stand only to have two royals shove him hard into his seat and hold him there. He met Haig's eyes briefly, and then the Lemyari turned his back. Isranon felt the cold bite of betrayal in Haig's action, having believed him a friend.

Anksha shoved off the table in response to Hoon's order, landing lightly as a cat, and stalked toward Mephistis grinning. The prince went pale, trying to back away from her; Isranon saw the terror in his eyes. He realized that what had been going on between Mephistis and Anksha for the past months had not been a simple nibble game. It had been something else entirely.

"Blood-slave," Anksha hissed, the dominance-link clicking in. Mephistis screamed, clutched his head, and collapsed, moaning and writhing on the floor.

All the strength went out of Isranon's body at the sight. He could not move. He felt empty and impotent. The greatest power in his world: all his sense of safety and of reality had been built around the invincible Prince Mephistis, most powerful of sa'necari. He had never imagined that anything existed that could do this.

Anksha raked Mephistis with her claws while he begged her to bite him, to take him, to drink from him. She continued her exhibition, giving him a taste of what she had given Bodramet, only worse--far worse. Mephistis jerked and wept each time she drew her claws along his legs and arms, leaving long, ugly tears in his flesh.

"Anksha, please," he moaned.

"Silence, blood-slave," Anksha ordered, licking her lips.

Isranon sensed the edge of her power as she lashed Mephistis' psychic body through the dominance-link. It smelled like smoke and tasted like acid. Mephistis gave a long anguished howl that shivered up Isranon's spine. The prince's body arched and fell in rolling convulsions, his fingers dancing uncontrollably on the carpet.

"What can I do to you, oh foolish prince?" Anksha demanded in a midnight voice.

"Anything, Anksha. Anything you wish."

"And what will you do for me? Open your belly at my command?"

"Give me the blade and I will do it."

Isranon felt that lash of power again as Anksha hit the prince a second time through the link. He winced at Mephistis' scream. His stomach heaved and it took all his will power not to spew all over himself.

"Bite me," Mephistis pleaded, his eyes filled with desperation.

"This time I will drain you."

"No!" Isranon spoke before he could stop himself. One of the vampires laughed.

"Watch closely, Isranon. This little demonstration was planned for your benefit," said Hoon.

Isranon looked up and saw Hoon standing close to him.

"Remember this lesson. I brought you here to teach it to you."

"Bite me," Mephistis whimpered louder. He sobbed, moaned, and pleaded until her fangs entered his neck and then he screamed on and on and on, while she rode him.

Hoon glanced across the room from time to time. "My lineage, Isranon, is Lemyari. I am a demon-vampire." He flexed his hand and his fingers became claws, venom beading on the tips. "I am the first born of Gylolean Galee, the first vampire made since the Burning Times. I can kill a yuwenghau, if I give them all ten fingers. My venom is very potent. Be careful around me. Provoke me and I will not hesitate to stick you."

Isranon glanced at Anksha still riding his prince, her claws tearing his arms and chest, her fangs deep sunk into his neck. His eyes filled. He thought of his sister and his murdered father. He remembered Rose, whom Dane Jayce had striven so desperately to save and failed. And now Anksha had taken his prince. He had nothing left, except a psychic hollow resonating with echoes of past and present loss. The young male retreated into his father's teachings, those of the Dark Brothers of the Light of which he was the last. "The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Isranon's eyes went soft and unfocused, his voice dropping to a whisper that was both silk and stone. "If you do not understand it, then I cannot explain it. When it is my time to die, I will die."

"I have given you a lesson in power. It is mine."

*"So be it." Isranon withdrew into his inner castle of silence, wanting to weep for Mephistis, yet refusing to show weakness. "I will not forget it." Nor will I forgive it.*

*Anksha rolled off Mephistis, who lay too still, came to her feet, and sauntered over to Isranon. Mephistis' blood coated her face and her breasts. She rubbed against Isranon, smearing his face and clothing with his prince's blood. He flinched and the two vampires restraining him tightened their grip.*

"I didn't kill him," she purred deep in her throat. "Get some blood and Sanguine Rose into him swiftly enough and he should live. Had I killed him, I would have eaten his entrails while they were still warm. I like the taste of them."

Isranon glanced at Hoon and the vampire lord nodded for his myn to release Isranon. He quickly got Mephistis up, shouldering his weight. Anksha paused in front of them as Isranon started for their bedroom. "Maybe I should take you now," she said.

"The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me...." Isranon replied calmly.

"Let them pass, Anksha," Hoon told her.

Anksha stepped aside, going to where Mephistis had bled onto the carpet. She threw herself down in the puddled blood and rolled in it like a dog over a carcass.

Haig reached Isranon in the hallway and slipped his arm around Mephistis. "Let me carry him. Put your wrist in his mouth."

Isranon glared at Haig for an instant, then yielded his prince, shoved his sleeve up, and pushed his wrist between the unconscious prince's teeth. Mephistis' fangs descended without his regaining consciousness and he suckled. Isranon released a sigh, a breath he had been holding until Mephistis broke the flesh on his wrist. They walked in silence. Haig laid Mephistis into bed and Isranon turned on him.

"Get out," Isranon said, his voice full of ice.

"Isranon...."

"Get. Out."

*Haig retreated to the door and left.*

\* \* \* \*

Ulik, the Master of the Birds, was a gaunt little man who had given his allegiance to Hoon in childhood, in hopes of becoming a vampire. Thirty years later, he was still hoping, but becoming less certain that he would get his wish from Hoon. The door into the largest receiving cage swung open as a bird entered. It was a large silver-white moonhawk and he knew only one person who used them: Zinzi. He lit the lamps to see better and moved deeper into the aviary chambers to get it and retrieve the message. A long worktable stood on the rear side and the tall cages that rose to the ceiling covered the other three walls with just enough of a window left to allow him to send out the birds.

He put on a glove and reached in. The well-trained hawk climbed onto his hand and emerged. Ulik stroked its head and took the message from the band. It had a seal on it that he recognized as Zinzi's colors, further confirming his suspicion that it had come from her. He put the bird into an isolated side cage and carried the message up to Hoon's garden, which took up a quarter of the roof. The gardens were a fetish with Lord Hoon. Every one of Hoon's houses Ulik had ever lived in had had them.

When he reached the garden, he found Hoon feeding and stood patiently waiting for Hoon to recognize his presence.

Hoon sat in his chair, head bent low over a nibari that knelt nude between his legs with her head on his knee as he fed. All of Hoon's nibari were fine to look at. The rare one that turned out less than comely was given to his sa'necari as depnanes or sent to the sanguiner for draining. Hoon's hands grasped the nibari's shoulders when she swayed. Blood dribbled down her neck. He drew her up into his arms, half-cradling her as her skin began to turn blue. When Hoon finished, he shoved the corpse aside and dabbed his lips with a handkerchief. "She angered me this morning. What have you brought me?"

"Messages from Zinzi. I recognized the color of the bands." Ulik passed the messages into Hoon's hands.

Hoon unrolled them. His face twisted with anger as he read. "Get a bird ready I will have messages going back."

Ulik bowed and left the roof. Back in his chambers, he went to the window where a desk stood next to it. He took out a large mirror and turned up the lamp that sat on it. The flames, given more wick to consume, brightened. Ulik could see across the rooftops to the old mage tower's outline in the night beneath the full moon that limned its damaged structure. Pointing the mirror at it, he put the lamp in front, held for a count of three and pulled it back. He repeated it twice and a light blossomed in the tower, flashed, and darkened in response. Ulik returned the mirror to the drawer and went to the aviary room's antechamber to await the message that Lord Hoon would be sending.

All that remained to do was to kill Zinzi's hawk and dispose of it where no one would find it.

\* \* \* \*

Hoon sat at an elaborate writing desk with scroll worked sides and claw-footed legs in his sitting room. The room was like all his others, hung with green and red scenes of vampiric debaucheries, and furnished with opulent well-cushioned sofas and chairs with a low table between them. The largest seat was where

he held casual court. Dipping his pen into the ink, he wrote out a message: "Kill Isranon. Give Yoris two treats. Get potion sample."

He sanded it to dry and walked out, anger in his stride. Those who knew him well recognized the nuances of his body and avoided him. This spread to the nibari and servants, so no one impeded him. On reaching the tower stairs that led up to the aviary chambers, he quickened his steps still more. This would all come to a swift end. Zinzi would stick Isranon and his blood would be drained. He had told Timon to send him Isranon's blood, but Zinzi would keep it for herself as she did all of her kills.

Isranon had overstepped and Timon had failed. He would punish his son's disobedience. Hoon would spend a few days deciding just how much to punish him.

Ulik was waiting for him with a bird ready when Hoon entered. The message was quickly slipped into the canister on the bird's leg and it went out the window. Hoon turned away and started down the stairs, thinking about how old Ulik looked. It was time to get him an apprentice and then relieve him of his duties--permanently.

\* \* \* \*

Mondarius stood on the roof of the old mage tower with three myn. One of them carried a longbow and the other two were sa'necari. He watched the bird until it had nearly cleared the walls of the city before gesturing to the archer beside him. "Kill the bird. Find where it falls and bring the messages to me."

The archer beside him lifted his bow and shot. The arrow pierced the bird's chest and it fell within the walls. A sa'necari crouching beside him immediately dropped through the trapdoor and ran down the stairs to fetch it.

"I want Hoon's mansion watched every minute of the day and night. No more birds reach him and none go out," Mondarius told the archer. "See to it. The queen will reward us when she comes."

"For the queen," replied the archer, bowing low and touching fingers to his forehead.

"When will she come?" asked the sa'necari who remained.

"Soon, soon. The one who will awaken her has risen."

## **CHAPTER two**

### **purity**

Bodramet tired of listening to Yoris' whining about Isranon. Rather than shut him up, he allowed it since Yoris helped him keep the others bitter and focused. Which was how he wanted them. The more they listed their grievances, the more heavily they dwelled upon them, and the more they looked to him for solutions. That gave Bodramet a measure of power and influence. The sa'necari met every few nights in Bodramet's rooms to take counsel from him as they did that night. Since they could not take their anger out on Anksha, more and more they looked to take it out on Isranon. Eventually he would work them up enough that they would help him put a blade through the mon's heart. The half-a-mon would pay for spurning him, especially in favor of lower creatures.

"Even the nibari favor him," Yoris complained, holding a handkerchief to his mouth and dabbing at it. "They took him into the pantry closet and stayed with him, while I had to clean the kitchen."

"You are the one who insists upon being paired with Isranon," Gareth pointed out.

Yoris shrugged, continued dabbing at a clear dribbling coming from one corner of his mouth. "When Anksha comes looking for blood, he offers himself in my place. Then, because he is her favorite, she takes neither of us."

Bodramet smirked at that. "Clever Yoris. If only you were clever enough to allow us to eat him...." He imagined Isranon's flesh yielding to the sharp kiss of a steel blade. His loins tightened and hardened; he could almost feel the warmth of flesh sheathing them; taste Isranon's blood spilling into his mouth; feel the slowing of his struggling heart. Bodramet shivered with desire and then shook himself free of it.

"If we learned his habits, his places," Yoris suggested.

"We would need to separate him from the lycans," said Ennis. "They are always about him."

Yoris immediately corrected Ennis. "No. No, they are not. When he goes off to play that bloody flute of his ... he likes to be alone with it. I tried to follow, but the noise makes my head hurt."

"He hides from us," Bodramet said, at last. "He fears us. That is why he bends over for the vampires ... takes Timon's rod up his ass. We must learn his habits."

The others chorused, "Yes."

Bodramet smiled. "Then let us begin tomorrow."

Color fled from Yoris' face suddenly. He covered his eyes with his hands as he staggered backwards into his chair. The others glanced at their companions and then Bodramet was at Yoris' side, grasping his wrist and reading him. When Bodramet raised his head, his eyes had gone very hard. He had held back on telling them, but the effects were showing more and more each day. "Anksha's power has spread like a cancer through his body. The withering has begun. Yoris is dying."

Yoris sniveled softly as Bodramet unfastened his robe and shoved it back from his shoulders so that the others could see his shame, the evidence that he was the weakest. A small line of red patches showed along his side. Bodramet touched one and Yoris winced in pain. "That is how it starts," Bodramet advised them. "Watch for it in yourselves."

Bodramet repressed a smile at their disturbed reactions without really listening. *First we stalk and then we pounce ... Isranon, your time draws near.*

When each of them had had a chance to examine Yoris, Bodramet addressed them again, drawing them in. "I have learned to mimic it."

Gareth looked sharply at him. "Then you don't have it? I had heard rumors."

"I don't. It is a ploy." Bodramet opened his robe and stroked away the welts. He brought them back and closed his robe. "Give them time and they will fail to consider me much of a threat to the half-a-mon. Then I will strike."

"Teach me," Gareth said. Soon they were all clamoring to learn.

\* \* \* \*

Anksha trotted through the halls looking for Isranon, peering into each of the main rooms until she reached the nibari dining room, a small pouch of candies in her pocket. She had already been to his rooms. The large chamber, which would easily seat forty, seemed oddly empty with only the five sa'necari sitting at the farthest end of the long table. Anksha was accustomed to seeing it filled with nibari,

but it was too early for them to be there. By Timon's order the sa'necari took solid meals here unattended; and blood in another chamber under the watchful eyes of Lemyari myn-at-arms.

The Presence Pain must have been increasing in them, for they were aware of her before she entered. Bodramet looked up, scowling. Anksha could smell his hate and the resentment of the chains she wrapped him in. It had worsened since he and the others had begun to wither. She had never expected Bodramet and the strongest two to wither this soon.

Her nostrils flared with distaste and her lips curled back from her fangs in reaction to the scent. Lust shimmered around him like an aura of heat. His eyes raked her with a mix of hunger and defiance. She almost snapped him with the dominance-link. Bodramet needed to be broken; however, she did not often break those who were withering because it increased the pace of it.

Rage and sometimes madness characterized the final stages of the withering.

The others refused to look at her. Gareth pressed his arm across his ribs as if he hurt and sat bent forward against the edge of the table. Anksha suspected that he was indeed hurting, for she had seen the marks and tasted something in his blood sufficiently close to the taste of the withering to satisfy her.

Isranon was not there. The entire room stank of rage, hatred, resentment, and lust.

"Where is Isranon?" she demanded suspiciously.

"We do not know," Bodramet said. "We have not seen him today."

Anksha sucked air through flared nostrils with a grim expression. Something in Bodramet's eyes made her uneasy, but she chose not to press it. If she did not find Isranon soon, she would return and rip him apart.

More and more she suspected these five of wishing ill to Isranon. She saw the way they looked at him covertly when they thought she would not notice. Whenever she could not find him it made her nervous. She could have summoned him through the link, but she was afraid it would hurt him. Anksha went out into the Great Hall among the many alcoves of couches and tables where the vampires dallied with the nibari to feed. They frequently included Isranon in their parties. She searched among them but did not find him. It seemed that they were all breaking the rules for him and that pleased her.

"Anksha?" Timon crossed the room with his arm around Ephry's shoulders. The pale lycan was a startling contrast beside the dark vampire. "Why the frown?"

Anksha gave an irritable growl, soft and deep. Her lower lip stuck out. "Isranon. I cannot find him."

Timon's face darkened. "Try the garden. If you don't find him there, come back and we'll all look."

Haig rose from a nearby divan with Nainee, her arm through his, and joined them. Haig would not taste her again until the child was delivered. From the way she looked at him, Nainee intended to have Haig's fangs and more inside her the moment her strength recovered from the birthing. "Try listening for his flute, Anksha," Haig suggested.

"A flute?" Ephry sounded astonished and then bemused. "A sa'necari playing a flute?" All at once, he laughed softly.

"My Lord Isranon plays it well," Haig responded, making a point of using the title. Nainee nodded at that, making it clear that she had heard it also. Sa'necari hated the sound of a flute because its music was that of life.

"You've taken a blood-slave as your liege-lord, Haig?" asked Jun, coming up to them. Jun was tall, solidly built, but nowhere near as well so as Haig. His black eyes slanted deeply, framed by long, thick lashes.

Haig folded his arms defiantly. "I took him as lord before he became a slave and I will not waver in my devotion."

Anksha scarcely heard them as she left the hall, walking down the main path, glancing along the side paths and scanning the benches, the chairs, and tables. She pulled a wrapped candy from her pocket and two more fell out onto the ground. Before she could pick them up, Randilyn had appeared and scooped them into her hands. Randilyn straightened, grinning as she handed Anksha one candy and kept the other.

"Have you seen Isranon?" Anksha asked.

Randilyn, seeing that Anksha was not going to ask for the second candy back, unwrapped it and popped it into her mouth. "Yes, that way." She nodded. "I lost him near the fountain. You must have a talk with him about this hiding game of his."

Then Anksha walked around the side towards the stables. She knew he would not venture beyond the walls as that was forbidden. The rear was a deep thicketed area that included the fountain she liked splashing in during the warm weather and a spot where a stream passed under the walls. She had nearly given up when she heard a strange sound, high and sweet, almost like a bird's voice, yet different. Anksha dropped to all fours and crawled low on her belly under a bush, stalking the sound. There it was. Yes. She was quite certain now that it was coming from the other side of the fountain. Anksha crept up to the fountain and then slithered around it and prepared to spring.

"Isranon?" Anksha squeaked in surprise. He had a long silver stick in his mouth that he laid aside when he saw her.

"Have you come for me, Anksha?" Isranon asked. He wore no shirt, going about in loose black trousers with a rose colored sash: dressing like Timon and Ephry. Anksha had granted him that extra privilege. He no longer had to wear the blood-slave robes. For the first time since Anksha took him, Isranon had felt safe to take out his flute.

"Not to feed," Anksha said, curling up against him, her words slipping into a comfortable patois. "I worried when I did not find you. Looked all over."

"You worried?" Isranon ran his fingers through her hair, getting the leaves and twigs out. Day by day his health had improved since the first weeks after Anksha had taken him. Too many people were looking after him, trying to make certain he did not die too quickly, that he did not wither. He lifted Dawnhand's flute again and paused.

"The others are nasty. They would kill you, I think." Anksha tilted her face up, half-resting it against his leg. "Why are you so calm?"

Isranon quoted his father's teachings. "'Serenity is gained by an acceptance of fate.'"

"I do not understand," she said, her eyes wide with puzzlement.

"So long as you feed frequently, I experience little or no discomfort in your presence and I can actually enjoy being with you like this." He tousled her hair again, savoring the way her face brightened with pleasure. "By yielding. By accepting. I am free."

Then she remembered Timon's question. "Do you like women?"

"If I did not like women, you would not have snared me."

"Wrong answer," Anksha growled. "You offered yourself as a sacrifice."

Isranon thought about that and gave a short nod. "True. Yes, I like women."

"Men? Do you like men also?"

"Where is this going, little one? Do I have a secret admirer?"

Anksha flashed him two fingers and a large grin.

Isranon laughed and she rolled onto her back to lie looking up at him. "Tell them I like all flavors," he said.

"What is that thing?" She asked, prodding the silver stick. "Sounds like a bird."

"A flute. My father gave it to me when the craving for blood first came on me. He said that anyone who could play the flute and enjoy it would never become a monster. I have never taken a life out of appetite nor have I engaged in their soul-stealing rites."

"Then they are stronger than you are."

"There are many kinds of strength, pet," Isranon responded. "Listen." He put the flute to his lips and began to play. After awhile he paused and said, "All my life I have wanted to walk in the Light, to be part of it. But it has no place for me. Instead I was born into the Darkness, I have walked in it, and I will die in it. At best I can hope to find a twilight path. Think about that as I play and then I will say the words that go with it as my father taught me."

A twilight path that runs east of the sun

So that my hand summons Dawn before I die

To stand in the light, to know its touch

So my hand touches God before I die.

I will not fear my blood upon another's lips,

I will step into the flames of righteousness,

Sweet suffering of freedom for my belief,

I will burn, but I shall not rise in darkness

A path at twilight runs east of the sun.

Dawn now summons for me to die,

The path is barred, the gates are locked

I rest, I dream, from me they'll hear no cry.

I never found the twilight path of shadowed sun,

Yet sun it was. In the light I could not touch,

I built my house of sticks and set it burning.

This day I die, from fate I will not run.

I stand within the womb of the flames.

I perish reaching for the Dawn

My honor clean, my ash remains

I have not lived in vain.

Anksha's lips trembled uncertainly. "That's a sad song."

"Melancholy, Anksha. There's a difference." He held the flute out to her. "Do you recognize the flute? It was Dawnhand's."

Anksha immediately drew back from him, shaking her head furiously. "I was a baby."

Isranon heaved a sigh of frustration and let it go, returning to his playing.

Anksha crouched down next to him and fought back tears. She could sense his need to know about his ancestor, the one she had loved so much. Yet she dared not tell him what she had seen and known so many centuries ago.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon never ceased to marvel at the manor's library, but then, he reminded himself, Timon and Hoon had had centuries to acquire it. Whenever they had been forced to move to other holdings they simply gathered it into some marvelous carrying orbs and it went along with them. Isranon had spent most of the winter reading tomes on the philosophy of the Borealysyn, a vampiric cult that had many similarities to the Dark Brothers. While they were not pacifists--many of them were soldiers--they restrained their hunger for the blood, living in a gentle symbiosis with their nibari, never taking a life out of appetite or for the simple pleasure of the kill. Haig was Borealysyn and made no secret of it; although most of the others appeared to do so. The founder was named Timradnuu. Isranon suspected that was a nom de plume to protect him from the vampires who objected to the cult.

He had just settled on a small sofa in an alcove with a slender volume when he became aware of someone next to him.

"I have always wondered what Mephistis saw in you. Were you lovers?"

Isranon closed the book, slitting his eyes at Bodramet. He could smell the hunger rising off him. "That is none of your business."

"Everything is my business if I wish it to be." Bodramet ran his finger along Isranon's neck. "You were his lover, weren't you?"

Isranon could see how long Bodramet's fangs had become--nearly to full extension. He did not want to cause a scene among the books and risk damaging them. Isranon rose quietly and walked away from him. His heart was racing as he shelved the book. He could hear Bodramet walking behind him. Anger began to simmer.

"Tell me, yes or no," Bodramet demanded.

Isranon noticed several royals watching them. He debated whether to go to them or try to handle this himself. To lean too heavily upon their intervention would set a dangerous precedent; cause the sa'necari to think he would not fight. He missed his blades. He would not give Bodramet what he wanted without a fight. Isranon walked out of the library into the corridor, his step quickening. He would pick the ground, not Bodramet.

\* \* \* \*

Jun watched Bodramet sit down beside Isranon, his nostrils flared and he could smell the tension between those two. He drifted near with two others, listened discreetly to their conversation, and saw Isranon flee into the corridors.

"Fetch Timon, I think we have trouble," Jun said to Garin.

Garin nodded and left by another door. Jun went after Isranon and Bodramet. Rumor had it that five of them were half-dead from the withering, but if that was so, then Bodramet was extremely strong to still be chasing Isranon.

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet overtook Isranon, catching at his arm to turn him about. Isranon was more heavily built, thicker through the chest and shoulders. He shook Bodramet off and ran, snapping his shields into place; they would not take much of a hammering from someone of Bodramet's ability and power. However, he was nearly to the spot where he intended to make his stand.

"Father forgive me, but I cannot allow this," Isranon murmured.

He turned a corner, which placed him in the kitchen stairwell beneath the upper curve in the shadows. He waited, breathing hard, crouching hidden by the edge of the rise to the upper landing. Bodramet arrived. Isranon straightened and hit him, two solid blows to the stomach and solar plexus.

Bodramet went to his knees, gasping. "You'll pay for that."

Isranon stood over him, shaking with anger. "Let me be, damn you! Let me be."

"Never," Bodramet snarled. He staggered to his feet, gathered his power, and slammed Isranon into a wall with a gesture.

Isranon's head connected with the stone and he fell stunned.

"Let him be," said a new voice.

Isranon glanced up. "Timon!"

Timon and three royals from the library stood behind Bodramet. At a gesture from Timon, two of them reached for Bodramet's arms. Before they could seize him, Bodramet crumpled to the ground, clutching himself as if the pain of the withering had flared up.

"Take him away," Timon prodded them.

They dragged him off.

Jun lingered. "The rage of the withering already?"

"Possibly," Timon said curtly. "I don't give a damn. Go back to your business, Jun."

Jun bowed to Timon and returned to the library.

Timon knelt beside Isranon with so much concern in his eyes that it made Isranon uncomfortable.

*A lover's eyes. Has Timon fallen in love with me? But he is Hoon's son.*

"Are you hurt?"

"No." Isranon shivered as Timon touched him. He could not deny his attraction to the Lemyari prince who appeared to be trying to step into Mephistis' role as his protector. "I can take care of myself," Isranon said with a sudden proud lift of his head.

"I never said you could not. But you do not have your blades now, and their magic is stronger than yours. Especially Bodramet's."

A shudder of memory slid through Isranon. He smelled Hoon's breath, his perfume, felt his fangs in his neck again, and the constraining arms pinning his. "You are your father's son...."

Timon frowned and withdrew his hand from Isranon's shoulder. "You hold that against me? You did not hold Mephistis' nature against him."

Isranon squared his shoulders. "May I leave now?"

"Yes."

Isranon walked away feeling troubled. Timon's strength was tempered by kindness and tolerance toward all on the estate except for Bodramet and his companions. He was so very different from Mephistis and Hoon. Yet, he was still Hoon's son. Isranon desperately did not wish to make another mistake in friendship or love; Timon was making that matter much harder.

That night Isranon hurt, partly from Bodramet's blow and partly from the Presence Pain that was growing again. Nevin gave him the last of the Sanguine Rose. As he sank once more into the warm comfort of it, Isranon knew he needed to ask Timon if there was a supply at the estate and if he could have some; however, he did not want to ask Timon for anything. He was already bound to one master and he did not need to be bound to another through debt.

One drowsing worry led to another, Hoon, Bodramet, this mysterious other, and it led his Sanguine Rose influenced mind back down the paths of dark dreams and memories best forgotten.

*Dane showed Isranon where he had buried Rose, while his people were packing up to leave Dragonshead. Isranon settled beside the grave, which Dane had concealed with stones and debris, took out his flute and began to play his saddest songs.*

"I am sorry, Isranon," Dane told him. "I tried and I failed you."

Isranon shook his head, continuing to play.

"Listen to me...." Dane pleaded. "Isranon, since you will not come away with me. Should you ever be forced to flee, there is an estate near Charas. Ask for Haig or Zulaika. They know where and how to find me. They will help you."

"I never should have fallen in love." Isranon lowered his flute. "Love is not for such as I."

"You're young, Isranon. Too young to be saying something like that. Will you accept my offer of sanctuary should you need it?"

"I don't know. I doubt it."

"Why not?"

"I accept that the sa'necari will eventually kill me, like they did my father and his father before him. That's always how it ends for us. I feel in my heart that I will never be given a chance to flee."

"Do not say that. Say only that should you flee, you will come to me."

"I will try." He turned away from Dane and resumed his playing, closing the vampire out. Isranon heard them ride away, the sound of their horses' hooves thudding on the soft earth until it faded from his hearing. The leaves rustled and he looked up to see Juldrid emerge. She settled by the grave, placing a sprig of mistletoe at its head.

"I'm sorry for your grief," she said, venturing her first freely given words to him in all these months. "I know you loved her."

Isranon lowered his flute. "More than anything. I swear I will never love again. I will never put anyone at risk because of what I am."

Juldrid nodded, sucking air through her nostril while chewing on her lower lip. Isranon could see that the first faint swelling of her belly had become noticeable. Juldrid followed his eyes. "They are mine as well as theirs. Had I a hope of escape I would take my children where Mephistis and Margren could never find them."

"And if they are born sa'necari? What then?"

"Then I will find someone to teach them to be like you."

"I cannot help you, Juldrid. I cannot betray my prince and run away with you. Besides, I know nothing of these lands. How would I protect you?" He felt his helplessness keenly since the gauntlet brought it home to him. The walls of his inner castle had been breached and he no longer felt as prepared to fight the monsters as he once had.

"Do you know how I met Margren?" Juldrid asked after a long silence.

Isranon shook his head.

"My ancestor is Carliff the Mad Lich who rules Norendel. The sa'necari calls him mad because his people defend, rather than feed upon, the living. He and his were punished with undeath because they broke oath with a branch clan of the Rowans. For five hundred years they have waited for release, waiting for the forgiveness of a paladin or priest of the Rowan lineage to release them."

"So you came here looking for Rowans and found Margren?"

Juldrid bowed her head, but not before Isranon saw she had tears coursing her cheeks. "Yes."

*Although their grief was for different things, it was still grief and when Isranon extended his arms to her, Juldrid entered them. They held each other and mourned together.*

\* \* \* \*

The nekaryiane sang, her voice rising along the harmonic scale, dipping and twisting in haunting, seductive strains. Zyne savored the power of her song, which had been restored to her and enhanced by the transition to nekaryiane. As a seiryne she had betrayed the truce between the tritons and her people when

she took the triton Skree's godson, Josiah, and betrayed him to Hoon. Her own mother had severed her vocal cords to deny her the power of her gift, but now it was restored to her and she had a god to worship freely. All was as it should be.

The males came, bringing their women. Several Ylesgaires waited in the streets and the trees lining it. The women started to complain and some would have left, but their males would not let them. The lesser bloods moved among them, snaring reluctant minds with their eyes. The crowd quieted. It had not been necessary to take all the women's minds, but just enough to control the rest--like sheep following a belled goat. Three of Lord Hoon's royals, two Lemyari and a single lycan, watched the lesser bloods closely from their hiding place in the shadows.

"The priests are my enemies," Zyne proclaimed. "Women, hear me. Bring me the heads of my enemies and I will make you my angels."

"I don't like this," a lean, red-bearded Lemyari named Kalmaryn said to the lycan standing beside him in the shadows of an alley mouth. "It's happening too fast."

"I smell treachery on the wind," the lycan said. "The way she's working the lesser bloods. Let's get back to Hoon."

Zyne moved among the women, smiling, looking for the one she wanted. She found her standing near the edge. The woman, her belly hugely swollen with child, cringed away from her. Zyne smiled, gesturing to the men at the woman's side. They took her in hand. Zyne stroked her belly.

"Lovely, lovely, lovely. Come with me."

The woman whimpered. "Please."

Zyne canted her head. "You want to come. Terrible things happen to those who refuse to worship me. You want to worship me, don't you?"

The woman nodded and was silent, tears running down her face. They took her to the old ruined mage tower, which Zyne used. Her lesser bloods and minions were quietly repairing it unknown to Hoon. In a room redone in black and crimson, she had a pentagram tiled on the floor. Both the darkness and the light used the versatile device. The points had tall iron stakes rising from them. The pentagram was black against the crimson floor. Zyne nodded. The men stripped the woman and bound her to the stakes. Zyne opened a cabinet, setting out her tools and instructing her servants.

Soon incense burned and the chanting began. She had had to teach them syllable by syllable since the language had not been spoken since the Age of Burning.

-- *You do well, Zyne*, --Galee whispered.--Finish her and give me my body.--

Zyne smiled. She dropped her clothing. The acolyte removed it. She slithered over the woman's swollen body, licking her belly, pricking it with her fangs here and there. She could taste her fear, eat her terror. Zyne mouthed her nipple, curling her tongue around it and sucked for a time, then bit it off. The woman screamed as Zyne swallowed it. Zyne moved along her, kissing and licking. She covered the screaming mouth with her own. She extended her hand and an obsidian blade was placed in it. She began to slice the woman in delicate tracteries of flowers and runes, moving downward from her shoulders to her mound. Zyne shaved away the hair until all was revealed. Then she placed her mouth over the sweet mouth of pleasure and breathed Galee into the unborn child. She raised the blade and slit the woman's stomach open, lifting the infant Galee out. Zyne cut Galee's umbilical cord, handing her to an acolyte. Then she placed the point of her blade on the left side of the woman's breastbone and slipped it in.

As soon as the woman died, Galee began to change. Her body matured. The acolyte cried out and almost dropped her. Galee fastened onto his neck, her claws extended, sinking into his body, releasing their venom, and paralyzing him. The others tried to flee. Zyne sealed the chamber with a gesture.

Zyne sat cross-legged with a satisfied smile on her face, watching her god feed. With each death, Galee matured until she stood forth in winged glory. Where Zyne was red and black, Galee was midnight blue. Her beauty took Zyne's breath away and she went to her knees, worshipping her.

"My Beautiful God!" Zyne murmured awestruck.

"Finally! Finally!" Galee shrieked her triumph, beating her wings. "I am restored. The Dawnhand refused to fetch the box and open it for me in the rite. For that I had him killed. I reclaimed the night by the vampire's kiss and now I have reclaimed the day. My godhood is whole once more. Neither man nor god will ever take it from me again."

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, Bodramet's back and shoulders still hurt and throbbed from the beating administered to him following the incident in the library. They said they would have beaten him far worse, except for the fact that he was withering. Had they allowed him to feed sufficiently on blood, he would not still be hurting. He could have healed his injuries in minutes. At least they had not put him back to work yet.

He brooded in his rooms, staring out the window with his foot propped on the fender of the fireplace and his arm on the mantel. He had been humiliated for the last time by that half-a-mon. There would be no more advances, no more overtures. He would make this a war.

He watched the Lemyari gathering in the courtyard below for a hunt, their favorite sport. Isranon mounted his favorite chestnut mare. A Lemyari handed Isranon a set of blades and a pair of javelins. Bodramet snarled to see that. They trusted him not to try to keep them. Isranon always returned them when the hunt ended. The Lemyari drew Isranon into their games, exercises, and other play, demonstrating a growing camaraderie with him. Timon had to be buggering the half-a-mon's ass. Why else grant Isranon these privileges?

Isranon deserved whatever Bodramet could shove in his face. Yes, that was a way to make a start of it.

A knock preceded Yoris arriving with a platter of rare cooked pig. It looked almost edible the way it resembled human flesh. "You should eat."

"Where are the utensils?" Bodramet left the window.

Yoris winced as he pulled his handkerchief out and dabbed at his mouth. "They said if you wished to use them, you would have to eat downstairs. We are not allowed even so much as a fork in our rooms."

"Do they think I could kill someone with a fork?" Bodramet rolled a slice of meat up and chewed it slowly. He began talking between bites. "I suppose they are afraid I might stick something into Isranon."

Yoris studied him. "Would you?"

"Poor little Yoris. You're afraid of everything. You were not always this bad."

"Anksha...."

Bodramet sighed. "Yes, Anksha. Always Anksha."

Yoris dropped his eyes, staring at his hands. "Would you?"

Bodramet moved closer to Yoris, stroking his face with greasy fingers. "Would I stick him?"

Yoris nodded, trembling as Bodramet's hands traveled along his thighs.

"Yes, Yoris. But if you speak of this to the others, I will be rough with you."

Yoris trembled. "I just want to help."

"I know you do. Go into my bedroom and undress like a good boy."

Bodramet rolled up another slice of meat and followed Yoris into the bedroom. By using Yoris as a winepress, he was hastening the weaker man's withering while delaying his own. He did not intend to tell Yoris that. Bodramet had been nobly born, youngest son of a great Waejontori house. He was accustomed to having serfs, slaves, and nibari to feed upon in plentitude. Nature had never intended for him to be a blood-slave with so little to dine upon and Yoris was such poor fare. At least Yoris shared when he earned another nibari in his bed.

Yoris climbed onto the bed and watched him. Bodramet could smell the fear on him. "I am only rough with you, when you give me reason to be. On your knees, Yoris."

Yoris swallowed, assuming the position in the center of the bed. He lifted one hand and dabbed at his mouth again.

"Why do you keep doing that?" Bodramet demanded.

"There's too much fluid in my mouth. It comes out around the edges and I can't stop it."

"You're drooling?"

Yoris flinched. "Yes, I guess that's what I'm doing. Except I can't stop it."

Bodramet thought of how rabid dogs frothed at the mouth and wondered if this meant that Yoris would soon be entering the madness and rage of the last stages of the withering. He shoved the questions aside. There would be time later to investigate.

He crawled onto the bed behind Yoris and pushed his buttocks up better. While he shoved into Yoris, he pretended it was Isranon; and that he had a blade to slip between the half-a-man's ribs as he rode him into death.

He finished rapidly and fell back upon the bed, willing paleness to his flesh. "Fetch them, Yoris! Fetch them. I'm having a bad attack from the withering."

Yoris turned paler than Bodramet, pulled his clothes on, and ran out of the room. Bodramet waited until he heard the nibari coming and then he began groaning. They made him willowbark tea for his pain and poured him a glass of blood--an inferior blend--before settling him beneath his covers again.

\* \* \* \*

Spring had brought the turning of the year, and 1066 became 1067. By then the Lemyari were including Isranon in everything. The blood-slave who should have been dead by winter solstice had flourished instead. That morning Timon had sent Isranon a note, insisting that Isranon meet him in the rose garden and he waited for him in a fragrant arbor thick with climbing blood-red roses.

The rose gardens lay between the formal gardens at the immediate rear of the mansion and the wild section along the edges that they had allowed to grow into thickets for Anksha's pleasures. Isranon knew the gardens better than anyone except Anksha and loved her thickets most of all.

When he saw Timon, the breath caught in his chest. The prince had dressed in red silks, brocaded in gold and sashed with black. It brought out a burnished quality in Timon's dark skin. The man was so handsome.... Isranon had had only two lovers in his life, not counting the casual sex with the nibari. One was dead and the other had been sent away from him by her father. He wanted to touch Timon and be touched by him. It was not right. Timon was a prince and he was a blood-slave. And then there was the matter of Timon being Hoon's son. It made him ache. "You wanted to speak with me?" Isranon asked.

"Sit down next to me." Timon patted the bench.

Isranon looked about, expecting Ephry, but did not see him. This had the air of a carefully plotted sexual assignation. Suddenly, he felt as cornered by Timon as he did whenever Bodramet made his unwelcome advances.

"Call it a mood." Timon bent and produced a bottle of fine wine and two glasses from beneath the bench. "You remind me of Dawnhand."

Isranon blinked. Caught off guard by the hope of learning more about his revered ancestor, he joined Timon on the bench. "You knew him?"

Timon laughed as he handed Isranon a glass of the red liquor. "He was my uncle and I loved him."

Isranon raised the glass to his lips and rolled the first taste around his tongue. He detected the trace of demon blood spiking it with an intensity that could easily get him drunk. "What was he like?" Isranon asked.

Timon's eyes turned distant. "He liked to laugh and tell stories. He levitated me out of a tree once. It was a huge chestnut tree. I was ten years old. I thought if I kept climbing, that I would climb all the way to heaven." He gestured expansively as he spoke, creating images with his hands.

Isranon stared at his glass, realizing he had consumed most of it and it was already going to his head in a far different way than Sanguine Rose. He did not want to find himself alone and drunk with Timon. Hell knew what might come out of his mouth--or what he might do. "What happened?"

"I got into the thinner branches near the top. One broke and I fell. But instead of falling all the way down, I crashed into the middle and became stuck. No one could get me down, until someone fetched my Uncle Isranon Dawnhand. He sailed me up, over, and out. I saw the forest spread like a green carpet, but no sign of heaven."

Isranon laughed, and then sobered. "Do you know what became of Warrior?"

Timon extended the bottle to refill Isranon's glass and, when Isranon covered it with his hand, he shook his head at him. Isranon's lips tightened an instant, then he relaxed and removed his fingers. The thick sweet wine rose like blood to the edge before Timon stopped pouring. The wine was very good. It sent a warm flush through Isranon's body and lightness to his head. He could see that the prince held his wine better.

"The staff?" Timon sighed, his eyebrows raising and then lowering in a flicker of surprise. "No. I was fourteen when it happened. My father may know, but if so, he has never told me. The same day that Dawnhand died, my father became as you know him."

"Did you cry?" Isranon wished he could have taken that question back the minute it came out of his mouth. He had begun to feel very peculiar. His glass kept tipping in his hand and he had to focus on it from time to time to keep it from spilling on him.

Timon sipped his wine, staring off into the distance. "Once I would have told you no. Now I don't suppose it makes a difference. Yes, I cried. But not where anyone could see me. Waejonan, accused by his name forever, made all of us watch. He told us that if any of us were to shed a single tear, we would die next."

Isranon drank his and Timon refilled their glasses a third time as silence settled briefly. Tears filled Isranon's eyes and he realized with embarrassment that he was feeling maudlin. "My family suffered because of Waejonan."

Timon's eyes misted. "As did mine. I was only two years younger than you when I died. My father arrived to turn me in my last moments. Waejonan fired our estate in my father's absence, murdered my little brothers and sisters."

"I am sorry." Isranon leaned closer, covering Timon's hand with his own. He smelled the musk of the mon and wondered what Timon would look like nude. So far he had only seen Timon bare to the waist in the salle. The dizziness had worsened and he swayed within inches of Timon.

"Don't be. It was a long time ago. Yet even after all these centuries, I still dream of them. I still miss them. I hated all sa'necari ... until now." Timon leaned in and kissed him hard. Isranon's lips parted before Timon's ardor and their tongues twined and probed hungrily.

*I cannot feel this way. He is Hoon's son. I saw his father shove Mephistis into the path of the King's blade. Hoon tried to kill me. Hoon killed Josiah.* Isranon twisted away from Timon abruptly, his balance off and nearly tumbled from the bench. The last of his wine spilled onto the ground. Timon caught him and held him tightly to his chest. Isranon pushed at Timon and the prince released him. He sucked in a breath, and then let it out slowly, working to form each word precisely. "It was you and Ephry that Anksha was talking about, wasn't it?"

Timon studied his glass for a moment. "Yes. I am in love with you, Isranon."

Isranon drew farther from him. "I ... 'ave to think. Understand ... your father killed my friend ... ordered Anksha take me."

"I am not asking you to love my father." A note of impatience entered Timon's voice.

Isranon's eyes hardened as he began trying to shake off the liquor and demon's blood, but it was getting worse. "Ye're yer father's son."

"I am my own mon, damnit. I am not my father."

Isranon stood up, squared his shoulders, and lifted his head to a proud angle. "I need to think."

Timon came to his feet beside him. "You have heard of the Borealysyn?"

Isranon felt totally confused by that question. "Of course, I have. Haig is one. A vampiric philosophy. Take no lives out of appetite or for simple pleasure of the kill."

"Have you read the books?"

"Since I been here."

"And the author's name did not strike you as familiar?"

Isranon dropped his glass and backed away from Timon. "Timradnuu ... it's an anagram, isn't? Timuundar ... Timon. You wrote them! Does your father know?"

Timon shook his head. "And I will thank you not to tell him."

Isranon fled drunkenly in uncharacteristic confusion.

\* \* \* \*

Timon returned to his suite feeling irritated and baffled. He thought he had done everything right. First he had gone out of his way to befriend Isranon and then he had begun the seduction. He peeled out of his tunic, tossed it into a corner near his chifferobe, and sat down on the bed.

"You spoke to him?" Ephry asked, sitting at his dresser and brushing his long white hair.

Timon dragged off his boots. "He rejected me again."

"Oh?" Ephry drew his feet up onto the stool and laid his head on his knees, with the brush dangling from his hand. "Lover, I can smell the lust on him every time he gets near you. What did he say exactly?"

"That I was my father's son."

"And that was it?" Ephry smiled. "Well you are, aren't you?"

Timon made a low grumbling noise. "It has been centuries since anyone threw that in my face. I have made my own reputation."

"Perhaps Isranon does not know that. There is a certain na~vet~© to the young mon. Although I do not understand how anyone could be as sheltered as he appears under the circumstances that he has lived."

"Raised by Dark Brothers and lycan herdsmyrn until age fourteen when he went south with Mephistis... I hope I do not make a mistake. Anksha insists that he is as pure as he seems. That he has never taken a life in the rites. And yet that is so hard for me to imagine of any sa'necari born."

Ephry laid the brush down and swiveled on his seat. "He doesn't smell like the others."

"You have said that before."

"And I will say it again. There is a distinct odor to sa'necari who have taken lives in the rites and it worsens the more lives they take."

"Your people put a lot of emphasis on what you can smell."

"If you had noses like ours, you would also, lover."

Timon rose from the bed and put his boots in their place near the foot. Then he went to Ephry and put his arms around him. "I am not certain how far I want to pursue this until Anksha has shown us just how pure he is."

"Then I would not waste anymore time."

"I won't. We'll do it tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Six gathered around the pentagram in a private room beside the roof top gardens: Timon, Ephry, Anksha, Isranon, and two nibari. They stripped and Isranon lay down on his back in the middle, relaxed and trusting. They spellcorded him spread-eagle to the pegs at the points of the star. Anksha sat between his legs, Timon and Ephry at his sides and the two nibari flanked his head. Anksha stretched herself over him and, with surprising gentleness, bit him. As his blood flowed into her mouth a special link flared which could go much deeper than her casual linkages. Timon and Ephry put their hands on her back and followed her into his being, the core of his magic centers, all the little places where the taint from dark rites could linger. The auric patterns glowed, clean and bright. Timon had never seen anything so wondrously clear. It made him ache.

"Enough!" Timon broke the link and sat back. He released Isranon, pulled on his pants, tied his sash and belted his pouch on, and then walked out of the room into the garden. Ephry followed him.

Timon walked to the edge and stared out across the estate with his hands folded behind him. He could not let go of his thoughts of Isranon, the feel of his skin. It made his loins tighten and his cock hard.

"You want to kiss him again, don't you?" Ephry asked, sliding his hands sensuously along Timon's back, up his shoulders and then around him.

"Yes. I haven't been able to get him out of my mind for the last year, even before he rode off with his prince and my father. Now I want him more than ever."

"Shall we make love to him, lover?"

Timon's face brightened with lust. "Yes." Then he drew Ephry around to face him and kissed him deeply.

## **CHAPTER three**

### **heretic**

Father Levis stood in the nave of the Daveranan Temple, tracing its vaulted arches and vine-carved columns, certain that he would never see it again. He loved this place. It had been his home for fifty years. Light glistened in golden patches upon the altar and streamed through the skylights to punctuate the shadows with its brilliance. He had wanted to leave a week ago. Spring had arrived many weeks past, opening the roads and fords again. But the younger men had argued. Finally only two of the four younger priests agreed to come with him.

"Father," said Cyril, the youngest of the pair. "If we are going, we should go. The horses are ready."

Father Levis nodded. He had known Cyril since he was a lad, not taller than Father Levis's hip. "You're right. I ... I simply had no idea how hard it would be to give up my temple."

Cyril smiled and clapped the old mon on the shoulder. "I do know. Why do you think it has taken us so long to agree to go with you?"

Turlough, the third priest, was a slender male from Gormond's Reach who had been sent there six years ago by the Mother Temple. "Come on, both of you. We can discuss these matters more comfortably on the road."

As they started toward the door, six women came in, walking quickly toward them. Father Levis knew all of them. They were part of his congregation, and had been so since childhood. He had solemnized their births, their marriages, and their own children. He had also been telling their families to leave the city

for months, and was prepared to linger long enough to tell them again.

"Father Levis, where are you going?" one of them asked, curiously.

Father Levis frowned. "Away. As you should, as I have told my entire congregation, there is darkness in Minnoras. All should flee."

The mon put her hand on his shoulder. "Yes. I know," she said pleasantly.

Her hand came out of the pocket of her skirt, concealed by the folds of material. She shoved the blade into his chest, twisting it. The old priest's eyes bulged, and then rolled up into his head as he fell. The young men grabbed her.

"What have you done?" Cyril cried, shaking her.

Turlough dropped to his knees beside Father Levis, feeling for a pulse, but the old priest was dead.

The other women circled them and the blades came out. Three blades slammed into Cyril's back, and he staggered with a cry, releasing Father Levis's murderer. Turlough's head jerked up and he saw Cyril sag to his knees and then collapse face down. Before he could shout a warning to the rest of the building, the women were on him like furies, stabbing madly. A whimpering animal noise came from his throat. Crimson drool dribbled from his lips. Then Turlough fell across Father Levis and moved no more. All save one of the women went in search of the other two priests and the servants. Seri's mother knelt, cutting Father Levis' head off in a methodical fashion, determined to be the first to return to their god with a priest's head.

\* \* \* \*

Twelve-year old Seri noticed when the children began to disappear in the neighborhood. She had always had a tendency to see monsters under the bed and hear them in every creak of the floorboards at night. Being the oldest, she had also gone looking for those same monsters with a broom firmly clutched in one hand. Seri's mustard and brown cat, Oddo--whom she was sure understood every word she said--followed along with her on these excursions.

Singing woke Seri one night and she crept out to see what it was, Oddo at her heels. She held her broom tightly in hand, ready to strike and run if something threatened. Seri crept along the side of her house, staying in the shadows as she got closer to the street. A chill breeze rose and she clutched at her cloak. She heard people talking and some shouting. The singing had stopped and now a mon with the loveliest voice she had ever heard spoke. It sent a shiver through her more profound than the touch of the wind. Why should something so beautiful scare her?

"Kill the priests. Kill the priests, for they are my enemies."

Seri could not believe what she was hearing and stole closer to the edge of the building for a better look. She reached the corner and terror made her heart hammer. Her mother stood near the front of the crowd of adults with a bloody knife in her hand and a mon's head in the other. *Father Levis!*

"I have brought you one. Make me an angel!" Seri's mother demanded.

"Soon. Soooooon. It is nearly time for making angels. Who has brought me a child? The altar thirsts for their pure sweet wine."

Seri moved closer still and could see the speaker now at the head of the crowd. She was midnight blue and winged. Beside her was another winged mon, this one red and black. A mon rushed up, pressing a

boy--seven-year-old Kez from two blocks over--into her hands. The red mon took the child from him, smiling. "These are the lambs whose blood makes us strong. You will all gain power when I open his veins upon our altar." Then she flew away.

"I will bring you a child," Seri's mother said. "I have a daughter. Seri. You will enjoy her. Her blood is pure and sweet."

*No. Oh, no.* Seri shook her head in denial.

"Now, who dies in my arms tonight?" the midnight blue one asked.

Several men began shouting for the right to do this.

"Dies?" Seri hissed as the fullness of the horror flashed through her. She almost dropped her broom to clamp a hand over her mouth, wanting to scream; and knowing that if she did, she would die now. *They're vampires and my mother is giving me to them? Please, gods, this can't be!* Yet she could not deny the sight of poor Father Levis's head hanging from her mother's hand.

The midnight blue chose a sturdy young male, running her long nails down the side of his face. "You," she said.

The male's eyes lit with eagerness and longing. He threw the crowd a triumphant glance and stepped into her arms.

Seri felt sick, her stomach clenching.

The midnight blue flew off with him to the roof of the old mage tower. Oddo began pulling at Seri's dress, dragging her away. Seri went, walking in numb silence. She was halfway home when she heard the man scream. Seri hunched over, clutching her stomach as she began to shake. So this was the source of the screaming that reached across the city. Oddo tugged her skirt to get her moving again. Seri crawled in through her window, climbed onto her bed, and huddled in her blankets. Oddo dug her out, pressing his pink and brown nose to hers and did a peculiar thing: he spoke in her mind.

*--Seri, don't be afraid of me.--*

"Oddo? I'm hearing you?" She blinked in astonishment. Seri had heard all the tales of magical creatures, even seen some of them such as the lycans who rode with Gryphonheart's Rowdies, but she had never suspected that her cat might be one of them.

*--I was just a homeless catkin till you took me in. Trust me and I'll help you. There are not a lot of catkin in Minnoras. Usually, when there is trouble, we only look out for ourselves. We're scattering into the woods over the next few nights. But I'll take you with me, your brothers and sister too. If you'll let me. But we must do it soon. Your mother intends to give you to the vampires tomorrow night, as an offering to their hellgod.--*

Seri had never heard of catkin, but she was willing to accept that Oddo was one, to grab at any hope. She could scarcely rest, although Oddo told her she should try to sleep. Her mother intended to feed her to the vampires; like in all the dark scary stories she had been told over the years when she misbehaved about monsters that committed dark rites with children. She felt frightened; but even worse, she felt abandoned and betrayed. Her eyes teared up. She pressed her face into her pillow to stifle her heartbroken sobbing before it could betray her to anyone who might hear, to her mother if she came back soon. *How could she? How could she?* The question kept repeating itself in Seri's mind.

It would do no good to start packing until all was ready. Her mother kept a small quantity of fire poppy

for her hangovers and headaches that tended to result from spending too much time in the taverns each Jarienday. Tomorrow morning she would add it to her mother's breakfast with lots of honey. Then she would pack the littles up and tell them she was taking them to visit their aunt and uncle who had a farm at Merkreth's Crossing in the bordering kingdom of Gormond's Reach. By the time that her mother woke, they would be far from there.

\* \* \* \*

Seri woke, wondering at first if it had all been a dream. She started the breakfast and sat the bottle of fire poppy on the counter. Surely nothing that happened last night had been real. It would all go away. She had had vivid dreams before that seemed real and had proven not to be.

Her mother came down smiling, hugged her, and kissed her cheek. "How fine you look, Seri," her mother said. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mother." Seri felt an intense swell of warmth.

Her mother wandered out of the kitchen into the sitting room where Seri's siblings were playing.

Feeling better, Seri took the bottle, reaching to put it back on the shelf; and, as she did, she saw the knife lying near the basin. There were streaks of blood and flesh on it. Her heart caught painfully in her chest. Reaching out, she touched it tentatively, frightened. Several strands of hair clung to the edge. Seri pulled the hair loose, measuring it. The hair was as long as her own and black. Father Levis had had long black hair. "Oh, mother, no."

The scene in the street came rushing back at her, slamming against her mind, heart, and soul. Seri closed her eyes, fighting the tears welling beneath her lids. She grasped the bottle, pocketing it. She wrestled the kettle of oatmeal to the table, filled the bowls, and called everyone down to eat, adding half of the bottle to her mother's bowl. Was that enough? What if it was *not* enough? What if her mother woke and sent the vampires after them? What if she gave her too much and killed her? She had heard of people dying from too much fire poppy. But her mother was going to kill her; and possibly her little brothers and sister also. Panic rose in Seri. She had to risk killing her mother; she could not allow the four of them to die. Seri had to hazard it. It was up to her to keep them all alive. She poured the rest of the bottle in. Then she added plenty of honey, butter, and even syrup.

At the first taste, her mother frowned. "What can you be thinking of, Seri, making mine so sweet?"

"I made it special today ... and I may have burnt it a little. I was daydreaming again."

Her mother laughed and ate it. She seemed so normal that Seri wanted to cry. Then they cleaned up together as they always did before her mother went off to work at the weaver's. Her mother was putting the plates on the cabinet shelf when she felt what Seri had done. The plates slipped from her hands as she caught at the edge of the counter and then she lost her hold on that, folding up on the floor.

Her eyelids fluttered, her muscles twitching spasmodically as she struggled to remain conscious. "You poisoned me."

"No," Seri protested, tears rising to her eyes. "Just enough to put you out while we runaway."

Seri's mother's eyes grew heavy-lidded. "How much?"

"The whole bottle...."

"Then you've killed me." Her mother's eyes fluttered toward closing.

Seri faltered and then grew angry. "You made me do this! You killed Father Levis." Seri knelt, glancing around for her siblings, praying that they did not appear and hear this. She felt sick and hollowed out.

"For my ... god. For my ... beautiful god. Tonight you ... would have ... become hers."

Her mother's eyes closed, but her body continued to twitch horribly. Seri dragged her into the bedroom, and leaned her mother up against the bed. Then she climbed onto the bed, gripped her mother beneath the arms, and heaved her onto it, waddling backwards and using her weight to manage the limp body. She stared for a moment at the sightless eyes, and faltered. Seri grasped her mother's cooling hand and pressed it to her cheek, fighting tears. She was going to kill us. To kill me. She was ... "I hate you!"

Seri covered her up and backed away shaking. When she got to the door, she closed it and fled to the kitchen where she began filling packs with food and whatever else she could think of. "I hate you," she muttered as she shoved bread, dried fruit and salted meat into the packs. None of them were large enough to carry much, but she made do and at the last minute shoved some jars of preserves and honey into her own pack. She would have to carry the heaviest stuff. Finally she rolled up blankets to carry herself since they would be awkward for the littles, Jordi, Ceeli, and Kye.

Then she gathered up them up and headed for the city gates with Oddo riding wrapped around her neck.

"I wish we had a horse. And this food will not last."

--*Trust in me.*--Oddo told her.--*A bachelor male is very resourceful.*--

"Where are we going?" Jordi kept asking.

"To visit Aunt Sonja and Uncle Ulrim. Mother says to go." Seri worked hard at not thinking about the fact that she had just killed her mother. The image of the twitching body kept rising up in her mind and she wanted to scream.

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet woke in the night and stared at Yoris who slept beside him. His nose wrinkled. Yoris smelled more and more of illness. His veins were becoming a sewer that left a bad taste in Bodramet's mouth. The only pleasure he was getting from Yoris these days was as a sheath for his sword. Even that was fast becoming less satisfactory. The fact that Yoris was forever dabbing drool and spittle from his lips disgusted Bodramet. But he would need to begin imitating it soon. Pippa had confirmed that this was, indeed, the first sign of the onset of wither-madness. Rage sent a rush of adrenaline through Bodramet. He left his bed and went to the window.

On the ground below, three figures moved, two myn and a white wolf walking in the moonlight. The wolf had to be Ephry. He was the only completely white one. That meant the others were Timon and Isranon. He saw the taller of the myn, lift the shorter one's hand to his lips and kiss it.

Bodramet snarled and turned away. "Bellocar, my liege-god, hear me! I want them dead."

\* \* \* \*

Timon enticed Isranon with stories of Dawnhand that only he knew, and discussions of philosophy. Sometimes Ephry would join them and spend the entire time casting sensuous glances at Isranon so hot that it made him blush. That day it was just Timon waiting for him in the private garden.

"Sit next to me," Timon said.

Isranon did so, refusing to meet his gaze. It was difficult to keep saying no when he wanted to say yes.

Timon laid his hand on Isranon's knee, squeezing it gently. "I want you."

Isranon tensed, his pride itching and an edge creeping into his voice. His fingers slipped under his slave collar and he clutched it as a reminder of his status. "It is not for me to say yes or no to a prince when I am only a slave. Just send me into your bed, if that is what you want." *I won't fight you, but I feel as if I ought to.*

"That is not what I want, Isranon! I am not Waejonan, although you seem to think I am. No one was ever allowed to say no to Waejonan."

Isranon winced and retreated. *Your father is the same way. Why do you always go back to Waejonan?* "I did not mean to imply...."

"Damn it!" Timon sighed at this withdrawal to old ground. "On this estate it is. Say no and I will never touch you again. But at least make a decision."

Isranon changed the subject. "I have read your books. All of them."

Timon blinked and inclined his head. "What have my books to do with this?"

"I could fall in love with your mind. There is brilliance and clarity in those books. I don't think that everything you describe is possible...."

"We have lived in different shadows. How can anyone know what is possible or impossible until you have striven for it? Why should you settle for what you believe to be possible, when you can strive for the impossible and go beyond what you believed could be achieved in the first place?"

Isranon shivered. "There are similarities to what my father used to say." A rush of memory surged through Isranon, and he added, "My father would disapprove of my sleeping with a vampire."

Timon gave a small laugh. "We are not our fathers."

Isranon smiled. "You are right. We are not our fathers."

Timon's expression turned soft and beseeching. "Let me hold you. Let me love you, Isranon. I swear I will never hurt you, nor let anyone else hurt you. Not even my father."

"Timon ... I--" Isranon's fingers released his collar.

Timon covered Isranon's mouth with his own. Isranon's lips parted to the touch of the prince's tongue. The breath caught in Isranon's chest as their tongues twined and Timon's hands slipped beneath his tunic. He trembled with longing for the moment, when their mouths finally parted, Isranon murmured, "Yes, Timon."

Timon kissed Isranon's neck, licking along the favored vein.

Isranon drew a long, shivering breath and leaned into him, offering himself. For an instant he remembered Hoon's fangs and the way the blood and life had been pulled out of him. Isranon thrust the memory away. He pressed his face into Timon's shoulder and arched his neck. Timon unlaced Isranon's pants, slipped his long-fingered hand in, and fondled him. Isranon moaned softly. Timon's fangs lengthened.

Isranon relaxed deeper into Timon's arms as the prince wrapped around him. He inhaled the sandalwood-based perfume that Timon wore. What sweet pain as Timon pierced his neck and swept

into him with a taste of dreams. Both Merissa and Rose had been younger than he; this was his first sexual encounter with someone older and more experienced. Timon continued to suck his neck, while firmly stroking Isranon's cock. Isranon hardened under Timon's efforts, poking straight out between the flaps of his pants. The pressure built until he knew he was close to coming. Timon lifted Isranon's maleness out of his pants and brought him off. Isranon sighed. The gentle strength with which Timon sucked the blood from his veins combined with orgasm to leave him dizzy and hot.

Timon released Isranon's neck, lifting his bloody face and licked the vein to stop the bleeding. He shoved Isranon's pants down. "Get out of those."

Isranon shoved his pants off and felt a flutter of trepidation. If Timon intended to try him up the ass, he was not certain he could handle it. Timon's hands closed on his buttocks, kneading them. Isranon's sphincters tightened and his body went tense.

"Haven't you ever had anyone inside you?" Timon asked in a puzzled tone. "I know you have slept with Auclos."

"Only once...." A flashback of Troyes brought a scream to the edge of Isranon's throat.

Timon released his buttocks and began stroking his back in gentle movements. "You did not like it?"

Isranon's throat tightened until he could almost not speak at all. "He..." Isranon swallowed. "He was taking me in the rites."

Timon's stroking slowed and he kissed Isranon in the small part of the back. "I am sorry. Do you trust me?"

"Yes," Isranon responded, shivering.

Timon's thumbs explored Isranon's anus as he pushed him gently to his knees. "I will not hurt you. I will be gentle. It is just my thumbs."

Isranon closed his eyes, relaxing, experiencing the pressure of the thick hardness entering him. He kept repeating that this was Timon and that Timon was not Troyes.

"You trust me?"

"Yes ... Yes, I trust you."

Timon moved inside him and Isranon gasped. "That does not feel like a thumb."

Timon gave a tiny laugh. "It isn't." Then Timon's power swept into Isranon again and this time it became a dance of magic as well as of flesh--vampire and sa'necari meeting and melding together.

Isranon moaned as Timon rode him, and when the prince finished, Isranon collapsed panting among the flowers. Timon lifted him up and carried him into his bedroom.

"I have never before tasted sa'necari blood fresh from the vein, nor have I tasted any as sweet as yours," Timon murmured, lowering Isranon into the middle of the silken sheets.

\* \* \* \*

Three wagons rolled down the main road traveling south toward Minnoras from the fords accompanied by thirty riders traveling under the gryphon grasping a willow branch banner of Gryphonheart's Rowdies, a freeranger search and rescue company with charters throughout six kingdoms and city-states. Nans

Gryphonheart led with Itch Hollens and Travis Potshard, her second and third respectively, flanking her. She was a cinnamon-haired, sapphire-eyed mon and tall--though not by Sharani standards--five foot eleven inches. Most people knew her only as a freeranger captain, some knew that she was the bastard cousin of King William Gryphonheart of Gormond's Reach, and only the Rowdies and close friends knew that she was yuwenghau, a demi-god; the wilderkin daughter of Willodarus, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures.

They saw the first of the fleeing people two days past the fords. Something in the way the people moved, the quick, nervous glances, never meeting anyone's eyes, betrayed their distress. They were not ragged and did not look hurt. They looked scared. Nans could recognize fear even in the most schooled of faces; she could smell it as well as any lycan.

"Something is not right, Nans," Itch observed, pointing to the way one mon flinched from making eye contact with him. He flashed Nans a hand signal, telling her to look at certain ones, especially the mon who had refused to meet his eyes.

Nans flashed back: *I see it*. "I want the sentries doubled when we make camp," she ordered. The crisp quality of command in her voice spoke of the long years she had led. "I want everything so tight not even a mouse can get into the camp."

"It's too bad my old dog ain't around no more, Nans," Travis said. "Nothing ever got into the camps me and my brother set when that old dog was around."

Nans and Itch exchanged glances and shrugged. Travis did not have a tale left that he had not told at least a hundred times, mostly about that old dog named Blue.

"Why that old dog was the best boar hound this side of Vallimrah. Let me tell you about the time that my brother and I--we couldn't have been more than nine and ten--ran into those wolves. Ten wolves, Nans! And Old Big Blue was more than they could handle...."

Nans sighed and closed him out mentally as she signed for a halt to make camp.

Her myn were a diverse lot that knew their business. They had been abroad getting children out of some ruins from the Age of Burning, which dotted this still essentially unexplored continent called Merezia. The Rowdies worked disaster relief. The Green Seers of Willodarus and Davera's temples foresaw natural disasters and sent them word of where to be. And who would know better than the priests of the Woodland God and the Earth Mother?

\* \* \* \*

It was late; the sa'necari would have gone to their rooms by now. Anksha gave them chores about the estate to keep them out of mischief. 'Idle hands are the hellgod's workshop,' Hoon always said. She took it to heart. Yoris enraged her. He went out of his way to be paired with Isranon for whatever tasks were set them. No matter how Anksha set the tasks up, Yoris somehow managed to persuade whoever was overseeing his efforts to change the assignments the moment her back was turned. She kept encountering Yoris when she went looking for Isranon, which made her suspicious. She would remedy that. She raced into Yoris' room. Anksha knew he had begun to wither; she could taste it in his blood, see the rapid spread of it across his body. The welts now extended across most of his chest. She did not care. Yoris was food, nothing more. Her food would obey if it wished to remain in the larder and not on the table.

"Anksha!" He backed away.

"Raise your voice and die," she said, punctuating each word sharply in her throaty voice. "Your

cowardice is tiresome. When I tire of my toys I kill them." She stalked toward him.

He stumbled against a chair and went to his knees, whimpering. "Anksha, please. Whatever you want."

"You will no longer be paired with Isranon. Ever." She snatched his sash away. Yoris' robe fell open. The withering had worsened from what it had been even a few days ago. It had spread across his stomach and his flesh hung loose over his ribs.

"The madness will come on you soon, Yoris. Then I will have to kill you," Anksha growled.

"Give me the potions. Please. Don't let me die this way." Yoris groveled, weeping. She shoved the sash in his mouth, tied it in place with a second one that was hanging from her belt, and started in with her claws. The dominance-link cracked like a whip through him. Yoris writhed and thrashed beneath her.

Her power washed over him, cresting like a tide. "You love me, Yoris?"

Yoris nodded, tears streaming down his face, trying to speak around the gag.

"Then be still." She snarled and sank her fangs into him.

A couple of blood feedings would heal him, but he would remember the lesson. The taste of the withering was strong. Yoris would be gone by mid-summer. Odd that Bodramet showed the symptoms just as strongly, yet the taste was very slightly off.

\* \* \* \*

It began as it always did, by Bodramet trying to put Isranon in his place as the least among them. Anger had been building in Isranon for years, ever since Mephistis found him and insisted that so long as he walked at his side he was safe, that he should walk among his own kind. But the sa'necari were not his own kind. He did not have a kind. He was sa'necari by birth, but not by choice. No. That was not right. He had had a kind ... those who had rejected the rites and refused to become monsters--the descendants of Isranon Dawnhand and the Dark Brothers. But they had been hunted down and killed as heretics. He had also had a place briefly among the lycans, but they had come to doubt him because he had been born sa'necari. Troyes had ruined that for him, although Nevin and Olin, his clan-brothers had come here with him. He could not prove that Claw's finding Troyes lying dead on his own hidden altar had not meant that Isranon had rited him. He had a place now with Timon and Ephry.

"You should not associate with them," Bodramet growled at Isranon during breakfast. He clutched a damp handkerchief in his hands, dabbing constantly at his mouth.

"What I do is none of your business." Isranon watched the five sa'necari. They only behaved badly when they caught him alone. They were hungry, accustomed to feeding freely on lives and blood on their estates in Waejontor. They had followed Mephistis south thinking to take their fill, but these lands were held by the vampires who lived cautiously and with restraint among the humans and other races. They would not tolerate their concealed holdings being disrupted, the delicate symbiosis with their nibari destroyed by random acts of violence. Timon had fostered this among his retainers.

"They murdered the prince," Bodramet persisted. "We saw Hoon shove him into the path of the abominant king's blade." 'Abominant king' was their name for the Sacred King of Rowanhart.

Isranon twisted uncomfortably within his own mind, unwilling to condemn Hoon--for this single act and by extension Timon--although he hated Hoon and had loved Mephistis. "Hoon freed his family's souls from the legacy. He had a right to do that." Isranon saw Yoris and Gareth rise from the table and move to stand behind him.

"He destroyed Waejontor."

"Waejontor be damned!" The words he had always wanted to say tumbled defiantly from his mouth. "He is Brandrahoon. I am Isranon, son of Isranon, son of Isranon. There were three brothers. Remember their names and then leave me alone." Isranon left.

Yoris hissed at Bodramet and spittle frothed around his lips. "What did he mean?"

Bodramet smiled at Isranon's departing back, his eyes feral. He had finally gotten the confession he wanted. Now the others would follow implicitly. "Brandrahoon, Isranon, and Waejonan. Isranon is a heretic and the price of heresy is death."

\* \* \* \*

Kye was crying again. Seri had to quiet him before someone heard them. Something bad had happened in the city. They had barely gotten out ahead of it. People passed them all the time; people who traveled faster than they did; adults mostly; people on horseback; people in wagons. Little children simply did not move very fast. Especially Kye who was only five. Much of the time she carried him on her shoulders. He wanted his mother. Seri had not told them that she was dead. She had gone in one last time and their mother had been staring at the ceiling sightlessly, not breathing anymore. The sight haunted her. She wanted to scream at Kye, wanted to scream about what she had done.

Oddo curled around them. The catkin talked only to her. He would disappear from time to time, then return long enough to make them hide whenever someone came down the road. Oddo did not trust any of the fleeing adults. Seri wished he would let her talk to someone.

"Shush, Kye. Shush. We need to hide."

Seri gathered the little boy into her arms, holding and rocking him, but he refused to be quieted.

"Well, well, what have we here?"

Oddo hissed as three large males pushed the concealing bushes aside to stand over the children. Then he changed into a small furry mon about four feet tall with green slitted eyes. She had not realized what Oddo meant when he said he was a catkin--she had thought that he merely meant that he could talk.

"Run all of you!" He flexed his claws and sprang at the nearest one, slashing at his eyes. The mon sprang back, drawing his knife.

Seri fled with Kye in her arms, heading instinctively for the road, hoping to find someone to help them. Jordi and Ceeli went full out ahead of her. She heard the ear-splitting battle cry of the catkin followed by a mon's roar of pain. Seri hoped the little catkin had gotten him good.

\* \* \* \*

"It was a foolish thing you did, throwing your lineage in their faces that way." Timon said. His voice was as smooth and soft as the fine leather of the couch they sat on and utterly without recrimination. He sat with one arm stretched out along the back of the couch, one ankle on his knee so that his leg pressed across Isranon's. Isranon did not look at him as he spoke, keeping that proud, defiant tilt to his head that always drew Timon. Isranon only yielded in the bedroom and even then, in yielding he seemed to dominate. It was odd. He was wise and naïve at the same time, shifting back and forth between absolute serenity and a troubling melancholy that made Timon ache to see it. The intricacies of the mon captivated Timon. Isranon frequently reminded Timon of Anksha. Underneath all that pride and stubbornness, was a fiercely defended fragility and a longing for something the young mon could not find

or was denied. Timon had probed for months to discover it all without much success.

Isranon's eyes narrowed. "I refuse to bow to them any longer."

A soft glow of bemusement lit Timon's face. His strong fingers dug into the muscles of Isranon's shoulders, kneading them. "You have never bowed to them, Isranon. I have watched you. You have been practically spitting in their faces since the day you answered Mephistis' letter and arrived on our doorstep."

Isranon heaved a sigh and relaxed against Timon. "It gets harder to deal with my anger. I wasn't always this angry. At least I don't think I was." *I am not keeping the teachings. Why should I? They failed my father. He's dead because they could not protect him.*

"You are safe here, Isranon. You don't need to stay angry. I won't let anyone threaten you."

"It's still hard...."

Timon slid his hands into Isranon's pants and squeezed his buttocks. "I know something harder and far more pleasant to deal with."

"I imagine so...." Isranon's hand went to Timon's crotch as the prince began to unlace his pants.

\* \* \* \*

The Rowdies had just begun to break camp when Nans' head jerked up at the sound of Oddo's yowling battle cry and she came to her feet running. "That's a catkin. There's trouble."

Ten Rowdies followed her as Itch told them off with a finger, "You, you, and you." And then he shouted, "Four lycans, now." The shifter scouts dropped and changed, racing to get ahead of the running rangers. That was when Itch spotted Jordi running through the brush. The little boy was staggering with exhaustion. "I see one!"

Itch ran. He reached Jordi, scooping him up. "We're gonna help. Tell us what happened?"

"My sisters ... my little brother...."

"How many sisters?" Itch ruffled his hair and hugged him tight. "We need to know how many."

"Two." Jordi began to cry.

Itch turned to his myn. "Okay, we got two little girls and a little boy out there." He told off four more myn to join the search. "Be careful, Captain," he murmured, knowing it was too late to be heard, for Nans was already out of sight.

\* \* \* \*

Seri stumbled upon reaching the road. Kye was heavy. He had gone silent with terror. She no longer saw either Jordi or Ceeli. Seri found her footing on the dirt road, hard-packed from years of travel, and bent slightly over Kye as she tried to run with him, his chubby legs dangling around her hips. *Oh gods, oh gods, oh gods.* She no longer heard Oddo and feared that meant her little cat was dead.

One of the men appeared suddenly in front of her and she stopped abruptly, backing so quickly she almost fell, glancing wildly for the others. Another male soon joined the first, coming up behind her. He had a clawed face and arm.

"I stuck your catkin," he said, grinning and fingering his crotch. "But I'm going to stick you with something friendlier."

Clawed Face opened his pants enough to lift himself out and Seri quailed at the size of him. Seri felt suddenly weak as cooked noodles. She trembled. Then she realized that Kye was staring at his erection also, and turned his face into her shoulder.

"If I give you what you want without a fight, will you let us go and not hurt my little brother?"

Clawed-Face glanced at the other and shrugged. "Give it nice enough and we'll even take you all along and protect you, feed you."

Tears welled up in Seri's eyes. There seemed nothing to do for it. Perhaps later she could find a chance to get them all away. She put Kye down. "Kye, honey, you go over there and don't look. Promise not to look." She wondered where the third male was. *Perhaps this was her punishment for killing their mother. Perhaps the gods had wanted her to be eaten by the monster.*

Seri slipped out of her smock and lay down on top of it with her legs partially open, waiting, her heart hammering. Her small, round breasts had barely begun to fill out in the first stages of adolescence; they were little apples, not yet ripened. The black hair on her virgin loins stood stark against her light olive skin.

No decent mon would want her for marriage now, but then what decent mon wanted a matricide anyway? Life. What life? There was no reality left to her life. It was all shattered.

*And then Clawed Face ripped the rest of it away. He shoved into her, grunting and thrusting, his hands on her thighs to open her as wide as he could. His member was too large for a girl as young as Seri, and he tore her inside. Seri sobbed at the pain and humiliation. He stank of alcohol and sweat. Her stomach heaved and she fought it down, certain that if she lost it they would kill her. He bit her on the nipples, leaving bloody indentations. Clawed Face reared back and drove his rod in as deeply as he could when he came. He finished quickly, but to Seri it felt as if he had ridden her for hours. Blood pooled around her hips and thick white fluid seeped from Seri's vagina.*

Clawed Face rolled off her and stood up, fastening his pants. "She's nice and tight. Have a go."

The second panted with eagerness as he dropped to his knees between her legs and threw himself on top of her. Seri whimpered as the violation of her body was repeated with still more savagery.

"Get your smock back on," Clawed Face ordered when his companion was done. "We're keeping you, but we don't need the little ones." He nodded to his companion who drew his blade and grabbed Kye.

"No!" Seri screamed, rising on her knees. "You promised."

Clawed Face backhanded her into the dirt.

Seri lay sprawled, staring up at him stunned, her face wet with tears. She covered her loins with one hand, terrified, seeing her future as an endless repetition of what they had just done to her. When they tired of her, they would either discard her, slit her throat, as they were about to do Kye's, or sell her into prostitution. She knew the stories.

"Promises are made to be broken," said the one holding Kye, and then gurgled.

Seri's eyes widened in shock seeing a blade point emerge briefly from the mon's throat from behind and

then withdraw. As he collapsed Seri saw a leather-clad mon standing behind him. The mon caught Kye, pushing him toward the road. "Run, little one," she ordered and Kye did so.

Seri gasped, clutching her smock to her body, unable to move, unable to grasp what it meant. *Was it rescue? Or merely another predator come to claim them?*

"Some promises are to die for." The mon grinned broadly, her bloody sword point describing a taunting circle. The blade had that red-gold sheen of fine kenda'ryl, the hardest metal in existence, which held the keenest edge and strongest magical charge imaginable; all in all a very fine blade. "You promised. You broke it. Now you die."

"Bitch with a sword, now ain't I seen everything? You pussy-eaters show up from time to time, but you never live long."

"Neither do whiz-suckers like you, you silly cockwhore," Nans laughed. Her blade weaved a devil-may-care pattern and then she sprang at him. He retreated, hard pressed to fend her off and her strikes were solid, strong, making his arm ache each time their blades met. Understanding dawned as his arm went numb.

"Yuwenghau." He spun, trying to flee. Nans' sword connected with the small of his back, split the spine, and continued on through.

"It took you long enough," she said, contempt dripping from her voice. She wiped her sword and sheathed it. Nans found Seri struggling to rise. "Don't move until I've Read you." Nans took the girl's wrist, Reading as deeply as she could. It was too early to know if they had gotten her pregnant. "Do you get your moondays?"

Seri nodded, her eyes wide and frightened.

"Do you know what it means if you miss one?"

Seri's eyes dropped and her hands slid down to her stomach, her fingers fluttering across her navel. She said in a very small, hesitant voice, "Yes. It means they put a baby in me."

The last thing this child needed was to find herself pregnant. *Why the hell did so many males act this way?* "You'll be fine, child. But if you miss one? Or you start getting sick to your stomach, you tell someone right then."

"I understand. My brothers and sister?"

"We have them. We heard the catkin's battle cry and knew someone was in trouble."

"Merciful gods, Oddo." Seri grabbed at Nans in panic. "He tried to defend us."

"Where did you last see him?" Nans lifted her head listening to a series of barks. "Sounds like our scouts have found him."

"Your dogs?"

"Scouts. I have four lycans. I'm Nans Gryphonheart."

Seri had heard of the Rowdies. She threw herself into Nans' arms and wept with relief. They were safe.

\* \* \* \*

It was turning into a fine spring for all of them. Anksha mimicked her favorite trio in black pants with a bright sash--a glaring lime green--with little scarves shoved through at intervals along it to thrust into the sa'necari's mouths when she ambushed them for a feeding, which she did with more savage frequency since a nibari told her of the conversation he had overheard at breakfast one morning. A hole at the back allowed her tail to poke through. Hers were the only random acts of violence allowed on the estate. The nibari did not mind them at all since it kept the sa'necari in line and made them feel safer.

She felt Isranon's joy in his deepening relationship to Timon and Ephry through the link they shared, loving the trio intensely and wanting to be part of it, even if it were just as a pet. They fussed over her, which made her feel very warm, constantly teasing her for dressing like them. Spring deepened and all seemed very right with Anksha's world for the first time in centuries--since Dawnhand perished. She stopped worrying that Isranon would die like all the others who had withered away to nothing, certain that she had made changes to keep him alive and would have him for a long time. Amiri had begun to advise her and Anksha listened to the Ymraude's suggestions eagerly.

"I am going to keep Isranon," she whispered to herself, running through the grounds and leaping at tree branches for the sheer joy of it. She spotted Nevin and leap-frogged onto his shoulders before the wolf was aware of her.

Nevin, who had grown accustomed to this behavior, caught her by the nape of the neck and sent her rolling across the grass in order to buy himself a moment to change. Then he chased her around the benches while she squealed and laughed. Soon Olin had joined the romp and several of Timon's lycans followed suit.

Randilyn and Willa joined in and soon there were several nibari in the playing crowd, giggling like children. Some of the nibari children stuck their noses out and came to play also. The masters sat back and laughed, content to see the joy suffusing everything.

\* \* \* \*

"Change of plans, Itch, Travis," Nans said, sitting around the campfire that night. She had chosen to remain camped and not move on until she had had a chance to think it all through. They had found the catkin, injured, but alive. She had had to sedate Seri once she got the full tale out of her. "I don't know what this creature is, but it sounds bad. I'm sending two-thirds of the company back to Merkreth's Crossing with the kids and their catkin. Rest of us will go in and take a look."

Her people were not soldiers, although some of them had been, and they were all good with their weapons. They did not do wars. They were search and rescue. Generally an earth seer's prediction would give the alert, which would start them riding. Forest fires, floods, avalanches, earthquakes, natural disasters, marauding monsters that got too close to free towns and non-aligned villages; odds and ends that fell under the headings of a local Willodarian priest's request for assistance. They pulled trapped children off the sides of mountains, out of ancient Burning Age ruins and mine shafts. They joked about the time they pulled a dog out of a tree. Things that were not deemed important enough to send out soldiers to take care of. The temples paid their wages and pressured the kings to approve their charters so they could pass through without being hassled. Only rarely did they deal with outlaws and renegades. But they had, a few times.

Now it looked like they were going to do a war whether they wanted it or not.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon sat upon a bench nearly overgrown with ivy and concealed by rose briars grown to shoulder height. The others could only have found this place by learning his patterns, his haunts, and his places.

They were discovering where to find him and when. He felt uneasy--they were stalking him. Until then they only had contact at the dinners the nibari prepared and rarely then since more and more he had started to either take his meals in the kitchen or carry a plate to his rooms.

"You are not a proper sa'necari," Yoris hissed. "You have never taken *mortgiefan*."

"Nor will I. Neither did my father before me, nor his father," Isranon replied. He frowned at the way three of them carried handkerchiefs and dabbed at their mouths frequently.

"Anksha does not take you any longer. You betray us to her."

"You would not know if she did. I do not make a coward's noise." Isranon knew he had struck a nerve when Yoris reacted, his face flushing at the younger man's words. Isranon had only an instant to savor that tiny wounding of his tormentor.

Yoris threw a dark web of power across Isranon's chest and mid-section. Isranon cried out and hit Yoris, knocking him down. Bodramet let out a curse, sending an angry lance of energy at Isranon. Isranon brought his shields up, deflecting most of it. Bodramet's next spell sent him reeling to his knees. Isranon flung back a death web at him, but Bodramet turned it dismissively.

A shriek of rage erupted behind them and Bodramet cried out, staggering to his knees before falling on his face. Anksha straddled him, her claws dripping blood. Timon and three royals stood behind her.

"Take both of them out and beat them, one hundred lashes each," Timon ordered.

"But I'm withering!" Yoris screamed. "I'm withering."

"You should have thought of that sooner," Timon said. Then he knelt by Isranon. "Are you all right?"

Isranon nodded. "I will be." His voice dropped. "They don't strike as hard as they used to. Is that the withering?"

"Yes, the withering must have greatly weakened their powers by now." Timon read him quickly to be certain that any injury they had done him could be mended with blood. "I will fetch you some nibari."

"Is the withering why I see them constantly dabbing at their mouths?"

"Yes. It's a sign that the madness is not long off. When that becomes full-blown, Anksha will kill them."

Isranon dropped his eyes, feeling thankful that he had not begun to wither.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon lay that night with his arm circling Nevin's ruff, his mind running in circles. Withering or not, had Timon and Anksha not arrived, the sa'necari would have slain or badly injured him. In a sense, he had brought this on himself with his revelations and unceasing defiance. He had been daring them to hurt him. He had not planned it, just done it. Defiance, resentment, and anger were not keeping to the silences--in fact he seemed to have abandoned the silences altogether. Isranon knew he was breaking the teachings that his father had handed down to him. His father would not approve of his behavior and in a way he was dishonoring his father's name. Yet, it seemed that he could no longer control his expression of those feelings. They had simply grown too intense and strong. He had turned twenty the previous autumn on the Night of the Dead, Sowayn. He was a man, with a man's needs, such as putting behind him his childhood concerns. Or so he told himself.

Depending upon Anksha and Timon for protection was not that much different from the dependency he had shown in his relationship with Mephistis. He could not afford it. *You are always the hunted or the hunter*, he thought, remembering countless talks with Nevin on the subject. He did not want to repeat the mistakes of the past, and yet what could he realistically do? Nothing he did would alter the fact that he was a blood-slave. Timon had refused to return his blades, seeing in that a precedent he did not wish to set.

He almost woke Nevin to talk about it and then decided otherwise. He would simply be more careful around the others, try harder to rein in his feelings, to re-build his castle of silences. Abruptly he pressed his hands over his face, realizing that he had already allowed matters to progress too far. "It's too late ... too late. The price of heresy is death and they know what I am."

## **CHAPTER four**

### **the price of heresy**

The scent of fresh green growth filled the inner courtyard on that hot summer day. Anksha, who loved both the orderliness of the front gardens and the wild tangles of the rear thickets, had her blood-slaves digging at the flowerbeds. Dirt stained her slaves' robes, grimed the creases of their necks, spotted their faces, and gritted beneath their nails. They worked in bitter silence. Their labor served both the purpose of getting the job done and as a further lesson in humiliation. The only one excluded from this was Isranon, who rested in his rooms, having fed her that morning. The demon-eater watched them closely, chewing on an arm bone from an imp she had caught. She gnawed the last of the flesh off and cracked the bone open to suck the marrow out.

Shirtless, Timon lounged on a nearby boulder, which had been placed in the middle as a bit of artistry; Ephry lay curled at his feet in white wolf form, his large head resting on Timon's lap. The jingle of harnesses drew all their eyes. Mondarius rode up with his guard of sa'necari and royals. He dismounted, throwing his reins to a stablemon. The divinator carried his two satchels hanging from his shoulders, his tools in his belt, and in addition pulled a saddlebag from his mount before striding toward them. Timon rose to greet him.

Mondarius opened the saddlebag. "Timon! I've come to pick up some books from the library for a project I'm working on for your father. I've got my usual goodies for everyone."

Anksha rose to see if the divinator had brought her anything; he usually did. She had stopped trusting him after the dust-up on the road home. Yet she adored getting presents. She signaled to her blood-slaves that they could cease their activity. They wiped their hands on their robes and followed behind her. The blood-slaves' gaits had become shambling, as they showed more and more signs of the withering in their bodies. All of them had begun to beg Anksha, the vampires, and even the nibari for something to ease their pain. Only the nibari would grant them anything; they gave them minor herbs like willowbark, withholding the Sanguine Rose for Isranon. The other sa'necari, knowing the truth, studiously avoided looking at Yoris as if seeing his suffering held up a mirror of their own fate to their eyes.

Mondarius settled on a bench, bringing out several strands of amber and carnelian for Anksha. She squealed and ran off with them. Mondarius met Bodramet's eyes, his own narrowing, and his lips turning in a sly, quickly passing smile. "I have a book you might enjoy. There are many matters you should be put to work on for Hoon."

"Thank you." Accepting the book, Bodramet wondered briefly to what Mondarius referred. Feeling the tingle of power in the cover and pages, he turned, and walked swiftly away with it, taking the others with him.

"They are not to be trusted," said Timon, observing the haste with which they left. "Had my father not wished otherwise, I would have destroyed them long ago."

"They are useful. Anksha managed to capture the best of the late prince's servants. I need to make use of them. Your father has agreed to this."

Timon's expression hardened. "My father does not rule this estate, I do. I will allow this, but within limits, Mondarius."

"I will keep close eyes upon them," Mondarius said. "I need everything you have on the prophecies of the abominant king. Your father is extremely concerned. What with everyone declaring that Aeystrys Rowan is the Sacred Paladin King in service to Kalirion--that is, the abominant king of the sa'nevari prophecies--"

"You don't need to persuade me, Mondarius. I said I would allow it. They are half-dead anyway."

Mondarius' eyebrows lifted. "Oh?"

"The withering."

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet carried the book to his rooms. The others crowded in behind him, sensing his intense interest in the object. The rooms were smaller than his original accommodations, when he had been guest and not blood-slave. He resented that.

"What have you got?" Gareth demanded.

"Silence! Sit down and let us discover it." Bodramet pulled a chair into the center of the room, opened the book to the middle, which had been marked with a ribbon sewn into the top of the book itself. Power shimmered and a female voice spoke.

"Bodramet, hear me. I can free you and your companions from Anksha's hold. But first you must do me a favor to prove yourselves. I am the sa'nekaryiane. I am the Glistening One, third wife of Bellocar. You knew me as Gylolean Galee. My godhead has been restored. First, you must kill Isranon and second you must kill Timon. Then I will free you of your bonds. However, if you would have real power, bring me Anksha to be sacrificed on my altar and I will make you my priests and consorts."

"Free," Yoris murmured. "Free of the pain.... An end to the withering. I begged Anksha for a taste of the Sanguine Rose to stave it off. She refused me."

The voice in the book laughed. "Yes. The withering can be healed once you are free."

"We were meant to own cattle, not *be* cattle," Bodramet growled. "I want to see that little bitch, Anksha, rited."

"She will be," the voice in the book said with a trace of feminine smugness.

"Then we are yours," Bodramet said and the others chorused their agreement.

"Now you must wait for my servant, Mondarius, to inform you of the next steps."

Bodramet closed the book and walked into his bedroom, seeking for a place to hide it. He started to shove it between his mattresses and then rethought the matter. Instead, he took it to the fireplace. The hearth was deep and broad, stained with ashes and soot from earlier in the season. He had not needed it

in weeks. Bodramet lay down on his back inside it and then crawled up to the ledge, wedging himself against the chimney to reach it. He placed the book there.

As he turned to slide back out, he noticed a bump in the brick and ran his fingers along the edges. It seemed to call to him and he pushed it. A grating sound answered and the rear wall of the fireplace slid back. Bodramet's pulse raced with excitement as he explored further. A corridor seemed to run far down the wall, somewhat narrow, but it could be negotiated. He crawled out and went to his companions.

"Gareth, Petros, come with me."

They moved along sideways through the narrow corridor between the walls of the manor. It led down a stair that Bodramet suspected put it level with the dungeons, but further out. Tree roots broke through the roof in places and it smelled dank with a coppery acrid edge. It ended at more stairs, these going upward. Bodramet climbed and when he reached the top, he pushed at the trapdoor. It grated and resisted him. He ran his fingers along the edge and could feel the roughness that told him it was rusted closed.

"Gareth, help me."

His companion came to the top step. Their bodies pressed tightly together in the narrow space as they shoved with all their arcane strength. The trapdoor groaned and creaked as it came loose. A weight lay upon it, but they managed to get it open. Dirt tumbled into their faces, demonstrating that it had been a long time since anyone used this passage. Bodramet worked his head through, scraping the sides of his face, which made him snarl. His shoulders followed and he pulled himself up until he was sitting on the edge.

They were in a thicket somewhere in the wildest part of the gardens. Briars, which had been covering the trapdoor, still clutched at it with the brittle fingers of the old growth beneath the green.

Bodramet stood and brushed his robes off. "Interesting. Come on up."

Gareth followed and then Petros.

Movement to Bodramet's left caught his eye and he stole toward it with a sign to his companions to be silent. Isranon was sitting on a boulder beside a strange gate.

*Very, very interesting. This must be where he goes when no one can find him.*

Bodramet pointed Isranon out to Gareth and Petros. Once they had seen him, he led them back to the trapdoor and they disappeared through it. The concealing briars settled back into place over it.

"We have him now. It is simply a matter of picking the time to act," Bodramet said.

\* \* \* \*

Timon and Anksha sat in the large chairs in Timon's study. "Mondarius wanted to rite Isranon," Anksha growled. She wore the pretties Mondarius had brought her, tangling her fingers in the strings and twisting them as she spoke. Anksha was nude, streaked with dried mud and blood, the usual mess in her hair from creeping through the underbrush, fresh from a small hunt that had carried her beyond the estate's grounds. They had always had difficulty keeping her in clothing, especially when she hunted. She did not understand the concept of modesty.

"As Mondarius explained it, he considered Isranon to be too weak to survive ... A legitimate reason by most standards," Timon responded.

Anksha's growl deepened. "Not only reason. He knows what my Isranon is. Don't trust him."

"Anksha, my pet." Timon stroked her tangled hair. "I am different, but that does not mean I cannot understand their logic. For now, keep Isranon away from the library and out of Mondarius's sight. Stay close to him until the divinator leaves."

"I'll do that, yes."

"Clean up and then go to him. And put on some clothes."

Anksha scampered out of the study and up the stairs, calling out in passing to one of the nibari, "Water for a bath, quick!"

After Anksha had bathed and dressed, she went looking for Isranon. She checked his rooms first, but found no one there. She had left him resting that morning. Usually he dozed until early afternoon after she had fed upon him, so this sent a shiver of disquiet creeping along her spine. She trotted down to the kitchens next, knowing the nibari tended to ambush him and shove him into the pantry for illicit feedings, especially after he had been her breakfast. Anksha jerked the pantry door open. No. Not there either.

"Are you looking for Isranon?" Nainee asked, emerging from a storeroom.

Anksha stared at how enormous Nainee's stomach was. The nibari could scarcely move with her time so near. Anksha's hands drifted to her own stomach with a sad fluttering of her fingers. There would never be any babies for Anksha; so far as she knew she was the last of her kind. "Yes."

"He went to the gardens with Amiri."

Anksha smiled. "Thank you." She trusted the Ymraudes to keep her Isranon safe.

Anksha trotted through the great hall with its alcoves of chairs and couches where the vampires gathered to talk and feed. Several called out to her; she simply nodded and kept moving. The main circle of garden opened in a half moon of low hedges, climbing roses covered trellised archways and intimate bowers in smaller crescents punctuating the whole. She paused to scan for him and then darted through one of the archways into the rose gardens, which she knew Isranon favored. There she found him seated upon a bench talking with Amiri, his scarred chest bare and glistening with sweat. Most of the males on the estate went shirtless once the full heat of summer hit. The Ymraude started to smile and then her eyes settled on Anksha's pretties with a thoughtful expression.

Anksha flung herself at Isranon's feet, folding her arms on his lap and propping her chin on her arms.

"You must not go to the library, Isranon," Anksha told him. "Not for many days."

Isranon frowned. "Why not?"

"Mondarius is here. He's spending most of his time in the library. Research for Hoon, he says." She cocked her head, peering up at him through her hair.

Amiri lifted a skeptical eyebrow.

Anksha frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," Amiri said. "I simply don't trust the mon. Are those new pretties?"

The demon-eater smiled. "Yes, from Mondarius."

"Can I see them?"

Anksha hesitated. She did not like other people playing with her pretties. Then she re-considered. Amiri's advice to them had helped Isranon to flourish, where Yoris failed. Without Amiri, Isranon would already have withered to death.

Anksha took them off and passed them to Amiri. Amiri folded her fingers over the stones and closed her eyes, turning inward. After a moment, she opened her eyes again and extended the necklace to Anksha. "I sense something on them, but whatever it might be is very, very subtle. Bury them, Anksha, and do not accept anything else from Mondarius."

The demon-eater growled, "Should I rip him?"

Amiri shook her head. "There's a wrongness to them. However, since I cannot say what it is, there is no excuse for you to kill him. Simply be wise and bury them."

"I am a law unto myself," Anksha continued to growl softly.

"Hoon would not be happy if you killed his divinator, pet," Isranon said.

Anksha sighed. "Hooooooon. I will bury them and I will not rip Mondarius."

\* \* \* \*

More dreams. More memories turning in a dance of ghosts. Isranon moaned in his sleep. Nevin listened with his shaggy head lifted, regarding him with dark eyes full of love and concern. Isranon comfort nested with them in the non-sexual lycan way among bachelors, yet he gained no comfort from it. That evening he had resorted to Sanguine Rose again to deal with a resurgence of the Presence Pain and refused to inform Anksha of it despite Nevin's pressuring him. Now he paid for it.

*The nibari served wine for both their masters and the sa'necari, as well as treats for the necromancers that only living myn could enjoy. Timon had deliberately dressed them in the most provocative clothing for the party, dancer's silks that displayed their charms. Anksha singled out each of the sa'necari for attention, taking their measure, flirting outrageously. The creature was cute in her silks and jewels, her build was a delicate perfection of winsome femininity with a small perfectly curled tail at her back, fair-skinned and dark-haired--a striking contrast--and Isranon could see how Mephistis could be attracted enough to her to allow such rough nibble games. The single time she came sufficiently close for Isranon to see, he realized that she was covered--except for her face, throat, and hands--in velvety fur. She was so small that she did not come quite to his chin. Doubtless she took Mephistis's mind off his lost Margren. Any female, to Isranon's mind, was preferable to Margren.*

Bodramet wandered across the room to Isranon. "I've watched you working with your sword and blades, Isranon. You've a fine body despite the scars."

Isranon moved away from him, disliking the closeness. Bodramet smelled like Troyes, whom he had slain to save Merissa, Claw's daughter. He experienced a flash of memory, Bodramet standing at the far side of the hall with his beloved Rose shoved to her knees as the price of his cooperation--the bait to force him to walk the ranks of the gauntlet. One of them had murdered Rose after he collapsed wounded at Bodramet's feet. By all rights, since he had made it across the room alive, the sa'necari should have released her. Isranon walked further away from Bodramet, trying to keep some distance between them. Yet the sa'necari simply followed him.

"Is there a reason those scars won't leave? What made them?" Bodramet slid a hand onto his shoulder. "Do you play nibble games?"

Isranon had been refusing Bodramet for three years now--Bodramet already knew the answer. The youth felt bile rise burning from his stomach into his throat. He wanted to fall to his knees, vomiting. "Don't touch me!" He felt again his terror and anguish as Troyes shoved into his body. Isranon pulled away from Bodramet.

"Am I not good enough for you?" Bodramet grabbed his arm. Isranon knocked him aside, striding quickly across the hall into the corridor. Mephistis followed him out.

Isranon leaned against the wall, breathing hard, sweat running in rivulets down his face, his body shaking.

"Isranon? Tell me about it?"

Isranon shook his head, but said it anyway. "I nearly died ... I nearly died in the rite. Troyes. He said he killed Rose ... that he had planned all along to take me."

*Mephistis bowed his head and shoulders for a moment, and then slipped his arm around his only friend. In a world of monsters, true friends were rare. "Let's talk about it in your rooms."*

Isranon's sleeping grasp on Nevin tightened. The wolf wondered whether it would be better to awaken him from it ... but what if it was not a natural dream and doing so would hurt Isranon?

*"I will never be a monster," Isranon said stubbornly. "Never."*

They were alone in the parlor of Isranon's suite of apartments. Nevin and Olin were not there when they arrived. Doubtless, since the lycans had been excluded from the party, they had found or made one of their own either among the nibari or the lycans who served Hoon and Timon. Isranon had given Mephistis the entire story of what had happened with Troyes.

Mephistis listened, first sitting and then standing, pacing at times in a troubled fashion.

"One day the monsters will kill you. That is why I did not want you here."

"Then they will kill me." Isranon held his head up, that proud tilt, not looking at Mephistis, closing him out, closing the horrors out, building that castle in his mind again.

"Isranon, look at me," Mephistis commanded, turning Isranon's face toward him. "If those sa'necari are monsters, then I am a monster. In fact, I am the monster of monsters because I carry the Legacy."

"You are my prince. I am your sworn mon. That is all that matters. I understand you. I was born into a world I have no power to affect. No power to change. I must live with it. But I will live my own life by my own rules. Even if I must die for it. And I understand this world, this life, you."

"Then you understand something I don't." Mephistis released him, stepping to the window and stood looking out, his hands tightening on the sill until his knuckles whitened. "You and your sister were the only incorruptible things in my life. Margren was so sweet. But I corrupted her. I enjoyed doing it. I loved the way her eyes lit up with each new thing I taught her."

"You are sa'necari. It is the way you are. Ask the lions of the forest why they kill. Because it is their nature. You cannot deny them their nature."

"You were born sa'necari."

"I am a descendant of the Dawnhand."

*Mephistis turned, startling Isranon with the tears in his eyes. "I swear to you, Isranon, so long as I*

*survive, the others shall not again lay hands upon you. You are under my protection."*

Isranon woke and sat shivering. Nevin changed and went to a small table in the opposite corner of the room where a bottle of red wine kept company with glasses and a bottle of Sanguine Rose.

"Are you hurting?" Nevin asked.

Isranon shook his head. The pain was in his heart, not his body. Mephistis had not been able to protect himself, much less them both.

Nevin brought two glasses of wine to the bed and Isranon took his, sipping. "You want to talk about it?"

Isranon shook his head. "No ... I mean ... Nevin, I must have been sailing a ship of dreams on nightmare seas." He fell silent, drinking more deeply. "I think I made Mephistis my anchor. I think ... I think my father's teachings may have been illusions. I have tried to make you proud of me."

"I am proud of you."

Isranon's face screwed up. "I did not beg or whimper when Anksha took me. The others did ... including Bodramet."

Nevin sat on the bed beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "I know. I heard him."

"What is hardest, Nevin ... What is hardest is that Anksha killed my dreams. At Hoon's command ... my hopes and dreams." He downed the wine and smeared tears away from his eyes with the back of his hands. "Murdered dreams are as hard to live with as murdered friends."

"It is all hard, Isranon."

"I was promised ... promised the staff of Dawnhand. The one Waejonan stole when he murdered my ancestor. The ghost said I would walk with Kings and Gods of the Light to a distant place ... I am anathema to them. Doubly so as Anksha's blood-slave."

"Isranon, you must never give up."

Isranon sucked in a breath. "I should not react to their words and actions, yet I can't take them any more. My father was right. The only way I will ever be able to keep the teachings is to die. I'm not afraid of death, but neither do I want to die. I want to live a full life."

"Who knows what the future will bring?"

Isranon shook his head, saying bitterly. "I am a fool. Blood-slaves do not get full lives."

\* \* \* \*

Bodramet and the other four had been released into Mondarius's custody for the next three days to help him in the library, making notes and consulting on volumes the divinator would need to take back with him. Each day, they waited and listened for Mondarius to say something about the sa'nekaryiane and her promise of freedom, to tell them the next step; yet he said nothing beyond what was required for their work.

On the fourth night, the five gathered in Bodramet's room. As always, Bodramet arranged them in chairs and upon the small divans as if he held court. Gareth, who was his closest in power sat at his right hand. He was a tall sa'necari who wore his black hair oiled and braided into a single tail at the back. Petros sat to Bodramet's left, indicating that his standing was less than Gareth's, but greater than the other two who

sat upon the divan: Ennis and Yoris.

"What if it was all a lie," Yoris whined. "I'm withering, I'm dying ... and still he doesn't speak to us."

"Shut up, Yoris," Bodramet said. "Otherwise I will put you out of your misery the next time Anksha leaves on a hunt. Mondarius has always wanted Isranon. It fits."

Gareth frowned. "What if Yoris is right? What if it was a lie? A trap?"

Bodramet rounded on Gareth, his nostrils flaring as he snarled, "We cannot be more trapped than we are now. They have no intention of giving any of us the Sanguine Rose or the other things they are using to preserve the half-a-mon. How long before another of you starts to show the signs of withering? To feel the pain?"

Ennis squirmed.

Bodramet's eyes widened. "Or are you already? Ennis, take your tunic off."

Ennis winced, yet made no move to comply.

"Take it off, or we will take it off for you," Bodramet threatened.

Ennis's face twisted up as he removed his robe and there, in a long line beneath his left arm and across his chest were red streaks, welts, and patches.

Bodramet could tell at a glance that this was real. He steepled his fingers, tapping them against his lips. "Sooooooooo."

A knock came at the outer door. Bodramet closed the intervening door before answering so it might not be seen that they had all gathered. "Who is it?"

"Mondarius."

Bodramet opened the door and ushered him in. Mondarius carried his large satchel as always. The sa'necari watched Mondarius's eyes go to the door into the inner chamber. "What do you want?"

A thin, venomous smile crossed Mondarius's face. "Are they all here?"

"You knew they would be or you would not have come."

Bodramet led Mondarius into the inner chamber and resumed his place at the head of the room. The divinator's entrance brought a murmur of surprise from the others.

"I told you he would come," Bodramet said.

"The Master of Blood sends his regards," said Mondarius.

The mention of Zarliche Blood was sufficient to quiet the room. No one really knew what he was; only what he did. He ran a freight company spanning the East Bank of the Hillora from Charas in the south to Waejontor and Creeya. MZB Hauling. He also made weapons, traded in items of dark magic, poisons of incredible potency, and left a string of slain yuwenghau in his wake. Rumor had it that Zarliche had finally been bested by a veteran band of the Thirteen Chosen, warriors of the Fae. However, he and many of his people had escaped. If the sa'nekaryiane had access to or the loyalty of the Master of Blood, then far more was occurring than the five sa'necari had dreamed.

Bodramet was intrigued. He eyed Mondarius closely as the divinator opened his satchel, bringing out four large objects wrapped in shielding black cloth, which he passed to Bodramet's companions. When Mondarius handed him nothing, Bodramet demanded, "What is this?"

"I fear I was only able to acquire four from the Master. One of you will have to acquire your own. I take it you found the book enlightening?"

"Very," Bodramet said. "Why is there nothing for me?"

"Because you are the strongest. Acquire a common blade and bless it when next you feed upon a full meal." Mondarius smiled then, his parting lips showing the edge of his fangs. He ran his tongue along them and then flicked it out in a sensuous, suggestive manner. "You must wait until Anksha has gone hunting. While she is away, you will find these useful. Be careful that no one discovers you have them."

Then Bodramet knew what he had brought them without even looking. He wondered what Isranon would taste like, his loins and fangs quickening at the images he conjured. "Does it matter how we do it, Mondarius? So long as he dies?"

"Blades," Yoris grinned, turning his over in his hand, feeling the weight of it, the balance, tasting the power in the runes.

"To a degree, yes," Mondarius responded as Bodramet wandered over to have a look at what Yoris held. "Look at them closely."

Bodramet extended his hand to Yoris. "Let me see it."

Yoris glared, but yielded the blade to Bodramet.

Bodramet turned it in his hand while Mondarius continued to speak. "One side of the blade has my spell runes. The other has sa'necari death runes. The quillons and hilt have a specialty of Master Blood's, see the deathtree rune of the Hellgod?"

"I see it."

"All four must be shoved into Isranon all the way to the quillons at least once ... while he is alive. More would be better. That will lodge my spells in his body to be triggered at the instant of his death. Ideally, the quillons themselves should touch his bare skin to call forth Master Blood's spells. Then, even should they find him alive, they cannot save him."

Bodramet reluctantly returned the blade to Yoris. "Why give those to them and not me? I want one also."

"Because you are the strongest," Mondarius repeated. "If you must have a blade to carve him up, I am certain you can acquire one. Your powers should be sufficient, Bodramet." Mondarius played to his ego. "If I could have waited another two weeks before leaving the Master of Blood would have finished the fifth blade, but Hoon became insistent that I depart. I did not know whether I would get another chance to come. So long as Isranon and Timon die, it does not matter. Rite the one if you wish and suck the undead soul out of the vampire. So long as the blades go in as I described, it does not matter how it is achieved."

"Carve ... him up," Bodramet's mouth licked around the word 'carve', liking the sound of it. "Yes, you are right, Mondarius."

Mondarius closed his satchel and slung it back on his shoulder. "I must go. We leave at dawn. I am told that you wither, Bodramet. Will you be strong enough for this?"

"A deception. Nothing more. I do not wither."

"Well played then."

Bodramet nodded absently as he left, and then moved to stand looking over the blades his followers were examining. The runes were different from anything he had ever seen before. Only one symbol was recognizable: the skull-tipped deathtree of the Hellgod.

"Isranon, this play draws to a close." Bodramet murmured. "Anksha leaves on a hunt soon. Give her a few days away and then we will do it."

\* \* \* \*

Isranon came downstairs to dinner, intending to simply fill his plate and leave. Auclos and a small crowd of nibari, along with his clan-brothers accompanied him. Anksha had left for a long hunt, intending to be away for a week or two--at least that's what she had told them. In her absence, the sa'necari had grown increasingly harder to control, harder to deal with, more filled with anger and willing to demonstrate it.

"We know what you are, Dark Brother," Bodramet said, shoving Isranon. "Traitor with a traitor's name."

Isranon stiffened, regarding him with narrowing eyes, fire in their depths. "Waejonan was the traitor. The Accursed they call him in the outlands."

"What would you know of Waejonan's truths, half-a-mon?"

Nevin reared up in his transitional form, as did Olin. "Back off, sa'necari," the scarred lycan growled. "Let my brother be. We did not come here for trouble."

"But trouble is what you have found, wolf," Gareth told him, moving closer.

"You are not one to be giving out warnings, dog," snarled Yoris.

"Let me handle this," Isranon said quietly, his hand going to Nevin's shoulder. He ached for his blades, for the things he knew so well and felt so safe with. The nibari and lycans had begun to fear for him as Anksha's absence lengthened.

Ennis threw a plate against the wall, shattering it. The nibari flinched. "Don't you crave the taste of something finer than this shit?"

Isranon's stomach tightened, feeling sick of battles he could not win. Bodramet stepped away from him as the others closed on the three.

"The vampires should have let Mondarius rite you, half-a-mon," Petros said. "You have no power, no strength, no purpose. We were meant to *have* cattle, not be them. *You* have always been cattle. We know your teachings of silence."

"If you are finished here, then leave," said Eilwen. "It is our turn to eat."

"The cattle wish to eat," Ennis sneered, smashing another plate and watching their faces.

"Anksha will punish you," Auclos said evenly.

"Hells, she punishes us whether we misbehave or not. And all for the sake of this half-a-mon!" Ennis swept his hand at Isranon.

"It's the madness," Eilwen said, "Look at them, they're almost foaming at the mouth."

"Yes," replied Jules. "Anksha will be killing them soon."

The nibari slicing the venison laid the long blade aside, using forks to fill the plates. It was their turn to dine, yet the sa'necari showed no sign of leaving. Bodramet moved close to the server, reaching out with his power in a tiny lance, sliding into his mind. "Where is the carving knife?" Bodramet demanded. "What did you do? Leave it in the kitchen again? You do this deliberately, don't you? Just to upset me?"

The nibari blinked. He had been certain the blade was there beside the platter. "No. I'm not doing this deliberately. I just ... must have left it in the kitchen. Your shouting is making me forget things!" Then he left to hunt for the blade he had left in plain sight beside the platter.

Bodramet smiled, slipping the blade into the concealing folds of his robes. As Mondarius had advised, he now had a blade of his own.

"Enough!" Bodramet shouted. "The half-a-mon is not worth the trouble, brothers. Let us go before they call the Lemyari to protect him, poor helpless little half-a-mon."

Isranon sucked in a deep breath, trying to still the anger that was making his body shake.

"So long as you are the hunted...." Nevin said.

"I know. I know."

\* \* \* \*

The sa'necari followed Bodramet upstairs to his room and settled themselves on the chairs and sofas. Bodramet assumed his position at their head, a smug expression lighting his face. He reached inside his robes, fingering the hilt of the blade, treasuring the feeling of power it gave him to have something sharp in his hands again.

"We should do it now," said Gareth, leaning close to Bodramet.

Bodramet looked up from his musings and scowled at Gareth. "No. They'll be watching us. Let matters settle down again." Bodramet pulled the carving knife out and thumbed the sharp blade, bringing a small bead of blood to the surface. He shoved his thumb in his mouth and sucked it. "They think it is the madness. In the early stages it comes and goes. Let them think it is gone for the moment."

"I want to do him now!" Gareth snarled. "Return my blade and I'll do him alone if I must."

"You can't," Bodramet snarled back, showing his fangs in displeasure. "We will not be freed unless we do it properly. All four blades to the quillons like Mondarius told us." He began to play with his knife, making thrusting motions. "The feel of his flesh parting will be sweet."

"We can't wait long," Yoris whimpered. "I'm withering."

"Shut up, Yoris," Ennis growled. "I am too, but I don't make noises about it."

"I'm with Gareth," Petros said. "I'm sick of waiting. I'm sick of pretending, this entire charade has gone on long enough. I hate the heretic and I hate Anksha even more."

Bodramet's eyes flashed. "No. One misstep and we're all meat on the sanguiner's hooks. Is that what you want?"

The mention of the sanguiner reduced them to silence and seething looks. They all spent time with him each month, being bled for Anksha's special blends. The image of the carcasses hanging on meat hooks with throats slashed, blood draining into the sanguiner's basins, had lodged the fact sufficiently into their brains that they could be next.

"They'll be looking for the missing knife. I need to hide it with the rest," said Bodramet.

"I want to touch my blade again," said Gareth. "The feel of it gives me hope of freedom."

Instantly the others began a chorus, asking for the same as Gareth.

"Not now," replied Bodramet harshly. "They may send someone to check on us after the incident in the dining room. All of you get out. Except Ennis. I have something for you to do."

Once the others left, he went into his bedroom and crawled into the hearth. All of the blades were there, as well as another missive from Mondarius. The divinator was becoming impatient to have the deed done. Bodramet renewed his shields upon the cache and crawled back out. He dusted off his robes and sauntered out to see Ennis.

"There is a task I have for you," he said to Ennis.

Ennis gave him a prompt nod. "Tell me and I'll do it."

"I want you to go down and summon Pippa. Tell her that I am having a major attack. I need to cover our actions in the dining hall."

Ennis grinned. "Can I fall ill soon after?"

Bodramet chuckled. "Considering that you were breaking plates, yes."

While Ennis ran for Pippa, Bodramet settled himself on his bed and made more changes in his body. The appearance of the withering now covered his entire chest and stomach. He changed the drool, making it foamy at the edges and laid down on his bed beneath the coverlet.

When he heard them come in, Bodramet rolled off the bed onto the floor with a loud groan and lay tangled up twitching and shivering as if caught by an intense chill. The sound of his fall brought Pippa and her two companions, one of them a Lemyari this time, rushing into the room.

Pippa knelt and threw Bodramet's robes open. She stared at the way the withering had spread and glanced up at Jun. "Fetch Amiri. This is more than I can handle."

"Help me.... Please, help me." Bodramet's words emerged in a hoarse whisper.

"We'll try," Pippa said.

Ennis and the nibari assistant got Bodramet settled once more on his bed and by that time Amiri had arrived with her satchel. She set out a purple vial and read Bodramet. "I cannot promise that he'll last until Anksha returns. Have Timon excuse him from working."

She poured a measure of the liquid and helped Bodramet to sit. "This will ease you. It's pollendine."

Bodramet had never heard of it before, but accepted it. Warmth spread through him, followed by an interesting sensation of floating. "Thank you."

Amiri shook her head at him, brushing off his gratitude. She held up the measuring glass. "You must not

take more of this than where I have my finger." She indicated a line on the glass. "And you must not take it more than three times in a day."

"I understand." Bodramet found himself enjoying the drug and feeling a bit sleepy. Whatever it was, it was far better than the willowbark tea they had been giving him.

He fell asleep soon after they left, dreaming of Isranon.

\* \* \* \*

Timon continued to focus on the ledger book, going over the latest list of stores they had brought in, while attempting to ignore Ephry sitting on his desk. The furniture was black in a whitewashed room. A huge two-handed sword sat on pegs above Timon. His mate was still annoyed at being refused a hunt. One of the lycans had found some manticore spoor, and the thought of serious big game had Ephry drooling to go after it.

Ephry leaned forward. "Timon, all work, and no play ... Besides, Isranon would love it. I imagine he has never hunted anything to match it. Manticore is awesome game."

Timon scowled. "What? We've rescued Isranon from the sa'necari, just to have you drag him off to get gored by a manticore? Pick some other game if you're going take him along."

"I want to hunt manticore."

"Not with Isranon. With Bodramet dying, I've just now started to relax. I don't want you giving me more reason to worry about Isranon."

"With you, then."

Timon did not look up. "Ephry, if you wish to gather some others and go after it, do so. This must be finished today."

Ephry slid along the desk and put both of his long-fingered hands on the ledger. Timon moved his hands off and then started writing again. Ephry leaned in close and kissed him on the bridge of his nose. "It isn't as much fun without you."

"Another time."

Ephry folded his arms across his chest and pouted.

\* \* \* \*

Every day Isranon evaded his friends and went to the tiny postern gate called "Anksha's Gate," to wait for her return. This was where she entered and left the grounds on her hunts. He had liked sitting on the boulder near the odd gate even before he had known that it was Anksha's. The deepest part of the thickets in the most tangled portion of the far northwest section of the garden concealed the gate from casual eyes. It was wrought of high quality steel twisted into the shape of lions leaping. Bone runes were set into the stone of the arch that held it. Isranon often wondered what they said. No darkness emanated from them, and the one time he had touched them he had felt a clean savagery in their depths like a wild beast's, something whose mind was not turned to evil for its own sake.

He imagined how Anksha would jump at him upon her return, laughing and happy. Sometimes she would drink from him; other times she would demand sex and they would make love here. Or she would ask him to play his flute and tell stories. So many sides to Anksha. So very many sides.

It made no sense that he was physically holding his own and showing no signs of the withering; while Bodramet, who was stronger in magic and body than Isranon because of the rites, had at most only a few weeks left according to Amiri. Isranon had expected to be the first of them to die.

Isranon smiled. A small pouch with candy in it for Anksha hung from his neck on a leather thong. His bare-chest would have been as smooth as a boy's except for the scars. A slight sheen of sweat glistened on his shoulders, gilding his strongly defined, muscular chest, and heavy arms. Isranon had just sat down on a boulder with his flute in his hands when the five sa'necari emerged from the trees around him.

Isranon stood up, wondering how they had found him. "What you do want?"

"To speak with you," Bodramet said, coming nearer.

Isranon stepped back without realizing the others had closed behind him and he had placed himself into their hands. Instinctively, he lifted the flute to his lips, trilling a melody of life and joy. Bodramet flinched as the music cut through his necromantic senses with the sharpness of a blade and the chill of ice. The others fell back from Isranon, clapping their hands over their ears. Yoris dropped to his knees, covering his mouth to stifle a shriek.

Bodramet shuddered as he forced himself to straighten. His lips drew back in a grimace as he fought the power of the music. Isranon's eyes widened at the effort Bodramet put into resisting it. He started to step backward when Bodramet's hand shot out like a striking cobra and ripped Isranon's flute away, casting it into the dirt.

"You'll not call the bitch to your aid this time." Bodramet threw a web of energy in Isranon's face.

The searing web melted into Isranon's head, blocking his ability to summon Anksha through their link. Power slammed into him from four directions. His shields snapped up, only to buckle instantly before their onslaught, the backlash of power making his head ring. Isranon's magic overmatched, he struck with his hands, knocking Ennis into the bushes and doubling Petros over with a solid jab to the solar plexus that slammed the air from his lungs. He glanced around for an avenue of escape and saw Bodramet close the distance between them.

Pain seared through Isranon. He dropped his eyes to Bodramet's hand and saw the long carving knife being shoved into his mid-section. The point emerged from his back as Bodramet ripped it upward. Desperate to gain control of the blade, Isranon grabbed at Bodramet's fingers, trying to pry them off the hilt, struggling to prevent him from moving it in the wound or drawing it and piercing him again.

With a gesture, Bodramet struck Isranon with a lance of power through the chest, reaching into his being to wind his spells through the Dark Brother's core. As he sobbed for air, Isranon's hands came loose from the blade-hilt and he grabbed at his chest.

"I have ... done nothing ... to you," Isranon gasped.

"Half-a-mon, you should have taken what I offered." Bodramet gave the blade a twist and Isranon shuddered. "When sa'necari kill sa'necari they do it well."

Gareth yanked Isranon's arm around and stabbed him in the side. The blade went in to the quillons and the deathtree runes seared his skin when they touched it. "The Master of Blood sends greetings, Isranon."

Isranon tore his arm free and grabbed at Bodramet's hand again. He pried Bodramet's fingers from the hilt and pivoted, looking for an avenue of escape with the blade still in his body.

"The price of heresy is death," Ennis growled, rising from the bushes and drawing his blade. He lunged at

Isranon and sheathed the blade in his ribs.

Isranon stiffened, then jerked, and opened his mouth to scream.

Laughing, Yoris popped one of Anksha's scarves into Isranon's mouth as he plunged the runed blade into his back. Petros whipped a second scarf around Isranon's head to secure the first one, swiftly knotting it tight.

Isranon tottered two steps when Petros released the knotted scarf, trying for a small gap between Yoris and Bodramet.

"Traitor," Petros snarled, catching Isranon's shoulder to halt the tentative retreat. He slipped his blade in, and completed the set of divinator runes required to embed Mondarius' spells in Isranon's flesh. The spells unleashed themselves.

Blinded by pain, Isranon faltered. His hands dropped first to his sides, and then clutched at his wounds, his shoulders hunching. *Too late ... too late ... I brought this on myself.... I defied them ... I broke the teachings...*

Yoris caught him by the arm and stuck him again, slamming the Master of Blood's runes hard against Isranon's bare flesh. The runes left a blackened burn on Isranon's skin.

The dark magics of the demon-forged blades wove a flaming web of agony through Isranon, burning like venom in his veins and arteries. Isranon reeled away from them, struggling to keep his feet, heading for the trees. The sa'necari were on every side; no matter which way he turned, they stabbed him. Again and again the hell-runed quillons met his skin as the blades entered his body as Mondarius had directed.

Isranon reached the first tree ... staggered three more steps.

A trail of blood marked his progress.

In the shade of an elm tree whose leaves dappled him in shadow and light, Isranon's body surrendered its strength to resist. He stumbled to his knees before Bodramet. His chin settled to his chest. Five blades protruded from him. Isranon's eyes blinked slowly, unable to clear his clouding vision. He swayed. Once more he heard his father's voice saying, *"The only way you will ever be able to keep the teachings is to die." Father ... I will join you soon.*

Bodramet regarded him with satisfaction, head tilted and sneering faintly. Gareth threw a net of death magic through Isranon and drew it tight before dragging the blade along his arm. Isranon no longer tried to scream; he had no strength left for it. He recognized the spells: they were severing his ability to heal with blood.

"Are you lovers, Isranon? Did you trade one prince for another?" Bodramet knelt, pulling the knife free, hissing in Isranon's ear. "Having had Mephistis, you had to have Timon?" He tangled his fingers in Isranon's hair, twisting his head around. He pulled the second scarf down around Isranon's neck and kissed his lips as he shoved the blade into Isranon's side and rotated it in the wound.

Isranon looked at Bodramet with dulling eyes. He heard Yoris giggling, the others jeering. The sa'necari pulled their blades out of him and slid them into new places in his body. Isranon slipped into a netherworld of shock, everything going gray around the edges.

Bodramet forced his tongue into Isranon's mouth and encountered the scarf. He pushed two fingers in and pressed the scarf into Isranon's cheek, so that he could twine his tongue around Isranon's before lapping at the blood pooling beneath it. Bodramet kissed Isranon's lips again as he drew the blade slowly

forth. He noticed the sack of candy and sliced it open. Candy spilled across the ground, stained with Isranon's blood, like an offering to the earth of sweetness and sorrow.

Isranon crumpled forward, sagging against Bodramet. Ennis and Petros caught him, holding him up to get at him better. Petros's fangs lengthened and he sank them into Isranon's neck, then drew his blade along the Dark Brother's thigh and shoved it into his leg, sawing at the muscles until it emerged from the side. Ennis bit him on the shoulder and began to suck. Isranon writhed in their grip.

"How do you like our kisses now?" Gareth worked a spell to force Isranon to remain conscious throughout their assault, yanking him back every time he started to slip away. "You're going to feel all of it--every last bit of it, until I release you or death takes you."

Gareth and Bodramet twisted their webs up from the bottoms of his feet, from his hands and his head, knotting them together in his guts.

Petros lifted his face, Isranon's blood rimming his lips. "My steel cock still hungers for you." He put the blade repeatedly through Isranon's thighs, working it in the wounds. "See how hungry it is?"

Yoris stood behind Isranon, head tilted, a sneering smile on his face. He saw the flute where it had fallen from Isranon's hand. Yoris stomped the flute, breaking it.

Bodramet drew the blade desultorily along Isranon's leg, while considering what to do next. He shoved Isranon's pants down and pushed the others away. He would finally get what he had wanted since he first met Isranon, when the Dark Brother was fourteen. Bodramet dragged him to the boulder by his heels, panting with eagerness. He draped Isranon over the boulder on his stomach.

*Nooooo. Not the rite ... not the rite ...* Isranon's fading consciousness shrieked as he hung unmoving, his hands and feet in the dirt, his cheek pressed against the cold rock, feeling a chill more profound than stone settling through his flaccid body.

Bodramet opened his pants and lifted his cock and testicles out--he was already hard as a spear from the excitement of the blood. He dropped the blade on the ground, spread Isranon's buttocks, and forced his rod inside.

"Yeeesss!" Bodramet hissed in triumph, grasping Isranon's hips to go as deeply and savagely as possible. His companions began demanding a turn. Bodramet's juices spilled forth and he pulled out. "You may ride, but not rite."

Gareth mounted Isranon next, and they took turns in order of their standing. Finally, they hauled him off and straightened his clothing, preparing their little surprise for Anksha. They placed Isranon against the boulder as if he sat leaning there; but his limp body would not stay upright. So they wedged some sticks under his armpits, and braced them with rocks. Then they walked off, laughing.

\* \* \* \*

Anksha had caught nothing, but she had chased many things for the sheer delight of the chase and had many stories to tell. She pushed the gate open and came in bouncing on the balls of her feet happily, full of energy and excitement. She saw Isranon leaning with one shoulder against the boulder that he usually sat on, his head hanging down as if dozing.

A bright smile spread across her features and she grabbed him playfully. "Isranon!"

He toppled slowly forward, canted to the side, and lay still.

Anksha's breath caught sharply in her lungs. She stepped around to see his face. Her mouth parted in a soft cry as she squatted in front of him. She saw the wounds, the torn clothing; she smelled his blood, thick and coppery. Her hand stole forth to touch him, tentatively, only to jerk back, seeing his blood on her fingers. She reached for Isranon through the link and found only a void where he should have been. Anksha began shaking her head in frantic denial of her senses, even as she straightened him on the ground. The shifting of his body caused his entrails to bulge through the tears in his clothing.

"No, my Isranon ... no." Her throat constricted and she choked on her tears.

Then she saw the broken flute, the discarded carving knife, and the bloody candy spilled around him. Blood still dribbled from the corners of his mouth, although most of it was being soaked up by a roll of cloth stuffed into it. Anksha pulled the cloth out and stared at one of her scarves going stiff with his blood. She flung the scarf away and yowled in grief and rage, promising a terrible vengeance upon the sa'necari.

## **CHAPTER five**

### **grief**

Timon sighed and pushed Ephry to the edge of the desk. "Sit in a chair, you're distracting me."

Ephry grinned cheekily. "That's what I'm trying to do. I want a hunt."

Timon lifted his hand in a warding gesture. "Stop. I have had an hour of this."

A knock preceded Bodramet and the rest of the sa'necari filing into the room.

"Is there something you need?" Timon demanded, not bothering to school the irritation from his voice. Their actions from last week in the dining hall still had the nibari jittery. Madness or not, he was growing tired of their petty displays. If he did not hear back from his father soon he would simply order them destroyed out of hand. His patience was at an end.

Yoris closed the door quietly. "A private word?" Then he giggled.

They spread through the room, eyeing the vampire and the lycan in a way that caused Timon to turn his head sidewise in dawning suspicion, trying to keep them all in view. Ephry slid from the desk, moving to his side. Then the blades came out. Timon could sense the power rising from them, speaking of death and destruction.

"How, in Hell's Nine Names, did you get those?" he demanded.

A long, ear-splitting howl of anguish broke from beyond the open window and sounded as if it came from near the walls, changing to a shrill keening. That could only mean a single thing. "You killed him. And now you have come for me."

A shadow of doubt swept across Bodramet's face. "Anksha's back ... Already?" Then he forced the look aside, focusing on Timon and Ephry.

Timon stood up, jerking the broadsword from the pegs behind him, as Ephry changed into the gigantic white wolf. Before they could engage, however, the door opened and Zulaika appeared. "Timon, Anksha is screaming--"

Zulaika stared for an eye blink before seizing Yoris and crushing his wrist. Yoris shrieked, and dropped the blade. Zulaika kicked it into the hall. "Guards! The sa'necari are attacking the prince!"

The Ymraude soldier spun Yoris about and hurled him into the corridor. Ennis whipped round on her, blade raised for an overhand strike. Zulaika caught his descending wrist with a twist, hooking her other hand beneath his arm and threw him into a wall. Ennis slid down, scrabbling to keep his feet. She stepped on his blade hand, grinding the bones into fragments beneath the heel of her boot.

Ephry went for Gareth's blade hand as Zulaika grabbed him from behind. Amiri rushed in with spellcord and bound the sa'necari in quick grabs. Gareth dropped his blade in response to Ephry's worrying of his flesh. Royals flooded the room.

Wishing he had kept his blade, Bodramet shrieked, sending out a lash of energy in a spell of undeath denial in an attempt to twist the soul from Timon's body. The vampire kicked the desk into him, spilling the papers in a white flurry and leaped forward with the sword. The edge of the desk caught Bodramet in the stomach, and he lost the breath in his lungs and the spell on his lips. Timon put one foot to the desk, shoving him hard again with the wood and brought the blade to rest in the hollow of the sa'necari's throat.

"Anksha's blood-slaves do not rise undead, Bodramet," Timon told him in a flat, emotionless voice. "If I kill you, you are truly dead."

Anksha's keening continued to echo across the grounds, through the mansion, in an unceasing torrent of grief and loss. Timon wanted to kill Bodramet, holding back only because he was Anksha's meat and, therefore, vengeance would be hers.

\* \* \* \*

Timon listened to Anksha's keening: 'Isranon. Isranon.' It had not paused for an instant. Anticipation of what he would find spread through him like a nauseating vapor.

"You really think he's dead?" Ephry asked, his hand on Timon's shoulder as they stepped into the corridor mere moments later.

"Listen to her." Timon's voice tightened, and he had to force his words out as he gestured at the sa'necari, who had been spellcorded to block their powers. "Bring them."

Timon grabbed Bodramet. The sa'necari twisted in Timon's grasp and the vampire snarled, baring his fangs, "Give me a reason to rip your throat out."

Bodramet stilled.

Timon strode through the corridors with Zulaika, Haig, and Amiri walking immediately behind him. A pall had fallen over everyone, deepening as they moved. They descended the stairs to find a large crowd waiting for them. They followed Timon and his captains into the gardens, then deep into the thicketed recesses along the walls. Timon judged Anksha's location quickly and headed for her gate.

They found Anksha clutching Isranon. She sat by the boulder, legs folded beneath her and her head thrown back to release another yowl of grief. The sound shrieked up the harmonic scale in patterns of animal loss that made everyone shiver. Her arms circled Isranon's chest, holding his shoulders lodged beneath her breasts. His limp head pressed her arm. Her disheveled black hair formed a dense veil about her face, the long strands trailing across Isranon's features, his closed eyes and parted lips. She howled and keened, pausing only when forced to suck in another breath. "He's dead. Hesdeadhesdeadhesdead." She let go one last forlorn note and then pressed her face into the curve of his neck, sobbing.

Nevin and Olin--who had reached her first--crouched beside her, trying to persuade her to let them touch Isranon; but she kept twisting, pushing them away, and threatening to scratch them.

"Please, Anksha," Nevin begged. "The mon was my brother. Give me his body that I might carry it back." He reached for Isranon. "Let me take him home."

Anksha's eyes widened and she brandished her claws again. "Don't touch him. Don't touch him!" she shrieked.

Nevin's shoulders sagged in defeat. He had promised to see Isranon buried in Claw's valley when he died.

Haig's face tightened into a sickened mask "They butchered him."

"Yes," said Nevin. A single word, a single syllable, and all the pain in his heart bound up in it.

Randilyn wept with her head pressed into Amiri's shoulder, while the Ymraude looked on stone-faced.

"How the hell did they get past me?" Haig growled. "I was sitting in the great hall and I had someone in the kitchens."

"I don't know," Nevin said, his bleak tone and thickening brogue further betraying the depth of his grief. "I cannae understand ha they found him when I couldn't."

Hearing all of this, Anksha's gaze darted about her, taking in the gathered people. Her eyes fastened on Bodramet. Her nostrils flared, her tail twitched like a stalking cat's, and her lips curled back from her fangs. She ceased to sob and keen, her tone settling into a chill sibilation. "*You* killed him."

Timon handed Bodramet to Haig's grip. "Take him to her. I don't trust myself."

Haig obeyed, although his whitening knuckles showed how hard he had to resist letting his venomous claws emerge and sink into Bodramet's flesh to give him a terrible death. When Bodramet tried to avoid Anksha's eyes, Haig seized his chin and forced his face around to hers. Their eyes met. The dominance link clicked in.

"You killed my Isranon," Anksha hissed. "I hate you."

Bodramet's eyes went dull, his voice hollow. "The price of heresy is death."

Timon gasped and hit him in the stomach. Bodramet doubled over, spitting blood.

Ephry knelt by Isranon, staring at the bloody ruins of him. Nevin and Olin moved away and, where Anksha--in her initial hysteria--had been fending them off, she allowed Ephry to reach across her and stroke his lover's face. His nostrils flared, taking in the scent of fading life, the sweet and salt of the blood. Ephry's long white hair fell across Isranon's chest like a wintry curtain and his eyes were iced with sorrow. "Calm yourself, pet. Feel through the link. He isn't dead. But I fear he's beyond help."

Anksha's expression reflected her turning inward. At first she found only a void where Isranon should have been. She went deeper, trusting Ephry's words, and found the flickering light of Isranon's life force, beckoning her like a guttering candle. "Hold him," she told Ephry.

Ephry took him from Anksha's arms and clasped Isranon's bloody chest to his own, supporting his head against his neck.

Nevin reached out in a slow, tentative fashion to brush his fingers along Isranon's cheek. "Alive? My brother, hold firm. Don't die."

Anksha felt beside her for the carving knife Bodramet had used on Isranon. She stalked toward him on

the balls of her feet, her hair haloing with power. "Feed him."

At Timon's nod, Haig shoved Bodramet to his knees before Anksha. Snarling, she slashed Bodramet's arm open from wrist to elbow, striking the artery. Blood fountained over Anksha, Ephry, and Isranon. Ephry licked at the splatters on his arms.

Nevin's mouth twisted in grim satisfaction. "Gut him."

Knowing that unconscious sa'necari could be awakened by the taste of blood, she pushed Bodramet's arm into Isranon's mouth. The normal sa'necari response did not occur--Isranon did not fasten to Bodramet's arm and suck. Blood filled his mouth. Anksha glanced frantically at Timon. "I'm drowning him."

Seeing this, Timon settled beside them and took Isranon from Ephry. He cradled his lover's shoulders against his chest and forced swallowing for as long as possible. He gestured Anksha and Bodramet away.

Bodramet clamped his hand over the wound, glaring at Yoris, who kept whimpering, "I didn't touch him. I swear I didn't. It was the others."

Timon stared at the multitude of wounds in Isranon's body, which showed not the smallest signs of closing, as they should have. He pressed his cheek against Isranon's head, his hand on his lover's wrist, and Read him. Timon found every violation they had committed upon Isranon and sensed the coiled webs of dark spells embedded within him. When he spoke, the rage he felt showed as a quiet tightness in his voice. "I can't get any more blood into him. We'll take him back. Clean him. Try to get more blood into him later." Timon regarded Bodramet again, his calm eyes guarding his emotions with their stillness. "Lock them in the shielded dungeon."

"I didn't stick him." Yoris's litany of denial finally drew Timon's notice.

"Shut him up," Timon ordered.

Zulaika spun and hit Yoris in the face. The sa'necari crumpled into a ball, small piteous noises still escaping from him, but no words.

Timon did not speak of the spells and magical damage lest he provoke Anksha further: once set upon a course of action she could not be stopped, and he wanted to interrogate them. Yet even as he watched he could see the thoughts swiftly passing through her mind by the expression on her face. She looked pensive.

Anksha, the lycans, and the nibari were normally the only living sapients on the estate, other than an occasional sa'necari. She and the lycans healed well on their own. Sa'necari did also. Isranon needed a healer and they did not have one. Ordinarily sa'necari rose undead as necari. Isranon would not rise.

Waves of guilt crested through her. *I didn't know ... I didn't know who you were.* Her eyes started to fill with fresh tears. "Is. Ra. Non." She broke his name into a sad chant, and then looked at Bodramet with terrible hate. Her claws slid from their sheaths and she ripped his clothing open, taking skin with it. Bodramet shrieked.

Anksha yanked the sash on Bodramet's robe and it fell open, settling in folds along his sides. Everyone stared: all signs of the withering were gone. It had been a deception. Immediately, Lemyari began jerking open the others' robes. Only Ennis and Yoris bore signs of withering.

Anksha placed the carving knife in Bodramet's hand, folded his fingers tightly around the handle, and

pressed it against his belly. "Kill yourself."

"Anksha!" Timon shouted, but it was already too late.

Bodramet twisted in her control, the cords standing out in his neck. His eyes bulged and his body broke out in a sweat that trickled down his face. The point pricked his belly as he fought Anksha's command to slit himself open. Blood ran down his dark skin below his navel. His upper body writhed, yet his hands and the positioning of the point never wavered.

Anksha growled deeply in her throat, sensual and threatening, extending herself, stroking his face. She twisted the dominance-link in his psyche into shapes of fire and ice, commanding his lust and submission into the forms she wished it. She snapped his will and clouded his mind. "You want to put it in because you love me. You want the steel to slide inside you like a lover's cock. You want it. You love me."

Bodramet's body relaxed as his resistance dissolved. He let out a long shuddering sigh, his eyes glazed with surrender. "I love you, Anksha." He moaned like a woman reaching climax as the blade slipped inside him.

Nevin's scarred lips formed an ugly smile graced by savagery. "That's the way."

Anksha dipped her fingers in the bloody rivulet running down Bodramet's belly, and licked them. "Fuck the blade, Bodramet."

"I love you, Anksha." His pelvis moved in harmony to thrusts of the blade and he cherished the handle with his thumbs. "May I kiss it?"

Anksha stroked his head. "Yes. But then you must put it back in and finish making love to it."

A broad, eager smile came on Bodramet's face. He pulled the blade and kissed the handle, twining his tongue around it. Bits of gray entrails clung to the blade as well as the blood. Holding his wound open with his fingers, he slipped it back in.

Anksha tore his pants open with her hind claws, allowing his erection to pop out for the others to view. There would be no question in anyone's mind what she was doing to him. "Whose cock is inside you?"

Bodramet sighed. "Isranon's. I love you, Anksha."

"Damn him!" Nevin growled. "So that was it. He wanted my brother."

Fresh rage surged through Anksha as she realized that Bodramet had planned the murder because Isranon had refused to become his lover.

Tension became a palpable aura around those watching: none of them had ever seen Anksha do something this extreme or exert her powers so fully. Silence settled; interrupted only by Yoris' soft, terrified sobbing, and the words passing between Anksha and Bodramet.

"Make him hurt, Anksha," Nevin shouted. "Make it bad."

Anksha kissed Bodramet's face, rubbing against him. She regarded him with eyes as smooth and chill as wind-worn stone. "Move the blade higher," she purred. "Feel it slide in and out. Feel my love."

"I love you, Anksha." Bodramet moaned louder, putting both hands on the blade and sliding it in and out of him as he dragged it up. The blade grated against his breastbone and stopped. "I love you, Anksha." He glanced down at the hilt pressing against his skin and fondled it. "Isranon at last.... Isranon. So

handsome."

"The Beast is as powerful as the legends say," Amiri murmured, standing with her arms around Randilyn. Randilyn started to lift her head, but Amiri pressed her face into her shoulder, keeping her nibari's eyes turned away from the scene. "Don't look, Randi, it will give you nightmares."

Anksha smiled in feline satisfaction, took hold of the blade, and tore it through Bodramet's lungs and spleen. Then she released her hold so that he could feel it.

Tumbling from the hallucinatory sensations of sexual repletion, Bodramet screamed and sagged. Realizing that he was dying, he lifted his eyes to hers. "Isranon deserved it. I would do it over again."

"Filthy sa'necari!" She slashed his face, took out his eyes, and opened his throat. "If one of you is hungry, there is your dinner. Drain him," Anksha said to the vampires.

Timon's lips curled back in an ugly smile. "Have the sanguiner drain them for the bottles. Except for the two that are genuinely withering. Their blood isn't worth saving."

"You did it well, Anksha," said Nevin.

Anksha knelt by Isranon, stroking his face, trying to feel that faint life in him.

"Mend him with blood if you can," Gareth shouted defiantly. "He'll never be whole without *mortgiefan*. You can't keep him alive without it. We twisted him."

Timon closed his eyes briefly, hatred written on his face. "There it is, the whole sick revelation."

"We denied him the blood's gift," Petros snarled contemptuously. They all shouted out how they had made an example of Isranon that would be remembered forever; how they had defied the Beast; how they had redeemed their honor; how they had revenged both Waejontor and Prince Mephistis--all except Yoris who had begun another litany of denial. It sounded like sheerest madness to the assembled royals. It hung in all their minds that the arcane workings of these unholy sa'necari prevented them from healing Isranon by feeding him blood.

Ephry gave a roar and rushed Gareth, his arm changing, growing thick white hair. His hand became a claw. His face twisted in rage, his lips drawn completely back in a savage snarl while tears ran freely from his impassioned eyes. Ephry disemboweled Gareth with a single swipe of his claw, and he fell screaming to his knees.

Timon lifted Isranon into his arms. Isranon's blood coated his fingers--there was nowhere to touch him that was not oozing blood. His lover's head fell against his neck and Timon pressed his cheek to the dark, curling hair as he carried him into the manor, followed by Ephry. Timon had ordered deaths, dealt them many times, and would again; yet those acts never assuaged the sense of loss left by the deeds they avenged.

"Give her whatever she requires to see these executions carried out. While you are about it, try to discover exactly what it is they did to him."

Yoris shrieked. "I didn't stick him. I don't want to die." He cowered in a desperate heap, forcing two Lemyari to lift him bodily up to carry him away.

Anksha stalked toward the others.

"Anksha, pet," said Haig. "Rather than take all day and waste food, poor food that they are. Why not let

us have them?"

Making a circle with her thumb and forefinger, Anksha then shoved a finger through it suggestively.

"Just like they do it in mortgiefan..." Haig agreed. "But we'll get a little more creative."

"Do it well," she growled. Then she looked about and found the broken flute. Anksha carried it into the house as if it were the most precious of treasures.

Haig and the other Lemyari dragged the sa'necari away to execute those not already dying and to drain those who were for the bottles. Finally only Randilyn remained. She knelt and gathered up the bloody candies, carrying them to the garden. There she dug a hole beneath a red rose bush, ignoring the way the thorns tore at her hands, and buried the candies there, covering them over with soil in a reverent manner.

\* \* \* \*

The nibari had gathered in the Great Hall near the doors when they heard the sound of Anksha's keening, waiting to learn what terrible thing had happened. On their seeing Timon bearing Isranon, a tremendous chorus of wails rose. Several of the younger ones collapsed to the ground, sobbing. Some of the older ones followed Timon and Anksha as they carried Isranon to his room. They shoed the masters out, cleaned him up, and bandaged his wounds before calling them back in.

Timon and Anksha watched the nibari hover over Isranon, pricking themselves and dribbling blood on his lips, smearing it inside his mouth. When their efforts brought no response, Timon turned to Anksha. "Force him to feed."

Anksha feared hurting him further, but what choice did she have? Could she even do this? Would she need to connect through the blood for this? She would try without it first. Anksha climbed onto the bed, curling her body around him, laying her head on his torn shoulder. She reached inside him through the dominance-link and his pain nearly swept her away. A low animal noise of anguish rose from her throat. The black webs of magic burned her. She pushed through them, struggling for control of his body.

Timon watched the suffering look on Anksha's face with concern. He had never asked her to try anything like this before. Then Isranon's lips writhed back from his teeth and his fangs extended. Timon drew a nibari close, and pressed his wrist to Isranon's mouth. Isranon fastened on it sucking; his eyes remained closed and he did not awaken.

Anksha released him with a sigh and sat up, watching him feed, her expression tired and hopeful. *Dawnhand. Dawnhand.* Dawnhand had not liked her to bite people. He fed her bits of meat when she was little and he bled this cow--the cow never seemed to mind much--just a little, stirring it into a yogurt for her. He had called it 'blood pudding in the raw.' She liked it. She wondered if Isranon knew how to make it and then the tears started again.

"The wounds are not closing," Timon said, his voice flat, disheartened. "They were right when they said they had denied him the blood's gift." He sent the nibari away with a curt gesture.

"Troll's blood?" Anksha asked. "Maybe troll's blood?"

A small shine of optimism slipped between the curtains of Timon's despair. "Sanguine Rose. There are a few bottles of it left. If it helps at all, you'll have to catch more trolls."

"I can do that." Anksha dashed out.

Timon settled by Isranon's bed again, watching him, concern written deeply in his eyes. He stroked

Isranon's face in feather light touches, desperate for a reaction while awaiting Anksha's return and got nothing. "Isranon, I swore to keep you safe. I failed you. Forgive me."

Anksha slipped up to him with the bottle. Timon slid his arm under Isranon's shoulders, lifting and cradling him to his chest. The vampire could feel the faint, lingering life; sa'necari were hard to kill; yet Isranon was nearly gone. Timon pressed his cheek against Isranon's forehead briefly, took the bottle from Anksha, and poured some of it into Isranon's mouth, persuading it down his throat. Then he Read him. "It helps. I don't know if it will be enough. We still haven't gotten the spells out."

\* \* \* \*

The late evening breeze ruffled the linen curtains in Isranon's bedroom. Anksha had gone out again to hunt trolls this time so that Isranon would not go without the precious Sanguine Rose. Timon had relinquished his place at Isranon's side to Nevin and retired for the night with Ephry.

Amiri sat beside Isranon's bed Reading him while Nevin leaned against the wall watching. "Timon asked that I try to identify the spells they have embedded in him. If I can, I am to try and get them out." She Read for a long time, finally shaking her head wearily. "I have never seen these before. Our best is to get him stable and try to keep him that way. I fear that whatever we do, it won't hold forever. He's dying."

"Did you get a look at the blades?"

Amiri nodded. "Divinator runes on the blades ... four different sets. It took all four blades to complete the spells, lock them together. Deathtree on the quillons--that's what accounts for the burns. Zarliche Blood, the Master of Blood, made these. Whoever acquired those blades desperately wants Isranon dead. They must have tremendous influence to have gotten them in the first place."

Nevin closed his eyes and swallowed. "Do you mind, Amiri--I want to be alone with him ... I will sit through the night here."

Amiri rose and Nevin took her place at the bedside. She squeezed his broad shoulder. "I understand." Then she left.

Nevin held Isranon's hand all night and into the pre-dawn hours. He had become lost in his thoughts when a low moaning drew his attention to Isranon.

"Blades ... blades everywhere ... can't escape," Isranon groaned in his dream. "Father ... I join you."

Nevin started from his reverie and touched Isranon's forehead, finding him feverish. "Isranon."

Isranon's eyes fluttered open. "Nevin.... Nevin, they were all around me.... I tried to fight."

"I know," Nevin said, brushing the sweat drenched locks from Isranon's face.

Isranon's eyes closed and his head listed to the side.

"Hold on," Nevin murmured. "Hold on. We don't want to lose you, my brother."

Isranon's lips moved, but the words came so soft and faint the lycan had to put his ear to Isranon's lips to hear. "Nevin, forgive me if I can't."

Nevin exhaled heavily and poured a glass of Sanguine Rose. He lifted Isranon's head up and helped him drink. Only then did he have himself mastered enough to speak again. "You must try, Isranon."

Isranon closed his eyes. "Tell Merissa ... and Claw.... Tell them I died well. That I was not afraid." Then

he drifted away again.

Nevin pressed his cheek to Isranon's, remembering the proud defiant eight-year-old he had been, standing hands on hips and glaring up at him while insisting, 'My father says violence is evil.' Had Isranon been lycan and less articulate, Nevin would have dispensed with the nonsense by turning Isranon over his knee and applying his hand to the boy's bottom. The first of their arguments had come over Nevin's insistence that Isranon learn to use a blade. The arguments had eventually become intense discussions. Then came the day that Nevin had noticed Isranon taking the same stance with one of the adult Dark Brothers and drifted closer just in time to hear him say, 'Nevin says...' and the wolf had nearly choked before retreating into the trees.

The lycan swallowed and sucked in a deep breath. "Nevin says ... Nevin says you must get better."

Watching his spirit-brother, the memories started to come.

*As a reflection of the uncertain times, the clan had added a modest salle to the Great House. Clan Red Wolf were farmers and herders, not a battle clan, although all of them knew their weapons and Claw kept a small number of myn-at-arms present. The day had warmed enough to melt the snow on the roofs, although spring was still nearly two months off. There was a large stone hearth to warm it in the middle. Weapons hung upon the walls and there were brackets for torches.*

"You kept up your blade work?" Nevin demanded, taking some wooden practice swords from the walls. He tossed one to Isranon.

"Yes."

*They went round for several minutes with Nevin pressing Isranon hard. Isranon lost his footing under the impact of one blow, twisted aside, and rolled to his feet, springing up with a stout whack to Nevin's belly. The old wolf whooped and stepped back, signaling an end to it.*

"You didn't learn that from a sa'necari," Nevin remarked as they sat sweating.

Sa'necari rarely used swords, favoring their magic and their runed hellblades of various types. "No. I learned from a vampire. Dane Jayce. He befriended me."

*Nevin made a disparaging sound. The lycans were as skeptical and suspicious of the vampires as they were of the sa'necari. He threw a towel at Isranon to wipe the sweat off his face and arms. They were both drenched in it. Nevin shrugged out of his sweaty shirt, drying himself off, watching for Isranon to do the same. Instead, Isranon headed for the house.*

Nevin followed him to his rooms. The youth simply stood in the middle of the sitting room, staring at him uneasily. "Go on, get into something dry before the sweat chills," Nevin told him, then went into the youth's bedroom and dug out a clean shirt, which he tossed to him.

*Isranon caught the shirt, but continued to hesitate, clutching it to his stomach. Nevin frowned more deeply. The youth had never been shy of changing in front of him before. Nevin grasped the bottom edge of the sweaty shirt Isranon wore with a suspicious glance at his face. Isranon's hands closed on the lycan's, holding him off for an instant, then released him. Nevin pulled the shirt up, gave a savage snarl at what he saw beneath it and brought it over Isranon's head, exposing his stomach and chest. He threw the shirt in a corner of the floor, snarling louder. Isranon's upper body was a mass of scars.*

Nevin dragged Isranon, unresisting, to a chair, sat him down, and knelt in front of him to study

*them. Isranon shivered as Nevin's rough fingers traced the worst of them, two crossing his chest and three puckered scars in his lower ribs. "They treated you rough, boy. You had two when you left four years ago. Now you're covered in them."*

Isranon winced. "They're sa'necari. I don't heal as well as they do."

"That's not an answer. They had no right." Anger edged Nevin's voice. "It looks like they tried to kill you."

"They did. Mephistis...." Isranon said helplessly.

"He allowed this?"

"No. He rescued me." Isranon focused his eyes away from Nevin, clearly hoping that his mentor would not press the matter.

Nevin growled at that, determined that Isranon would not get away with refusing to answer. "Still ... how can you say you'll answer if he calls?"

"I love him. He's my prince."

"Love? As a man for a man or a man for a prince."

"As a man for a prince. Mephistis has been good to me."

Nevin snarled. "I don't call what I'm seeing on you good."

Isranon began to get his old, proud look in his eyes, his back straightening, and his head coming up high. It was an attitude he rarely showed toward Nevin.

"Don't go back to him," Nevin said.

"When he calls, I will answer," Isranon said, drawing the fresh shirt over his head to end Nevin's examination. "I would not wish to live with myself should I fail my prince."

"Then they will kill you."

"They will anyway." Isranon's voice softened and some of the stiffness went out of his shoulders and the angle of his head. "I am the last. After me there will be no more."

"And that is what you want?" Nevin seized his shoulders, giving him a shake.

Isranon met his gaze steadily. "I was doomed by my birth. Only the circumstances of my death are my choice--I can die trying to flee fate or standing beside my prince in full honor."

"Honor is a harsh mistress."

*"You taught it to me."*

Nevin shook himself free of the memory and pressed his fingers into the corners of his leaking eyes. "This isn't fair. Was I wrong to try and teach you a different way? Or would you have been laying dead with your father years past? Should I have told you that I was in love with you? Would it have made a difference in your fate? Ancestors, guide me. Is any of this my fault?"

\* \* \* \*

*The mon stood on a rocky knoll amid tufts of spiky grasses as high as his hips. Isranon had a sense of his being very tall. He wondered who he was. The mon raised a strange staff on high and summoned power. His staff was incredible, the sight of it filling Isranon with awe. It was six feet of hard rock maple, its butt sheathed in nine inches of diamond that had been magically grown onto it and incised with Kalirioni runes. The entire length of it was intricately runed amid vines and leaves in jeweled inlays. The upper body, head, and wings of a pegasus topped it, so solidly done in heavy burnished kenda'ryl that it could be used to strike with at that end also. He could feel the power and energy coiled around it. It was both a master's and a warrior's staff. Light shimmered around the mon in a rainbow aura as his powers manifested and he sent shafts of blinding energy into a valley. Isranon could see now that strange hostile creatures had gathered there. The mon swept them away like fallen leaves before an autumn gale.*

Dawnhand ... and Warrior. That had to be what he was seeing. Isranon lifted his gaze from the fallen enemy to the mage and marveled. Dawnhand's features were finely drawn, his ears pointed like a sylvan's and that surprised Isranon. He had never suspected that his revered ancestor might have been sylvan.

Then the scene shifted from one of victory to one of death. The mon, now older, hung dead, a pole transfixing his body lengthwise and emerging from his shoulder. He was nude, his ankles bound to the base of the pole and his wrists spellcorded behind him to block his powers while he died. His body was torn by the whip and burned by the irons of torture.

*Isranon's blood ran cold and he sank to his knees, weeping bitter tears. "So this is how it was. You died betrayed, in humiliation and agony. You fought. You were not a Dark Brother, committed to the ways of peace and reason by the creed. Yet we are much alike."*

Pain drove Isranon again to consciousness. He felt someone's hand on his and opened his eyes. "Nevin..."

The wolf had been crying. His cheeks glistened and moisture had caught in the ridges of his scars. Nevin blinked and his expression changed as he released Isranon's hand to snag the bottle of Sanguine Rose and the glass beside it. "You're going to get better."

"Nevin..." Isranon could not say it, but he knew Nevin was wrong. "I dreamed ... I walked the lineage ... and saw Dawnhand."

Nevin got him up and helped him drink before responding. "It's your wounds and the Rose talking. Nothing more. Rest. Do not allow it to trouble you."

"Bodramet?" Isranon asked, his voice hoarse and struggling. "What became of him? And the others?"

"They're dead. Timon saw to that. Just as he promised."

"How?"

"Anksha killed Bodramet," Nevin said as he returned the bottle to the table. "Ephry killed Gareth. Yoris was craven to the core. He begged to the last, then squealed like a bloody pig at the butcher's when Haig showed him the same kindnesses he had shown you." Nevin savored it as he continued to describe how the five sa'necari ended. Yoris had been the last to die. Haig made him watch as the vampires butchered the others. When Yoris tried to close his eyes, Haig sliced his eyelids off. By the time they were done, Yoris had confessed to all manner of things, some credible, others not. After Yoris described the rape, Haig had sliced the sa'necari's cock open like a sausage before shaving his genitals off and shoving them into his mouth.

When Nevin finished, he saw that Isranon had slipped away from him again and had probably not heard most of it. He sucked in a long, shuddering breath. "You must live, Isranon. Otherwise, I'll take you home and follow you, my love."

## **CHAPTER six**

### **broken things**

Anksha displaced Nevin to curl up beside Isranon on the bed, stroking his face. Nevin lay at Isranon's feet in wolf-form. Olin had gone downstairs to find something to eat. Timon sat on a chair, leaning forward, elbows propped on his knees, chin on his hands. They never left Isranon alone. His episodes of consciousness came only in brief, widely spaced intervals; they had to struggle to get more Sanguine Rose into him.

"Until he crosses that line with the rite, he's more human than not." Timon said.

Anksha sighed heavily. That triggered a chain of sighs as if she had forgotten how to breathe any other way. "Then he won't be Isranon anymore," Anksha said, mournfully. "Is. Ra. Non."

Ephry joined them, dragging up another chair, which he turned backwards and straddled so that his arms draped the back with his chin on them. "But he would be alive. If he only did it once, he would not be *that* much changed."

Timon shook his head. "He doesn't want to pay that price."

Sensing where the conversation was going, Nevin changed. Isranon had taught him all the sayings and teachings of the Dark Brothers, the reasons for their passivity and their sense of honor during long hours of discussions over the years. He would never forget seeing the hurt in Isranon's eyes, that brief vulnerable flash of sensitivity the youth kept buried, the day that Claw accused him of riting Troyes after his body was discovered lying drained upon a stone altar. Isranon could not bear to be suspected of committing the rites, any of them.

"Anksha could force him," Ephry insisted.

"Gods, no," Nevin growled, drawing a sharp glance from Ephry. He straightened his shoulders proudly, head back, and assumed the mien of the lycan lawgiver and teacher he had once been. "He'd kill himself. He deeply believes in his father's creed that it is better to perish than to take a life in the rites."

Timon shot Ephry a hard glance. "Nevin is right. Isranon would refuse to live with that taint on his soul and his honor. Once Anksha was away on a hunt long enough for the hold to loosen, he'd take his own life. I've seen it before. Some that she has taken required her placing deep coercions against committing suicide to be free of her. The coercions damaged them, left them with almost no mind."

Ephry's face twisted up, and before he could lose it in front of them, he stalked from the room. Timon followed him into their bedroom and found him sitting on the bed. He joined Ephry there, slipping an arm around his mate.

"If it's any comfort, Ephry, he did not go down easy. If they had not had those blades, he might have fought free."

"Just one life, Timon. If he would just take one life." Ephry's voice was desperate, urgent. It all seemed so simple. They did not need to lose Isranon. He wished the sa'necari were alive so he could kill them again. "Just one life!" Ephry screamed.

"It's a filthy rite." Timon's lips twisted around the words in distaste, refusing to lift his head and look at his mate. "They kill them in the middle of sex, shatter their souls and suck up the pieces. What is left is a broken, eternally-suffering ghost."

"I don't care!"

Timon hit him--a solid punch that caught the pale lycan full in the chest, sending across the room, slamming into the wall. Ephry slid down to the floor and sat there, too emotionally stunned to react. Timon had never hit him. Timon had never lost control before with him. Ephry could see how hard Timon was shaking; he could just barely hear him talking, with so much pain in his voice that it hurt the lycan to listen.

"Waejonan did it to my brothers and sisters. They were just children. He was my uncle. He forced me to watch. When I was the last one left alive, they fired our estate and then impaled me ... like they had my uncle the Dawnhand ... before riding away. I was a day and a half dying. Anksha fetched my father. He turned me in my final moments. She was just a tiny thing then. Not yet half grown. Then the rising in cold, dead flesh.... Knowing what I had become."

Ephry moved to his side, forgetting and forgiving the blow. "I'm sorry." His hand stole across Timon's. "You never said."

"I don't like talking about it.... Thinking about it."

Ephry kissed him chastely in apology and comfort for having pushed him to this. "I didn't understand. He just means so much to me."

"And to me. Isranon is my cousin. Twenty or so generations removed," Timon forced a laugh, wiping tears with the back of his hand. "So I guess it's not exactly incest. Oh hell, Ephry, it's so hard. It's so damned hard."

"Then let me help you forget it." Ephry took Timon's face in his hands and kissed him deeply. He pressed him backwards on the bed, moving lower with his mouth.

\* \* \* \*

*The day was bright with the snow reflecting the sunlight strongly enough to glare into Isranon's eyes as he rode. He found a rail down and dismounted, slinging his saddlebag over his shoulder as he moved to nail it back into place. The top rail had fallen over the far side. He tried to reach it, cautiously avoiding putting any of his weight against the other rails but could not reach it, so he put his hand on the post and jumped it. Holding the rail into position on one end, he carefully nailed it back, then went to the other end and began on that. The whack, whack, whack of the hammer on iron nails and the thud of driving it into the wood masked other sounds until the one who had been watching him stepped into view.*

"Hello, Isranon." Troyes leaned against a tree, arms folded, sneering slightly. He exuded a predatory sensuality that disturbed Isranon, running his eyes over the younger man's body. His tongue emerged from his mouth and ran along his lips teasingly.

Isranon watched him, the hammer shifting in his hand so that it was held as a weapon rather than a tool. "What do you want?"

"You know what I want. What I've always wanted since Dragonshead. You."

"Let me be!" Isranon snarled. He felt violated by Troyes' stalking, his unwanted attention, and bitterly

resented that the one place where he should have been safe was being desecrated by this sa'necari's appetites. Wasn't it enough that he had taken Merissa? His stance widened to give him greater balance in fighting as Troyes sauntered up to him.

"I cannot understand why you let them make a servant of you. This is a way station, we're guests of the crown."

*"I help because I want to." Isranon's eyes narrowed. Troyes came within arms length of him. Every fiber of his being cried out to strike Troyes down. But it was a fight he would lose unless his first blow killed the larger male. He hesitated, bound up in his father's teachings of non-violence. He could almost hear his father's voice saying 'Be strong in the Teachings. Those who live by violence, die by it.' The teachings were like cords of steel around him for an instant. Father, those who do not live by violence also die by it. You and the others are dead.*

*Troyes moved to Isranon's side, nuzzled his neck and Isranon could feel the faint prick of his fangs. Then Nevin's teachings, which had always run counter to his father, flashed through him with the revulsion of Troyes' touch and Isranon knocked the sa'necari aside with his shoulder under Troyes' chin. Isranon kicked Troyes hard in the chest, landing him in the snow, and raised the hammer.*

"Touch me and die," Isranon growled.

"You will regret this," Troyes said, rising to his feet, black energy forming around his fingers.

"What happens here?" Nevin dismounted.

Troyes laughed, drew back the magic, and walked off.

Isranon found that he could suddenly breathe easier and had not realized that his breathing before had been anything but steady. "Nothing."

Nevin frowned deeply, which made his scarred face a hideous mask. He touched Isranon's neck, bringing away a few drops of blood. "Nothing?"

*Isranon's head came up and his shoulders straightened to a proud angle. "I can handle it."*

"Arrogant pup. What if you can't?"

"I can handle it!" Isranon winced away from him as Nevin tried to turn him about to see into his eyes.

"Sooner or later, pup, you're going to have to talk to me."

*"When I'm ready." I am not going to endanger the clan by making this their business. If Troyes forces a confrontation with them, it will not be because of me. Merissa, what would they do if they knew you were sleeping with Troyes? He picked up the other end of the rail and went back to nailing it in place.*

\* \* \* \*

Timon was sleeping, spooned around Ephry when Zulaika burst into their rooms, waking them. Timon came immediately upright, the sheets sliding down around his nudity. Ephry snuggled closer to Timon who frowned at Zulaika.

"Timon, Yoris was right," Zulaika said. "I found them."

"What is it?" Timon asked.

Zulaika wore her gloves to protect her hands from the book she carried and a sheaf of papers. "Bodramet stashed them in the hearth up the chimney. There's a sa'nekaryiane in Minnoras. There is also a hidden passage through the fireplace. It's how they got to Isranon without our seeing them."

"Damn them," Ephry growled.

"They are damned," Zulaika replied. "I made certain that Hadjys got all of them."

Timon bolted out of bed. "You're certain it says 'sa'? How can there be a living version of the great evil? Zyne could not have made one, she was undead."

"Absolutely. But one thing at a time. In exchange for killing Isranon and you, the sa'nekaryiane would free Bodramet and the others from Anksha."

"Can that be done?"

"How should I know?"

"Does it say anything of my father?" No one living on the estate had Hoon's mirror-gift; they had messengers and shifters. His father frequently spent long periods out of touch, so Timon had seen no threat in his silence. Now he did.

"I'll send one of my sisters, the Ymraude are less well known there."

"Thank you, Zulaika." Only one person had come from Minnoras unlooked for and spent time with Bodramet: Mondarius had gotten the sa'nekari the weapons. They were betrayed. "Have her wait for me to write a letter to my father."

Timon dressed and went down to his study. He detailed what had happened and his suspicions concerning Mondarius in the letter. As he sanded it, the door opened without a knock and the very last person he had any desire to see walked in. "What do you want, Zinzi?"

She settled into a chair without being invited. Her long hair hung loose and looked as if it had not been brushed in days. "Don't take that tone with me, Timon. I came because I'm worried."

"I don't need your worries on top of my own," Timon growled as he folded the message before she could lean forward and catch a glimpse of it.

"I'm sorry about Isranon. But my news should worry you. None of my birds have come back. I have had no messages from your father in months. And, my three winged-shifters haven't returned either."

Timon felt stunned. "What are you going to do?"

"I will give it a week and if there has been no word, I'll go there," Zinzi said.

The Ymraude courier entered and interrupted the conversation. She had a confident, military stride as she passed Zinzi without so much as a glance and went to Timon's desk. "Is it ready?"

"Yes." Timon handed the letter to the Ymraude courier, who shoved it in the pouch she wore and walked out.

Zinzi stared at the woman's back as she left. "You're using Ymraudes?"

"It's none of your business, Zinzi. Now if you'll leave me, I need to send for Anksha."

"Something is going on, Timon. Something big. You need to tell me."

Timon's hands closed into fists atop a ledger book. "No. Get out."

"You'll regret this."

"I doubt it."

Zinzi departed scowling and he sent for Anksha. She came in sad eyed, her normally tightly curled tail drooping expressively.

"Isranon?" she asked as Timon gestured her to his side.

"No. Not precisely. I have a question for you." His expression told her how serious it was. "I know that father has held you back from fighting yuwenghau and the greater demons ... He would never risk you lightly, nor would I."

Anksha looked uneasy. Only one creature had ever bested her, a Badree Nym styling herself Mally the Warrior-Princess. Mally rode around on a one-horned goat brandishing a wooden sword. The Badree Nym, pariahs of the sylvan races, were child-like people caught up in endless games of 'let's pretend.' They had an uncontrollable and unconsciously triggered poltergeist effect that could knock down buildings. Anksha had managed to scratch and bite Mally before the Badree Nym dropped a tree on her. Then Mally proceeded to thrash Anksha's exposed bottom with her sword before losing interest in the game and wandering off. Anksha looked up at him, asking in a trembling voice and the crude dialect of her childhood, "Anksha, not get Nym?"

Timon smiled at her deepening patois and took her on his lap. "No. I would never ask that of you."

Anksha steadied and nodded. "Then what?"

"Could you kill a sa'nekaryiane?"

"Is a demon?"

"Not exactly." Then he explained what little he knew about those nightmares out of legend.

\* \* \* \*

As Anksha climbed the stairs, her thoughts were on the sa'nekaryiane on whose orders Isranon had nearly been butchered. She did not know whether she could kill such a thing or not, but she would try hard to if she encountered it. Rage boiled hot in her veins and psyche; in the grip of rage she always felt invincible. Her predator's instincts took over and left her reason behind, making her more than ever the Beast whose desires were simply to maim and kill. She would have left for Minnoras instantly, had she not feared returning to find Isranon had died in her absence. Timon wanted her held in reserve, should all else fail.

With a bottle of Sanguine Rose under her arm, fresh brewed since she had gone hunting last night, she reached the second floor landing and headed for Isranon's rooms. Nevin saw her and walked over.

"More Sanguine Rose?" He squatted to look her squarely in the eyes.

Anksha nodded, one hand unsheathing and re-sheathing her claws in a pre-occupied manner. "I want to kill something."

Nevin sucked in a deep breath, not bothering to conceal the unease that provoked. "You did last night."

"Something else..."

"You want to talk about it? Or go to Isranon? He was awake last I saw."

"Isranon." The sa'nekaryiane would not get Isranon, nor did Anksha intend to let him die without a fight. "She can't have him ... she does not get his life."

Nevin frowned. "Who?"

Anksha realized she had said too much, for Timon wanted to be the one to inform the others. So she covered her mouth with one hand and fled down the hall with Nevin stalking in her wake.

\* \* \* \*

Eilwen, a nibari, sat on the edge of the bed, stroking his face. "We drew lots, Isranon. Rite me. We don't want you to die."

"No. 'Better to die ... with honor ... than to take a life ... in the rites.'" Isranon quoted the teachings of the Dark Brothers and turned his face away. Why wouldn't they simply let him die? He wished they would stop pushing at him, let him close his eyes and not wake up; he wanted to be allowed to die while his honor still remained whole. The darkness hovered around the edges, beckoning, promising peace. No more confusion, no more conflicts, no more anger. Death to keep the teachings as his father had foreseen for him. It seemed far easier to let go and die than he had ever imagined. At least, he would not rise undead. Blood-slaves did not. He would not have to step into the flames as his sister had.

The door opened and he glanced in spite of himself. Anksha came in, followed by Nevin who then leaned against the door.

"I told you," Anksha hissed at Eilwen, shoving her away, and taking her place.

Isranon wondered how long Anksha had been listening to Eilwen. It was hard keeping his eyes open, yet Anksha's need tugged at him to do so. "What is it ... Oh great loud ... noise in my head?" He breathed hoarsely, resisting the lassitude enveloping him.

She stepped over him and sat beside his head, bending to peer into his eyes. "Don't leave me, Is. Ra. Non." Anksha said, her lower lip trembling.

Nevin thrust Eilwen out of the room, closed the door behind her, and took up his watchful, yet non-intrusive pose once more.

Then Isranon saw the tears. "Anksha." He wanted to touch the tears, but was too exhausted to lift his hand. He managed a faltering smile that disintegrated into a grimace of suffering. "Anksha."

She produced a bottle from under one arm. "More troll blood. Fresh. Very fresh. I just caught it," she said hopefully.

Isranon wanted to refuse; but the expression on her face, the tears, the sound of her voice stopped him. Anksha, the dreaded Anksha, loved him--it was breaking her heart to watch him die. He decided to take it one day at a time, to hold on with all of his strength and will--for Anksha. Yet, he would not cross the line, no matter how much agony the embedded spells caused him. And he knew she would not ask that of him. "So be it. I will drink ... if you'll get yourself ... some candy from the jar."

Anksha laughed, rubbing at her tears with the back of her hand. "Deal."

Nevin fetched the jar and held it out to her. She dipped her hand in and smiled encouragingly at Isranon as she crunched candy. Then Nevin pulled up a chair and joined them.

Isranon saw the love and concern for him in both their eyes, and resolved to try and show them the best face he could manage. He would not tell them that the pain in his body and the twisting in his mage centers never entirely went away no matter how much of the Sanguine Rose they gave him. He could not identify most of what the sa'necari had done to him even on those rare occasions when he had allowed himself to brave the anguish and focus his inner eyes inward to examine the damage.

\* \* \* \*

Ephry could not let go of that single hope of saving Isranon despite everything they told him. The beloved mon lingered, yet he gained little in strength. One night Ephry managed to find himself alone with Isranon.

"If you would just take a single life, Isranon," Ephry pleaded, having worked himself to tears, yet careful not to raise his voice, desperately aware of how weak Isranon was. "I love you. I don't want to lose you. Just one life. I'll get you someone who deserves to die."

"Stop, Ephry." Isranon lifted his hand and Ephry caught it, pressing it to his tear stained face. "I--I don't want ... to hear this." Ephry sensed the intense pain in him and reached for the bottle of Sanguine Rose, helping him to drink. In the large doses they had recently begun giving him he would soon float in a half-dream feeling nothing, semi-conscious, his mind driven so far from his body that he would become unaware of the pain beneath the drug's embrace. "Had I had the strength that day ... I would have dragged myself into the bushes where Anksha could not have found me until it was ended."

"Why?" Ephry felt a fist tighten around his heart.

"I knew what they did. I refuse to live at that price. That rite ... Bodramet..." Isranon's body tensed at a harsh flashback slamming through him. For a moment he could not breathe and then the languor of the drug slid through him. "Bodramet said I traded one prince for another. He was jealous. He..."

Ephry rarely caught images and he was not a Reader, but he loved Isranon intensely and knowledge flashed across his mind. "Does Timon know? Was it just Bodramet? Or all of them?"

"All of them." Isranon closed his eyes, turning his face away. A proud, harsh edge entered his voice. "What does it matter? They are dead. There was another sa'necari. Troyes. I nearly died in the rite. A lycan killed him before he could finish."

Ephry held his hand tighter, bending over his arm and swallowing.

Isranon's voice went distant as he journeyed into the grip of Sanguine Rose and his memories. "I watched my father die when I was twelve. The sa'necari came for him, for all of us. My sister and I got away. We paused on the hillside and watched out of respect for his courage. I played my flute so that he knew we were safe. I think for a moment he saw us. Then we fled."

"You have a sister?"

"She's dead. They caught her. Two years later. She killed herself afterward. They always catch us. Dark Children of the Light. The Darkness hunts us and the Light does not want us. If Mephistis had not become my protector, I would have been killed long ago. I will join them soon and there will be no more of us."

The room filled with ghosts. Isranon watched them with glazed eyes, feeling the languid warmth of the Sanguine Rose and its dance of serene detachment. A single mon, his abraded complexion and rough hands so familiar although Isranon had known him for so short a time, moved from the crowd, reaching for the sa'necari.

Ephry turned, trying to see what Isranon was looking at. "What is it?"

"Ghosts. The room is full of ghosts. My friends. My family. Josiah." Isranon lifted his arm, his fingers reaching for the mage's. He felt Josiah's hand close on his as firmly as if it had substance.

*"I am here to help you. Sometimes it takes a broken mon to heal a broken mon."*

Comforting warmth spread through Isranon. Then his eyes closed and the Sanguine Rose overcame him. His arm fell to the bed. Ephry turned to see what he could possibly have been pointing at, yet saw nothing. He decided that Isranon must have been having a hallucination from the Sanguine Rose.

\* \* \* \*

The howling woke the entire manor, including the vampires who drowsed in a half-dream state in the pre-dawn hours--the royals not being confined to certain hours like the lesser bloods, the Ylesgaire. Timon snapped awake instantly and knew the source of the howling, if not its location: the other side of his bed was empty. He drew on his pants and boots, then went immediately to Isranon's room, fearing this meant they had lost him in the night, but found the mon struggling to sit while Nevin shoved pillows behind him in an effort to help him. Nevin shook his head and shrugged.

"Ephry?" Isranon asked, breathing hard with just that small effort.

Timon nodded. Seeing Anksha had chosen that route, he went out the window.

They found Ephry at the side gate where the sa'necari heads had been piked atop it--the one they now called 'traitor's gate.' He had a spear in one hand and a heavy mace in the other. The battered remains of two badly rotted heads lay on the ground. Ephry jabbed at another with the spear, trying to get it down. His aim was off and his gait unsteady. Several wine bottles, mostly empty, leaned against a tree. Timon signed for the others to go back. He and Anksha lingered in silence, watching. After a few tries, Ephry dislodged another head. He dropped the spear, grasped the mace two handed, and beat the head, howling and shrieking. Rotted flesh and fragments of bone splattered him.

Timon stole around him and picked up the spear. Ephry started when he reached for the spear and found himself staring at Timon's boots, and then lifted his eyes to his mate's face.

"I'll get the rest down," Timon said patiently. "Then you will tell me why this is happening now."

Anksha joined Timon as he dislodged the last two heads. Then they returned and waited for Ephry to either explain or start bashing heads.

Ephry sobered a bit under their gaze and felt distinctly uncomfortable, too much so to pulverize the remaining heads. He muttered something too softly for them to be certain of what they heard.

Anksha glanced at Timon sharply, almost sure, but not quite.

"Say it again, Ephry, louder," Timon ordered.

Ephry let the mace slide through his fingers. "They raped him ... All of them. It wasn't enough they sliced him up ... twisted their magic through him ... they raped him, Timon."

Timon sighed heavily, dragged Ephry into his arms, and held him, feeling the young lycan shuddering with escaping sobs. Ephry was so much younger than Timon. The vampire hoped that the wild spirit did not get crushed out of him, for Timon suspected matters would worsen. "Love, I have known all along. Had they not wasted time raping him, I doubt Anksha would have found him in time."

Anksha picked up the mace and started pounding the last skulls.

Timon and Ephry walked off, leaving her to it.

Ephry went to Isranon's room as soon as they returned to the manor. His eyes widened when he saw him sitting and he took the nearest chair. Isranon reached for him. Ephry leaned into the embrace. Timon stood over them, arms folded with a protective air about him.

"Ephry," Isranon said, his voice thickening with Sanguine Rose. "What they did ... at first I thought it was the rite. I would rather die than perform that rite. Even on someone like them."

Ephry changed, dropping to all fours. Then the great shaggy white wolf crawled up onto the bed and laid its head on Isranon's lap, sad-eyed. Isranon's hand slid onto Ephry's head.

"I love you, Ephry," Isranon said, drifting back into slumber.

Timon kissed both of them and settled into a chair.

\* \* \* \*

Isranon lay on his side watching Nevin open the windows to allow fresh air into the room. Despite more than three weeks of heavy doses of Sanguine Rose and straight troll's blood, he could still neither sit nor stand unaided. The one time he had tried to stand, he had fallen on the floor and been unable to get up until Nevin found him. He fought depression. At first he had only been able to remember bits and pieces of the attack, but more and more of it had come back to him since the night he had spoken to Ephry about the rape. He also remembered images of his dream vision of Dawnhand. The detailing of the staff had faded, but the mon himself remained clear. Dawnhand had fought back. If Dawnhand, who had been known as a mon of peace and compassion, had been willing to fight, then how could it be wrong to do so?

"My flute, Nevin? Where is my flute?" Isranon craved the solace of the music to help him work his way through his feelings.

"They broke it."

Isranon closed his eyes, trying to deal with the loss of the precious heirloom, his only connection with Dawnhand. A new desolation touched him. Then he opened eyes again and asked a different question. "The blades ... How did ... they get them?"

"Mondarius," Nevin said, watching his eyes for a reaction as he turned from the window. "Mondarius provided the weapons to Bodramet's followers. Told them to kill you. Then Timon."

*Timon also?* The beginnings of fresh anger began in his middle. "Why?"

"Sa'nekaryiane in Minnoras. She ordered it. Mondarius was their go-between."

Isranon fell silent.

Nevin's brow furrowed in thought. "My brother?"

Isranon lifted his eyes to Nevin's again. "What?"

"The first morning of our ride ... as we were returning to the estate. Mondarius spoke to you. Afterward you told me to keep him away from you. Did he threaten you? Do you remember what he said?"

Isranon's eyes went distant as he reached for those memories. He recalled being frightened and cold, weak and ill from the initial effects of Anksha's having taken him and begun feeding upon him. Then the words returned. "He said he wanted me belly-down on his altar. Afterwards he would make a powerful spell from my death."

"He planned to violate you from the beginning," Nevin snarled. "There were Divinator runes on those blades. Mondarius's spells are inside you."

Divinator runes--if he survived it would be as an invalid or at best a cripple. No wonder he was not getting better. Isranon felt chilled and then angry. "If I... "No. He had to sound more positive than that for Nevin's sake. "When I get better ... when I... "Isranon swallowed. "I want to ... kill them both. I did ... nothing to them. Nevin ... I'm tired of ... being hunted ... simply because I exist." Then he lapsed into silence.

Nevin nodded and grasped Isranon's hand. "We will hunt them together."

"Yes." Isranon twisted suddenly in a sharp wave of pain as another attack swept through him, washing away his anger, his thoughts.

Nevin lifted him, getting the Sanguine Rose to his lips and holding him while he drank. The scarred wolf continued to hold him until he could see the drugs begin to take effect. Then he laid him down, straightened his blankets, and settled into a chair.

"If I die...."

"Vengeance. I will bring it, my brother."

Isranon managed a small smile, finding comfort in Nevin's words. "Dawnhand fought back. The Gods of Light approved of him." Then he slept and dreamed again of the man with the staff.

"The Gods of Light," Nevin muttered. "He's too obsessed with them for his own good. Ancestors! He's sa'necari. They don't want him."

*Nevin watched Troyes closely. Granted, with winter still socking the valley in, there was little space in the Great House for Isranon to completely avoid the sa'necari, but Nevin suspected far more was going on there than either of them let on. He sat before the fire in the common sitting room, oiling his blades with a soft cloth.*

*The clan had never been fond of the sa'necari who ruled Waejontor and, when King Baaltrystan lost two-thirds of his kingdom to Shaurone in the aftermath of the war, they had hoped that meant they would no longer have to deal with them. However, that had not proven to be the case. Their valley had become one of the first way stations that Baaltrystan established in the occupied territories. The Waejontori had no intention of either allowing Shaurone to retain possession of those lands or to cease in their attempts to take Shaurone itself. The clan maintained an uneasy accommodation with Baaltrystan. They did not want the Waejontori to come raging through their valley from their citadels hidden deeper within the higher mountains, nor did they wish for the Sharani to find their valley, which nestled in the rocky warrens of the mountains. After all these years the Sharani were still exploring and mapping. They had become cautious where the*

*Lionhawk had been bold, slamming through their lands with the fury of an autumn storm.*

What fools they had been to exile that one. The Lionhawk would have found this farm and many others.

*Nevin watched Merissa exclaiming over a bracelet Troyes had purchased for her at the nearest village. Troyes smiled and his hand stole over hers. The sa'necari seemed to be courting Merissa, and Nevin might have believed it had he not seen the way that Troyes' eyes kept sliding across to Isranon. Everything about Troyes set Nevin's neck hairs to standing. Mephistis had told that male to move on, but he hadn't. Nevin was close to deciding to have a talk with Claw about it.*

Isranon had a book open on his lap, but seemed to be paying very little attention to it. The youth was watching Merissa and Troyes over the edge of it. Nevin could see the way his eyes moved. Finally he snapped it shut and left. Nevin rose and followed him.

"Can I talk to you?" Nevin asked as Isranon started to close his sitting room door.

Isranon had an odd look in his eyes, almost pained. He swept his hand at the chairs around a small table. "Yes."

*Nevin sat down and leaned forward on his elbows, studying the youth who took a chair opposite him. There was a branch of candles unlit on the table and a bottle of red wine with a pair of glasses. Nevin wondered who had been here last to drink with the youth, deciding after a moment's consideration that he probably shared it with the nibari who sometimes spent the night with him. "May I?"*

Isranon immediately poured them both a glass. "What did you want to discuss?"

Nevin rolled the wine around on his tongue. It was very good wine. Aisha had given Isranon a bottle of her best vintage. She liked to spoil him. "What I keep seeing in your face."

"Why are there no gods for me?"

Nevin had expected to have that delayed talk about Troyes and the question caught him off guard. The boy had always stayed away from such subjects and Nevin suspected it came from his father's teachings. Isranon was an odd mix of experience and naiveté, of courage and vulnerability. Some things had changed about him, but not nearly as much as Nevin had expected. "Are you asking me as a lawgiver or as a friend?"

"Both."

Nevin heard the tiny catch in Isranon's voice. "Lycans are neutrals, as you know. We worship and pray to the ancestors to intervene on our behalf. I have no personal knowledge of much that lies beyond this valley, but only such records as we have kept. It may well be that some of our folk have turned to the gods and it may be that they have not. That would be a private choice."

"I'm talking about me, Nevin. Did my family go to hell despite all of their kindness and gentleness?"

Nevin nodded, pulling at his split upper lip. "It is the belief of the lawgivers that all sa'necari born go either to the nethergod's hells of punishment or to those of the Hellgod himself who rewards his servants for what we would term their misdeeds. It is much a matter of how they died that determines which one trapped their souls."

"Then what was the use? What was the use for all that my family suffered for their beliefs...?" Isranon's voice started to break, his eyes filled, and the last part of his statement came out in a croaking whisper.

"Generation after generation hunted down and killed because they would not participate in the rites, their powers barely formed because of it. What was the use!"

Nevin rose and wrapped his arms around the youth, holding him tightly. Isranon had begun to sob. Nevin waited until the worse was over before speaking again. "I cannot believe that a truly just god, as they say the Gods of Light are, and even the nethergod is, would condemn a good man on the basis of what he was born alone. Now what set this off?"

"Troyes. I want to kill him. Those feelings make me ashamed. And yet he will not stop touching me at every chance. My body fills with such revulsion when he does that. I did not want to say anything."

*"It's okay, pup. It's okay. I already knew." Nevin almost suggested nesting with him. The lycans were into non-sexual nesting, especially among the bachelor males, and the comfort of bodies, of touch was important to him. But Nevin no longer trusted himself with Isranon, for holding him then, the scarred wolf realized that he had fallen in love with the youth that Isranon had become. And that was wrong.*

\* \* \* \*

Josiah appeared in a shimmering distortion of the candlelight, standing two inches off the floor near the bed. He passed the nibari who sat reading to Isranon, sat down upon the corner, and waited for Isranon to notice him. The nibari shivered in the chill of his passage, unable to perceive him.

Isranon stopped Eilwen's reading with a small gesture. "I want to be alone. Come back later."

"Isranon," Eilwen protested. "Anksha says you're not to be left alone."

"All you're going to do is give me Sanguine Rose. The bottle is within reach."

Eilwen looked uncertain. "Promise you won't try to get out of bed. You'll call someone."

"I promise."

Eilwen nodded, closed her book, and departed.

Isranon waited until the door shut before he spoke. "Josiah."

The ghost touched Isranon's hand. "*We never finished our conversations.*"

"No, we didn't. I want to learn about the Gods of Light and so many things."

*"Then I will talk or teach or whatever you wish."*

"Thank you, my friend." Silence came while Isranon decided upon a question. "What liege-god did you serve?"

The ghost's expression became troubled. He had failed, suffered, and died because he had shown pride towards his god. Yet he had promised to teach his injured friend. "*Kalirion Sun-Lord, God of the Sun, Healing, and Prophecy.*"

"Healing? Do you know some way that I can heal myself?" Hope mingled with desperation in Isranon's voice.

Josiah shook his head sadly. "*Shared Life mimics some of the life-mage spells, but I was never a life-mage. Some of my descendants were ... My lineage was slain in its entirety by the sa'necari*

*and vampires."*

"I am sa'necari...."

"No," Josiah replied, catching the implication of Isranon's words. *"You are something else. We need to find a new word for you."*

"Thank you." Isranon extended his hand and Josiah's icy fingers brushed his.

Josiah began it like a story for a child, and Isranon's eyes took on an eager, boyish fascination. *"The Nine Elder Gods, the ruling Pantheon, each dwell in their own gardens of incredible beauty. In each of the gardens there is a special tree. Kalirion's is the Idyn Tree and the fruit produces a healing elixir called the Sapphire Elixir of Idyn. But Dynanna stole the elixir from him and damaged the tree in a fit of pique at his clumsy lovemaking. She cursed his garden with magical gophers."*

Isranon managed a faint smile at the image, although he longed for the elixir.

*"Willodarus's garden lies in Imralon upon the continent of Sealandia. His tree is the Yuwen Tree, and produces the elixir of youth."*

"Josiah," Isranon interrupted. "Do you believe that all the Dark Brothers went to hell after they died, or that their souls became earthbound as punishment for what they were born?"

The question caught the ghost off guard and Josiah did not answer immediately. *"Hadjys the Dark Judge is a stern, harsh deity. He grants myn few exemptions from his torments. However, if they were all like you, then, no. Hadjys is not unjust. He judges those who come into his hells by their deeds alone."*

"He holds Mephistis' soul in chains of torment. Hadjys allowed Mephistis' ghost to speak with me briefly as a favor to Ishla."

*"Mephistis deserved it."*

Isranon sighed unhappily. "I know. I turned my back on what he was doing out of love and gratitude. I did love him. He was my friend, and I think he loved me back. I rationalized what the sa'necari did as nothing more than what the beasts of the field do. I said it was their nature, but it did not have to be my nature."

*"If it did not have to be your nature, it did not need to be theirs. They chose it."*

"I have needed the blood to keep me healthy and alive since puberty like the vampires ... Does that make me a monster, Josiah?"

*"No, Isranon. You will never be a monster unless you take a life in the rites."*

"I will never do that."

*"Then you will never be a monster. I know what you are. You are majios sa'necari."*

"But I'm not a mage...."

*"We will see about that one," said Josiah and faded away.*

\* \* \* \*

"Timon!"

Another interruption. Timon doubted he would ever get his paperwork finished at this rate, and then there was Ephry constantly demanding another hunt to take his mind off Isranon. Ephry wanted to have some new stories for Isranon and some more deer horn to carve trinkets for their injured lover. The pale lycan had started filling a shelf in Isranon's room with the figures he carved. So now it was someone else.

Zulaika and Amiri strode into Timon's office, followed by an Ymraude that looked familiar, but whom Timon was almost certain he had never met before.

"What is it?" Timon had been struggling to work, even though his heart was not in it. *Each of us deal with it in a different manner, Ephry*, he thought.

"We sent Trizina to your father, but she did not reach him. She's dead."

Timon stood, his face tightening. "How?"

"We don't know how. We just know she is. Since you are a man of honor, we will trust you with one of our secrets," Zulaika said. "This goes no further?"

"Of course. You have my word."

"When an Ymraude perishes, her nibari changes and takes her place. Last night Kellena changed."

"That is why you do not share your nibari." The Ymraude were the most secretive of vampires, all female with jealously guarded nibari herds.

"Precisely. We are bonded to our nibari."

Timon nodded, blowing air through his nostrils. Zinzi had left for Minnoras weeks ago and there had been no word from her either. "Thank you, Zulaika, both for your trust and for what you tried to do. I grieve for your loss. I must try again to get word to my father. Perhaps a riding in strength?"

"I think that would be wise. I ask that you allow Amiri and I to accompany you."

"Granted."

Timon sat alone after they left, his thoughts swirling like flights of demons as he wondered what he might have done different. If only he had listened to his instincts and destroyed those five sa'necari sooner. If only he had stayed in closer touch with his father. If only ... if only ... if only. Was his father even still alive? Or had he passed into the true death at last? And what of Zinzi?

Ephry slithered in, jumped onto the desk, and leaned close to kiss him. "What's wrong, lover? You look troubled."

"I am." Then Timon poured it all out to him.

\* \* \* \*

Anksha had sat with the broken flute in her hands for a long time before she went looking for Timon. The demon-eater found him sitting alone on a bench in the rooftop garden. She joined him and put Dawnhand's broken flute in his hands. It had required effort to remember the flute as having been his, which made its loss all the more sad to her. This had been the only thing that Isranon had had of his ancestor. Now he had nothing. He needed another reason to get better. That decided her.

"What's this?"

"Isranon's flute," she said quietly. Anksha was in one of her reflective moods, which made her seem more human and less like the Beast. "If we raise his spirits perhaps he will try harder to get better. His father told him that anyone who could play the flute and enjoy it would never become a monster."

"A monster. He is afraid of becoming a monster? What is it you want me to do? Replace the flute?"

"Yes. Raise his spirits and make him want to get better."

"I will do it, pet."

THE END

*(But the story concludes in Blood Dawn.)*