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DARK BROTHERS OF THE LIGHT

Book iiI

BLOOD HOPE

By

JANRAE FRANK

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DEDICATION:

To Team Daverana:

Mark Prins, the Boy with the Bodacious Book

Natalie Daniels, Saber-toothed Engine of Destruction

Phil Smith, Evil Overlord and Mad Genius

Steven Beeho, the Gittiest of Gits

Tabitha Brown, the Grand Inkslinger

Thanks for everything.

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BLOODY ANKSHA

Blow softly ill wind of omen

I smell her scent, not born of woman

The Beast's scent is on the breeze

Through darkling woods she stalks

Through halls no sane man walks

Her glance, her scent will make you freeze

A rush of lust brings you to your knees
She never listens to your pleas
Anksha, Bloody Anksha stalks the night.
She'll take your body, soul, and blood, leave your corpse lying in the mud.
Anksha, Bloody Anksha stalks the night.
Those slain not become her slaves
Her dominance-link the soul depraves
In madness longing for her fangs.
Children listen, adults heed well
She is pretty, but she is fell,
Anksha, Bloody Anksha stalks the night
If underneath the moonlight bright
You should glimpse her in the night,
Flee before she nears you, mon
You have not strength to fight her,
And no magic will affright her,
Anksha, Bloody Anksha stalks the night

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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. In those days there rose up three women, Asharen, Danae, and Rowan. They built Shaurone to hold back the brothers' darkness. And then there was Abelard who will be born again into his own lineage to ride once more beneath Rowan's banner. Mage-paladin to the God Kalirion the Lord of Light, healing and prophecy, Abelard's return will signal a god-war. Should he fail or perish, then only the Children of the Risen Dead will stand between the Fathers of Darkness and the destruction of the world.

St. Tarmus of Lorendon

Priest of Willodarus, God of the Woodlands and Wild Creatures.

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CHAPTER ONE

TOO MANY QUESTIONS

The winds of late autumn tasted of frost and a promise of early snows as it set the last fading leaves dancing upon the stalwart maples and stout oak trees. The Army of the Renunciate had skirted the edges of the shattered city of Zol to turn northeast and journey deep into the demon-haunted forest of Terramere. That night they shivered in their tents, camped for the night, spread across the muddy roadside.

The towns and villages they had passed along their line of march had either been abandoned for several years or occupied by the stubborn remnants of their previous populations. Demons and dark creatures had emerged to besiege the latter; and their beleaguered survivors now went north with the Army.

Four years ago, the Sacred King of Rowanhart marched home from Charas. She crossed the Hillora River and persuaded the people to go north with her. All the priests of the Nine Elder Gods of Light had spoken of omens and signs portending disaster if the people failed to follow her to safety. Now, those stalwart souls who had refused to flee found themselves besieged by monsters and demons, the advance guard of the Hellgod-Queen of Minnoras, Gylolean Galee. Time and again, the Army of the Renunciate had halted their march to aid those folk.

The mass exodus worked to the advantage and disadvantages of the army. Fewer eyes saw them pass; however supplies were harder to come by. The roads were rougher and inclement weather slowed their progress to a crawl.

A flag flew on a pole outside a dark blue tent. An ebony bar sinister split the banner, with the blue gryphon clutching a willow branch in the upper left of Nans Gryphonheart, and the Renunciate's symbols of a solar disc framed in flames on the lower right; all upon a hunter green field.

The Renunciate, Lord Isranon Dawnreturning, sat at the long trestle table in the command tent, which was one of the few pieces of large furniture the army had brought with them, besides his big bed that lay to the far side of it behind a curtain partition. The table, like the rest of the furnishings the army had brought with it, could be taken down and stored flat in the back of a wagon.

Built more like a blacksmith than a mage, Isranon was of average height—five eight. His sturdy frame had once carried more muscle than he currently had. Arcane wounds, from an assault that left him for dead nearly two years ago, had stolen much of his physical strength and were stealing his life an inch at a time, despite everything that both gods and myn could do for him. His black hair, pulled into a tail at his neck, was a mass of loose curls and wavy strands. The sunburst-cradled-in-flame godmark of Kalirion shimmered on his brow, partially hidden by a lock of dark hair that had come loose and fallen across his forehead.

Sunlight entering through the open flap did little to illumine the dim interior. The sleeping area had been curtained off more heavily since Isranon's increased appetites showed no signs of lessening. For the first time since early adolescence, it seemed like he could not get enough of either blood or sex and it troubled him as much as it did the others. For years he had prided himself for having those aspects of his sa'necari heritage under firm control; now it seemed that they controlled him.

"Kalirion, liege-god to my heart, soul, and faith..." Isranon rubbed his hands over his face as he struggled to frame a prayer. "What kind of monster have I become? Am I doomed to be what I was born? Where lies the strength to reject my nature?"

Sa'necari-born, the vile appetites of his race filled him with self-hatred. They were necromancers who had stolen all of the powers and abilities of the undead that they could take or control, assuming them through their rites, mastering and perfecting them in addition to their native arcane talents. Their gifts had been gained at a price, for they also had the needs and cravings of the undead; the unnatural hunger for

blood and souls. After generations of sa'necari being created in the rites, their very genes had altered until more and more of their descendants began to be born sa'necari with those appetites and talents manifesting in puberty. Their rites of blood, rape, and death had become merely the means for increasing their arcane potency through the shattering of souls.

One small band of sa'necari-born rejected the rites, living lives of strict and unremitting pacifism: the Dark Brothers of the Light. Deemed heretics, the sa'necari massacred them except for one frightened twelve-year-old boy who took refuge among the lycans of Clan Red Wolf, the largest and most powerful of the hereditary chiefdoms of the wolfweres.

Reaching down to a long narrow pouch that hung from his belt, he caressed it, and his thoughts turned to the flute inside. His dead father had told him that so long as he could play the flute and enjoy it he would never be truly evil. Fact as well as philosophy had been blended into his father's statement. The more lives the sa'necari took in the rites, the more painful the music of a flute became to them.

The flute that his father had given him had once belonged to their revered ancestor, Isranon Dawnhand. Two years ago, one of Isranon's sa'necari attackers had broken that flute to prevent Isranon from using its power to stop them. The flute resting in the case at his side had been a gift from his first liege-god, Dynanna God of Cussedness and Perversity.

Yet Isranon had been afraid to touch it for weeks. He felt unclean.

Isranon closed his eyes and pressed his forehead to his clasped hands as he found his center, and prayed ever more fervently to his liege gods, Kalirion and Dynanna, for the forgiveness that he found impossible to grant himself. In still moments alone, he grappled with his memories of the four imps at the village of Chyniolus, how they had screamed and twisted in his grip as he sank his fangs into them one at a time, draining them to death in the madness of hunger. Amiri had insisted that his draining of the imps had been a hemovore's natural response to the stress of a prolonged battle. Yet he could not forgive himself, and doubted that he ever would.

He had departed so deeply from his dead father's teachings of absolute non-violence, of not taking a life out of appetite or for pleasure, that Isranon knew there could be no turning back to the way he had been raised. When his father had found the blades that his lycan mentor, Nevin, had given him, Isranon Soulspeaker had told Dawnreturning that the only way he would ever be able to keep the teachings would be to die. He had been a month shy of twelve-years-old and two weeks later his father and all of the Dark Brothers were dead.

Sometimes he thought he heard his father's voice condemning him in the night as he struggled for sleep and finally resorted to drugs to gain the slumber he needed.

Each day when he rose from sleep, he felt again for the godmarks on his body to reassure himself that their favor had not been withdrawn from him: Kalirion Sun-Lord's sunburst godmark on his forehead; Dynanna God of Cussedness and Perversity's squiggle on his scarred chest; and Dynarien's rose on his neck. They were all still there.

Isranon tried to focus on his prayers, but his thoughts kept flickering back to his father with intense feelings of shame. His hand went out to the enchanted staff of his ancestor and namesake, Isranon Dawnhand, and caressed it as if it were a talisman to ease his heart. At eight years old, Isranon had vowed to find it; and his father had chastised him for being arrogant. A year ago he had persuaded the God of Cussedness to relinquish it to him from her hoard.

He ran his eyes down the staff known as Warrior and managed a small smile. Even from where he sat Isranon could feel the power and energy coiled around Warrior's six feet of hard rock maple. Nine

inches of diamond had been magically grown onto the butt and the shaft was incised with intricate Kalirioni runes amid vines and leaves in jeweled inlays. The upper body, head, and wings of a pegasus topped it, so solidly done in heavy burnished kendaryl that it could be used to strike with that end also.

Anksha darted into the tent, threw her cloak over a chair, and wiggled her body in gratitude to the warmth of the spell Isranon had placed over the tent.

"Baby's growing." She slipped into her comfortable patois as she rubbed against him, patting her puffy belly. She could speak perfectly in several languages, but often reverted to the way she had spoken as a child. The tight curl of her tail showed how happy she felt. The tiniest bit of fur, so sleek as to be indistinguishable from the skin of her face, throat, and hands, showed beneath the edge of her neckline. Except for that it was easy for her to pass for human. "Anksha not one of a kind anymore."

Isranon caressed her with a fond smile. For centuries, his wife had been the only surviving member of her species. No one had ever realized how profoundly lonely she felt until he came into her life. His rogue magic had crossed the boundaries of their species and given her the child she had always craved. The pregnancy had relieved her abiding sense of isolation. She was his lion on love's leash; and he loved her with all of his heart.

She searched his face for signs of his mood, the tip of her tail beginning to twitch. "You're brooding, again?"

Isranon kissed her forehead. "Always."

"You are a good mon, my Isranon." She watched his expression.

"No, I am not. The darkness in my soul does not yield easily to my good intentions, Pet."

Anksha blinked and considered. "Hoon is bad. Sometimes..." She paused and thought for a bit more. "Sometimes, I think I always knew it. He did not kill Dawnhand, but he stole the staff so that Waejonan could do it. I was a baby." Anksha extended her hand to indicate how small she had been. "I forgave him. I was always forgiving him."

Isranon heaved a sigh and shook his head. "If you are saying that what I have done is forgivable..."

"No, not saying that. You're not a bad mon. You're teaching me not to eat little children. I liked the taste of babies. I still do. But now I want to know if they are good children or bad children before I eat them." She gave him a cheeky grin, displaying her huge tearing fangs. Anksha had the instincts of a cat that liked to play with its food and steal nestlings out of trees; armed with a feline's claws and fangs and possessed of a taste for blood and flesh—especially the blood of the powerful. "I only eat bad children now."

"You should not eat children at all." He ruffled her thick mane of black hair.

Anksha scowled. "I want to eat Stygean. He's bad."

Isranon stiffened. He could not let go of his belief that he could turn Stygean Loosestrife from the path leading to the darkness of the rites of mortgiefan, before the boy's soul could become tainted by them.

"Promise you won't eat him or take him as a blood-slave, Anksha. Please?" Isranon remembered the way he had suffered when Anksha took him as a blood-slave, setting her Dominance-Links through all the fibers of both his physical and psychic body; and he shivered at the thought of her doing the same to Stygean.

"If he's bad..."

"I should be the one to decide that."

"Jingen likes my candy. I give him candy all the time. Stygean says mean things to me when I offer him candy."

"Give him time, Anksha. He will come around." Isranon's thoughts strayed to the two boys. Jingen would be thirteen soon; Stygean already was. They were sa'necari-born and had already matured into their fangs, powers, and appetites for both blood and sex. Many of Isranon's companions had tried to pressure him into having both boys killed on the grounds that they were too old and indoctrinated into the ways of their people to ever change. Isranon felt driven to try and salvage them. Jingen parroted Isranon's teaching at everyone. Stygean constantly threw his sa'necari beliefs in their faces and rejected the teachings. Yet, Isranon felt most drawn to Stygean; seeing something of himself in the boy. Defiance had been Isranon's sword and shield after he lost his family to sa'necari raiders at twelve. Stygean's defiance reminded Isranon of his own.

"I have a dream, Anksha. I am the last Dark Brother of the Light, and I have chosen a path that leads counter to some of the teaching. I think salvation for my people can only be achieved if I found a new Dark Brothers. One based upon a middle path. You captured twenty-eight sa'necari-born children during the fighting at Ocalay. I want them. I want to teach them to follow my path."

"Including Stygean and Jingen?"

"Yes."

"Stygean wants to kill you."

"Possibly." Isranon gave a weary shrug. "Stygean is sa'necari, born and raised. However, he is not yet tainted by the rites. He's known love, and I'm certain he still craves it. How can I hope to end the cycle of hatred if I fail to turn boys like Stygean from the paths of darkness?"

"I eat them. No more hatred."

"It's not that simple." He stroked his fingers through her hair. "Redemption is not cheaply bought. Neither mine nor his."

* * * *

Randilyn stood in the doorway of the tent she shared with Amiri, gazing out at the hard rain sheeting down. The dense black clouds had turned that late afternoon as dark as midnight. Her pale hair and skin looked ghostly against the backdrop of the overcast day, limned by the lamplight from the table behind her. Autumn had arrived with a vengeance, forcing the Army of the Renunciate to halt frequently and wait for it to break before moving on.

She was an Ymraude nibari. They were made, not bred, or born. Most of them began life as humans, although a few sylvans could be found in their ranks. Potions and spells moved them into the change from whatever species they had begun life as; and the initial action of the potions was to extend their life spans through the use of Blue Moon's Mourning. They all had one thing in common: they had been born male and wished they had been born female. All things came with a price; and Ishla the God of Love and Technology offered them a trade. She would make them female, but only if they agreed to become nibari and ultimately vampires.

Compared to the Lemyari vampires, the Ymraudes had no power of any consequence. When the godwar broke out, it went swiftly against the original pantheon of light. All of the major and more

powerful gods fell to the onslaught from the hellgods; and finally only Ishla remained. She was a gray god, neither fully of the light or of the darkness; secretive and subtle. Powerful secrets stolen from her temple by her high priest, Zarlec, who betrayed her, had given the hellgods their victory. The Lemyari resulted from a bastardization of her initial research into vampires which Zarlec had given to the hellgod Gylorean Galee. In order to buy herself time to open the last surviving Gate Arcane through which she could bring allies, young gods, to her aid, Ishla unleashed her two most powerful remaining weapons: the demon-eaters and the Scavenger, a being so terrible and unstoppable that she vowed never to create a second one.

Her final act before opening the Gate had been the creation of the Ymraudes. They were subtle creations, designed to infiltrate the ranks of the other vampires, and destroy them from within. She paired them with the demon-eaters, deploying them in guerilla units. Whenever an Ymraude perished, her chosen nibari immediately transitioned into the vampire's replacement, making it close to impossible for the enemy to destroy all of them. Unlike their more powerful kinsmyn, the Lemyari, the Ymraudes did not suffer from the uncontrollable appetite for blood. Their instincts never dominated their faculty for reason.

The Ymraude shaman, Amiri, had been chosen by Ishla to guide, protect, and study the last of Ishla's demon-eaters. Amiri had gambled dangerously by tricking Isranon into biting Anksha, which brought the little demon-eater into season for the first time in her life and nearly resulted in the deaths of both Anksha and Isranon.

Amiri's friendship with Isranon had suffered because of it. Randilyn had told her that it would; but her master was stubborn when it came to her quest for scientific knowledge to replace what had been lost in the godwar thousands of years ago. The fragmentary texts on the demon-eaters, what little had survived the centuries, had been entrusted to Amiri and by extension, Randilyn.

She stared again at the sleeting rain, wishing it would stop. One of the few things that their liege-lord, Isranon Dawnreturning could not do was alter the weather. Randilyn wished he could. Going north was taking twice as long as coming south had.

She heard the beads in Amiri's corn rowed hair clack together and knew that her master had roused. Randilyn's mouth pursed. She opened the neck of her tunic and sank to her knees. "I suppose you're hungry?"

Amiri's fangs descended, ivory against her crimson lips. "What are you pouting about now?"

"Did I say I was pouting?"

"I know that tone of voice, Randi." Amiri settled behind Randilyn and licked her neck.

"Bite me and get it over with."

"Definitely pouting." Amiri's fangs broke the skin on Randilyn's neck delicately, sucking the delicious fluid that rose to her mouth from her nibari's veins.

Randilyn stiffened and pushed away Amiri's attempt to lessen the discomfort by swishing into her pleasure centers.

: *Come on, Randi. Relax.* : Amiri sent through their link.

: *Won't.* :

Amiri finished, licked the wound closed, and rocked back on her heels. "What have I done now?"

"You lied to him."

"Isranon?"

"If truth dies / all that is left of life / is darkness and lies."

"Oh, for Ishla's sake, don't start quoting Padruig Caimbeul at me."

"I will if I want to. You lied to Isranon."

"If I had told Isranon the truth, it would have destroyed him."

"I searched the books, trying to find where you got your information. All I found was that vampires and sa'necari don't pin up and kill imps like he did because of the stress of battle ... unless they're going rogue."

"You have it all wrong. Hunger always becomes an issue when too much power is expended by a vampire or other high-level hemophages and hemovores. It isn't as rare as you think for a hemovore to drain an enemy in the midst of battle, Randi. When..."

"You've never done it." Accusation deepened in Randilyn's voice.

"I don't wield the kind of power that Isranon does. I don't spend that much of myself in battle, because I don't have it to give."

"The rogue state...."

"He isn't showing any other symptoms of the rogue state, Randi."

"You've been watching him?"

"Don't I always?"

"Then what do you think it is? He sends for more nibari every hour or so, sex and blood again and again. He wasn't like this three years ago. If that's not rogue, then define it for me."

"I assure you he isn't going rogue. He's sa'necari, not a vampire. If I tell him how utterly mystified I am, he'll come to his own conclusions, and those could be fatal."

Randilyn lowered her gaze and closed her tunic, fiddling with the buttons in a distracted manner.
"Corbienne is going rogue."

Corbienne, one of five Lemyari vampires traveling with Isranon's company, had always seemed unstable to her; and the more that Randilyn learned of Corbienne's history, the more the nibari became convinced of it. Corbienne's father had owed gambling debts to a vampire of Lord Hoon's lineage. Not knowing the nature of the mon that he owed the money to, Corbienne's father had tried to avoid paying the money. The vampire had then demanded Corbienne as repayment for his debt. After slipping the young mon some of his blood in a glass of wine, the vampire had killed her in front of her family and abandoned her. When Corbienne rose three days later, the maddening hunger of the newborn had driven her to consume her entire family. She had then fled into the forests, grieving and confused, until Haig found her and tried to teach her self-restraint as he had once been taught by Dane Jayce.

Randilyn had recognized the signs of a breakdown in Corbienne following the battle of Chyniolus, and knew that she was Passion-Dancing her human lover, Iuf; mistaking appetite for love and gradually killing him. Amiri had made a study of the Passion-Dance, allowing several innocents to die for the sake of her

scientific investigations. Randilyn had protested it then, and continued to try and act as Amiri's voice of conscience. Sometimes it worked, but far more often it failed and resulted in Amiri disciplining her for interfering.

"You ought to do something, Amiri."

"I've spoken with her time and time again. So long as she's in denial and refusing treatment, there's nothing I can do."

Tears welled in Randilyn's eyes. "Won't you do something more than talk?"

"No."

"You could tell Isranon..."

Amiri frowned, wiping the last traces of Randilyn's blood from her lips. "I'll think about it. I promised Iuf that I would not speak of it without his permission."

* * * *

The huge scarlet pavilion dominated the south corner of the non-humans section of the camp where it met that occupied by the humans. Isranon's general, Nans Gryphonheart, had insisted upon the segregation to reduce the chance of friction. She had spread the myn of her original unit, the Rowdies, through all the groups, mostly as officers.

The gaudy pavilion served as a line of demarcation between the lycan units and the human. More than one hundred nibari were in the herd that Isranon had claimed as reparations from the sa'necari households his army defeated at Ocalay. The nibari were genetically altered human cattle, bred for docility over the centuries by the vampires and sa'necari. They produced high levels of endorphins, and very low levels of adrenaline—too low to allow for aggressive behavior.

The majority of the nibari in their herd were female, while most of the humans in their company were male. In order to avoid dissention in the ranks arising over the non-humans' access to females and the humans lack of it, Isranon had established a brothel for the troops by rotating a portion of his nibari slaves to serve in the Scarlet Tent.

Captain Luck Settlesby had served in Nans' freeranger rescue unit for over twenty years. He had been just fourteen and his older half-brother, Itch Hollins, seventeen when they signed up with her. They had earned their freerangers' runes while traveling the northeastern and central eastern portions of the Merezian continent with her.

Luck kept himself occupied and his phlegmatic nature did not lend itself to brooding; although there were times when he felt bitter and angry about Itch's death just over a year ago. The Scarlet Tent helped take the edge off his tensions and not a day passed without his getting in a bit of rutting. He had taken a particular liking to a golden-haired nibari called Farris and whenever she rotated into the tent, Luck reserved himself two sessions a day between her legs.

He emerged from the Scarlet Tent feeling satiated and relaxed. The rain had stopped. Luck pushed his broad-brimmed hat back on his head and spied Iuf walking past. He frowned at how gaunt and lined Iuf's face had become; the circles beneath his eyes were so dark they looked bruised. The branching crow's feet spread around his eyes looked more deeply-sunk than before, etched into skin that had been weathered to the texture of old leather from years spent in the saddle. "You okay?"

Iuf paused, pulling at his grizzled beard as he waited for Luck to reach him. "Sort of. I was on my way to

see Amiri. I need to get more of her tonics."

"Still sick?" Luck's eyes narrowed, settling on the scarf that Iuf wore. Most of the myn wore heavy wool scarves around their necks to deal with the late autumn cold; however it seemed as if the way that Iuf wore it so carefully placed was suspicious. He wondered how many bite marks he would find on Iuf's aged neck.

"Yeah. Just a mite."

"Can I walk with you?"

"If you want." Iuf shrugged.

"She say what's wrong?"

"Gave it a fancy name I can't pronounce."

"I heard that Amiri took you off active standing. Does Nans know?"

"Not yet. First big city we reach, I'll be leaving the company."

Luck frowned in concern. "That bad?"

"Yeah."

Luck walked Iuf to Amiri's tent and wagons. The Ymraude shaman had two wagons and a large tent. Since she cared for all the ills of the company, the humans had had to get over their initial uneasiness at having a vampire as the main healer and surgeon for the army. However, most of them, Luck included, preferred dealing with Randilyn over Amiri. It was not entirely because Amiri was a vampire. Her stone cold way of dealing with myn did not go over as well as Randilyn's warm concern.

Iuf went inside the tent and Luck considered following, and then changed his mind. While Iuf and he were old friends, the mon was not in any of Luck's units and that made it none of his business. So he decided to give Iuf his privacy.

He turned at the sound of young voices and spied Disharyl Scathwick first. Only a few of Anksha's blood-slaves had that much freedom to move about the camp. Disharyl was one of them. She had been Liuthan Loosestrife's principal bio-alchemist on his estates in Ocealay; and Amiri employed her skills with herbs and arcane substances. Luck had never been comfortable around Disharyl, and it was not simply because she was sa'necari. Something about her had never rung true for him. She was small, buxom, and somehow tawdry although he could not quite place his finger on why he perceived her that way.

Jingen Scathwick ran past Luck and threw his arms around his mother and she kissed the top of his head. The boy had just turned thirteen. He was one of the two oldest of Anksha's twenty-eight child slaves, sa'necari-born, branded and collared, but not held in the destructive bondage of her Dominance Link. Jingen released his mother to give Luck a polite smile and dip of his shoulders.

Luck turned about, knowing that where Jingen went, his sullen companion, Stygean Loosestrife, was frequently close behind. Stygean carried an armload of firewood into the circle created by the two wagons and Amiri's big tent.

"Staying out of trouble?" Luck stepped closer to the boy.

Stygean dropped the wood in a pile near the fire and backed away from Luck with an uncertain

expression that soured into a glare. "I'm not allowed to visit my father until my chores are done."

Luck studied the boy's eyes, noting the hatred in them. A shift in Stygean's scarf as the boy moved revealed the edge of the slave collar laying beneath it. "Then you better get to it."

Stygean snarled and ran off.

Luck could understand why his friend, Travis Potshard, disliked the boy; however Luck himself had mixed feelings.

* * * *

Stygean threw himself down on his bedroll exhausted from a day of travel on horseback followed by hours of chores. A small chest sat at the head of his bedding. It contained all that remained of his personal possessions. His family had been wealthy and powerful. Now he had nothing except a few changes of clothing, three books that Isranon had given him, and an empty swordbelt and scabbard.

He pulled the tie off his tail of black silken hair, tucking it under his pillow. It hung to the middle of his back and would have grown all the way to his ankles if he let it. The blackened metal slave collar chafed his neck and he ran his fingers beneath it before letting them stray to the A rune burned into his light olive shoulder. Blood normally healed everything for a sa'necari-born like Stygean, but the smith who branded him had used a kendaryl iron. Nothing would ever make it go away.

His tent mate, Jingen Scathwick—also a slave—rolled over in his bedding and propped his head on his hand. "Finished?"

"They always make me do more than you." Stygean snarled a curse under his breath.

Jingen sneered at him. "That's because you cause them more trouble than I do."

"I hate them."

"So do I. But that's no cause to get yourself disciplined every time you turn around. You ought to be more sneaky about things."

"I can't be. They killed my mother and they're killing my father. It eats me up to think about it."

Jingen shrugged and stretched out on his back. "I'm beginning to think you've given up on our plans for vengeance."

"I haven't."

"You have to be nice to their faces, stick them in the back when we get our hands on some blades."

"Fat chance getting a blade."

"If you say so. Real sa'necari don't give up so easily. I think you're afraid of the Renunciate. The price of heresy is death, Stygean. We're the only ones free to do it to him."

"I don't know..."

"Don't be a gutless cow. We'll bide our time and then we'll slip him the blade."

"The Renunciate?" Stygean rolled over on his side to face his friend.

Jingen rolled his eyes. "Yes. The Renunciate. He's a heretic. Death is his destiny and we'll give it to him."

"I just ... I just don't know." Stygean could not keep the hesitation from his voice.

"Are you sa'necari or have you become one of the cattle?"

Stygean tensed, pricked by the suggestion that he was not sa'necari enough. "I am sa'necari."

"Then it's agreed. We stick him."

Stygean sucked in a long breath. "I'm not afraid of them. I'll do it."

* * * *

As she did every evening once camp had been made for the night, General Nans Gryphonheart joined Isranon in the command tent for a glass of wine and a discussion of the day's events; they would also plan for what they might expect the next day based upon scouting reports and pin-point where they were on the maps of the region.

War had never been something that Nans expected to find herself involved in. She had earned her runes as a freeranger at seventeen, doing search and rescue work; which rarely involved fighting. Nans had taken out her share of monsters and bandits; however, war was far different.

One of the more pleasant discoveries of the previous week had been a town with a relatively intact collection of abandoned taverns, wine shops, and a distillery. They had seized every bit of good liquor in the place. Their foragers always went through the abandoned towns with swift thoroughness.

Tenly, Isranon's aide-de-camp, had a talent for making perfect mulled wine, adding the cinnamon, cloves, and sugar precisely to a warmed cup of claret. His skills, attention to detail, and unflappable nature, led Nans and her officers to overlook his private indiscretions; one of which was appropriating looted goods acquired in his foraging expeditions and then selling them to various soldiers under the table.

General Nans Gryphonheart tapped the map on the table in the command tent, a huge blue pavilion. She was a cinnamon-haired, sapphire-eyed mon and tall—though not by Sharani standards—at five foot eleven inches. Most people knew her only as a freeranger captain turned general; some knew that she was the bastard cousin of King William Gryphonheart of Gormond's Reach, daughter of a Gormondi princess who most considered mad. Until a year ago, 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. Nans had been forced to reveal herself after becoming trapped in Minnoras as the city-state fell to the forces of a hellgod, Gylorean Galee. She had ripped the portcullis off with her bare hands and led a group of refugees through to safety in Gormond's Reach.

"Once we strike the Lusatranden Highway, we should be able to make better time in spite of the weather." Nans flicked a wisp of cinnamon hair from her face.

Isranon sat with his legs wide and a nibari kneeling between them, her arms together behind her back in First Position. He listened to Nans with his fangs buried in the nibari's neck. The blood filled his mouth, ran down his throat, and filled his body with a pleasant warmth. She was his third that evening. He licked the wound closed and wiped his blood-rimmed mouth on a small square of black cloth.

"Tell me about the road, Nans." He noticed that she no longer stiffened when he fed in front of her. Isranon had met Nans on the edges of Gormond's Reach, leading a small party of refugees, survivors of Gylorean Galee's coup that caused a bloodbath in Minnoras. Their respective peoples were mortal enemies, and he had been reluctant to reveal his nature to her, until a vampire-led ambush forced him

use his fledgling powers to save them. They had crossed the gulf of distrust lying between them. Friendship had blossomed and devotion followed.

Haig entered, running a hand through his unkempt, coarse black hair. He wore a bearskin cloak thrown back which matched the generally hirsute aspect of his stocky, powerful body. One of the five Lemyari vampires in Isranon's company, Haig led his fellows in service to the Renunciate.

Tenly brought out glasses and three of the golden preserving bottles the sa'necari produced. He turned to Haig and asked in a droll tone, "Troll, demon, or mantichora?"

"Troll."

Tenly nodded and poured him a glass of troll blood.

Haig gave a long, hard laugh. "You're a good one, Tenly."

"I know, sir."

The vampire eased his bulk into a chair and leaned to see the places that Nans had marked on the map. "If I'm any judge of distances, we should be at Linder's Meadow tomorrow."

"Most likely before dark." Nans ran her finger along the road on the map.

One by one, Isranon's commanders and counselors arrived.

Nevin Igguiden, oftentimes referred to as Nevin Scarface, arrived next with his cousin Olin. An ugly scar traversed Nevin's face from his forehead, across a broken nose, and to his upper lip that was half-split, all from a wound that had failed to heal properly. It gave his hoarse growly voice a sibilant quality. Lycans healed faster and better than humans, rarely leaving them with scars; and as weapons went, only runed-silver and kendaryl could do that to one of them. His long black hair was caught at his neck in tail, except for two long strands at his temples into which had been braided the fingerbones of demons signifying his rank as chieftain of a newly formed battle-clan. Formerly the senior lawgiver to all of Clan Red Wolf, Nevin had been Isranon's childhood mentor and was now his spirit-brother. Nevin carried a big, crescent-headed axe in his belt, a sword at his shoulder, and a pair of lycan knives strapped to his thighs.

Most lycans carried just those fighting knives. Unlike humans, who often carried a sword whether they knew how to use one or not, the ever-practical lycans carried only weapons they were adept with. Their knives were among the best on the continent, with a curved back edge that ran a third of the way up the blade, and strong quillons. They had evolved over the centuries out of the hunting knives carried by rural folk.

However, it was the axe that first clued Haig to the fact that Nevin was one to walk softly around. Haig continued to do so and gave Nevin a polite nod of welcome as the lycan settled into his place at Isranon's left hand.

Travis followed Luck into the tent, spied Nevin, and picked a seat as far from the lycan as he could. Nevin frowned at Travis. Olin ducked his head with a chuckle, running his fingers through his black and white hair. Travis had been uncomfortable around Nevin ever since Olin informed him that his cousin was corsach—a homosexual.

Amiri the Ymraude shaman and Zulaika their warleader arrived next. Zulaika carried herself with military precision as she settled into her chair with Amiri at her left hand. Anksha bounced into the tent two seconds behind them and curled into a seat at the head of the table beside Isranon. She ran her tongue

around her mouth, licking the last bits of blood from her upper lip.

Amiri regarded Nans and Isranon. "We must decide soon where we plan to winter. Otherwise the snows will trap us."

"My thoughts were Gormond's Reach." Nans tapped the map. "It's the closest safe realm."

"That should not be our only concern. We need mages," Amiri said. "The only magic here is Isranon's. I am a shaman, not a mage."

"Perhaps Edvarde can help there," Isranon said.

Nans poured herself another glass of wine and stretched her legs out better. "Before the Azure Circle set up in Rowanhart, Ildyrsetts had the largest mage school outside of the City of Magic itself. Lord Edvarde is one of the Ildyrsetti School's largest patrons. He can certainly help. However, that will mean turning west and add at least a week, more likely two, to our journey."

"I'm willing to chance it, Nans. Amiri's right. I can't do it all myself."

Nans scanned their faces and gave a small nod. "So be it. Ildyrsetts."

When the meeting ended, Isranon sat with only Nevin and Anksha. His shoulders slumped. He was hurting again. Nevin noticed and poured him a glass of Sanguine Rose. Isranon sipped at it. "I worry. For all that I have done, I am still sa'necari. Since the Five Captains made that fact known abroad, we could find our allies turning upon us."

"Edvarde won't," said Anksha. "He knew before we left last spring."

Isranon nodded listlessly. "Edvarde is a good mon. Yet Treth closed its doors to us and broke the charters it had issued to Nans."

"Gormond's Reach will not break with us and that means that Darr will not either," Nevin pointed out.

Isranon's lips framed a faint smile. "And the Taladrim say I'm sacrosanct."

He would never forget the Taladri, Gaeatyra. She had come to kill him because he was sa'necari. The Taladrim were paladins of Tala; anti-social loners running with their moonwolves to hunt and destroy abominations like sa'necari and vampires. Travis had brought him a girl entrusted to Gaeatyra's care that had been wounded by a death blade of the sa'necari. He had pulled the death magics out of the girl and healed her.

Gaeatyra's moonwolf scented sa'necari on Travis, and she beat him senseless to locate Isranon. At Nans insistence, Gaeatyra had Read him and found him pure. Isranon had chanced her killing him to convince her that he had never crossed the line into the darkness of the rites.

Isranon saw little difference between the chances he was taking with Stygean and those he had taken with Gaeatyra, a paladin of Tala.

* * * *

The five Lemyari had camped between the Ymraudes and the lycans in a quadrant that served to buffer the human majority from the blood-slaves and the nibari herd. Among the dark ranks, Lemyari were considered and often referred to as the 'royals' of vampires, because of their great power. Haig had the largest tents for the fourteen nibari in his private herd and their young. Jun owned only a single nibari; a

young female named Nolly that Isranon had given him last summer. The other three, Corbienne, Garin, and Keahi, had smaller tents and fed from the common herd.

Corbienne's tent contained two huge chests, a scattering of large pillows for sitting, and a thick heavy pallet. Three goose down comforters made the bedroll, topped with blankets and more comforters. Iuf snuggled deep between the layers, warm and comfortable, watching Corbienne undress. She fluffed her long black hair, and arched her back, thrusting her ivory breasts and roseate nipples at him.

He might lie to others, but the old freeranger could not lie to himself. He knew that his vampire lover had lost herself to the obsessions of the Passion-Dance, and was slowly killing him. However, no matter how rough she became with him, Iuf could not find it inside himself to stop her. He loved her as he had never loved anyone before in his life. Amiri had excused Iuf from all work and told Nans that he was not well. He hoped that she had not told Nans the truth. Amiri had also given him a blood tonic to take to slow down the rate at which he was succumbing to the effects of Corbienne's constant feeding. Iuf fetched the tonics on time each week from Amiri; he had taken it for a few days and then thrown it away and kept throwing it away after that. Corbienne refused to face up to what she was doing, and Iuf had decided that he did not want to prolong the Dance. He was getting old and there were worse ways to die than in the arms of his love.

Iuf ran his hands through his graying hair and licked his dry lips. He no longer had the strength to make love to Corbienne. Her disrobing had become an empty symbol of a deadly love affair. Corbienne looked so young, barely eighteen; and Iuf was well past forty, close to the age he should have retired. The life of a freeranger was hard and the myn who lived that life tended to age fast. She had made him feel young and taken his mind off his years.

Now they were both paying for it. Nans and Isranon had both tried to put a stop to the relationship. Iuf knew that they had been right to, but he could not stop loving Corbienne, not stop wanting her, and not stop opening his veins to her.

"I love you, Iuf." She slithered between the blankets with him.

"I know, Corbie. I know."

He turned his face away from her to expose his neck better and shuddered for an instant as her fangs opened the artery. Illusion stripped the years from him and he once more walked the meadows of his youth; a young mon hand in hand with his one true love. Iuf grew swiftly dizzy, descending deeper into the dreams she gave him. His eyes closed and the darkness claimed him.

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CHAPTER TWO

SADDLING UP

To make the most of the waning number of daylight hours so close to winter, the camp rose before dawn each day and halted their march at the first touch of darkness. Dawn remained an hour off when the myn lined up at the cook wagons in each section. Pork slices and oatmeal with pieces of dried fruit in made breakfast. Feral cattle and pigs abounded in the area, deserted by their owners three years ago when they fled north. It meant that they ate well.

Isranon sat cross-legged in the middle of his bed with a nibari on his lap, his spent member lingering

inside her while he fed from her neck. Coupling with nibari each morning and evening was not considered adultery in Isranon's culture. He heard the clatter of dishes as his aide-de-camp set out his breakfast beyond the heavy curtain. Withdrawing his fangs from her neck, Isranon licked the wound closed and moved Eevy to the side of his bed. Eevy was one of his favorites. The only nibari he had owned longer was Eustyn, a mule. Haig had purchased Eustyn from the lycan chieftain Claw Redhand as a gift to Isranon. The vampire had felt that Isranon should have a nibari along to keep him fed during their journey from Red Wolf to Lord Hoon's estate near Minnoras. Isranon had forfeited his ownership of Eustyn when he was taken as a blood slave by Anksha, but Haig had re-purchased Eustyn, holding him in trust until Isranon's rogue magic transcended Anksha's arcane bonds, making the slave the master.

"Get dressed, Eevy, and get back to your wagon."

Isranon wrapped himself in a blue robe and stepped around the curtain. Tenly had set out Isranon's breakfast and the aroma pleased his nostrils. Slices of pork, a bowl of porridge, and cinnamon cakes with butter. As Isranon settled into his chair, Tenly poured him a large glass of cool water and filled a small glass with Sanguine Rose. The latter was an arcane blend of troll blood, herbs, and drugs. It was also the one thing keeping Isranon alive. He carried a flask of it at all times to sip from when the pain became bad.

"Will there be anything else, my lord?" The stout human drew himself up to attention.

"No, Tenly. Come back when it's time to pack up."

"As you wish."

Isranon was learning to appreciate Tenly. Nans had suggested that Isranon required a human aide-de-camp, and asked for volunteers. Tenly had been Isranon's choice after explaining their duties and exposing them to his feeding habits. The mon had not flinched or been put off in the slightest by seeing Isranon sink his fangs into Eustyn, and that settled it for Isranon, who feared to have his myn think him a monster.

His hand drifted to the flute case hanging from his belt and caressed it. A strong longing laid hold of him. Isranon sucked in a deep breath and took the case from his pouch, laying it on the table before him. His hands shook as he opened it and ran his fingers along the silver tube. Reaching for his center to steady his nerves, Isranon lifted the flute to his lips and blew. The sound sent pleasant shivers over his body. A smile of contentment spread across Isranon's face and he began to play.

Outside the tent, Stygean Loosestrife nearly dropped the bucket he carried and stared at the command tent, trembling in pleasure at the strange sweet sounds coming from it.

He looked up at Randilyn. "What's that?"

"The sound?"

"Yes, that."

"Isranon is playing his flute."

* * * *

The lycans gathered before Nevin's tent. Most of them wore charms of changing, which granted them the illusion of clothing when they shifted back from wolf into their hybrid or human forms. Ten would go out that morning in wolf form, running ahead of the army. They worked in pairs. Teeth, claws, and stealth served them as well on their scouting runs as swords and daggers. The scouts shape-shifted at Nevin's

command.

So far his myn had been lucky. The closest they had come to having a serious casualty had been Nevin himself, when he had been peppered with darts poisoned with Devil's Silver back in Chyniolus. He still had twinges from it at times, but most of the lingering effects had passed.

At his nod, the wolves raced through the camp. He dismissed the others to pack up and get mounted. Then he turned and spied a lycan watching him. "What are you doing standing about there, Gordain?"

"I want a change of assignment."

Nevin scowled, making his scarred visage intimidating. "Why? The humans make you itch?"

"I've no problem with Dahnig and Grygg. But sentry's a grind. I'd like to be part of the scouting unit that enters Linder's Meadow."

"You got a taste for danger, Gordain?"

The scout gave him a cheeky grin. "Maybe I want to impress someone?"

"Bitch or human?"

"Uhuh. My secret."

Nevin considered for a moment. "Get your tail chopped off and that's your problem. Get someone else's chopped and I'll skin you."

"Is that a yes?"

Nevin nodded and walked off.

* * * *

Nans rode down the length of their long line as they formed up for the march. Nevin sat his big gelding at the front of the van, haired over, and slightly snouted. His long dark hair had bones braided into the side locks and the rest had been gathered into a tail at his neck. Assembled in their hybrid forms wearing boiled leather armor, the lycan scouts were impressive in their dark green mottled tunics with the big lycan knives strapped to their thighs and the heavy, basket-hilted broadswords at their shoulders.

The swords were as close to the basket-hilted version of the lycan claymore as could be purchased in Ocealay where they had outfitted themselves. Boiled leather had been easier to come by than chain and plate, and the weight of the armor more suited to their tall, fast horses.

The younger ones spoke of the eagerly awaited midwinter rite of passage while they waited for the command to move out. They would be given their first tokens of membership in the battle-clan then: bones to braid in their hair. The polished bones—stained in colors, whose significance Nans could only guess at—were awarded to mark how many years they had been part of the clan, and for acts of bravery.

The bear and the crescent moon on their dark brown shoulder patches declared their devotion to their liege-gods, Willodarus and Tala, who were considered to be the guardians of their race.

Over the course of the march, more Ymraudes had joined their sisters riding under Isranon's banner. Twenty of them rode behind the lycans and the other two score rode in the rearguard, which was primarily Ocealayens, former kandoyarin—mercenaries—who had flocked to Isranon's cause after he

saved their city-state from a sa'hecari coup. Most of the Ymraudes were dark-skinned to the point of black, with beads braided into their nappy hair. They wore matching uniforms of tightly tailored short tunic over long tunic, slate over murrey; the long undersleeves blousing beneath the sleeveless overtunic. Their saddles had side slings to carry their javelins on the left side and large flaps on the right beneath which they carried their bowcases and quivers. Cavalry sabers rode at their hips.

The strangest member of their company walked at the head of their baggage train. Yiggsil was a stone troll, standing eight feet tall and carrying a gigantic spiked club. He had come too close to their camp one night nearly two weeks ago, hungry for monflesh, and fallen slave to Anksha's power. Unlike her other blood-slaves, Yiggsil would not wither, since trolls regenerated. Nans eyed him cautiously when she rode past him. She had read about the origins of his kind that lay in the genetic arms race of the previous godwar and a failed attempt to create super-soldiers. Her wilderkin-predator aura smelled to him like a female of his kind and he had already propositioned her twice and been soundly rebuffed. He always had a hopeful grin for her.

The yuwenghau—demi-god daughter of Willodarus—did not feel in the least bit threatened by Yiggsil's interest in her. The troll was no match for her. Also, he was beneficial to have around. Apart from his obvious strength, Yiggsil's blood provided the key ingredient for Isranon's Sanguine Rose, and his presence had ended their need to periodically stop to hunt trolls.

The Ymraudes' nibari rode horses at the head of the baggage train, and few like Randilyn drove wagons. Nans finally understood why they were so assertive and aggressive compared to other nibari, which made them, in a sense, not nibari at all. They were not from the genetically altered stock, bred for docility over the centuries, but transformed members of the free races who had volunteered to become what they were. The true nibari rode inside the first set of wagons that looked like over-sized sigourney carts. Supplies and equipment filled the next set. Anksha's blood-slaves rode in the final set, chained to the benches inside in order to satisfy the Ocealayen drivers who did not feel safe transporting sa'hecari, blood-slaves or not. Jingen and Stygean rode horseback, but the rest of Anksha's slave-children had a wagon.

Units of kandoyarin provided a buffer for the baggage train riding before, aft, and alongside it. The dress, armor, and armaments of the Ocealayens varied because they had been drawn from many different kandoyarin companies. They ranged from veterans in chain mail to slingers in boiled leather. A few of them were unblooded boys who had managed to impress Nevin and Nans with their martial skills. They formed the rearguard with the five Lemyari assigned to them during the march.

Thirty refugees from some of the villages they had passed drove a herd of cattle along behind the rearguard with an escort of soldiers.

Satisfied, Nans rode back to the head of the van, lifted her hand high, and signaled the 'move out' with a two-fingered gesture. Their horses caparison jingled as they set off. The wagons creaked as their teams put their shoulders into it and the vehicles lurched forward.

"What do you think we will find when we reach Linder's Meadow?" Isranon urged his horse closer to Nans.

"Hard to say. The myn we rescued from Chyniolus insist that Linder's Meadow isn't completely abandoned."

"And the last time they heard from them was this past summer?"

The look in Nans' sapphire eyes was soft and patient. The myn of Chyniolus had refused to speak openly to Isranon. They were afraid of him. Yet they had been more afraid of remaining behind after the

imps had decimated their numbers. "Isranon, you don't need to keep asking the same questions. I learn anything new, I'll tell you."

"I see." Isranon focused on the ground ahead of his horse. "Of course, you would."

Anksha shifted in the stirrups of her gelding, which had been drawn up almost to the saddle skirts to allow for her diminutive size. She dug her fingers into the waistband of her trousers. "My britches are snug."

"Well, loosen them, Pet." Isranon glanced over at her.

"Can't." Anksha lifted her tunic so that he could see. There was barely enough end left to the lacings to tie. Her lower abdomen was puffier than Isranon had realized when he had sex with her last night. The surviving information on the demon-eaters was fragmentary and Amiri could tell him nothing about the gestation period of demon-eaters. There was no way to guess when their child would be born.

"Ask Randi to let the seams out, Pet."

"I told you baby's growing. Anksha is going to be big out to here." Anksha extended her free hand, indicating to an exaggerated degree how much she expected to swell.

Nans chuckled.

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CHAPTER THREE

LINDER'S MEADOW

The army camped at the edge of Linder's Meadow. They left a wide swathe of open ground between themselves and the first buildings to make a decent killing field should there prove to be hostiles in the town. Silence greeted them. Both the sounds of human activity and the noises of birds such as sparrows and chickadees that lingered through the winters were absent. Isranon gazed at the gray weathered buildings, the paint long ago chipped from their wooden sides. He felt tempted to send a low level scan through the town, and reconsidered. Exhaustion clung to him and there were other matters that he needed to take care of. Isranon had promised Nans that he would not overtax himself doing things that others could do just as well. Swallowing back a flash of resentment at the myn who had left the arcane wounds in his body, he struggled for a moment to make peace with his limitations.

"How do you want to handle this one, Isranon?" Nans shifted in her saddle to watch his face.

Isranon looked thoughtful. "I need to refresh my scry wards. Galee is looking for us, but I haven't felt her presence in several days."

"Normal procedures?"

"You're the general, Nans."

"So be it. Nevin, scouts in. Paired. Luck, double the sentries until we know what's in there."

The two myn set off to their tasks.

Isranon dismounted and Tenly promptly took the reins of his horse.

Isranon had less energy lately than he had had in a long time. Tiredness pulled at him and he walked slowly.

Tenly tapped him on the shoulder and offered him a flask.

"What is it?" Isranon asked as he accepted the flask.

"Sanguine Rose."

"So you're carrying it also now."

Tenly gave a small shrug and a smile caught halfway between uncertain and reassuring. "It's my duty to take care of you."

Isranon swigged the flask. "I guess it is."

* * * *

When Gordain persuaded Nevin to allow him to enter Linder's Meadow as part of the scouting part, the last thing he had expected was to find himself in charge of it. It was a chance to show what he could do. None of them were wet-tailed cubs. If any of them got their tails chopped, it would not be for lack of experience and training. Still, these matters were always risky. Coming from the continent of Sealandia, Gordain had expected there to be more differences between his own and the wolves of the Merezian continent. He had been surprised to learn that the lycans of both continents approached matters in remarkably similar ways.

He paired off with Olin, Nevin's cousin, as much to see him safe as to pursue his own private agenda by forcing an opportunity to ask Olin questions. The very last thing that Gordain wanted to happen was for Nevin's cousin to get hurt on his watch.

He ordered four of his scouts to wolf it, make the complete change to their natural form, and go in ahead of the others. Then he and his remaining scouts followed at a discreet distance in hybrid form.

They walked cautiously down the main street, alert and listening, one pair to either side in staggered order. Linder's Meadow appeared to have been abandoned. Some of the doors and windows of the two story houses were boarded up. Others flapped in the breeze half off their hinges. Then Gordain reminded himself that Chyniolus had looked abandoned also, and over confidence in that fact had gotten the first scouting party there ambushed.

The yips and barks of the forward scouts carried far in the silence. Gordain's ears, pointed and hairy in his hybrid form, twitched as he paused to listen. He gave a curt nod of private acknowledgement. So far, they had found nothing to suggest that the town was anything except empty. Gordain hoped it would prove out, since he did not relish the thought of being surprised by imps or worse.

"Does Nevin prefer light or dark?" Gordain moved on, his alert gaze searching the street while his hand rested on the lycan knife strapped to his thigh.

Olin's lips pursed at the offhand question, choosing to pretend ignorance. "Of what?"

"Nibari of course. I never see him come out of the tent...."

Gordain mounted the steps of the first house they had seen that looked in good order, paused for a moment listening, and then jerked the door open. Sticking his head over the threshold, Gordain drew in a deep breath through his flaring nostrils. He caught the scent of nothing more than dust and rot.

"If you call him a nancidawg, he'll cut your balls off," Olin observed dryly when Gordain returned to the street.

A large grin spread over Gordain's face. "He's corsach?"

"Not that it's any of your business ... yes." The wind changed and Olin raised his head to sniff it. He shook his head. "Nothing."

"I don't like being called a nancidawg either ... but it happens."

Olin scratched at his pointed hairy ear. "If you've eyes in his direction, I'd better warn you."

"Of what?"

Gordain tried another door and came up with nothing again.

"He's in love with someone he can't have."

Gordain chuckled softly and patted his crotch with a cheeky grin. "Maybe he needs to meet someone he can have."

A bemused smile twitched the edges of Olin's lips as the import of Gordain's gesture and words sank in. "I'll talk you up to him, if you want."

"No. I'd rather do it on my own."

A series of rapid barks stopped all conversation. Gordain listened and then threw his head back, releasing a long howl, sounding the withdrawal. His wolves had found something that was human, yet not human—just enough to disturb them.

He moved out into the middle of the street to watch his myn returning, waving them on as they reached him. Gordain and Olin waited tensely for the last to return and then brought up the rear. They massed again at the edge of town and proceeded to their camp.

Gordain debriefed his myn at the edge of the town, and then headed for the command tent.

He found Nans, Luck, Travis, Isranon, and Nevin waiting for his report.

"We've found something, but we don't know what it is. The scouts tell me it smells human and yet not-human. They can't recognize it, but they know what it isn't."

"Run down the list, Gordain."

Gordain nodded to Nevin and let his eyes linger for a moment longer than necessary on his chieftain's face. He went over the list of everything that it might have been, and his reasons for deciding that it was something different, something they had not encountered before.

Nevin shot a glance at Nans. "Tomorrow in force?"

"Dawn."

Nevin turned to Gordain. "Dismissed."

Gordain left the tent and moved far enough away that he could not be accused of trying to listen in and then he waited.

When Nevin emerged, Gordain sauntered over to him and gave the chieftain a cheeky grin. "Corsach?"

Nevin halted with a frown, responding testily. "So what if I am?"

"Just don't call me a nancidawg," Gordain sauntered off whistling.

* * * *

Stygean Loosestrife passed the guards at the entrance to the blood-slaves section of the camp. They eyed him suspiciously as always. The guards there were specialized units, comprised of six lycans and one of Isranon's five Lemyari. No one trusted the blood-slaves. Lycan minds could be seized by sa'necari arts, but not without a struggle. Humans were easier prey.

Stygean's eyes were wide and wary. He feared the lycans, especially Nevin, and felt gratified that the chieftain was not there.

The die off had begun. There had been over fifty of them with Anksha's Dominance Link set in every fiber of their beings; now they were down to forty-three. One of them was his father, Liuthan. Sooner or later, all of Anksha's blood slaves would wither and perish. It was the nature of her feeding and the drain upon their bodies from the Dominance-Link. Anksha drank blood hot from living veins; not because she needed blood, but for what was carried in the blood. Mages, sa'necari, and such had a secondary nervous system that linked the arcane centers—shaukras—and circulated the bio-alchemical properties throughout their bodies. The elements of their bio-alchemical processes were what Anksha fed upon through the blood. The mage-centers frayed, crisped, and finally burned out. Once those centers started to fail, the mage began to die.

Anksha had killed his mother a few days after taking her as a blood-slave. The demon-eater's initial psychic strike had reduced his mother to the level of a five-year-old child. Chinisi Loosestrife had perished clutching a dirty rag doll that one of the nibari had given her while Anksha drank her heart to stillness.

The last time that Stygean had seen her, his mother had been preparing to attend a banquet at Captain Tamric's estate. She had been full of joy and high spirits. Stygean had kissed her goodnight and curled up with a book in his bedroom. When he woke hours later, his world had been destroyed.

He entered his father's tent, eager to talk to him, and stiffened. His father, Liuthan lay upon the cot where he spent most of his time, his face locked into a grimace. Anksha sat astraddle of him, her fangs sunk in his throat as she fed noisily.

Stygean sank to his knees and put his face in his hands. He could close out the sight, but not the sounds and his stomach soured. "I hate you. I hate you," he muttered.

Anksha came loose from Liuthan, licked the wound closed and noticed Stygean. She strolled over to him, his father's blood rimming her mouth. "I don't like you either." Anksha's lips peeled back from her fangs in a snarl. "Keep being bad and I'll eat you."

Stygean shuddered and remained silent.

Anksha darted through the tent flap and out into the open.

Stygean crossed the tent. "Father?"

Liuthan looked up at him and held out his arms. Stygean knelt beside the cot and settled into Liuthan's embrace.

His father had lost weight. The skin on his once-handsome face had begun to sag. The patchy rash had spread along his neck among the bite scars. Stygean had become familiar with the signs of the withering and knew that his father was dying inch by inch.

"I hate them," Stygean growled deep in his throat. "I hate them."

"Don't say that."

"Why not? She's killing you!"

"I brought it on myself, Stygean. I planned and led the ambush at Tamric's party to capture Isranon. Tamric got Isranon and Anksha got me. Had I known his familiar was the Beast of Brandrahoon ... Well, it's too late for regrets."

"But not for vengeance."

Liathan stiffened. "Get that out of your head."

"Why?"

"Because they will kill you."

Stygean could not think of what to say, so he simply snuggled against his father like a small child rather than the grown man he tried to be.

It grew late and Liathan pushed Stygean away. "I think it's time you got back to your own tent."

Stygean started to protest and his father cut him off. "Don't argue."

The boy's lips tightened and he left without a backward glance.

As he walked slowly back toward his tent, he grew angry and obstinate. He veered off to the edges of the camp and walked along the tree line. He knew better than to try and flee. There was no escape from Anksha and the lycans, even if he had the smallest idea of how to survive in the deserted wilderness. He was a child of the cities.

The wind shifted and he shivered, facing defiantly into it as if to challenge nature in ways that he dared not challenge his oppressors. He opened his innate necromantic senses and embraced the darker side of reality, and froze. He opened his innate necromantic senses and embraced the darker side of reality and froze. There, at the edges of his arcane awareness, was the touch of something darker than he was.

Curious, Stygean stole toward it, darting to and from the concealment of the trees and tents. He made certain that no one from the camp would notice him, and scanned again. There it was, stronger than ever. It drew him with an urgency that went beyond anything he had known on an arcane level and his father had shown him many besides the rites.

A cry of anguish made him quicken his steps and he darted into a small glade. He saw a scruffy boy, dark haired and fair-skinned, standing stiff in the center, his eyes wide and frightened. He held a sling at his side. His body jerked and trembled, but Stygean could not see what held the boy there.

He widened his arcane scan and opened the perceptions of his inner eyes. Now he could see a vague shape clawing at the boy, opening huge tears in his soul, and lapping up what leaked out.

Training that had been ground into him to the point of becoming instinct, brought his soul shields into place, shimmering around him like an aura darker than the night. Stygean threw his strongest death web

at the creature and instantly knew he had made a mistake, for it dropped the boy and came at him.

Released, the boy curled up screaming as if his mind were lost in nightmare.

Stygean took two steps backwards, and cast a spell of undeath denial to rip the soul out of the creature. His spell did not even slow it down. Its claws tore at Stygean's shields, gouging holes in it. Stygean staggered backwards and tripped over a tree root.

He had no idea what the creature was, but there had to be a way to stop it. The adrenaline rush had him shaking, but he battled past that and tried a spell of exorcism.

The creature screeched, hesitated, and then attacked with renewed fury.

Stygean lost the threads of his spell and started over. The creature's claws reached through the holes it had torn in Stygean's shields and clawed the edge of his soul. Stygean swallowed back a scream, just as he would have in a rough bout in the salle with his father, and finished the spell. The creature fled.

Reaction set in as soon as he was safe and he scarcely realized that the boy had stopped screaming. Hands grabbed Stygean and jerked him to his feet. He reached for his spells, only to stop without casting them when he realized it was not the creature returned, but one of the kandoyarin boys.

"What did you do to Iyan?" Dahnig Elvustad, a sandy haired youth a head taller than Stygean with six inches and forty pounds on him, the first traces of chin hair fuzzing his jawline, jerked Stygean to his feet, his fist twisted into Stygean's collar. "Answer me, you filthy sa'necari. What did you do to him?"

Stygean, worn out by the fight, could find no words to say and stared dumbly at the sixteen-year-old.

Another kandoyarin boy knelt beside Iyan Helyt and shook him, bringing no response. Grygg Lostan cast a helpless glance at Dahnig. "I can't wake him."

"Get someone here who can." Dahnig pointed to the horn that Grygg carried. "You're supposed to be the leader. So lead. Call for help."

Grygg winded the horn and the sound echoed through the trees.

Gordain and Olin plunged through the trees and into the tiny glade seconds later, which meant they could not have been far off and were probably searching for Iyan. Stygean wondered how long Iyan had been missing; how long the creature had been tearing at the boy.

Dahnig gave Stygean another shake. "He attacked Iyan."

"I didn't attack him." Stygean shrank away from Dahnig, but could not get his clothing loose. "There was a creature...."

"We didn't see anything."

"It was invisible. My mage sight...."

Gordain freed Stygean from Dahnig's grip. "Much as I would enjoy opening his belly, we must not do anything before Lord Isranon gets here."

"There was a creature. It was tearing at his soul. I drove it off..." Tears of futility and anger ran down Stygean's face. "I did. Please believe me."

Grygg cradled Iyan's head in his lap. "Why should we, filthy, soul-stealing sa'necari?"

Stygean recoiled from their hatred and said nothing more.

Olin drew Dahnig back. "I'll watch him."

Dahnig looked ready to argue, but went to kneel beside his friends.

A bright light, too pure and white for a torch, shone through the trees. Stygean kept half an eye upon Olin as he glanced to see where the light was coming from. It grew nearer and Isranon entered the glade, Warrior blazing in his hands. He halted at the edge of it, his eyes seemingly filled with dancing flames, reflecting his inner power. The godmark on his forehead glowed.

"Death magic has been cast here. Sa'necari magic." Isranon studied the glade through eyes that could perceive the patterns of power. "There's an odd taste here. I'm not certain what."

Gordain approached Isranon. "Stygean tried to kill Iyan."

Isranon glanced at Stygean. "Did you see it, Gordain?"

Gordain shook his head and pointed at Dahnig. "He did."

Dahnig looked uncertain. "I didn't see it. I got here and Iyan was lying over here and Stygean was stretched out over there."

Isranon regarded Stygean and then turned away. He went to Iyan and knelt beside him, laying his hand on the boy's forehead. "His soul has been torn."

"The soul-eater did it!" Dahnig darted across the glade before anyone could stop him, and drove his fist into Stygean's stomach. Stygean gasped for breath and his eyes watered as he doubled over, clutching himself.

Isranon gestured to Gordain. "Spellcord him and lock him in one of the wagons under guard, until I can discern exactly what happened."

* * * *

Isranon emerged from Amiri's large medical tent to find Dahnig and Grygg standing just outside with Gordain. The three of them had often worked sentry duty together over the past few weeks. Isranon and Nans both preferred to have either one of the lycans or a vampire partnered with each group of humans on watch at night. The presence of a non-human increased the muscle to face what might come at them and decreased the chances of the sentries being taken by surprise. Who worked well with whom and what had long ago been determined; and when the social chemistry worked out well, they were matched together permanently for those duties. The vampires had become tolerant of the humans' bite-me jokes; the lycans had stopped being affronted by comments about dogs; and the humans had gradually lost their defensiveness.

Grygg stepped forward. "Is Iyan going to be all right?"

"I don't know yet." Isranon rubbed at the corner of his eyes.

"Can we sit with him?"

"You'll have to ask Amiri."

Grygg gave a considering and tight-lipped nod. He and Dahnig entered the tent. Gordain started to follow them and Isranon caught his arm. "Nevin wants to speak with you."

"His tent?"

"Yes."

When he reached the command tent, Isranon found that Tenly had three nibari waiting for him on the bedroom side of the partition, a dose of Sanguine Rose set out, and some sweet cinnamon cakes. Nans had already taken her place at the table. Nevin would join them later.

"Well, you think he did it?" The hard edge in Nans' sapphire eyes condemned Stygean without waiting for an answer.

Isranon settled into his place at the head of the table and shook his head. "Unless the southerners have discovered some spells I am not familiar with; Stygean could not have done it."

"But you had him spellcordered..."

"It's as much for the boy's protection as the others. The kandoyarin are less likely to try avenging Iyan if they believe I'm doing something about what happened. It is difficult to explain to people who are not familiar with my kind that there is a vast difference between shattering a soul and tearing it."

"It must have come from the town." Nans sipped her wine, her finger tracing patterns on the table.

"We could have attracted a wandering demon of some kind, but I doubt it. The towns are turning into pestholes. If it were not for the chance that some survivors lingered, I would simply burn the towns and villages down as I went."

"Any ideas what it is?"

"None. I might know more when Nevin gets here." Isranon sipped his Sanguine Rose. "I'll speak with Stygean later and then check whatever he tells me against what I can find in Josiah's books. Anksha is prowling the edges of camp. If it's a demon, she'll know what to do."

Isranon pushed his chair back with a gesture at the curtain. Tenly rose and returned with Farris. The golden-haired nibari of Black Cliff stock knelt between Isranon's knees in first position, her hands clasped behind her back, and her head tilted to expose her long neck. Isranon leaned forward, gripped her shoulders, and sank his fangs into her. He drew as much from her as he dared to without hurting her and lifted his head. A tap on her shoulder sent her away. He licked the blood from around his mouth, appearing vaguely unsatisfied.

Tenly looked on indifferently and turned to Nans. "Mulled wine, General?"

"Yes, please."

"Shall I bring you another nibari, M'lord?"

Isranon nodded.

Tenly stepped behind the curtain and returned with Eevy. The nibari knelt between isranon's knees, brushed her hair away from her neck, and assumed first position. Isranon bent over her. His fangs went in easily and he fed gently.

* * * *

Gordain entered and stood at attention. Carpets and sitting pillows made Nevin's tent cozy, but there was no furniture except for a cask of liquor resting in a small rack. Once they were deemed safe, abandoned

villages and towns were searched for usable goods by the company foragers. The last one had produced several casks of well-aged beer that the lycan chieftain had appropriated.

Nevin gestured for Gordain to sit, and he settled across from him. Most myn would have found Nevin's scarred visage ugly; Gordain thought the scars added character.

"How many of your scouts caught the scent of taint in Linder's Meadow?" Nevin filled two tankards from the cask and handed one to Gordain.

"Four. All of those were wolfing it. The rest of us smelled nothing."

"I want them to sniff around that glade. But not before morning. The creature might need the darkness to travel."

"You don't think Stygean did it?"

"I am certain he didn't." Nevin considered Gordain a moment, frowning slightly. "You're one of those I picked up in Imralon?"

"Yessir." Gordain framed a wry smile. "If you had not almost bitten my tail off, I would have been chieftain and not you."

"Oh, so you're that one." Nevin chuckled. He had outrun and out-fought his way through close to twenty lycans for the right to mate with the god, Tala, and found this battle-clan. Gordain had mounted her, but before he could consummate, Nevin had chomped down on his tail and viciously threw him bleeding to the side.

"The allure of the god is incredible. Even a corsach like myself was driven mad with lust for her."

Nevin tensed at the word 'corsach' and looked wary. "That's the second time you've brought it up. Did someone tell you I was corsach?"

"You are, aren't you?"

"That's beggaring the question," Nevin snarled. "Who was it?"

"Your cousin Olin." Gordain faltered, feeling suddenly defensive and wondering for an instant if he had overstepped himself. Then he recovered his attitude. "Now, are you or aren't you?"

"I am. Finish your beer and get on with your duties."

Gordain drained his tankard and favored Nevin with a cheeky grin. "Well, with that out of the way, if you get lonely, you know where to find me."

"Don't go flashing your tail at me, Gordain. I'm not interested in you."

Gordain shrugged and left the tent. Their people had issues with homosexuality and considered it a weakness. Still, Gordain felt confident of his ability to get past Nevin's defenses. Seduction was an art in which he was well versed.

* * * *

Stygean huddled in a pile of blankets in the middle of a blood-slave wagon. The long benches that lined the sides of it had manacled chains connected to the walls above them and leg chains attached to an iron bar beneath them. He felt dizzy and disoriented; cut off from his powers and mage sight. The world

looked duller through eyes that had no magic. Tears lurked behind his eyes at the indignity of being blamed for what happened to Iyan; yet he refused to let them escape.

"I'm sa'necari. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid."

The rear door opened and Isranon stepped through.

"What do you want, Renunciate?" Stygean chose the polite word when all he wished to do was to spit the word 'heretic' at the mon.

"To talk to you."

The compassion in Isranon's gaze irritated the boy. "About what?"

"Iyan. How did you know the creature was there?"

"So now you think it was a creature and not me?"

"Perhaps."

Stygean considered in tight-lipped defiance. He had been forbidden to use his powers and he would first have to admit to having scanned the area. Stygean sucked in a breath and told Isranon everything. Then he waited for his punishment.

Isranon nodded and placed his fingers on Stygean's forehead. The boy winced, remembering the time that Isranon had crushed all of his inner shields to see what lurked behind them. "Calm yourself. I'm only going to Read you."

Stygean shivered despite the gentleness of Isranon's arcane exploration of his being.

Isranon shook himself when he withdrew from Stygean. "There are tears in the edge of your soul and psychic body. You're lucky it did not get more of you."

"Do you know what it was?" Curiosity drew Stygean from his sullenness.

"Not yet, but its reaction to your exorcism spell is suggestive." Isranon sucked in a deep breath as he considered what to do next. "If I remove the cords, some of your discomfort will leave. However, the seals are also blocking your awareness of your wounds. I don't know what will be worse."

Stygean blinked and lowered his eyes, trying to decide where the Renunciate was going with that line of thought. "I don't understand why you are telling me this."

"I will remove the seals and cords if you wish."

"You're letting me go?"

"Yes. But I want you to stay with Amiri and Randilyn until you're healed. Is that understood?"

Stygean nodded.

Isranon released the deadly seals on the spellcord and unfastened Stygean's wrists.

Relief rushed through Stygean when the cords came off. Before he could savor his release, a surge of pain rose through Stygean's mage-centers. Stygean gave a long groan and fainted.

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CHAPTER FOUR

SHADOWS OF THE PAST

Nans Gryphonheart's tent was large, but could not match that of Isranon. The longtime campaigner in Nans demanded simplicity. She had long derided her cousin, King William, for his habit of traveling with enough furniture to have all the pleasures of home. It made decamping slow and Nans wanted to be able to move fast once they reached the plains of Angrim, where they intended to face off against the legions of the Minnorian Empire. A trestle table and six folding camp chairs sufficed for her, the former could be taken apart and moved flat in the back on one of the wagons. Her bed in the far corner was a simple cot and a pile of blankets. She tolerated Isranon's needs for heavy furniture because she knew that he required physical comforts due to the nature of his injuries.

Luck and Travis sat with her. Freyrick, her sturdy Ocealayan aide-de-camp, hovered near her back. He served as her secretary, personal forager, and sometimes butler. Nans had chosen him for much the same qualities that Isranon had seen in Tenly: attention to detail, a gift for diplomacy when the circumstances demanded, and a steady temperament that never faltered in the presence of the darker habits practiced by some in her army. However, as the bastard daughter of a Gormondi princess, Nans demanded a greater formality from her aide than Isranon did and Freyrick fulfilled her needs completely.

"You think Isranon can handle it?" Luck held a tankard of thick beer in his hands. A few scraps of bread remained on his breakfast plate.

"I'm certain he can. At least once he has some idea of what it is." Nans sipped her glass of mulled wine. Freyrick's efforts could not match Tenly's when it came to a perfect glass of mulled wine, but he came close enough to satisfy Nans. Thanks to the carrying crystals that had been stolen from Timon and Hoon, they were able to bring along far more than anyone suspected. "Isranon is amazing. He's holding a scry ward all on his own power against a hellgod. Not even Abelard could do that."

"That's usually done in circle and rapport, ain't it, Nans?" Luck leaned closer.

"Exactly. And even then, I doubt it could keep a full-fledged god out."

Luck whistled in surprise and then the troubled light returned to his eyes. "Yeah, but it's showing on him. He ain't looked this bad since before you went to Imralon."

Travis scratched at his chest. Thinking of Imralon made the long scar beneath his clothing itch. A gigantic Susgrag had split him open from chest to groin. Isranon had called him back from the edge of death and healed him. He owed the mon big time and had no intention of forgetting it. "There must be something we can do."

"Make all speed to Ildyrsetts and hope we get there before he collapses from the strain. If he drops the wards, Galee will be all over us. She fought my father for seven days and seven nights before he defeated her ... and now she's stronger than ever."

Anksha slipped into the tent, looking deflated, her tail drooping. "My Isranon ... he's going in. He won't take me with him."

Nans stopped in mid-sentence, raking her gaze across her captains with a frown. "Alone?"

"Taking Haig, Jun, Garin, Keahi, Corbienne." Anksha ticked the names off on her fingers.

"Does he know what it is?"

"No. I do. Is demon." Anksha touched her nose. "I smell it. I tell my Isranon, but he won't listen."

Luck and Travis rose from their seats together and headed out, not waiting for orders. Long association with Nans meant that they knew their jobs without being told.

Nans stood and lifted the little demon-eater, settling Anksha on her hip like a child. Anksha's legs dangled briefly, and then she locked them around Nans' waist. Nans ruffled Anksha's hair. She wanted to prevent Anksha from bolting after Isranon and carrying her was preferable to snagging her by the hair at the last moment. "Let's go. I wish he would not do these things without consulting me."

"Me too."

* * * *

Isranon walked through the camp, staff in hand, with Haig beside him and the other four Lemyari following. Myn moved from his path. Many then trailed after them, but no one ventured too close. They could tell from his determined stride that he had an action planned concerning Linder's Meadow and whatever had attacked the two boys.

"My brother..." Nevin intercepted Isranon at the edge of the camp with Gordain and Olin at his back. "We are going with you."

"No," Isranon answered in a voice that brooked no argument. "We six are going in and no one else. What's in there scarred Stygean's soul and nearly ripped Iyan's apart. I'm taking only the undead."

Nevin studied his face, noting the changes in his former student's manner. Isranon's spirit grew stronger even as his body became weaker. "Gordain. Olin." He gestured at two tall spruce trees. "Get up there and watch." His eyes narrowed. "If anything goes wrong, Isranon, I'm going in after you. And there won't be any stopping me. Understand?"

Isranon drew Nevin into a hug. "I understand." Then he pulled away and walked on.

The muddy road passed between houses whose rotting exteriors greeted Isranon like the ghosts of days past. He could not help imagining what the town must once have been like. The very ground beneath his feet vibrated with memories.

"The earth knows and Daverana remembers all that have moved upon its surface," Isranon quoted softly. Some mages could harness the vibrational memory of the soil itself. Isranon could sense it, but had not learned to access and manipulate it.

Even before he had found the rest of his powers, Isranon had been a Speaker to Spirits. Ghosts disliked sa'necari, avoiding them, eluding both their grasp and their powers; the only form of undead to be immune to their necromantic skills. Time and again over the years, ghosts had come and spoken to him. He could sense a tickle of interest in him from the unseen spirits hovering in the ruined houses, but for once the ghosts did not emerge.

Jun's tall, rangy frame hunched and he walked with his hand on his saber. His deeply slanted black eyes, framed by long, thick lashes, scanned the empty houses and shops. "There is something here. It makes my skin crawl." He spoke with an edge to his baritone voice.

Garin, a slender blond, turned his palm up and flexed his fingers, bringing forth his secondary nails that lurked beneath his primaries. Venom beaded on their tips. "If it's undead, my venom will do me no

good."

"Then we'll pull it apart with our hands." Keahi, the smallest of them, pulled at his nappy hair. "Or chop them to kindling. Remove enough pieces and even the undead die the true death."

Isranon's curt gesture stopped the crosstalk as they reached the middle of a small park in the center of town. Glancing at the buildings with their chipped and peeling paint, boards weathered to gray, Isranon halted. Frost-killed weeds drooped in thick clusters throughout the park and uprooted the cobblestones in broken patches.

Haig threw back his heavy bearskin cloak and tucked his thumbs into his sword belt. "You think this is wise, Isranon?"

"Wise? I'm not certain. However, I must do something. This should drive it into the open, whatever it is."

Isranon closed his eyes to concentrate better and initiated a low-level necromantic scan. First he picked up only small life forms, rats and mice shivering in their holes. He extended the scan and increased the level. Isranon picked up intelligent life forms in several clusters along the southwest end of town. His initial impression was humans. He centered his power on the nearest cluster. Again his first impression was humans, but there was an odd, shifting taste of arcane energy surrounding them. Isranon did not know how to Read that.

He raised his staff and shouted. "Falsity Fall, all Truths Revealed."

His power surged through the streets in a flood of rainbow colors. Shrieks and shouts of rage came from the far side of the town.

"Get ready," said Haig, unlimbering his big, cross-hilted sword.

A lean, lanky figure emerged from a building and sauntered toward them with a twig going round and round in his mouth. "Not a smart move, Isranon."

He wore two bulging sheaths that hung from his belt, the bottoms strapped to his thighs. A large metal tube was slung over his shoulder from a strap of densely woven material and the long hilt of an odd sword jutted above the opposite shoulder.

Isranon's eyes widened. "Dane!"

Dane Jayce embraced Isranon. "You've changed, kid."

"It's been five years..." Isranon blinked and stood back. "My scan did not pick you up."

"Necromancer scans don't ... unless I want them to." Dane moved a short distance from him. The twig stilled between his teeth. "Look at me and see what I am."

Isranon reached out to Dane with all his arcane senses. The crackling immensity of power and a sense age beyond reckoning inundated Isranon's mind and psychic awareness, sending him reeling. Haig caught him before he could fall. Images of mushroom clouds and collapsing cities filled Isranon's mind. Tremendous metal vehicles trundled across the landscape, belching fire from long turrets. Metal ships sank and burned in a great river. People flashed out of existence, leaving only their shadows burnt into the sides of falling buildings countless stories high. A name came rushing into his mind. "Louistrana ... no, you can't be that old."

"Colonel Dane Jayce, Louistrana Military Intelligence. We'll talk about it later. You've provoked them

and you're about to have more trouble than you can handle."

"What are they?" Haig steadied Isranon and then strolled closer to Dane.

"Every human in this town has become a host body for a demon. Galee had one of her main labs here during the Age of Burning. It was reopened three weeks ago by one of her sa'nekaryianes. Until recently I've managed to stay one step ahead of her. This does not bode well for my efforts."

The mention of the sa'nekaryianes sent a tremor of unease through Isranon and his companions, including Haig. They were the death angels of Gylorean Galee; the living forms of the most powerful of the undead, the nekaryianes. The creatures had been extinct since the Age of Burning, yet Galee had found a way to create them anew. They possessed the Seiryn's song that drove myn to madness, the venom of the Lemyari, and a mage's command of arcane power.

Isranon slid his gaze across the faces of his companions. "What does that mean?"

"You'll have to kill all the hosts and then cast a major exorcism here ... assuming you have some strong enough priests."

"I can do it."

"You?" The twig paused again in Dane's mouth. He pulled it out and let his fangs descend from their sheaths. "My people and I have been killing them for weeks. We came to permanently destroy her lab. I got it sealed again. A simple necromantic sweep isn't going to fix it."

"Trust me." A twist of weary confidence caught upon the edges of Isranon's lips. "There are no true humans left?"

"None."

Isranon's mind raced. "Get your people out here. All of them. I will need to shield them."

A puzzled look came over Dane's face, but Isranon's tone convinced him. He took the twig from his mouth and whistled. Six vampires and seven nibari came out of the surrounding buildings and formed up behind Dane. They all carried the same strange weapons as Dane.

"Is this all of them, Dane?" Isranon did not recognize any of them and he wondered what had become of the missing ones.

"Yes." Dane gave all the affirmation he felt necessary, so Isranon shook off his concern and refocused upon the task at hand. There would be time enough for questions later.

"All of you stand close together."

Isranon walked out into the center of the street and lifted Warrior high. Golden light surrounded him and golden shields formed around the Lemyari and Dane's people.

Dane cocked his head to the side, watching him. "What's he going to do?"

"Destroy the town," Haig answered casually.

"Can he do that?"

"Watch."

Isranon shook his staff and cried out to the heavens. The Sunfire lances answered. They came burning down out of the skies, striking all around them. Buildings exploded in flames and burning debris filled the air. They rained down from the heavens like the trails of fiery comets. Human forms rushed from the far end of the streets, screaming threats. As they came near, their twisted shapes became apparent. Isranon spoke to the heavens again. The lances struck and soon all of them were staggering around, beating at the flames consuming them.

Pain flashed through Isranon. His arcane wounds reopened, flooding his clothing with blood. Yet he never faltered. With another shout, Isranon reduced the last of the town to cinders. Haig saw him start to fall and broke from the shielded circle. He held Isranon close to him, supporting the mage.

Isranon began the words of exorcism. Despairing shrieks rose into a cacophony of jarring noise. Isranon fought off the gathering darkness at the edge of his awareness as he came close to collapsing. The final words slipped from his mouth. Rainbow patterns of light spread over the scene of destruction and the voices were silenced. Isranon's eyes closed and he sagged against Haig. The vampire lifted him up and cradled him against his chest. Jun lifted the staff.

Dane stared at the bloody ruin of his friend. "What happened?"

"Long story. Talk later."

Haig headed back toward their camp and the others followed. As they reached the edge of the destroyed town, a maddened human lunged from the shadows. Dane whipped the assault rifle from his shoulder, took aim, and blew it to bits.

Haig paused, staring. "What the unholy hell is that weapon?"

"A present from Ishla. Another long story." Dane shouldered his gun and kept walking.

* * * *

Stygean lay shivering in his blankets in Randilyn's medical tent. Myn had been coming and going all day, having various ailments treated. Several soldiers had come in with head colds, asking for willowbark extract, menthol, and Randilyn's special potion for congestion. The boy had watched her splint a broken arm and stitch up a long cut. The poppy milk made him drowsy, yet he woke every time someone came in. So far they had kept him separated from Iyan by a curtain. Stygean longed to speak with the boy he had saved. Randilyn kept calling him a hero and that felt oddly satisfying to him.

"I thought I ought to tell you that Isranon just entered Linder's Meadow, Randi." Luck sauntered into the tent, spied Stygean and knelt beside him. "You did well, boy. I starting to rethink my opinion of you."

Stygean blinked, stammering in confusion, "Th-thank you."

Luck patted his shoulder, rose and headed for the flap only to be nearly knocked off his feet by a soldier who came rushing inside. "Sunfire lances! Sunfire lances! Dawnreturning is destroying the town!"

"I want to see it." Stygean pushed himself into a sitting position.

"There's no way to see from here." Randilyn stopped grinding herbs in her mortar and pestle at the small table.

"If we sat him atop the wagon, he could see." Luck turned to Stygean. "What do you want?"

"Top of the wagon."

Luck gathered Stygean up in a blanket and carried him outside. "Randi, you think you could hand him up to me?"

"I sure can." Randilyn took Stygean in her arms, and the boy marveled at how strong she was.

Luck climbed onto the wooden roof of the wagon and Randilyn handed the boy up to him. The captain snuggled Stygean against him, supporting him so that he could see the incredible magic in the distance. Myn sat on wagon roofs and lycans occupied the trees. A huge crowd watched it from the edge of camp.

"Dawnreturning is doing all this?" Stygean could not keep the awe from his voice. He had never seen the like of it and the idea that a mon wielding such power was a sa'necari astounded him.

His mage centers began burning. Stygean felt as if his chest and heart were being squeezed, his entrails drawn out of his body through his navel, and his skin singed. "I have to shield ... magic get me ... in trouble. Have to shield."

Luck knew that magic had been forbidden to the sa'necari boys. He met Stygean's beseeching eyes and nodded. "Do it. I'll take responsibility."

Stygean raised his inner shields and held onto them tightly. The creature that had wounded him kept alternately pulling and pounding, trying to reach through him. "Iyan ... Iyan ... is he shielded?"

A shrill scream from the tent answered Stygean's question. His hand tightened upon Luck's arm. "Get me down there. If you put me beside him, I can shield him ... I know I can."

Randilyn glanced back at the tent, her features taut with worry. "Amiri could shield, but she's gone to the edge of camp. She's waiting for Isranon."

The nibari looked ready to bolt in the direction of Amiri.

"No time." Luck gestured at Randilyn. "Put him with Iyan."

Together they lowered Stygean from the wagon into Randilyn's arms. She carried him to the tent, and around the curtain to where Iyan lay. The human boy was writhing and convulsing. She placed Stygean beside Iyan. Stygean closed his eyes and focused inward. A transparent black aura formed around the adolescent necromancer. It wavered as Stygean resisted the draining pull from the creature that had scarred his soul. Slowly, inch by inch, the auric pattern spread over the bedding, over Iyan, and held fast.

Iyan's body relaxed, his eyes opened and his hand stole into Stygean's. "It got you too, did it?"

"You're awake," Stygean murmured.

"Just now. You saved my life. I owe you."

The gratitude in Iyan's voice caused Stygean's stomach to flutter oddly. "I'm just glad you're okay."

"I don't care what anyone says. You're a good one, Stygean."

Randilyn hugged Luck and kissed him impulsively. Luck chuckled. "He did it, Randi."

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CHAPTER FIVE

DIFFICULT ENCOUNTERS

Confident without arrogance, Nans Gryphonheart strode the path between circling rows of tents on her way to the evening meeting. She had been a freeranger for sixty years, yet looked no older than eighteen. Her eyes alone betrayed her years. The kandoyarin had been skeptical of her ability at first because she looked like a pretty, untried girl. A very few of them had even made sexual remarks during the first weeks of their march, earning them a drubbing from Luck, Travis, and some of the other Rowdies. The only would-be swain that she had been forced to deal with herself was Yiggsil.

"Speak of a devil..."

Yiggsil stepped into her path with a toothy grin, holding something behind his back. His skin was like dusty elephant hide and his feet were rounded and thick. He stood eight feet tall and had a face reminiscent of a rhinoceros. Without the horn, or at least on his face, Nans thought wryly to herself.

"Got present for lady troll."

Nans shook her head in disbelief. Yiggsil never seemed ready to give up. "Okay. What have you got for me?"

Yiggsil proudly swept his hand around and Nans saw that he had the hind leg and stinger tail of a manticore.

"Where did you get that?"

"Was sniffing horses." The troll struggled with the Engla—common tongue—language. Trolls did not often speak with the other races, being more inclined to eat them. He made a determined effort, screwing up his face with determination. "Yiggsil bash it. Tasty treat for lady troll. We eat, have some beer ... Fuck?"

Nans flinched when he shoved the pieces of manticore in her face, the stinger bobbing an inch from her nose. Frowning, she growled at him. "No."

Yiggsil's big hand shot in and pinched her nipple hopefully. Nans spun into a high kick faster than Yiggsil could follow and her foot connected with his immense chest, sending him sprawling.

The troll grinned up at her. "Hit like troll. Yiggsil in love."

Nans strode past him.

* * * *

Jingen Scathwick received more privileges than Stygean, because he presented a more accommodating manner than his companion. Where Stygean's visits with his father were limited and stringently enforced; Jingen could see his mother as soon as he finished his chores. He strolled into the blood-slave section, giving pleasant nods to the lycans on guard, and headed for his mother's tent.

Anksha came bouncing from one of them on the balls of her feet, licking the blood from her mouth. Jingen noted that the tent she emerged from was Liuthan's and he schooled a gloating expression from his face. The uppity Loosestrifes, who had once employed his parents, were getting a dose of payback that pleased Jingen; although he would never let Stygean know how he felt about it.

Anksha scampered to him and patted her pouch. "Are you being a good boy?"

"Yes, Anksha, I'm being a very good boy." Jingen favored her with a modest smile.

"Candy? I have candy for good boys."

Jingen held his hand out and Anksha filled it with a handful of honey candy wrapped in twists of wax paper. "Thank you."

She ran off and he shoved it into his pocket. Jingen always accepted it even though he hated honey candy. Once she was out of sight, he walked on.

His mother, Disharyl, shared a large tent with four other sa'necari women and a male. The place was partitioned off into bedrooms. It was the largest of the blood-slave tents. Except for those five females, the rest of the blood-slaves were male. Males were easier for Anksha to capture with her powers.

Disharyl lay between the blankets. She smiled at him and lifted the farther corner of the blankets. "Come my darling, and show your mother how much you love her."

Jingen slipped between them and suckled her breast like an infant while she unfastened his trousers and helped him enter her. Their grunts and moans of sexual congress could be heard to the farthest corners of the shared tent; and their incestuous relationship was common knowledge among certain blood-slave cliques. When the thirteen-year-old had spent himself within Disharyl, they cuddled for a long time in peaceful communion.

Disharyl Scathwick kissed his forehead, fondling his hair and stroking her finger across his cheeks. "You make your mother happy."

Jingen smiled, wearing a dazed and satiated expression. "I want you happy."

Disharyl's eyes turned haunted as the depths of a blackened wood. "I'm a happy as she allows. I am too useful to them for Anksha to abuse me like she does the others."

"Do you hurt, mother?"

"Sometimes. I can feel her presence in all the nerves of my body when she enters our compound to feed. The pain and distress is only lessened after she feeds. Yet I dread having her fangs in my neck."

"You're not withering. Liuthan's a mess."

"So you've said." Disharyl's mouth twisted in distaste. "Mark my words; he's the next to die. Those high and mighty Loosestrifes are getting what they deserve."

* * * *

Anksha crept close to Dane, curled up at his feet, and sniffed him with flared nostrils. Puzzlement lit her eyes. Nans had requested that they all save their questions for the evening meeting, which only heightened everyone's curiosity about the newcomer.

Just four of them sat around the table in the command tent with Dane: Anksha, Amiri, Nevin, and Nans.

Amiri gazed at Dane, awe written large upon her features. "We thought you were a myth."

He shook his head, polishing off a goblet of blood that had an anti-coagulant added to it. "I'm the last Louistranan." Dane produced a pouch of finely cut tobacco and a small pack of papers. He rolled himself

a cigarette and sat smoking it. Catching the way that Nevin looked at him, Dane rolled another and extended it to him.

"Tobacco?" Nevin eyed it suspiciously.

Dane struck a lucifer and lit it for him.

Nevin puffed on it and smiled. "I smoke a pipe. What do you call this?"

"Cigarette."

"And those weapons of yours?"

"Guns." Dane reached over and ran his fingers through Anksha's hair. "You look so much like Akee..." He paused, glancing at her swollen belly. "Where's your mate?"

"Isranon is papa." She patted her belly and grinned.

Dane shifted in his seat to look Amiri in the eyes. "How is that possible?"

"Rogue magic. He unlocked her genetics when they mated."

"Then he's changed a lot since I last saw him. He was barely eighteen. Bodramet and Troyes rited his first love. Her name was Rose and she was a nibari. They made Isranon walk the gauntlet to save her." Dane took a long drag from his cigarette and ran a hand through his hair. "I doubt any of you have ever seen a sa'necari gauntlet run. They use knives, not sticks. He made it as far as the bottom steps of the dais they were holding her on before he collapsed from his wounds. If Mephistis had not arrived and stopped it, they would have killed him as well as Rose."

Tenly emerged from behind the curtain. "Master Isranon is resting. Haig is sitting with him."

"What's wrong with the kid?"

They shared a guarded look and then Nans gave Amiri the nod to speak.

"The Master of Blood made five blades. Four of them were given to blood-slaves. They were supposed to wait for the fifth before attacking Isranon, however, they became impatient for his death. The fifth blade will complete the spell that the blades lodged in his body. The four components of the spell are killing him inch by inch. I have not been able to identify the spell. Kalirion has said that there is no cure except mortgiefan. Isranon has rejected that."

"He would." A thin smile touched Dane's lips, caught midway between regret and admiration for Isranon's devotion to his ideals. He picked another piece from Amiri's words; his brow furrowed and the cigarette bobbed between his lips. "The blades were made by Zarliche Blood?"

"Yes."

"He's on my list. Termination with extreme prejudice, as we used to say. I've been hunting him for centuries, but he manages to stay one step ahead of me." Dane rolled another cigarette and placed it in a box, then rolled another. "You mind if I have a look at the blades?"

The blades were brought out and laid before him. Dane handled them. "I'm going to keep them."

Amiri frowned. "Keep them? I need them to find a cure."

Dane shook his head. "The one most likely to know what to do about them is Ishla. I'd like to give them to her next time I see her."

"You see her often?"

"Every chance I get." Dane gave Amiri a sly wink and chuckled. "I sleep with her."

Stunned silence ended the conversation.

* * * *

On leaving the meeting, Amiri decided to look in on Iuf. She still carried her medical satchel slung from her shoulder, which she brought with her to every meeting in case means were required to deal with Isranon's illness. When she failed to find him in his own tent, Amiri checked Corbienne's. She found him alone there in Corbienne's bedroll, his breathing stertorous and a faint bluishness to his lips. The vampire put her fingers to his neck and Read him. The ability to Read bodies and bio-alchemy was rare among humans and lycans, yet all vampires and sa'necari could do it. The uses they put it to differed. Among vampires, the Ymraudes used it in the same way as humans, to diagnose illnesses and the extent of wounds; most Lemyari simply used it to better enjoy the deaths of their victims. Sa'necari used it mostly to decide where to slip the blades in while performing the rite of Mortgiefan or committing acts of torture.

Amiri laid out her tools. She opened a tiny casket of pure Amphereon, and blew a measured dose into Iuf's nostrils through a silver tube. Reading him again, Amiri felt his heart rate steady. She poured a measure of heart medicine and blood tonic containing foxglove, holadil, and pollendine, as well as other ingredients into a jar. Then she started to attach a long glass tube to the jar, expecting that she would need to force it down his throat; and his eyes opened.

She lifted him up, putting the jar to his lips.

"Amiri?"

"Drink." Amiri had a stern, but not uncaring expression. "I don't know how much longer I can keep my promise, Iuf."

"Can't tell Nans. Mustn't tell Isranon."

"Iuf, please."

"No. They'll kill her."

"The next time Corbienne feeds, you're going die. Don't you want to live?"

"I'm nearly fifty, Amiri. I'm old."

"This is suicide..."

"A mon gets old fast in this business. My eyes aren't what they were. My reflexes have been going for a while. And I love her. If my death is the only gift I can give her, then I want it."

"You could let her turn you."

"No. I'm human. If I were twenty years younger, I'd take her gift. But I don't want it."

"Iuf, are you aware of what Isranon will do to Corbienne when she kills you?" Amiri's eyes narrowed into hard black points. "At my urging, Isranon established his own set of laws concerning the non-humans."

"Yah, I know about that." Iuf squirmed.

"Then you know that he'll execute her?"

"She'll run, Amiri. He won't catch her."

Amiri closed her eyes and lowered her head with a reluctant sigh. "If you're determined to let her do this, then it would be better if you left now. Don't wait."

"Amiri, we plan on it. Next town. We're leaving."

"I'm sorry, Iuf."

"Yeah, me too."

* * * *

Captain Travis Potshard still considered himself to be a member of Gryphonheart's Rowdies, even though they had expanded into an army and now called themselves the Army of the Renunciate. Nans had drawn the majority of her officers from the ranks of her Rowdies. As he walked, Travis whistled a melody that he had heard Isranon play a few days past. Nothing Isranon played was familiar to him. He guessed that was because Isranon came from Waejontor, and Travis had never been there. He wondered what Waejontor looked like, imagining it as a dark place where the sun never shone.

Different colored tents and banners marked off the units and groups. The non-humans had the forward and center places in the camp, with the command tent in the precise middle of it all. The paths through the camp were arranged in spirals to hinder an attacking enemy from simply riding right through and wreaking havoc.

The lycan battle-clan's section had a black banner with a silver wolf's head flying above their tents. The weather did not bother them as much as the humans and there were several of them about in their transitional form. Seeing them snouted and furry in their efforts to deal with the unpleasant weather gave Travis an odd flutter in his stomach. His love of dogs had extended itself to the lycans; a perception that gave him a twinge of discomfort over the fact that his lover, and first real relationship, was with a lycan.

"At least I've stopped trying to pet them," he muttered.

Gordain lurked near Nevin's tent, staring at the flap as if waiting to pounce, and that made him curious. The scout seemed to be hanging about Nevin's tent with suspicious frequency since the day they hit Linder's Meadow. An idle thought ran through Travis' head, and he tried to remember if he had ever seen Gordain come out of the Scarlet Tent. However, Travis decided not to investigate. He wanted to reach the blood-slaves compound and walk his lover, Darianna Donahue, to their tent as he did most days.

'Daree' was one of only three bitches serving with their lycan scouts. She also did guard duty at the blood slaves' compound on a regular rotation. Most lycans did not approve of his relationship with Daree. They tolerated it because he had saved the life of their chieftain, Nevin Igguiden, and nearly lost his own doing it.

The next section of the camp belonged to the Ymraudes. The all-female vampires of Ishla the Tinkerer had a green banner with a bold black squiggle that was the rune of their god. The five Lemyari camped beside them with no banner of their own.

An enclosed wagon like a house on wheels and painted green with the distinctive squiggly rune of

Dynanna on the side drew Travis' attention. Beside it spread a large tent dyed the same colors and marked in the same way as the wagon. The weather prevented the bio-chemists from cooking potions, so the usual sight of boiling cauldrons was absent. Disharyl Scathwick stood in the doorway of the tent. Anksha allowed only a few of her blood-slaves to move freely to any degree, and Disharyl was one of them because she had been Liuthan Loosestrife's principal bio-chemist and Amiri used her skills a lot.

Travis' cornflower eyes narrowed in his square-jawed face. That one gave him the creeps; yet he could not put his finger upon why. Iuf emerged from the tent, pushing past Disharyl. Travis' gaze flinched away from Iuf. The mon was in his units, but had been released from duty due to illness. Iuf's face had become gaunt to the point of skeletal, dark circles beneath his eyes, and a blue tinge to his lower lip.

"He's dying ... has to be." Travis quickened his stride, unable to deal with the knowledge.

All that remained to do was pass the nibari herd and the big Scarlet Tent. The nibari quarters were marked off by green tents and a blank green banner. A single Scarlet Tent stood at the edge of the nibari section. The tent had an entrance on both the non-humans' side where Travis stood at that moment and another entrance on the far side that opened on the humans tents beyond it.

Travis could never resist passing close to the Scarlet Tent. The sounds of sex coming from it reminded him of the brothels he had frequented before becoming involved with Darianna. Guilt flickered through him, although he knew that neither the lycans nor Isranon regarded sex with nibari to be equivalent to adultery.

The black tents of the blood-slaves came into view. Their compound was roped off and heavily patrolled. The four guards nodded to Travis as he passed them. Travis still had nightmares about the day when Anksha rampaged through Ocealay, the night after Isranon had been taken captive by Captain Tamric. She had acquired fifty sa'necari blood-slaves as she uncovered Liuthan's planned coup against the city-state. As much as Travis hated sa'necari, with the exception of Isranon, Anksha's ferocity against them had unsettled Travis; and left him uncomfortable in her presence ever since.

Two had died before they left Ocealay, one of them Stygean's mother Chinisi, and three more had perished in the first weeks of their march. Chinisi had been too weakened by the ferocity of Anksha's initial attack to survive the march. So the demon-eater had put her down like an injured horse; which further disturbed Travis. Only a rare mon could kill in cold blood—and Travis was not one of them.

Six foot and brown-haired, his tanned and weathered skin the texture of smooth saddle leather; the only thing imposing about Travis was his height. His hands were broad and heavy, calloused and hard, but his touch was gentle.

He found Darianna standing by the central fire. She had haired over, but not gone snouted, to better deal with the cold. The lycans were a passionate race, freely expressing their emotions. At first that had made Travis a mite uncomfortable. Then Darianna had explained that her people preferred to let their emotions out, because when repressed feelings built up it could throw them into the change hard and fast—especially rage. Darianna tended to hair over at the first touch of anger, as instinct drove her into the hybrid state that her people fought best in. In her hybrid form, Darianna could lift Travis off his feet despite his far larger size.

Their hair color frequently reflected the color of their coats. Darianna's hair was silver with a red streak.

"Thought I'd walk to the tent, Daree."

Darianna slipped her arm around his waist and put her head on his shoulder. Travis' loins hardened the moment she touched him. His cheeks brightened.

"You still taking those herbs?" Travis whispered as they walked through the camp.

"You still have some eelskins?"

Travis inhaled sharply and shook his head. "I ran out."

"I won't be dishonest with you. Doing this the human way is getting annoying." She tilted her head in annoyance. "I'm taking care of this matter tonight the way my own people do it. Then you can stop asking me about herbs."

Travis sucked in another deep breath. "What's that?"

"I'm trysting with Olin tonight in wolf form."

Travis stopped in his tracks and stared at her. "What have I done wrong?"

"You've annoyed me."

"You're throwing me over for Olin?"

Daree flicked a long strand of hair back. "Throwing you over?"

"You're gonna let him wag his staff into you. What the hell am I supposed to think?" A frown deepened in Travis' face. "Humans not good enough for you now?"

"Travis! I'm only doing it once."

"Bloody hell..."

Daree giggled and Travis flushed. She cocked her head and made a moue. "You're starting to sound like us, Old Dog. I'm doing this for you."

"For me? Now this is getting down right queer."

"Once I mate in wolf form, I can't get pregnant in human form."

The anger faded from Travis' face. "Really?"

"Really."

"Why didn't you do that to begin with?"

"I had a lot of reasons. I wanted to be human for you. I didn't like the idea of having some strange wolf's stick inside me. I wanted you and only you." She kissed him deeply. "A lot of my people use herbs and eelskins. There are drawbacks to doing it the old fashioned way."

"Such as?"

"If we ever did decide to have children...."

Travis tensed at the mention of children, but remained silent.

"The only way would be for me to first have a child with a lycan from a wolf form mating."

His eyes saucered, he inhaled loudly, and then relaxed. "I can deal with that." A naughty boy smile crossed his face and a blush followed it. "Uhm, tit for tat, since you're gonna be ... well..." Travis lowered

his hand palm up and wiggled his middle finger "With Olin ... if you object I won't do it."

"Won't do what?"

"The Scarlet Tent."

"Why would I object? They're just nibari."

Travis hugged her and they continued walking. As they reached the lycan section, Travis spied the very last mon he wanted to deal with coming toward them. Nevin strode down the path with Gordain at his heels. Travis shifted to the other side of Darianna and ducked his head so that it would seem he did not see Nevin; and therefore did not have to greet him.

Darianna caught the movement. "What's with you and Nevin?"

"He's corsach."

"So?"

"Olin said he was in love with someone he could not have...."

Darianna stared at him incredulously. "Oh, Travis. You think it's you?"

"Could be."

Darianna burst out laughing.

"What's so funny, Daree? It must be someone who's..." Travis squirmed. "Well someone who's not ... corsach. I saved his life. Stands to reason."

Darianna stopped laughing with a tremendous effort. "It's Isranon. He's in love with Isranon."

"No kidding?" Travis relaxed, heaving a great sigh. "But he's married."

"Yes, I know." Darianna looked bemused.

Travis blushed, pulled her closer to him, and started walking again.

A distressed noise drew Travis' attention and he glanced between two of the wagons. Stygean and Jingen had Jun's thirteen year old nibari, Nolly, cornered. She had her back against one of the wagons, shaking her head vigorously, her eyes wide with fright.

Travis strolled closer to see what was happening, his movements casual so that he did not draw their notice. Daree held back, hands planted on her hips, and frowning.

Nolly's light blonde hair veiled the curve of her long neck, which sa'necari and Lemyari breeders considered appealing. She wore her blouse opened, just enough to reveal the tops of her breasts and the base of her throat. The ruddy cast of her fair skin and a hint of swelling in her neck suggested to Travis that she was far into a bad case of blood-bloat. A dangerous condition for nibari. He felt a flash of anger at Jun for having waited so long to blood her. Then his attention focused upon the boys.

Travis siezed them by their collars and yanked them off their feet. "Go on, Nolly. Get home."

Nolly fled.

Travis shook the two boys hard and then released them. "You leave her alone."

Stygean eyed him sulkily. "We weren't doing anything."

"I don't give a shit. You will stay away from Nolly. Furthermore, I don't like you just running loose about camp. When you get your chores done, I want you in your tents fast." Travis raised his hand to stop Stygean's next words. "That's an order and Lord Isranon will back me up when I tell him what you two little shits were doing. Now get to that tent."

Daree came up behind Travis and shifted into her hybrid form with a growl. "I caught them twice at the compound. Nolly's scared to go there now."

Travis shook his finger in the direction of their tent. "Get out of here."

The boys ran.

She put her arm around him, slipping back into her human form, and nibbled his ear. "Well, are we going to play Jack in the Orchard or not?"

"We are." They moved on.

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CHAPTER SIX

PUNISHMENT

The Army of the Renunciate struck the brick and mortar Lusatranden Highway that ran north as far as the Fords of Hillora and south to the Carasonè Sea. The people who had built this road had vanished into the mists of the past and even their names had been forgotten; although the name for the road had not been. The journey would go faster and easier now with less chance of the wagons bogging down on dirt roads. They made camp late in the afternoon beneath a spreading stand of ancient beeches that framed the road in shadows.

While everyone moved to their tasks, Jun and Garin gathered a group of Anksha's slave children and herded them to the nearby stream with buckets for water. The youngest children had begun to respond to Anksha's overtures of friendship characterized by gifts of candy and a willingness to play games with them. She even allowed them to touch her tightly curled tail, something she refused to tolerate from anyone except Isranon.

Jun and Garin oversaw and guarded the children as they struggled with buckets of water to be brought back from the stream near the camp. Stygean and Jingen, the oldest boys, had the easiest time of it, walking ahead of the rest. Some of the smallest children paired off to carry the buckets between them and share the weight. They were all sa'necari except for Nolly.

True humans were never assigned to supervise the sa'necari children, because as innocent and harmless as most of them seemed on the surface, they were all innate necromancers who would develop fangs and a craving for blood at puberty. The two oldest, Stygean and Jingen, already had theirs.

Jun kept Nolly close to him as much as possible after hearing from Travis; which was why Jun included her when he had to guard the sa'necari children. His petition to blood her had been approved by Isranon and Anksha more than two months ago, and then in a surprise he had never expected, Isranon had signed her ownership papers over to him. Nolly wore a collar that read: Nolly, property of Jun Goriah. Yet he had hesitated over when to blood her, wanting it to be special, private, and not in the tent he

shared with Garin. Jun had never owned a nibari before, although he had always had access to the herds of his employers and friends whenever he needed to feed. This caused him to feel intensely fond and protective of his Nolly, taking great joy in her smiles.

Nainee, Haig's lead nibari mare, had assured him that the girl was instructed in the first three positions of submission, but she had yet to learn the others—those were for her master to teach. He would be expected to teach her those over the next few months. Jun thought longingly of the old estate in Minnoras where he had served as a mon-at-arms, which had fallen to the hellgod Gylorean Galee. There they would have taken her to special rooms for blooding and afterward released her to the general herd, which fed the hemovores in the little alcoves of the Great Hall or in their chambers. Jun knew he should not keep postponing Nolly's blooding. Already he could see the first signs of Blood-Bloat, a dangerous condition that affected nibari if they were not fed upon regularly once they entered puberty. Nolly's complexion, normally fair as fresh milk, had turned ruddy, her face puffy, and the glands in her long neck swollen. If Blood-Bloat was allowed to continue too long, death resulted from it as the nibari's body became clogged with a surfeit of blood.

Jun could tell from the way that Nolly moved and breathed that she had begun to suffer. He had to blood her today before she became any worse. Travis had given him a tongue-lashing over it three days ago. Furthermore, the other Lemyari expected to see her marked soon, making it shameful to let her go and appear unworthy before her peers and the masters.

Nolly lingered at the stream, filling her bucket. Jun had noticed her pour the water back into the stream and refill the bucket three times in an effort to find herself alone with him. He knew she did it as an invitation to him. It made him hungry for her.

It's time.

"Get the rest of the children back, Garin. I need time alone with Nolly."

Garin grinned. "Mark her well."

"I will." Jun smiled back. Then he returned to the stream. Nolly dragged another bucket full from the water and hoisted it up. Jun took it from her hands and set it down on the banks.

"Later. Come with me. It's time."

Nolly stared up at the vampire's bulk, a nervous smile flickering on her lips. "Yes, Master Jun."

Jun lifted her buckets, carrying them as he led her around to a thicket of elms. He set the buckets aside, and spread his cloak on the ground. "Undress and assume first position upon my cloak."

Nolly disrobed and settled on her knees with her hands behind her, her head tilted to expose her enticing neck. Jun nodded approvingly. She had it perfect. Her budding breasts were sweet to his eyes, as was the thatch between her loins, and the throbbing vein in her neck. She would be worth breeding when she was older. The Loosestrife herds had had some fine bloodlines in them.

Isranon had not yet allowed a culling of the captured studs—they would not kill them, merely burn their fertility out, and make them mules to keep the females happy. That would need to be gotten to or else they would end up with more pregnant nibari than they could cope with. The studs had, perforce, been moved in with all the others and their instincts were honed for breeding over countless generations. It was always best to keep the number of studs down to two or three at most. Perhaps when they prepared for the culling, Isranon would allow him to purchase a fine stud to mate to Nolly. It was time he had his own herd, and he wanted only the most special and desirable stud he could afford to be ready when the time

came to breed Nolly.

Jun dropped his cloak, unbuckled his sword belt, and laid his weapons within easy reach. Nolly's eyes traced his tall, angular body as Jun removed his clothing, lingering on his long rod in a nest of curling brown thatch. He knelt in front of her, brushing his fingers through her fair hair and feeling her trepidation. "I'll be gentle. You'll feel much better when I'm finished."

Nolly quivered under his touch, watching his cock straighten as it hardened, and wondering how he could get all of that inside her without hurting her. "Yes, I know."

"Good." Jun took her hands and stroked her fingers through the thick curling hair on his chest. "Touch me. Feel me. Do not fear me."

Nolly stroked him timidly when he released her hands. Her fingers went gradually lower until they were tangled in the thatch around his member. She dug through his crotch hairs with a shy tentativeness that suggested she wished to touch the pale lance standing forth from the dark hair, but hadn't yet the courage.

Jun mouthed her neck, biting along it gently without yet breaking the tender skin. She trembled; and Jun tasted her fear. It made him hot, hard, and eager. Jun ran his hands up and down her body, soothing her. He took hold of her hair firmly to keep her from flinching when the time came, while his other hand thumbed her nipple. Nolly moaned beneath his skilled fingers. His fangs went in smoothly, barely eliciting a whimper from her, and he drank. Jun could feel Nolly relaxing as he drew the excess fluids from her body and relieved her Blood-Bloat. He was masterful, if not as tender as Haig who had a reputation for making his nibari very happy when he fed upon and lay with them. Jun swept through her mind with images of flowers and the scent of jasmine. He set sways within her mind to make her eager for him. The sways would fade in time, but by then Nolly would have lost her nervousness.

She went weak against him, smiling dazedly. He emerged from her, deliberately leaving a huge, conspicuous bruise with two small holes while being careful not to scar her, and licked the wound to close it. That bruise would linger long enough for all to know she had been blooded.

Nolly gave him a stunned smile as she fingered the bruise. "I'll wear it proudly, Jun."

Jun kissed her forehead and then her lips. "I know you will."

The final step of the bleeding was to remove the hymen and end her virginity. Jun fingered her vagina, finding that it was small and tight; while he was large and thick. The nibari always were at this age. He would need to be careful not to tear more than her hymen.

Jun pushed her to the ground, murmuring, "Third position."

Nolly lay quietly, with her legs opened in readiness for him. Her breath caught a bit and then came out in a nervous sigh as Jun spread his bulk atop her. He rested on one elbow so that he had a free hand to comfort her with.

Yes, Nainee trained her well. Nolly knew what he would do and was prepared to receive him. He entered her as gently as he could, yet she cried out when her hymen tore and lay very still as if afraid to move or react to him. Jun stroked her face as he continued to thrust methodically, opening her up more and more until he had torn it all away. Her warm, wet, tightness clutching at his member was very satisfying. Then he went deeper and harder.

"Put your legs around me. Grasp me."

She crossed her legs over his buttocks. Jun saw tears in her eyes and worried that he was hurting her.

"Put your fingers on the base of my cock and feel me move."

Nolly obeyed, but it remained a passionless coupling. That would change in time, with training. Jun smiled and kissed her. Yes, Nolly would be one of the better nibari. He would come back to her often. She would learn to trust him and then the passion would come. He reared back and shoved in all the way as his dead seed spilled inside her. She whimpered. And that was when Jun saw the figure, watching in the shadows, a slender half-grown boy. He suspected that it was Stygean.

"Damn it!" Jun cursed as he rolled off her and pulled his pants on.

Nolly trembled. "Did I do it wrong?"

Jun hugged her briefly. "Not you, Nolly. Someone was watching us. Get your clothes on and get back to camp."

Nolly obeyed and Jun walked behind her as far as the place he had seen the figure. He knelt and ran his hand over the ground, looking for signs of who it had been and came up with nothing. He felt tempted to come back with one of the lycans and have them sniff around for a scent, but the odds were that all of the children had passed through here and the scent would be confused. Instead, he headed off to inform Haig.

"That boy was watching me!" Jun burst into Haig's tent without announcing himself and stopped, looking abashed. Nainee had her bodice down and Haig was licking her breasts. "It seems to be a night for these things," Jun stammered.

Nainee laughed, worsening Jun's embarrassment, and pulled her bodice up.

"What are you talking about, Jun?" Haig straightened and wiped a smear of Nainee's blood from his lips.

"I blooded Nolly tonight. In a thicket as we finished with the water carrying. I had shot my wad—excuse my language, Nainee. Anyway, I was still between Nolly's legs. You trained her well, Nainee, by the way. And there he was, standing in the shadows watching it all."

"You got a good look at him?"

"No, he ran as soon as he knew he had been seen. But I'm certain that it was Stygean. That little death-eater is always creeping around, going places he shouldn't be."

Haig sighed, closed his trousers, and stood up. "I'll speak to Isranon."

"I'll go to Nolly in case she needs something," Nainee said. "A nibari's first bleeding can be a difficult experience. My first master was sa'hecari and not gentle."

* * * *

Isranon missed Dane, who had left the morning after the destruction at Linder's Meadow, and wished his old friend had agreed to come with them. Yet he also understood that they all had to fight the war with Galee in their own ways. He glanced up from the book he was reading, as Haig entered the tent with Jun. "Isranon, we need to talk about the boys."

He did not need to ask which boys. "What did they do?"

"They were supposed to go back to their tent. Instead, Jun discovered that one of them was apparently

stalking him while he blooded Nolly."

"Which one?" Tension threaded Isranon. Amiri and Nevin had pressured him into making laws to apply to everyone in camp—especially the hemovores—or else Amiri would have killed both boys out of hand as too dangerous to let live. He had left the discipline of the human soldiers to Nans Gryphonheart, while hoping he would never be forced to apply them to Jingen and Stygean.

Jun took a seat and leaned his elbows on the table. "He was in the shadows. I couldn't see his face, but I know it was Stygean."

"How do you know it was Stygean?"

Jun's face flushed with anger. "Because he's been stalking Nolly."

"Did she tell you that?" Isranon strove to remain calm, trapped between anger at this disobedience, and a reluctance to punish the boys when he was trying so hard to teach them a different path.

"We've all seen it, Isranon. Jun, Corbienne, Garin, Keahi, Travis, and myself. All of us."

Isranon got to his feet, leaning on Warrior: his legs were bothering him again. "Let's talk to both boys."

* * * *

Stygean huddled under his blanket with one of the books Isranon had given him as a birthday present. It was a 'pressed' book, one of those they had started to manufacture in Iradrim and Creeya. The dwarven technology had not yet spread to all the realms, but people claimed it would. Stygean paused periodically to examine the bindings, looking for flaws in the workmanship without finding any. Dawnreturning had confiscated all the books in the libraries of the conquered in Ocealay, including his father's. The book had been packed up, globed, and now resided in one of the wagons. Stygean thought with longing of his father's library, and how he used to curl up there in a chair to read. Resentment flared, stifling the need to cry for his losses: home, security, and a pleasant life.

He heard angry voices heading for the tent he shared with Jingen, and rolled onto his side, carefully placing the book in his pack for safekeeping.

"Stygean!" Haig shouted from outside the tent.

Stygean blinked, wondering what he had done, for he had been on his best behavior for several days. Emerging from the tent, he found Haig, Jun, Isranon and Anksha standing outside. He stiffened, trying not to look at Anksha the Beast. She frightened him and he hated her. "What is it?"

Jun stepped forward. "You did not return to your tent as you were ordered. You snuck back to watch me blood Nolly. I saw you."

Stygean sucked air. "It wasn't me."

"Where have you been then?"

"In my tent reading."

"Is Jingen in there?" Isranon reached for the tent flap.

Stygean shook his head. "No. But, there's no harm in watching. We've seen it all before. We've seen the rites performed."

A scowl flickered across Isranon's face more at the mention of the rites than at Jingen being absent, and turned to Haig. "Find Jingen."

The Lemyari left.

"Filthy sa'necari," Anksha growled, descending into her patois, the tips of her long black hair lifting and dancing as if caught in a static charge. "Always sneaking around looking for trouble."

Jingen sauntered up with Haig and Luka, Zulaika's nibari.

"Where were you?" Isranon frowned at Jingen.

"You were told to return to your tent," Jun growled.

Jingen looked at him with wide, guileless eyes, tinged with hurt feelings. "I had permission to visit my mother when I finished my chores. I went there directly. You can ask her. Luka walked me back."

Luka nodded.

"I didn't do it." The promise of punishment in their expressions sent a sick feeling through Stygean. He hadn't done anything—except stand up to them. They were bullies, the lot of them. Stygean glanced at Isranon, expecting anger, but finding only a disturbing sadness and resignation in the mage's eyes.

Isranon turned away, walking to a slender beech tree, leaning his shoulder against it and putting his back to the boys. "Jun, do what you have to."

Jun cut a switch from the nearest beech tree while Haig forced Stygean's tunic over the boy's head and tossed it on the ground. Stygean twisted and squirmed, his muscles and skin crawling in terrified anticipation of the first blow. Haig grasped the boy's upper arms and held him firmly, exposing his back to Jun.

Iyan raced up to them, his eyes large. "No. Stygean wouldn't do it. He saved me. He wouldn't do it." The adults ignored Iyan, so the boy pulled at Isranon's arm. "Don't do this."

"He disobeyed orders, Iyan. There's nothing I can do about it."

Iyan heard Stygean scream, spun about and saw the blood welling in long tears on Stygean's back. He scanned the faces and spied Travis standing with a smug look, realized he would get no help there, and so ran to Jun. "Please stop. Stygean's my friend."

Travis jerked Iyan off his feet, tucked the boy under his arm and carried him away. "Don't fool yourself, Iyan. That little bastard's no one's friend."

"Next time, you'll obey orders." Jun applied the switch to Stygean's back with savage enthusiasm.

Stygean flinched and tears leaped into his eyes. He shrieked and gasped each time the stinging beech wand met his flesh, pain driving the breath from his lungs again and again. His face burned with humiliation. He dimly became aware of the nibari children and adults gathering to watch. He had never been beaten before, so it hurt both his body and his pride. His flesh parted beneath the blows. Blood ran down his back, soaking the top of his pants. He felt dizzy and weak; his legs wanted to buckle as the beating continued for what seemed forever. Despite the pain, Stygean refused to beg Jun to stop. It ceased abruptly and left Stygean waiting in dread and confusion for the next strike. Instead, Haig straightened him up by one arm.

Isranon refused to look him. "Take him to his father."

Jun snatched Stygean from Haig, licking the bloody stick as he dragged the stumbling boy across the camp to the black tents of the blood-slaves. Daree, who was on guard at the tents that day, shook her head at Stygean's bloody back as Jun marched him past her.

Disharyl Scathwick, Jingen's mother, stood watching, muttering under her breath when she saw the boy. "My, how the mighty are fallen."

His father had a small tent apart from the other blood-slaves, since they did not want the previous leader influencing them and making them hard to handle. No one trusted Liuthan.

Jun shoved Stygean through the tent door before following him inside. Stygean staggered, and stumbled to his knees.

Liuthan, seated upon his cot, glanced at them.

Stygean picked himself up and managed to cross the last few steps to Liuthan, struggling not to weep.

The Withering, which was the fate of all myn taken as blood-slaves by Anksha the beast, had reduced Liuthan's once powerful body to flaccid sagging muscles on a gaunt frame. His rugged features had lost all traces of his previous handsomeness, and become faded and drawn with dark circles under his eyes, deep canyons of suffering etched around his mouth, across his cheeks, and lined his forehead. Liuthan rose from the cot with an effort, and his arms closed around Stygean. His son winced as Liuthan's arms touched his wounds. Liuthan frowned, lifted his arm, and stared at the blood on it.

"Your son misbehaved."

Stygean gave way to tears. "I hate you."

Liuthan shifted his grip on his now weeping son, one arm around his neck and the other across his bottom so that he could comfort Stygean without touching the bloody welts. "Dawnreturning..."

"Turned his back. We have rules. The rules will be obeyed, without exceptions." Then Jun stepped outside to give them time alone.

"I hate them." Stygean moaned. "I didn't do anything."

Liuthan helped his boy over to the cot and sat down with him. "Don't say that. The old ways are death for you now."

"But I didn't do it. It was Jingen. I'm certain of it."

"Don't protect Jingen. I never trusted his family. I have never trusted him. He's too much like his mother."

Stygean wiped his tears with the back of his hand. "You never said..."

"I didn't think you were ready to hear it. The two of you seemed to be friends."

Stygean frowned, changing the subject. "I took Farris."

Alarm swept across Liuthan's face. "Not in the rites?" He tilted Stygean's face up to study his eyes, to see if that first tainted shade of amaranth had entered them.

"No, of course not. I'm not stupid. I mean sexually."

Liathan listened to him describe his experiences with Farris, how he went to her nightly in hidden places. Then he kissed his son and took his face in his hands. "Now listen to me. If they catch you with Farris, it will go far worse than this for you. You must stop it. You must do what they tell you."

"Father.... I am sa'necari."

"It will not matter what you are, if you are dead," Liathan said sharply. "Listen to Dawnreturning. Learn his ways. And, if you can, embrace them."

"Father, I want to kill him," Stygean screamed. "He let them do this to me. The price of heresy is death. If I believed I could kill Anksha, I would try so that you would be free. But she is the Beast. And Jun ... I'd like to put a stake through his heart. I want to kill them all. Kill all of them. I want to rite that arrogant nibari, Nainee. They make me take my lessons from her. A nibari teaching a sa'necari! I feel humiliated."

Liathan listened until the rant had ended and Stygean began first to weep and then to sob brokenly, finally settling into some intermittent hiccupping. "Everything you say is true. What is also true is that all those things will get you killed."

Stygean twisted away. "I don't care. I am sa'necari."

Liathan's face reddened. "No! Listen to me. Get that out of your head. You are sa'necari. They can never take that away from you. However, to keep the truth of sa'necari alive, you must keep yourself alive."

"Father...."

"Let me finish. Listen to Dawnreturning. Do what he says. Stay alive; keep the promise of your nature alive. My health fails, Stygean. I won't be here much longer for you. Promise me that you will do what he tells you, that you'll stay alive."

"I promise, Father." Then Stygean pressed himself into his father's arms, and began crying again.

* * * *

Isranon sat at his table with his head laying on his folded arms amidst the books he had been reading. He devoted every spare hour to studying Josiah's journals and texts, knowing that his life and those of his companions depended upon his learning everything that he could about the arcane; yet he found it difficult to focus. Stygean's screams of pain still echoed in his thoughts.

He had become the first mage-paladin to Kalirion Sun-Lord by taking on Josiah's powers and responsibilities, but the core of it had been his willingness to also shoulder Josiah's sins and expiate them on his dead friend's behalf so that Josiah's soul could rest.

At the sound of someone entering the tent, he stirred and raised his head. "I didn't want to do it."

Nevin frowned and ran his hand through his black hair disturbing the patches of gray in his heavy thatch.

"You mean the boy?"

Isranon nodded.

"He deserved it. Maybe you'd have turned out better had I turned you across my knee like I did the others."

Isranon repressed a frown and wondered what had Nevin so grumpy. He frequently wrote it off to the

fact that lycan lawgivers not only enforced the law, they taught it to their primarily illiterate people. Nevin had always been quick to tack Isranon's hide to the wall in philosophical discussions. Isranon usually got sucked into such discussions even when they turned into arguments. The Dark Brothers of the Light had been given to endless rounds of debating philosophy when they were not brooding about the nature of things.

"The boy is bad, Isranon. He'll stick a knife in you one day. And I don't trust the other little shite either."

"Jingen?"

"Aye."

"I still did not like having to do that."

"Get used to it. The only thing they understand is strength ... and violence. It's what they were raised to."

Isranon sighed. "I want to get through to them. To teach them a better way."

"Beating the shite out of him is a good start."

"Maybe."

* * * *

Liuthan lay on his cot with his robe open, revealing the reddened splotches, pustules and running sores that covered most of his chest and stomach. His muscles sagged on his bones like an old man's. His clothing irritated the lesions. Randilyn flicked her pale blonde hair back, opened a jar, and smeared a healing salve over the lesions.

He shivered as the cool salve touched his skin and eased his discomfort. "Thank you."

"That's okay."

The tent flap parted and Isranon walked in. "Are you nearly done?"

"No, but I can come back when you're finished."

Isranon nodded and Randilyn left them. He grasped Liuthan's wrist and read him. He shook his head as he released Liuthan's wrist. "I can't do more than I've been doing. You'll start showing signs of the madness soon."

Liuthan grimaced. "Then I'm down to weeks."

"You won't see winter."

Liuthan fell silent.

Isranon placed his hands on Liuthan's chest and poured his healing energies into the man's body. Liuthan felt dizzy with relief as his pain eased, the worst of the lesions closed, but others continued to ooze.

"I feel like I'm rotting away inside and out."

"That's fairly accurate." Isranon removed his hands.

"Did you have to let them beat my son?"

"Stygean broke the rules."

Liathan winced at Isranon's tone. "He didn't break them. It was Jingen."

"Jingen was with his mother. A nibari vouched for him."

"A nibari's mind is frail...."

Isranon turned reflective, wondering about the nibari that had said she saw Jingen go into his mother's tent. Nibari were more susceptible to the psi aspects of sa'necari magic than other races. He still did not know to what extent the boys' had mastered the arts of the deathmages before coming into his hands.

"He has never been beaten before, Isranon. We raised Stygean with love."

"I regret having to allow it. But the rules are the rules."

Liathan closed his eyes. "He's always been a good boy. You should have seen how hard he worked with me in the salle. I taught him knives, swords, spears; all the weapons. He always tried to please me."

"He's weapons-trained?" A note of interest crept into Isranon's voice. Nevin had trained him in blades as a boy, thinking that his magic would never amount to anything because he was a Dark Brother of the Light.

"Yes. We had to pass as kandoyarin. I was training him into a blademaster like myself."

Isranon rubbed his face, let out a long exhalation. "I want to reach him."

"I keep telling him to follow your rules."

"Maybe if I put him to training again?"

"He would appreciate it. I'm certain."

"I'll put him with Nevin as soon as he's healed."

"Thank you. I don't want my boy to die."

"I don't either."

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CHAPTER SEVEN

EXECUTIONS

Isranon regarded Amiri in silence, waiting for her to tell him what she had come to talk to him about. He poured himself a measure of Sanguine Rose to ease his aching body and sipped it.

The Ymraude pulled at her wealth of slender braids, clacking the beads together. "This isn't easy, Isranon."

He nodded. "I gathered that."

"It's about Iuf."

"And Corbienne?"

Amiri's lips tightened. "I promised I wouldn't tell you. However ... I think things are too far gone not to."

"What do you mean?"

"Corbienne hasn't been right since Chyniolus."

"I noticed that. Get to the point."

Amiri looked uneasy, averting her eyes from his, and letting silence settle between them.

Isranon's brow furrowed and he knew what she would say. "She's Dancing him?"

Amiri gave a mute nod.

Alarm swept through Isranon and he nearly screamed. "I want them brought here now! At once!"

"I'll get Travis and Haig to help me look for them."

Isranon stared at the tent door long after Amiri left, a prayer on his lips that Iuf and Corbienne could be found before it was too late. Bad decisions haunted him, which led him to think again about Merissa Redhand and their son, Darmyk. His son was three years old now, and Isranon had never seen him. He had not even known that he had left Merissa pregnant, until after the boy's birth; when Nevin revealed it in Imralon following a bad episode of Isranon's recurrent illness. She was his childhood playmate among the lycans, the daughter of the Red Wolf chieftain, Claw Redhand. A sharp whiff of melancholy breathed through his heart and doubled his sorrows.

* * * *

Corbienne stroked his chest. "I love you, Iuf. You're the only one who makes me warm."

"I know, Corbie." He squeezed her breasts.

She pressed her body over his and licked his neck.

Iuf tensed and stifled a cry of pain as her fangs entered him. Usually Corbienne would have swept him into illusions of pleasure, but she was growing wilder and more desperate to taste him. He writhed in pain beneath her, which only excited her more. She sucked harder and harder, hauling the life out of him faster and faster. Iuf groaned loudly. Darkness gathered around the edges of his fading vision. He felt his heart palpitating madly. Dizziness swept through him.

Corbienne sensed his heart failing, and she knew she should stop. Yet, the taste of his blood called to her like a seiryn's song, and she kept thinking, *"Just a little more won't hurt. Just a tiny bit more. Iuf won't mind. He knows he keeps me warm. He knows I love him. He won't mind. Just a little bit more."*

Iuf's heart fluttered. His breathing shallowed out, grew stronger, and shallowed out again. Then his heart stopped, and he stared sightlessly at the tent roof.

Corbienne felt confused and disoriented when it became harder to pull more blood out of her lover. All she wanted was just a little bit more. So she continued sucking.

Travis and Haig poked their heads into the tent. "Hey, Iuf, what's up? Haig and I thought you might like to have a drink with—"

Travis' gaze fell upon Corbienne sucking on Iuf's neck, recognized the bluish tinge to Iuf's flesh, and noted his staring eyes. "Hey, get off him, you crazy bitch!"

Corbienne jerked her fangs out of Iuf and swiped her tongue over the wound, but the wound neither closed nor bled. She retreated from his body, shaking her head in furious denial. "I just wanted a little bit more," Corbienne whimpered.

Travis moved to Iuf's side and felt for a pulse that he already knew he would not find.

Haig stepped between Travis and Corbienne, eyes narrowing, taking in the blood smearing Corbienne's mouth. "How is he?"

"He's dead."

Haig's fangs came down and he snarled at Corbienne.

She shrank back from Haig. "I didn't mean to do it. He kept me warm. I needed him to keep me warm."

Haig flicked his big hand at Travis without taking his eyes off Corbienne. "Get help!"

Travis raced out.

Corbienne turned to flee, and Haig lunged, tackling her. His huge body, as bearish as the cloak he wore, carried her to the ground. He pinned her with his knee in the small of her back, and twisted Corbienne's arms behind her.

"We're going to stake you, Corbienne. That's the law. Take no lives out of appetite or for pleasure."

She jerked and twisted. "Let me go. Please, let me go. I didn't mean to kill him. I loved him."

"You loved him to death. You Passion-Danced him. We all noticed it."

"Then you should have stopped me."

"We couldn't stop you if you didn't want to be stopped. Amiri warned you. Isranon warned you."

"Mercy, Haig. Please."

The other three Lemyari vampires burst into the tent: Jun, Garin, and Keahi.

Garin glanced at Iuf's rapidly cooling corpse. "He was a good mon. He didn't deserve to die this way."

Jun grabbed Corbienne's right arm, his grip tight enough to make her flinch. Haig rolled off her, and grasped her left arm. Between them they brought her to her feet. "Amiri has the Ymraudes raising a pole and bundling faggots to burn her with."

Corbienne struggled, but could not get free of the two much larger males. Jun and Haig propelled her roughly from the tent. Garin followed them with Iuf's body in his arms.

* * * *

To take his mind off the possibilities while he waited for Amiri to return, Isranon poured over Josiah's journals again, working to memorize as much of the knowledge as he could. Sometimes it seemed like he would never absorb it all. He kept trying to compress Josiah's two hundred years of learning into days and weeks of reading and study. If they were going to stop the hellgod Gylorean Galee, he needed to

know everything he possibly could to the best of his ability.

Amiri burst into the tent. "Corbienne has killed Iuf."

Isranon paled, his lips parting in distress, his brow furrowed. "I warned them."

"We all warned her, Isranon." Amiri fiddled with her braids, clacking the beads woven into her nappy hair together. "What are we going to do?"

He closed the journal. "Burn her."

"Good. I already have a pole going up to hold her and wood being gathered for a fire."

Isranon nodded, fighting a tightening in his chest. "She was my friend."

"It doesn't excuse what she did."

"I know." He pushed out of his chair, grasped Warrior, and walked to the tent flap leaning on the staff.

Amiri followed him out.

Isranon glanced around. "Where is it?"

"I'll show you." Amiri led Isranon between several wagons to a place near the center of camp that was clear of trees. Zulaika, the captain of the Ymraudes, and several of her fellows had raked all the debris and grass from a large circle, dug a firebreak around it, and had the pole erected. Chains and manacles had been piled beside the pole. The light of the setting sun glinted on the metal pile, turning the blue-violet of the kendaryl—the hardest, sharpest metal of all and the one that held the greatest magic charges—a bright puce.

"You've done this before." Isranon's words framed a statement, not a question.

Amiri nodded. "We've always killed rogue vampires. It's what the Tinkerer created us to do."

Isranon turned to her. "How can you be so prepared ... when in the past you've—"

"Let people die for the sake of my scientific studies? You're never going to forgive me for that, are you?"

"I didn't say that. Without you I would never have been able to save Nevin."

"Then let the old wounds heal. Knowledge always come at a price."

Isranon's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "I know."

"And when are you going to drink that bottle of Josiah's blood I gave you? He traded it to me freely for knowledge."

"Soon."

* * * *

Haig and Jun dragged Corbienne through the camp nude. All around them people made obscene comments as they passed. Garin walked behind Haig with Iuf's corpse in his arms.

In the center of camp a pole had been raised, the area around it cleared, and myn were piling faggots of wood at the base.

"Please. I didn't mean to do it." Corbienne whimpered.

Isranon stood beside the pyre, his eyes as cold as the Iron Glacier. "Chain her."

"Please, have mercy!"

Lean, muscular Zulaika wrapped the chains around Corbienne's waist, binding her to the pole while Amiri held her in place. They manacled her wrists and ankles. She struggled and wept as they secured her against the wood.

Stygean leaned against Randilyn. They had summoned him to see this, despite the fact that he could barely stand. "She's a vampire. It's her nature. He has no right ... no right."

"She broke the rules." Randilyn hugged Stygean, careful of his wounds.

"It's not right."

Isranon gestured at Amiri. "Kill her."

Corbienne shrieked.

Amiri climbed onto the woodpile and faced Corbienne. "We all warned you." She pulled her blade. Corbienne began to thrash and yank at her chains, trying to pull free and avoid the blade. Amiri stabbed her in the chest, but missed Corbienne's heart because of the Lemyari's twisting.

"No, Amiri. Please."

Amiri jammed her blade into Corbienne's stomach and nailed her to the pole. The runes and enchantments on the blade burned and smoked in Corbienne's undead flesh. Corbienne shrieked in anguish. Amiri pulled a second blade from her belt, plunged it through Corbienne's chest, and fastened that part of her to the pole also.

Isranon flinched away from the sight of Corbienne transfixed against the wood and lowered his head, unable to watch the final blow. "Father, forgive me. She must die."

Amiri gripped Corbienne's throat, imprisoning her head to prevent further movement, pulled her third blade, and pressed it over Corbienne's heart. "You are convicted of murder in the Dance of Passion. The sentence is death. I herewith carry it out."

The Ymraude vampire shoved her third knife into Corbienne's heart. Corbienne stiffened, jerked, and vomited blood. Amiri gave the blade a ripping twist and tore Corbienne's heart in half. Corbienne's eyes bulged for an instant. She sagged in her bonds. Amiri released her. Corbienne's head fell forward onto her chest.

Amiri Read Corbienne and nodded. "She's dead."

Garin placed Iuf's corpse at Corbienne's feet and withdrew.

Isranon lifted his head and regarded the two corpses with sorrow. "Everyone move back."

They did so and Isranon summoned fire. The wood flared up, burning steadily. Then Isranon walked away, not wanting to watch further.

Isranon entered his tent and sat down at his table, shaking. He opened a bottle of whiskey, something he rarely drank, and poured himself a glass. His trembling hand caused the whiskey to slosh over the side.

He felt sick to the bottom of his soul at having ordered Corbienne's execution. Isranon had known that sooner or later he would be forced to order an execution, but he had never expected that the first one would take the life of a friend.

"Isranon?" Nevin came in. "I know that was hard."

He refused to look at Nevin, staring at a distant spot with his eyes unfocused, haunted. "I've punished two people in two days, one of them with death." He knocked back the whiskey and poured a second one. "Corbienne was my friend."

"The laws are the laws, Isranon. There can be no exceptions." The stern tone of a lawgiver entered Nevin's voice, forbidding Isranon his regrets.

The smell of burning flesh permeated the tent as the wind shifted and Isranon shuddered, remembering the sight of his father being burned alive by sa'necari. He gulped down the second whiskey and poured a third. The liquor eased his shaking, but loosened his emotions. "I never wanted to be a lawgiver or a leader of myn. I only wanted to live in peace."

"We all crave peace, Isranon. Even the sparrows. But one mon's peace is bought by another mon's sorrow in this world."

"It isn't fair." Isranon poured the third down his throat, swallowed, and wiped his mouth off on his sleeve. "My life is turning into an endless nightmare of decisions I don't want to make."

"Life isn't fair. Myn want peace, but to have that peace, they must have a shield wall of people strong enough to guarantee that peace ... to stand between them and the dangers."

Isranon poured a fourth. By then he had started to feel the liquor burning through his body, making him light-headed and distanced from everything around him like a wall of cotton. His emotions emerged more strongly and escaped his control completely. Tears ran down his face. He drank the fourth glass of whiskey more slowly. "I liked Iuf and Corbienne. I would never have survived this long without her. I—" He swallowed, trying unsuccessfully to master himself. "I remember that day on the road ... when I was so sick I could barely stand ... when our camp and Nans' refugees were attacked. Corbienne was right in the middle of it ... saving children. I keep wondering." Isranon paused, struggling with his tangled emotions.

"What?" Nevin reached across the table and squeezed Isranon's arm. "I'm listening."

"Back at Chyniolus, when I went in to fight the imps ... after you were wounded. I stumbled on Corbienne. She had four of them trapped, using a table and some cabinet doors to make a cage. She was dragging them out one at a time and draining them. I stopped her. I didn't understand then what a sustained battle brings out in hemovores ... the bloodlust ... the battle-rage. I condemned her roundly. You should have seen her face ... how she flinched from my words."

"Isranon, you did not cause her to kill Iuf."

"You can't know that ... not for certain. She was never the same after that. Something broke in her." Isranon finished the fourth and poured a fifth glass.

"Isranon, you're going to make yourself sick."

"I won't feel any sicker than I do now." He drank the fifth glass. "And frankly, I don't give a damn. I drained four imps myself. I used magic to force them into a corner. One by one, I sank my fangs into them and I savored the taste of death in my mouth." Isranon shuddered and a series of sobs broke free

of his constricting throat. "I was three-fourths of the way through the town. I caught them trying to eat a child. A living child. So I ate them instead. Oh gods, forgive me. I was absorbing all the rage and hatred surrounding me, making it my own. And I was so hell-forsaken hungry. I could not stop myself."

Nevin rose and went to Isranon's side. "I think you've had enough." He slid his arm beneath Isranon's arms and around his chest, lifting him up. Isranon grabbed the bottle and held on grimly as Nevin moved him to the bed.

Isranon staggered in Nevin's grasp and fell onto the big mattress. He put the bottle to his lips and swigged it again. "And what if I must kill Stygean also? I don't want to. I love him, like a little brother. He's so much like I was at that age. I know what he's going through. I don't want to kill him."

Nevin undressed Isranon, which took some effort and strategizing since the mon refused to release the bottle. Then Nevin got Isranon tucked into bed. "I'm going to find Anksha. You stay right here."

Isranon hiccupped and began weeping brokenly again.

Nevin patted his shoulder and left.

* * * *

Walking through the camp toward the blood-slaves' tents, where Nevin knew he would find Anksha, he could not entirely smother his own selfish thoughts. Handling Isranon's body like that had aroused him. His loins throbbed with need. As drunk and badly off as Isranon was right then, it would have been extremely easy to have seduced him.

Nevin struggled with the needs of his heart and requirements of his conscience. He had been in love with Isranon for seven years and kept it secret. It was wrong for the mentor to fall in love with the student—even when he was no longer one. Nevin had taught Isranon everything from the time he was eight until Mephistis came and stole Isranon away from him at fourteen.

"I should have killed Mephistis."

"Nevin?"

He started from his thoughts, realizing he had both spoken aloud and reached the tents. Looking down at Anksha, Nevin smiled with a faint turn of his lips. "Your husband needs you. He's very sad right now."

Anksha wiped the blood from her feeding off her lips and darted past him. Nevin kept on walking.

Gordain appeared abruptly at Nevin's side. "Is something wrong?"

Nevin's head lowered and he paused. "I—I'm lonely."

Gordain stepped close to Nevin, his hand went to the older wolf's crotch and rubbed the hardened spear. "Come to my tent and I'll make you less lonely."

Nevin nodded. "I'd like that."

They walked off together.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

COMFORT AND TREACHERY

Two days after Jun administered the beating to Stygean, Isranon put the boy to work copying documents and maps under his supervision. He tried to make caution a watchword around the youth, always removing the journals of the Mage-Master Josiah Abelard to a chest before Stygean arrived to do his copying so that he would not come into contact with them.

Josiah had been Isranon's friend in life, and his ghostly mentor after death. His soul had been allowed to return to the wheel when Isranon agreed to take Josiah's sins upon himself, expiating them on the Mage Master's behalf before their liege-god, Kalirion, Sun-Lord. Isranon had forsaken all hope of a long life, of seeing his children grown, and embraced the prediction of his early death, which Kalirion said would be the ultimate price of his sacrifice on Josiah's behalf.

Isranon stood over Stygean, watching the boy work. "You have a deft hand."

Stygean looked up, his eyes watering. "Thank you."

"Still hurting?" Isranon felt a tremor of concern that Jun had beaten the boy more severely than he had expected when he walked off rather than observe it.

Stygean dropped his head and bit his lower lip.

"You are, aren't you?" The image of Corbienne danced at the edges of his mind, provoking a sense of guilt and worry. *I'll risk everything I have if that's what it takes to stop you from becoming another Corbienne. I don't want to kill you.*

Stygean nodded.

Isranon looked away, searching for words as if they might be written on the ceiling of the tent and could be read there. He knew that he could not afford to seem ambivalent—even though that was how he felt—because discipline had to be maintained, yet at the same time he wanted desperately to reach Stygean and turn him around. His early kindnesses toward Stygean had never brought a response from the boy. *Please don't become another Corbienne.*

"I regret that I had to allow Jun to punish you. However, orders must be obeyed, rules must be followed. You broke the rules and so you were punished."

Stygean nodded again.

Isranon exhaled heavily and decided to take a chance. "I am excusing you from the rest of your chores. You come to me and only to me for the time being. I will inform Haig. Gather your stuff and go to Randilyn. Tell her I said to treat your back and give you something for the pain and discomfort."

Stygean rewarded Isranon with a look of gratitude, gathered his things, and started to walk out.

"Wait a minute."

Stygean stopped and turned, holding himself stiffly because of his sore back. "Yes?"

"Your father tells me you used to work out with him in the salle. When your back heals, I intend to have Nevin train you in blades."

"Truly?" Stygean brightened.

"I said it. Nevin trained me into a blademaker."

Stygean glanced at Isranon's empty belt. "You don't carry one."

"I don't need a sword, but I still practice with Nevin."

"Thank you."

"Now get off to Randilyn."

Stygean gave a quick nod and left the tent.

Isranon retrieved one of Josiah's journals on magic and tried to concentrate on the pages. He missed Josiah. Reading his journals, Isranon could almost hear his voice saying the words on the page. The books were no substitute for his mentor, and learning on his own without having Josiah around to answer questions made it more difficult, but Isranon managed. Although he knew the mon was happier now, he frequently wished the ghost was still hovering about him.

He sighed and realized that his fangs had come down. His throat and the back of his tongue crawled—the craving for blood had returned sooner than Isranon had expected. Amiri could not explain why his appetite had grown so large, both for blood and food. He stepped outside the tent where a small nibari child sat. They had begun to use the nibari children as message runners.

"Ask Nainee to send me three nibari."

"Male or female? Light meat or dark?"

"Don't speak of yourself as meat. Nibari are not meat."

The boy looked confused.

"Never mind. Just tell her. She knows my preferences."

Nainee brought him three blondes, all of good Black Cliff stock with long biteable necks, high breasts, and tight rounded bottoms. Isranon licked his fangs. He had still not worked his way through all of the nibari in the huge herd he had gained from his enemies in Ocealay when he defeated Liuthan's coup and rescued the city-state.

As each of the three assumed first position before Isranon, Nainee introduced them: Ila, Mardra, and Zeona.

Isranon ordered them all into his big bed and sent Nainee away. Haig owned Nainee, and although the Lemyari sometimes shared her with Isranon, he would never presume on Haig's friendship by tasting Nainee without his permission. Feeding always aroused him, and ever since he got his fangs at eleven, Isranon had coupled with the nibari as he fed upon them. Anksha had known that was his custom before he married her, and so she never complained about it. Like all the nibari from Liuthan's herds, these three had been fully trained in all twenty-six forms of submission. The twenty-sixth position was the only one that Isranon would never ask them to assume: that was the position they took on a sa'necari altar where they were killed at the moment of orgasm in the rite of mortgiefan. All sa'necari-owned nibari died that way. They were not allowed to grow old.

He renewed his warming spell on the tent as he watched the three undress, caressing each shapely body with his eyes. Isranon removed his clothes and climbed onto the huge bed with them. They giggled at him, a nervous sound that made him smile.

"Third position, Zeona."

She smiled back at him, laid down on her back, and drew her heels up to her bottom, opening herself wide to him.

"What about me?" Ila made a moue at him.

Isranon's fangs came down all the way at Ila's eagerness. Nibari always became delightfully wet and welcoming between their legs when they knew they were about to be bitten, so no preliminaries were required. He lifted Zeona's buttocks up and slipped his cock inside her. She moaned as he entered. Isranon liked the sounds they made.

Mardra ran her hands over his back and Ila stroked his chest.

"Ila, fourth position across Zeona."

Ila winked at Mardra and went to her hands and knees across Zeona, their breasts brushing together. Isranon licked Ila's neck as he began to thrust in and out of Zeona. Ila tensed for an instant as Isranon's fangs pierced her neck, relaxing as he began to suck the blood out of her. He grunted, shoved, and sucked until he felt Ila weaken. His seed pumped into Zeona as he licked the wound closed in Ila's neck. Isranon pushed Ila over on her back and took her next with the nearly insatiable arousal of a sa'necari while feeding on Mardra. Finally, he mounted Mardra and fed upon Zeona.

Anksha trotted into the tent and tilted her head, watching her husband feeding and fucking. All the forced sophistication dropped from her manner, and Anksha went to her hands and knees. She crept to the edge of the bed where she could investigate it better like a curious cat, her tail uncurled and the tip twitched. Anksha studied Isranon's cock sliding in and out of Mardra. "Are you putting babies in them too?"

The nibari giggled.

Isranon blinked, paused, and nearly lost his erection. "They're not in season."

Anksha sniffed each nibari and patted Zeona's bottom. "She is."

Nibari had a ninety-day cycle, unlike true humans, and Isranon had not considered the possibility that Nainee would bring him a nibari that had gone into season. He started to pull out of Mardra and roll onto his side. Anksha stopped him.

"Keep going. I want to watch."

Isranon gave a tiny nod and finished with Mardra. It had never occurred to him that Anksha might have a voyeuristic streak.

"Now that one." Anksha patted Zeona's buttocks. "Make a baby."

Isranon flushed. "I think we should talk about this first."

Zeona giggled. "He's already had me."

Anksha grinned, flashing her fangs that she could not sheathe completely like the vampires and sa'necari. "You go to Amiri. If you don't have a baby inside, come back tomorrow."

"Anksha!" Isranon's flush darkened his cheeks. "I'm not a horse or a dog."

Anksha wilted. "I just want lots of Isranons."

Isranon ushered the nibari out and gathered his wife into his arms, wondering why—if she had wanted this all along—Anksha had not forced him into the role of stud while he was still her blood-slave. "It would not be a good idea for me to simply start trying to make lots of offspring."

"Why not?"

"Well, there's a matter of inheritances." He opened Anksha's smock and rubbed her puffy belly. "Timadi will be my legitimate heir. The others would all be bastards."

"So?"

Isranon remembered that his father had not married his mother until it became apparent that Isranon had been born sa'necari. On the other hand, he had married Anksha as soon as he knew she had become pregnant by him. Yet, Timadi could not possibly be sa'necari. The child that Anksha carried was clearly a demon-eater. Sa'necari never married their non-sa'necari lovers unless they had produced a sa'necari child, because sa'necari genes were recessive and not dominant except when both parents were sa'necari. "Anksha, if they turned out to be sa'necari, they would quarrel over inheritances."

And I will not be here to raise them.

"I can handle it."

A small, uncertain smile touched Isranon's lips. "I'm sure you can. Why is it so important to you?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to lose you."

His arms tightened around her. "You're not going to lose me." *Yet.*

"Yes, I am." Anksha pushed away from him and fled.

Isranon started to go after her and then decided not to. He stretched out on his bed, trying to remember who he had shared Kalirion's prophecy with. Nans was one. He felt certain that she would not have told Anksha. Was there anyone else?

* * * *

Anksha found Nainee in the tent she shared with Haig. Trained as a hostess, the elegant nibari had an out-going nature that matched her training. She sat with her bodice open, holding her infant to her breast while he suckled.

"I want lots of Isranons."

Nainee looked startled. "What do you mean?"

Anksha pressed her lips together, considering her words and struggling to set aside the comfortable childhood patois that she frequently retreated into. "It would be nice to have lots and lots of them. Dawnhand only had four children. Waejonan killed his daughters. His son had only a single child."

"I know the legend."

"History." Anksha corrected her. "I was there. Waejonan raped each of his little girls before he sent them to the military brothels. I was very little then." She held her hand out, indicating the height of a five-year-old child. "I went after Waejonan, but I wasn't big enough to stop him. He and his soldiers...."

"Anksha shivered, a single tear running down her face. She had repressed the memories for centuries until Isranon awakened them months ago. "They raped and beat me ... tossed me on the garbage heap to die."

Nainee went cold at the images, returned her son to his cradle, and gathered Anksha into her arms. "I didn't know. I'm sorry it happened."

Anksha sniffled and rubbed the back of her hand across her eyes. "Is okay. I grew up and I killed him." She sucked in a breath to steady herself. "So I want lots and lots of Isranons. Too many for the enemy to find and kill them all."

"And how do you propose to do that?"

"Nibari. I need your help."

"Tell me what to do."

"Send Isranon mostly, and if possible only, nibari that are in season."

Nainee chuckled. "You have yourself a conspirator. Choose out some nibari of good bloodlines and when they come into season, convince him to play a bedroom game with say, three of you; trick him into seeding them. Then you'll get your Isranons."

"Sounds good."

"And, let Haig and I help you. When we get to Ildyrsetts, we could hold a small, private orgy, with just the Lemyari, a bunch of ripe nibari, you, and Isranon."

"Sneaky." Anksha grinned.

* * * *

Seeing Luck and Travis walking toward him, Stygean ducked his head as he walked past them heading toward Randilyn's tent to have his back tended.

Luck nodded at the boy. "Isranon seems to have taken a liking to that one."

Travis glanced to see which one Luck meant and shook his head. "If he hurts Isranon, I'll cut his throat." Travis stiffened and then shook his head. "Never thought I'd say that about a kid. But after what happened with Corbienne—"

Stygean flinched when he heard Travis threaten his life, but kept on walking. Everyone hated him here. Everyone wanted to kill him. Everyone—except—except, maybe Randilyn. She always seemed so kind.

"You never had a kid with fangs to consider, Travis."

"Yeah."

"You missing Iuf?"

Stygean's eyes slewed around, and he walked slower and slower; listening as long as he could to what they were saying, expecting another threat, and wondering if Luck wanted to kill him also.

Travis' mouth tightened. "It shook me up, Luck ... finding him like that. Her fangs in his throat ... and him turning blue."

"I feel his loss like a blade in the gut." Luck squeezed Travis' shoulder. "Look, I picked up a couple of bottles of cheap whiskey at that last town. You want to help me kill a bottle?"

"Sure do."

Their voices faded into the distance, and Stygean breathed a sigh of relief. He reached the medical tent and poked his head inside. "Randilyn?"

Randilyn sat at a small table near the left side of the substantial tent, grinding dried herbs to powder with a mortar and pestle. She glanced at him and smiled. "What do you need, Stygean?"

He sucked in a breath. "Isranon said to have you treat my back."

She set her work aside and reversed a chair for him. "Take your shirt and tunic off. Then straddle the chair so I can have a look at it."

Stygean went inside and noticed how much warmer it was in the tent than outside as he gingerly removed his tunic and shirt. He straddled the chair and propped his arms on the back. "It's warm in here."

Randilyn smiled and indicated a brazier. "Dawnreturning made us some hot stones. Say a special word and they heat up."

"He's sa'necari." Stygean squirmed inwardly at all the strange abilities that Isranon demonstrated. It tilted his sense of reality and threw everything he had been taught out of kilter.

"Yes," Randilyn murmured distractedly. She looked over Stygean's back, frowning. Some of the long tears had a yellowish film over them and looked swollen with pus. "Have they been feeding you?"

"Nibari? No. Jun didn't want me healed by blood until he was satisfied I had suffered enough."

"Were those Jun's exact words?" Randilyn opened a small chest and started laying her tools, ointments, and medicines out on the table.

Stygean licked his lips. "Pretty close."

"What did he say exactly?"

"He said, 'you're going to fucking hurt until I decide you've had enough.'"

Randilyn's lips tightened. "Sounds like Jun." She picked up a small scalpel. A century ago, an ancient medical tome had been discovered in some underground ruins by a group of dwarves in Iradrim. It was printed on some kind of slick material that no one could identify. They copied it and sold the copies to the sylvans and the Creeyans for a king's ransom in gold. All of them were struggling to translate the text, and reproduce the various medical tools shown in those pages. The scalpel was one of those discoveries. The closest anyone had yet come to reproducing the hollow needle that injected medicine and could be used for blood transfusions was a young Nerien healer, named Taun, in Rowanhart. Instead of using a needle, Taun had used a sterilized viper fang. Randilyn's master, Amiri, had managed to get a look at the hollow fang and the book, scanning both into a memory crystal. When Randilyn was not busy with other things, she was slowly copying off the images from the crystal.

Randilyn looked his back over a second time. "This is going to hurt. I need to lance some of them and get the pus out. Then I'll put a drawing salve on it. You should have said something to me. I didn't know they weren't letting you heal."

Stygean heard the warmth and concern in Randilyn's voice and it comforted him. "I will next time."

"Well, I hope there won't be a next time. You come straight to me if someone hurts you."

"I will. I promise."

Stygean tried monfully not to flinch as she worked on his back. It seemed like forever before she cleaned his wounds with an astringent solution and then smeared the salve on them. She wrapped his injuries in gauze and poured him a measure of willow bark juice that he drank.

Randilyn hugged Stygean gently. "You remind me of the boy I always dreamed of having."

"Can't you have one?" Stygean asked.

Randilyn gave a sad laugh. "No. Ymraude nibari are chosen, not bred." She shook herself and winked at him. "Do you have a favorite nibari?"

"You."

"I mean for feeding. I'm going to sneak one in here for you."

Stygean smiled. "Farris."

"Hang on, and I'll send someone to fetch her."

He relaxed in the chair and it was not long before Randilyn returned with Farris. Stygean's fangs came down the minute that Farris entered. His throat itched with need and the back of his tongue crawled with longing.

Farris ruffled Stygean's hair. "They were too rough with you, young master."

Stygean had not expected that reaction from Farris, and it caused an odd flutter in his stomach. "Thank you."

"How would like me? Shall I undress?"

He shook his head. "You don't need to undress. Just assume first position."

Farris knelt with her head tilted to expose her neck and her arms behind her back with her wrists crossed as if held by invisible cords. Stygean turned around in the chair and bent over Farris. He sank his fangs into her neck as gently as he could, and sucked the warm liquor of her veins into his mouth, swallowing gratefully. A moan of pleasure vibrated deep in his throat, matched by one from Farris. Her blood washed all the weariness and pain from his body. He felt Farris start to weaken, and was already pulling out of her when Randilyn tapped him on the shoulder to indicate that he had had enough. Stygean licked the wound closed and kissed Farris on the lips. "Thank you."

Randilyn dismissed Farris, crossed her arms, and regarded Stygean. "You're bedding Farris, aren't you?"

A lie rose to Stygean's lips and died unsaid. "Yes."

"That's breaking the laws. Remember what they did to Corbienne."

Stygean squirmed, recalling how Corbienne had screamed while Amiri stabbed her. "Are you going to tell on me?"

Randilyn exhaled heavily, searched his face, and considered. "No. If you want sex and more blood that desperately, speak to Dawnreturning about it. I'm sure he will understand."

Stygean ducked his head, knitted his brow, and chewed his lower lip. "I don't think he would."

"Please think about what you're doing. Think about talking to Dawnreturning."

"I will."

* * * *

With nearly fifty blood-slaves, Anksha could spread her feedings out over many and not take excessively from any. Yet she felt drawn to Liuthan and kept returning to him. She fed upon him only in brief tastes to reduce the level of the Presence Pain in a manner similar to what she had done with Isranon in the beginning. It felt odd.

Liuthan sat on his cot, folded forward across his arms as if in pain. He lifted his head with a sharp intake of breath and opened the neck of his tunic. Resignation clung to him like a cloak of despair. "Have you come to feed?"

"Yes." Anksha strolled over to him, drawn by a familiar scent upon him. It only took a second to identify it. "You smell like Isranon."

"He just left. He comes to me every seventh day to take the withering out. He's asked that no one be told, but you're his mate."

"It's already started?" Anksha was astonished. "I thought I tasted it in your blood, but I wasn't certain."

"Yes. You took me hard ... killed Chinisi in front of me ... I believe that..." he paused and swallowed, "predisposed me to this. I'm dying faster."

Anksha blinked. Liuthan had been one of the strongest of her blood-slaves. She had expected him to last months. She wondered what she was supposed to feel. Shame? Isranon kept trying to teach her compassion, but she failed to understand it. She did not feel anything. "Take your tunic off. I want to see."

Liuthan obeyed. Anksha leaned close, examining the sores and patches of irritation beneath his arms, along his sides, and across his belly.

"You're not going to last long. A few weeks, maybe."

Liuthan swallowed again, making his Adam's apple bob. "Uhh. I pray I last longer than that ... for my son's sake."

A growl rose from Anksha's diaphragm. Her fangs went to full extension. She licked them, imagining Stygean writhing and screaming as she set her Dominance-Link in all the fibers of his being. She would see to it that he died quickly and without mercy. "I don't like him."

"He's just a boy..."

"First position!"

Liuthan slipped from his cot, clasped his hands behind his back, and knelt with his head turned to the proper angle to expose his neck.

Anksha pounced on him, sinking her fangs into his neck before he had time to prepare himself psychologically for the pain. She burned through his psyche and body like a bonfire as she fed from his damaged shaukra net as well as his blood. He whimpered and groaned. The demon-eater savaged him worse than she had in weeks.

The former captain of Ocealay weakened swiftly and started to collapse beneath her. She pulled out of him and closed the wound with a swipe of her tongue.

Liuthan lay back on his cot, pale and weary. "Thank you for not killing him. My son is very precious to me."

Anksha knew his pride and how hard the words must have been. She could smell his gratitude and taste the truth through the link. She had set them very far down this time to prevent a repetition of what happened with Bodramet: take the leader firmly enough and the others would follow.

"Isranon does not want me to hurt him."

"Nor do I."

"Isranon does not want the boy to die."

"Nor do I. Nor do I." Desperation edged his voice. "I got three children on the nibari, but they were not born sa'necari. Nor were they born within the bounds of marriage. Stygean is my only heir."

Anksha ran her hand across her belly, thinking of her own child nestled there. "You are bad. Isranon loves both his children. He does not ask first if they are sa'necari."

Liuthan lowered his head and fell silent. When he looked at her again, tears were in his eyes. "My boy ... I will do anything to protect him."

"Then make certain he behaves himself." Anksha rushed suddenly out. Liuthan was her only blood-slave since Isranon who had the capacity for making her uncomfortable.

* * * *

Isranon ran hard, darting through the bushes and trees with his bow at his shoulder and his skinning knives at his hips. Panic gripped him and his heart raced. Breathing was a lance of fire in his lungs and chest. He could hear the sa'necari coming closer, riding him down. There must have been twenty or more of them. Nevin had told him not to hunt this side of the river, to stay on the clan lands. Yet, the buck had been too beautiful not to bring down. Such tremendous antlers and so much meat! At fourteen, Isranon prided himself on his stalking and hunting skills. He had been straddling the stag when the sa'necari appeared out of nowhere; making leering remarks about riding and riting him. Isranon cut one of them and got loose, fleeing.

The woods ahead of him thinned and he could see the bridge that would take him back onto clan lands where his pursuers could not go without permission—which the clan chief, Claw Redhand, would never give them under the circumstances. He burst from cover into the path of four horsemen he had not realized were there because of his concentration on those chasing him. Strong hands caught him by the collar and yanked him off his feet, dragging him across the saddle. Isranon twisted and thrashed. The horse sidestepped uneasily. A fist clipped his head in an admonitory thump.

"Be still, boy!"

Isranon looked up into a thin, almost effeminately sensual face with a tiny goatee of silken black hair. "Let me go! Nevin and Claw will...."

"Are you lycan then?" The mon frowned, touching his face lightly. "I'm here to buy horses from Claw."

Isranon's hair stood on end as the mon continued to touch him and then he felt the shivering goose bumps along his arms that betrayed the touch of the mon's power. Isranon screamed. The mon was Reading him and in a moment, he would know what he was.

"Sa'necari," the mon hissed. "And not blooded in the rites or your powers would be stronger."

Isranon squared his shoulders the best he could despite being draped head down. "Kill me and be damned. I do not fear death."

The mon laughed. "You were running away from it fast enough."

The boy's pursuers drew rein around them. One rode forward, bowing low in the saddle to Isranon's captor. "I see that you caught him, highness."

The mon tilted his head with a thin, indolent sneer. "Caught who?"

"The heretic. We planned to rite him when we caught him."

"There is no heretic here, only my young friend," the mon snarled and then whispered to Isranon, "what is your name?"

"Isranon," the boy whispered back.

"There is only my young friend Isranon here and he is not a heretic. Furthermore, he is under my protection." The mon's voice took on a dark, venomous tone. "Touch him and I will destroy the lot of you."

Isranon goggled at the way they all started fading back into the forest without contesting further. "Who are you?"

"Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan."

Isranon woke from his dream, his mouth tasting of ashes. It had been seven years since Mephistis dragged him across that horse and saved him. Once a dream of his slain friend would have eased him; but the loss was bitterness on his palate. He realized, with a surge of unexpected self-awareness, that circumstances were forcing him to become the man he had once believed Mephistis to be.

* * * *

Stygean lay on his side on his bedroll, staring at the tent wall. Randilyn's attentions and Farris' blood had relieved most of the discomfort in his back, but he still did not wish to test it by rolling over. The thought of working with blades again had cheered him up a bit. He had many good memories of working out in the salle with his father. However, Stygean feared Nevin almost as much as Anksha. He could not stop dwelling on how easily Nevin had knocked him unconscious the day they captured him. He didn't trust Nevin. The wolf could easily turn their practice bouts into an excuse to beat on him again. Depression set in and a bitter anger followed it. "I hate all of you." He caught himself. "But not Randi."

"What are you muttering about?" Jingen strolled into the tent, looking smug and self-satisfied.

"Nothing." Stygean scowled. "Where were you?"

Jingen shrugged. "Visiting my mother."

"They let you visit her every day."

"Because they like me better than you. Everybody does. Even the filthy Renunciate."

Stygean tensed up and almost mentioned Randilyn, but held back because he didn't want Jingen playing up to her. "I don't see you doing special chores for the Renunciate."

"I wouldn't put much store by it. He's just trying to seduce you. You're not going to let him are you?"

"Of course not. I hate him."

Jingen settled onto his bedroll. "Good. You should play up to him. Let him think you're convinced. When he lowers his guard, you can slip the knife into him."

Stygean shivered. The dishonesty bothered him. "I don't think I can."

"Give him the knife?" Jingen tightened his fingers and made a stabbing motion. "Don't be gutless."

"That's not what I mean. I mean the lying. I don't think I can."

Jingen shrugged. "Have it your way. So long as you don't hesitate when it comes time to stick him."

Stygean pulled his blankets around his shoulders, feeling colder than ever. "I'll stick him good. Count on it."

"I don't believe you. I think you'll wuss out on me. I don't think you have the guts."

"I'll prove it."

"How?"

"You'll see."

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CHAPTER NINE

I AM SA'NECARI

Stygean stood outside Nevin's tent, waiting as patiently as he could while feeling irritated at Nevin sending for him. Stygean guessed that it might have something to do with Isranon informing him that he would soon be training at arms with Nevin—a fact that engendered more than a little ambivalence in Stygean. On the one hand, Stygean had always enjoyed working out with swords in the salle at his former home; but on the other hand, he was more than a bit afraid of the big, scarred lycan.

Nevin emerged from his tent with a pair of wooden training swords in his hands. The swords had a metal rod inserted between two pieces of wood to mimic the weight of a real weapon. A second lycan came out behind Nevin and Stygean recognized Gordain, the one he often saw hanging with that kandoyarin youth, Dahnig. The chieftain tucked the swords under his arm to grasp Gordain's shoulder and plant a searching kiss on his lips. Stygean dropped his eyes. He had not realized that Nevin was a man-lover.

Nevin broke the kiss and slapped Gordain on the shoulder. "I'll see you later."

Gordain gave Nevin a wink and sauntered off.

The big lycan walked Stygean to a cleared area where several other pairs of myn were working out together with blades and other weapons. "Isranon tells me you're experienced with swordplay."

"My father taught me. I also had a private armsmaster."

Nevin handed him a practice blade. "That's all to the good. I take it you know all the basic stances and forms?"

Stygean started to say yes and caught himself. A lycan might know a different set. "I think so, unless you practice differently."

"That's a good answer. So warm up and show me what you've got, boy."

Stygean assumed a basic stance and went through his exercises with practiced ease. A smile spread across Nevin's ugly face and he nodded in approval. "Is that all you know?"

The boy shook his head.

"Then show me everything you can think of. I want to find your level so we're not going over old ground, and then we'll spar."

Nevin's smile turned into a broad grin as Stygean performed. "You're advanced for your age. That's good."

Once they began to spar, the lycan's years of experience showed and he sent Stygean into the dirt several times before calling a stop to it. He stuck out his hand to help Stygean up the last time and Stygean gripped it readily. "Now, boy, you'll come to me every day as soon as camp is made."

"Right."

"And you're good, boy. I'll make a blademaster of you for certain."

"Thank you." Stygean walked off, feeling happy for the first time in weeks.

* * * *

Isranon continued to Read the children, trying to calculate when each of the older ones would transition. As Tamric, the High Captain of Ocealay, had feared when he turned the children over to Anksha: they were all born sa'necari, the altered genes were present. There was nothing to be done about it except try to change them as individuals, turn them to the proper paths including dealing with their appetites. Stygean and Jingen worried him most. Jingen did everything that Isranon required, mouthing the principles back to him as though he believed them; Isranon suspected that he did not. Stygean rebelled openly. He was not certain which of them was worse.

Isranon's thoughts kept drifting back to the boys even as he struggled to focus his attention on Nans.

"I doubt Galee will try hitting us until we get further north, close to Ildyrsetts." General Nans Gryphonheart fiddled with the end of her cinnamon braid.

"The imps and the demons?"

"I doubt the imps were her doing, Isranon. Although I must wonder where they got such a sophisticated toxin blend for their darts."

Isranon nodded. "I insist upon personally being part of any scouting party that tries to enter abandoned or nearly abandoned towns."

"I won't argue with that one. I don't like risking you, but you saved our hides in Chyniolus and Linder's Meadow."

And lost a piece of my soul at Chyniolus. Isranon shuddered.

* * * *

Two wolves darted into the glade of denuded maple trees, squishing the piles of soggy leaves. The black wolf reared up, dancing around the smaller black and tan.

"*Watch yourself, Gordain.*" The black one spoke in loud barks, which communicated to their lycan ears as if they were literal words.

Gordain darted away from him. "*Nevin. Nevin. Nevin.*"

The chieftain raced across the clearing, butting him hard enough to roll him over in a pile of leaves. "*I've got you.*"

"*Says you.*" The younger wolf gained his feet in a flash, darted to the middle of the clearing and began to sashay around, flicking his tail at Nevin.

"*Hah. Bloody, pillocking flirt.*"

"*Always.*"

Nevin had not felt so alive in years as he charged him. The younger wolf slipped in a pile of soggy leaves trying to avoid him again. The chieftain cried victory as he pounced upon Gordain, gripped him tightly with his forelegs, and entered him.

Gordain sighed in bliss. "*I love you.*"

"*And I you.*"

That night, Olin moved out of the tent he shared with Nevin and Gordain moved in.

* * * *

Haig had rescued Nainee from a cruel sa'necari master years ago. The vampire had caught the sa'necari cheating at poker, killed him, and claimed his six nibari. Three of them were sold and three were kept. Nainee had been hostess-trained and became his favorite. To protect her, Haig had placed sways and triggers in her brain to override the normal nibari reactions, making her more assertive and confident.

When he entered his tent, Haig found Nainee curled up in the middle of their bedroll, looking satisfied and smug.

A bemused smile crossed Haig's face. "So how goes the plot?"

She folded her hands across her belly and grinned at him.

"Aha! I take it I no longer need to keep sending you to Isranon?"

"I think I caught the first night, but I kept going back until I was certain."

"And the others?"

"Six. Eevy's already starting to show. She must have caught before we left Ocealay, the little minx."

* * * *

Stygean rubbed his fingers beneath the slave collar. It was becoming a routine nervous gesture. Sometimes he noticed and stopped himself, but mostly he didn't. Nevin stood in front of him with a practice sword, waiting for him to raise his again. The chieftain worked him hard and Stygean was sweating.

"Ready?" Nevin asked.

Stygean nodded and assumed guard position. Nevin came at him. The wolf was fully human in shape so his blows were less than they would have been in hybrid form, but still powerful. Stygean defended desperately, until stumbling backwards and went down on his butt.

Nevin shook his head and then gave Stygean a hand up. "You're not balancing right and you're trying too hard."

They set to again in a furious dance of blades. Stygean managed to hold his own for several minutes, and then out of nowhere a bright colored ball ran between them. It startled Stygean. He faltered and recovered quickly, barely escaping Nevin's slashing blow. A second blow descended at him and just as he began his parry, he saw the toddler running heedlessly after her ball. She was going to run right between them. Stygean forgot his parry, throwing himself forward and tackling her. They rolled away from Nevin and he got a solid thwack across his back. The child began to howl in fright. Stygean sat up and patted her shoulders.

"It's all right," he said. "It's all right."

"Ball..." she said, pointing.

"I'll get it."

"I'll be damned," Nevin muttered. "I didn't even see her."

"Give me a second." Stygean retrieved the ball. His back ached from Nevin's last blow, but he ran gamely. When he returned, he placed the ball in her hands with a smile and she smiled back. Stygean felt warm all the way to the tips of his toes as he returned to his mentor.

"You did good, boy," Nevin said.

Stygean grew even warmer. "Thank you."

Farris came running up and lifted the child into her arms. "My baby. Thank you, Stygean." She bent and kissed his forehead chastely.

Stygean flushed and all the warmth drained out of him in shame. "She's your baby?"

"Yes. My youngest."

"Oh. Well I am glad she's all right. Very glad." Had Stygean been given his bleeding day gift of Farris's life on the altar of mortgiefan, that tiny little girl would have had no mother, just as he had no mother. He thought of how he used Farris at night under the noses of their captors, how he humiliated her. The sense of shame burned deeper. *I am sa'necari ... I am sa'necari ... I should not feel this way. What is wrong with me?*

Nevin came up to him. "Call it a day. Go down to Randilyn and tell her I said to give you some of that liniment I had them make up. Have someone rub it into your bruises and back good."

Stygean smiled, recovering a bit. Nevin had never offered him his liniment before. "I will."

Walking to Randilyn's tent, the sound of Isranon's flute drew the boy to the edge of camp. He reached the last wagon and hesitated, knowing that he could get into a lot of trouble for stepping into the forest. The beating that Jun had administered to him still lingered in Stygean's thoughts. Putting his hand upon the back edge of the wagon, Stygean looked out, searching for a glimpse of Isranon.

The music continued to call to him, and Stygean decided to creep forward. He dropped to his knees and crawled beneath a low hanging evergreen. Stygean got as close to Isranon as he dared and settled cross-legged, listening blissfully.

Isranon finished the song, lowered the flute to his lap, and gazed directly at Stygean's hiding place. "Come out, Stygean."

The boy crept forth. "You knew I was here?"

"Low level scan." Isranon regarded him with a smile. "You like the sound?"

"Yes. Could you teach me?"

"I could."

"Would you if I got a flute?"

"I would. However, you must realize that if you cross the line in the rites, you will never enjoy the flute again."

"Why not?"

"Because it is the music of life in the wildwoods. The deeper a sa'necari becomes in the rites, the more painful the music becomes to their ears."

"I still want a flute."

* * * *

Jingen finished his chores and watched Jun ride away with a group of others heading for the next village.

He went in search of Nolly and found her.

"Come, Nolly. It is time," he whispered to her.

Jingen was certain that he had placed his coercions too deeply to be found by Jun.

Nolly's eyes glazed and she followed him to the tent he shared with Stygean.

He indicated his bedding, "First position."

Once she was nude, Jingen studied her for bruises from Jun's feeding. Her heart fluttered like a trapped bird's. She knew what he was doing and what his ultimate intentions were, but his bindings in her mind prevented her from betraying him—or resisting.

There was a darkened bruise on her left breast. That looked promising. Jun apparently wanted to get a taste as close to her heart's blood as possible. Jingen marked the bruise with his finger so that he could find it without looking, and then covered it with his mouth, driving his fangs into her in the same spot as Jun had. He pulled his finger out and began to suck.

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CHAPTER TEN

NOLLY

They camped for the night on the outskirts of a fishing village called Miller's Cove. The inhabitants had refused to go north with the Sacred King, because they were under the protection of the Naiads of the Hillora River and felt secure.

Nans came to Isranon that morning as he was going over some of Stygean's lessons. "You must come down to the banks. The Naiads wish to meet you."

"Naiads?" Isranon replied. "Why?"

Stygean's head came up and he listened to them.

"Because they have heard of you. They wish to meet the sa'necari Renunciate who has found favor with Kalirion."

"This could be a way of spreading my teachings, of allowing them to see that not all of my people are evil. I will come." Isranon rose using his staff. His gait was off a bit and Stygean wondered what might be wrong with him.

"Can I come too?" Stygean asked.

"Yes," Isranon replied. "Be on your best manners."

"I will be," Stygean said. His thoughts whirled as he tried to guess what they would look like. As the three of them started through the camp toward the riverbank, Jingen appeared.

"Where are you going?" Jingen asked, falling in beside Stygean.

"To meet the Naiads."

Jingen grinned. "I want to come too. May I?" he called to Isranon.

Isranon paused and looked back at the two boys. "Don't you have chores, Jingen?"

Jingen lowered his head. "Yes, but I may never get another chance like this one. I will work twice as hard afterward. I promise."

Isranon glanced from boy to boy. "Very well, but mind your manners. The impression the three of us give the Naiads will affect all of our kind."

They both nodded and followed the adults to the riverbank. Nans brushed aside the branches of a willow and three females stepped from beneath its veiling curtain. Stygean stared hard at them. Their pale hair had tints of blue, green, and periwinkle. His adolescent eyes were drawn to their well-formed breasts and wide hips, and then down to the mounds between their thighs outlined by their damp, clinging garments of river silk. They appeared to be covered in tiny scales like fish, except for their faces, necks, and palms of their hands. Stygean abruptly realized that he had been holding his breath and let it out in a long exhalation.

Jingen jabbed an elbow into Stygean's ribs and whispered, "Close your mouth. Aren't they something! I'd like to have one of them."

Stygean nodded. He had already missed the first few interchanges between the adults because of his reactions.

"So you are teaching them the ways of the Dark Brothers?" the Naiad who appeared to be the leader asked.

"No," Isranon replied. "I am teaching them something new. I call it the Middle Path. I am the last of the Dark Brothers. The sa'necari killed them all because they refused to defend themselves. 'It takes two sides to make a war, but only one to make a massacre when the other refuses to fight back.' That is what happened to the Dark Brothers of the Light. It is not enough to reject the Darkness, but one must also defend against it."

"You are wise beyond your years, Dawnreturning," the Naiad leader said to him.

Stygean winced. Dawnreturning's philosophy of peaceful thinking and strong action seemed like a contradiction to Stygean. No matter how much he thought about it, he could still not make sense of it. Yet Isranon and his people had defeated Stygean's father, destroyed a tribe of imps, and burnt Linder's Meadow to the ground. There had to be a lie there, but Stygean could not find it. Everything the mon said was true.

"We have interdicted the Hillora. Nothing crosses it except at the Fords or in the far north where the river runs shallow and close to the banks," the Naiad said. "However we suspect that something on wings has crossed it."

"Nekaryiane," Nans said.

Isranon nodded, a twist of his mouth betraying the uneasiness of his momentary reflections. "I would assume so. We thank you for your warning."

The Naiad extended her hand to her guards and one of them placed a large blue-violet conch that shimmered like the light on the waters in Isranon's hands. "If you ever have need of us while you are near to water, sound the horn. We will answer."

Stygean could not believe what he was seeing and hearing. The Naiads were honoring a sa'necari. One of his own kind. No! No, they were honoring a Renunciate ... a heretic. This could not be. And yet, Dawnreturning was the only one of his kind who could have taken him to see the Naiads. Normally these river women only rose from the depths to kill sa'necari, not to speak with them. Stygean felt a painful confusion squirming around inside him, making his stomach tighten.

When they returned to camp, Stygean dragged his feet and fell further behind than he intended to. Jingen walked beside him. "Wouldn't you have loved to get your fangs into one of them?" Jingen asked. "And other things as well?" He laughed, grabbed his crotch, and made quick humping motions.

Stygean thought of Farris and her daughter, and drew back from Jingen. "Is that all you think about?"

"It's the only worthwhile one." Jingen grinned.

Stygean quickened his step and Jingen caught him by the elbow, holding him back. "Let go," Stygean snarled.

Jingen frowned and released him. "I think you're too easy to awe. You're weak.

Stygean stopped walking, folded his arms, and glared, his lower lip thrusting out. "I am not."

Jingen gazed contemptuously at him, one hand on his hip and the faint twist of a sneer on his lips. "Then drain one to the 'edge' or dry. I dare you."

"I would never get away with it."

Jingen's sneer spread along his mouth into fullness. "You would if you mimic the vampires' Passion-Dance. There's enough of them here to cast blame in a dozen directions. Let me tell you how to do it."

"Only if you do one also," Stygean replied defensively, remembering his father's words that Jingen was not to be trusted; and yet he felt himself being backed into a corner. Stygean did not wish to appear weak before Jingen, knowing his friend's predilections and opinions—opinions their parents had held before the fall of their estates.

Jingen flashed his fangs, a sudden glow of triumph lighting his face. "I already am. Haven't you noticed how tired Nolly is all the time?"

Nans reappeared, having noticed the boys were not following them. "Don't dawdle. You've got chores."

"Yes, General," Stygean said and ran to catch up with the others.

* * * *

Isranon walked into his tent in the center of the circling camp, and sat down in one of the chairs at his broad command table. He brushed aside the maps he had been looking at earlier and folded his arms on a bare space before pressing his face into them. Phantom pain in his chest and stomach echoed the grinding ache in the rest of his body. His right leg, which had been wounded by the five sa'necari who had tried to butcher him just over a year ago, had sharp pains running through it from the upper thigh to the knee.

Nans came in and settled into a folding chair. "You're hurting again. I can see by how you're walking."

Isranon nodded, lifting his head up and then letting it tilt exhaustedly to the side. "I had another attack last night...."

"You're supposed to tell someone when this happens," Nans scolded, wagging a finger at him.

Isranon closed his eyes for a moment. "It wasn't that bad. I'm never going to be free of them. The pain will always be with me. So long as I can deal with it, why call people's attention to it?" He paused between each sentence as if finding it difficult to speak.

"Because we care about you?" Nans replied, putting her hand over his.

Pride straightened the weary angle of his shoulders. "How many would follow me north to fight, if they knew how bad off I am?"

Nans could think of nothing to say at first. "I'm simply their general. You are their symbol, Isranon. Their inspiration. They will follow you regardless." She watched to see if her words had gotten through and then added, "You do not need to keep pushing yourself this way."

Isranon changed the subject, catching upon a single piece of her words. "I am not a monster...."

Nans' hands tightened upon his own. "You will never be a monster."

Nevin joined them. "Isranon, some of the villagers are here. They have heard that you can heal and they have some sick children. Would you take a look at them?"

Isranon pushed from the table and stood. Nans sprang to his side as he swayed and slid her arm around his shoulders to steady him. "Should you be doing this?" she asked. "I can handle most matters like this."

Isranon knew that Nans had basic healer training with herbs and such, but she was not a lifemage or even a Mender; and if this was very bad, only he could deal with it.

Nevin put Warrior in Isranon's hands and the young mage leaned heavily upon it as he emerged from the tent. Six villagers waited in front. A rough sided wagon, with bits of straw showing around the upper edges, stood closest to him. An older man sat on the seat with the reins of the horses in his hands, and another man, a female, stood near it with hopeful eyes. Four more stood around behind it.

The woman standing beside the cart came to him and knelt, grasping his hand. "Please, help the children."

"I will," Isranon said. "Not all things can be healed, not all lives can be saved, but if it is within my power to do so, I will."

* * * *

Thoughts of the Naiads still circled through Stygean's mind as he walked into the center of the camp.

"Wait up!"

Stygean paused and saw Jingen trotting toward him. The sight of Jingen brought back their discussion of taking a life. "What do you want?"

Jingen grinned, slipping his arm around Stygean's shoulders. "Have you decided which one you want? I'm going to be picking another soon. I'll be finished with Nolly in a day or two."

Stygean stiffened and then pulled away from him. "I like Nolly. I wish you wouldn't do this."

Jingen snarled softly. "She's nibari ... they are all wine cups to be drained and tossed away."

"Jingen...."

In answer, Jingen seized Stygean and jerked him off balance, dragging him staggering into a narrow space between two wagons. "You're not going soft? I thought you said you were sa'necari? Maybe you should ask Haig or Jun to pull your fangs out, since you don't know how to use them."

Stygean felt his muscles squirming under his skin with tension. "I'll do it. I swear I'll do it."

"Yeah, right, the cattle is going to do it," Jingen sneered. Then his head came up and he pointed to the center. "What's going on?"

Stygean slipped through the small crowd that had gathered there and stopped beside Randilyn. "What's he doing?"

Randilyn put her arm around his shoulders and hugged him. "Dawnreturning is healing the children."

Stygean's eyes widened and he thought of his father. A rainbow aura surrounded Isranon as he caressed the suffering face of a young boy Stygean's age. The boy was moaning on the ground, where they had moved him to. Stygean's eyes narrowed. Taking a chance that no one would notice, he extended his arcane senses—senses attuned to death and dying, designed to suck in the fragrance and essence of it.

Jingen edged his way to Stygean's side, his eyes glinting with pleasure as he sucked in the air through wide nostrils. He nudged Stygean with a feral grin.

Stygean turned away from Jingen, pressing closer against Randilyn. Whatever was wrong with those children—and it smelled like a sickness—they were dying.

The rainbow aura surrounding the Renunciate mage intensified as he knelt beside the first boy. Isranon lifted the child into his arms and cradled him, wrapping his arm with the staff around the boy's back. Stygean shivered as the magic swept out. The boy's scent changed and color returned to his pale skin. Stygean suppressed a gasp. Dawnreturning had healed the boy. One by one, Isranon cured each child with an embrace.

Stygean felt deeply shaken and uncertain, wondering about the night that Dawnreturning and Amiri had helped his father. Had it been Amiri or Dawnreturning that kept his father from dying that night? *He's sa'necari. He can't be doing this. It's an illusion. It has to be. None of this is possible.... And yet....*

Stygean pulled free of Randilyn and fled. Jingen followed, grinning.

* * * *

Three days later, Isranon sat making notes in his journal. They would move on tomorrow, leaving the village behind. Isranon looked up as Jun entered, carrying a limp, small body in his arms, with tears streaming down his face. Isranon sprang to his feet and went to Jun. Instinct send his hand out to touch the body in the vampire's arms and confirm the death, even though his eyes could see it and his arcane senses taste it.

"Nolly's dead," Jun wept, his lips drawn back from his teeth in a grimace born of sorrow. He kept shaking his head in a blend of anger and denial. "I didn't do it. I swear I didn't do it. I know how to restrain my feedings. Some asshole bastard 'danced' her."

Lividity had set in, leaving the upper half of Nolly's body pale and the lower blue. She was nude. Isranon noticed the white stickiness coating Nolly's pubic hairs. He parted her thighs and slipped his finger inside her vagina, pulling it forth with the pastiness of drying male juices. He focused on it, extending his awareness into the genetic material he had pulled from her. If the hemovore who had fucked her had also been the one who killed her, then it was sa'necari. "It was not you, Jun. A vampire did not do this, unless they were very recently risen. The seed is from a living mon."

"Stygean." Jun scowled deeply, sending a blood flush over his face. "He murdered my Nolly."

Isranon sighed. His heart felt heavy. "Or one of the blood-slaves did. There are too many to start passing blame without proof. Place her on my bed, then fetch Amiri. We'll crystal the genetic samples and try for

a match, but it won't be easy with so many."

Jun obeyed and Isranon was left to brood alone. He did not want it to be Stygean. The boy drew him. Isranon saw a reflection of his younger self in the boy's patterns of defiance. Defiance had colored Isranon's childhood and his teen years: defiance of his own kind, defiance of what he feared, defiance of death and all dangers that presented themselves. Isranon had been nearly a year younger than Stygean when his parents were murdered as heretics by sa'necari. He felt for the boy, yet sometimes he wondered if those feelings were misplaced, as Haig insisted they might be, and Jun believed they were.

* * * *

Stygean bounced the red ball to the little children surrounding him. They were a mix of the sa'necari and nibari children, all playing happily together. It gave him an odd feeling to see them like that, but he said nothing. Their laughter reminded him of his own when his life had been better. He had forgotten how to laugh except when he was with them. He paused to look as Jun and Amiri crossed nearby. Then Jun stopped short, rounded, and came stalking toward him. Stygean released the ball and backed away at the flaming hatred in Jun's eyes. He still remembered the beating the tall, rangy vampire had given him.

Jun's hand came down hard on Stygean's shoulder, closing painfully. Stygean cried out and flinched. "I haven't done anything," he protested, searching his mind for possibilities and coming up with nothing that could have made him this angry.

"Little bastard," Jun growled. "I'm taking you to Dawnreturning. He'll decide if you're guilty or not."

Stygean's eyes saucered in fright as Jun began to drag him along. "Of what?"

"You know what you've done."

"I don't. I haven't done anything."

When they reached the command tent, Jun shoved him inside. Isranon turned to them. "I didn't tell you to bring Stygean yet," Isranon said.

"Check him!" Jun shrieked.

Isranon's hand dropped to Jun's grip on Stygean. "Release him and get hold of yourself, Jun."

Stygean felt better when Jun's hand came loose from him. He craned his neck and could see Amiri kneeling beside someone on Isranon's bed, taking little tissue samples, and sealing them in the Reading crystals. The body was smaller than he was, and the face, distorted by death, not immediately recognizable. Then the dead girl's identity slammed through him and he remembered Jingen's words about how tired she was getting. "Nolly."

"Yes, Nolly, you murdering, little ass-sucker," Jun snapped.

Isranon held up his hands for silence. "Enough! Jun, if you cannot control yourself, sit outside."

The vampire quieted.

"She was pregnant, Jun," Isranon said. "Did you know that?"

Jun's eyes widened and he growled. "I didn't breed her. Why would I check for it? The little bastard did it. He got my Nolly pregnant and then he killed her." Jun glared at Stygean.

Amiri paused in her efforts, her expression fathomless. "We might as well establish one thing. Stygean,

come here."

Stygean swallowed and went. Amiri grasped his wrist with one hand and held the crystal with the semen sample in the other. She closed her eyes. Stygean shivered as he felt the touch of her awareness fly through him. Amiri released him with a shake of her head. "It wasn't Stygean."

"Double the guard on the blood-slaves," Isranon ordered. "There are too many of them for Anksha to manage properly. One of them could be getting out."

"Can I go?" asked Stygean in a small voice. His stomach felt tight and queasy.

Isranon looked at him with a mixture of relief and compassion. "Yes."

Stygean fled, running without stopping until he had reached the tent he shared with Jingen. His tent mate sat reading a book in the middle of his cot. Stygean grabbed Jingen and slammed him to the floor. "You killed Nolly. They thought I did it and Jun was ready to kill me."

Jingen's expression turned dangerous. "What did you tell them?"

Stygean glared at Jingen and climbed off him, to stand facing away with his arms folded. "How could you do this? Did you know you got her pregnant?"

"Pregnant? That's interesting." Jingen tilted his head, grinning slyly. "I wonder what Nolly would have looked like belly-swollen."

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing is wrong with me. I am sa'necari. That is what I thought you were." Jingen sat up and brushed dirt from his clothing. "I told you I would be finished with Nolly by now."

Stygean's muscles tightened along his neck and shoulders. Jingen had told him that, but Stygean had not allowed himself to accept the full ramifications of Jingen's words. "Why couldn't you have chosen someone I didn't know?"

Jingen shrugged. "She died on your bedroll by the way. I had a time of it sneaking her back to Jun's tent while all of you were gone."

Stygean shivered, staring at his blankets: he had slept there last night, secure and comfortable in his ignorance. "Poor Nolly...."

Jingen sneered. "You care too much for the cattle. They are food, not pets. You shouldn't bother to learn their names if it's going to bother you to eat them."

Stygean winced at the implications of Jingen's words.

"What did you tell them?"

"Nothing. Only that I didn't do it." Stygean hunched his shoulders.

"Did they believe you?"

"Yes. They compared my genes to your come."

"Good point." Jingen pursed his lips thoughtfully. "I should have washed her out when I finished with her. Now I need to pick another one."

"How can you take this so calmly?"

"I am sa'necari. Have you no gratitude? I just got you your vengeance on Jun. Remember how he beat you?"

Stygean dropped to the ground cross-legged, his chin sank to his chest, and he blew out a heavy breath. "I liked Nolly."

Jingen shrugged. "She was cattle. There are plenty of cattle here. I will be more careful next time. I won't leave anything of myself behind."

"There should not be a next time," Stygean said, his voice trembling with the sudden onset of reaction.

"There must be," Jingen pointed out. "After all, you said that if I did one, then you would."

Stygean's eyes widened and then narrowed again. "I don't want to...."

Jingen's eyes flashed with anger. "Are you sa'necari or not? Have you just joined the cattle or are you still a predator?"

"I *am* sa'necari," Stygean said so softly Jingen could barely hear it.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

KILLING FOR MY SINS

Isranon slept uneasily. He had been forced to resort to the Sanguine Rose again to ease himself. Sanguine Rose was a cocktail of powerful drugs and herbs in a troll's blood base. Troll's blood had an intense effect upon hemovores, passing along some of the creature's regenerative qualities for as long as it lasted in the imbiber's system. It was not a healing potion for humans. Coupled with the drugs that laced the blood, Sanguine Rose eased pain, brought sleep, encouraged healing, and, in very large doses, produced hallucinations.

He floated in its warmth and the dreams came, memories of terrible of things. The day of the attack upon him by five of Anksha's other blood-slaves had left him permanently crippled in body, although he hid it well.

Shirtless in the summer heat, Isranon sat again beside the tiny postern gate they called "Anksha's Gate," waiting 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 could not read those runes and 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.

Isranon smiled. A small pouch with candy in it for Anksha hung from his neck on a leather thong. He 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. "What you do want?"

"To speak with you," Bodramet said, coming nearer. Bodramet was nearly as powerfully built as Isranon. He wore his black hair oiled and gathered at the base of his skull in a dozen tiny braids.

Isranon stepped back without realizing the others had closed behind him and he had placed himself into their hands. Power slammed into his head from four directions. His shields snapped up, only to buckle instantly before their onslaught, the backlash of power making his head ring. Isranon dropped the flute, reacting where others would have reeled or fallen. His magic overmatched, he struck instinctively with his hands, knocking Ennis into the bushes and doubling Petros over with a solid jab to the solar plexus that whooshed 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 piercing him again.

Bodramet slammed 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.

"Half-a-mon, you should have taken what I offered." Bodramet gave the blade another twist and Isranon shuddered. "When sa'necari kill sa'necari they do it well."

Gareth stabbed Isranon. 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."

"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.

"Traitor," Petros snarled as he caught Isranon's shoulder, slipped his blade in.

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; and no matter which way he turned, they stabbed him. Again and again the hell-runed quillons met his skin as the blades entered his flesh.

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 his body. Isranon's eyes blinked slowly, unable to clear his clouding vision. He swayed. 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. "Having had Mephistis, you had to have Timon?" Bodramet hissed in Isranon's ear. Bodramet 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' 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. Ennis bit him on the shoulder and began to suck.

"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. "See how hungry it is?"

Bodramet drew the blade desultorily along Isranon's leg. He shoved Isranon's pants down and pushed the others away. Bodramet dragged him to the boulder by his heels, panting with eagerness. Dirt got into Isranon's wounds, the rough ground pulling at his torn flesh, small rocks and soil coated his chest. Bodramet 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.

Terror pounded in his failing heart as Isranon felt Bodramet's hands spread his 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. They set Isranon against the boulder as if he sat leaning there; but he would not stay upright. So they wedged some sticks under his armpits, and braced them with rocks. They walked off, laughing.

Then two new voices added themselves into the dreaming memory. Stygean and Jingen stood there looking at him, sticking fingers in his wounds and licking the blood off.

"What do you think?" Jingen asked. "Did they do a good job of it?"

"No," Stygean said. "If they had, he'd be dead."

"We can fix that." Jingen pulled a sa'necari dueling blade. It left fragments of cursed obsidian in the wounds, which slowly crawled through the victim's body until reaching the heart. He shoved it into Isranon's ribs.

"That isn't the right way to do it," Stygean said. He pulled his own blade, drove it into Isranon's heart, and rotated it methodically.

Isranon snapped awake with a cry of anguish and looked down at himself. The embedded spells, left from the divinator runes that had been on the blades Bodramet and his companions stabbed him with, had reopened two of his original wounds. He was bleeding.

* * * *

Stygean watched Nainee closely after the lessons were done. Jingen was driving him mad with insistence that he kill a nibari also. He had to go Jingen one better. Taking Nainee would be a challenge. She irritated Stygean; the entire idea of a nibari acting as his schoolmaster inflamed him, and when he got too far out of line she was not slow to threaten him with Jun. Stygean did not wish to be beaten again.

She was privately owned, which meant she might resist him, where the others had not. She belonged to the vampire, Haig, and his mark was on her and upon her collar. He would be taking a chance. Perhaps he could make it look like another vampire was doing it, mimic their passion-dance of blood obsession.

"Nainee, I have a problem with my homework. Could you help me?" he asked in the most childlike manner he could manage.

Nainee smiled in response to this unusual openness. "Yes, of course."

He almost laughed; clearly she thought he was finally responding to her. "Can we sit under that big shade tree over there to go over it?"

Nainee glanced where he pointed and saw the tremendous oak with a bit of scrubby brush around it. "Certainly. It should be cooler there."

Once they were there, Stygean reached for her mind. She twisted, her eyes going wide as she resisted the intrusion. Then he slipped his power in a needle-thin lance under Haig's protections in her mind, and

took her. "Come into the bushes with me, Nainee, and take your clothes off."

She followed him docilely. As soon as she was laying nude beneath him with his cock sheathed inside her, Stygean became very happy with himself. His confidence and feelings of triumph soared.

* * * *

Isranon sat in a patch of trees beyond the perimeters of the camp. He had needed fresh air and time away from the crowds of people. Merissa was more and more on his mind. He needed to write her directly, instead of sending word through her father. He wondered what his son looked like, was he fair like his mother, or dark like his father? He would have to tell her about Anksha. How would she react to that?

He had never lied to Merissa when they began sleeping together. He told her that he could not afford to fall in love. That they could only be friends. Would she think that Darmyk would change that? It had been Merissa who insisted they were merely making love like the wild cousins, with no commitment involved. Yet, he had never expected her to become pregnant. Sa'necari had a lessened fertility compared to most races. It was very hard for them to procreate. Yet, Rose had been pregnant by him when Troyes killed her. Merissa had borne him a son. And now Anksha was pregnant. What made him different? The rites, perhaps? Did performing the rites gradually render sa'necari sterile? It was a possibility. If he could find the time, once they were settled in somewhere for the winter, he would make a study of the blood-slaves and determine some of that.

"I have found you." Nevin stepped out of the trees and sank to his haunches.

"Yes."

"What is troubling you?"

"Merissa. I am fond of her, Nevin, but I don't love her. I told her that when we were...."

Nevin nodded. "Females are females, my brother. Another reason I am glad I prefer males in my bed."

"You cannot get a child on a male."

Nevin turned very serious. "I have a child due in the spring."

Isranon looked incredulous. "A child? You? But I thought your manhood would not rise for a female."

"It won't.... ordinarily. Do you know how a new battle-clan is made?"

"No."

"Tala herself, Master of Wolves, summons forth all the young males in an area, those who owe no one allegiance. One of them outruns and outfights the others to reach the god's side. He mates with her and she catches...."

Isranon's eyes had grown wide. "You, Nevin?"

"Yes. It is a strange feeling when I consider it. She said she will bring the child to me to be reared."

"I wish I had Darmyk. At the very least I should be allowed to see him."

"You will be. Merissa loves you, even if you do not love her. She cannot complain about your other relationships. You are not married."

"Anksha is my wife. And I love her."

"Be careful. She is a lion on love's leash."

Isranon took his flute out and lifted it to his lips, then lowered it again. "She is my lion, Nevin. Nothing will change that."

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CHAPTER TWELVE

TRIED AS AN ADULT

Two-thirds of the way to Ildyrsetts with the threat of snow hanging in the air, Haig had begun to notice how tired Nainee seemed of late. She was his finest and favorite nibari. One night as they had first begun a bit of sex play, Haig—like so many of his kind—enjoyed combining sex with food, Nainee winced sharply as his finger brushed the edge of her labia. Suspicion flared in Haig. There were certain areas that vampires who tended to leave marks would bite into because the small wounds and scars were more easily hidden there. One of those was the thatch covering the loins or close to it.

"Be still, Nainee, I must look at something," Haig ordered her. Then he gently pressed the hair aside and found it. The bites were small, the size a child would make; five of them placed at the juncture of the inner thigh. His expression tightened.

"What is it?"

"One of the children is feeding on you. Did you know it?"

Nainee's voice trembled. "No."

"He's smart this one, already knows where to hide his work." Haig had lost his erection by then, lost all interest in anything except learning which one had violated Nainee. He suspected it was that troublemaker, Stygean. Haig moved to her head, placed both his hands on the side of it, and reached inside her mind. He found a tear in her memories. He was old enough in his powers to spot it. The tear was slight; most might not have noticed it. The little asshole was going to be very good if Anksha allowed him to grow up.

* * * *

As a result of what happened to Nainee, they examined a large percentage of the nibari in the common herd and within several privately owned ones. What they found was evidence that over a dozen of them had been abused, although Nainee was the worst case, except for poor Nolly. None of the others could be pointed firmly at Stygean, but he was generally blamed. He would have eventually killed Nainee at the rate that he was draining her. Nainee was not only a very valuable piece of property, she was also generally loved. Anksha was ready to tear into Stygean and shove him into the ranks of her blood-slaves despite his youth, where he would have withered into death within weeks.

Isranon could barely control the rage simmering in the camp and knew he would have to punish Stygean severely to satisfy all concerned. He called a court to witness what he would do. Isranon looked deeply saddened when they brought Stygean before him. Anksha sat at his side, growling wordlessly. "You have brought this on yourself, Stygean. By rights I should have you severed. Instead, I'm ordering you corded and flogged as if you were an adult."

Isranon gestured and Jun brought out a cat-o'-nine-tails, smacking it against his palm with an eager smile.

Stygean paled and then erupted into defiance. "I don't care what you do to me! You hear me? I don't care!" Stygean spit at Isranon. "I need more blood than you're allowing me. Blood and lives. You're not letting me take lives."

Isranon looked shaken for an instant, and then recovered himself. "You are old enough for the rites. Which means, you are mature enough for me to give you to Anksha as a blood-slave. Do you wish to become like your father?"

He glowered. "I hate you."

"If a life is taken in the rites while you travel with us, then you become Anksha's meat. It does not matter to me that you are only thirteen." Isranon gestured at Haig. "Take him out, see that he is corded with seals on them. Ten lashes. Five for damaging your property. Three as justice for Nainee. And two to make him remember it. Make certain that his father is there to watch."

Stygean was dragged out foaming at the mouth in rage. Anksha followed, sending a nibari for Liuthan so that he would be forced to watch this in case he was aiding or abetting his son's activities.

A few minutes later, Isranon went pale as Stygean's screams reached them. Nevin sat down next to him. "You're seeing yourself in the boy, Isranon. That is not a good thing to do."

"When I was that age...."

"You were never like him."

"His mother is dead. His father is a blood-slave."

"You're still a blood-slave."

Isranon shook his head. "Actually, I'm not. What Anksha and I have is something else. We're more strongly linked than when I was a mere blood-slave. The bond began to shift when my child first woke inside her. Neither of us likes to go for more than a few days without feeding on each other ... our blood mingling. The taste of her ... I've been forcing myself to go to the nibari and others for a drink each day. I used to go weeks without the cravings setting in. Now? I don't know."

"Talk to Amiri."

"I will."

* * * *

Stygean squirmed and struggled as they stripped and corded him. His body shrieked silently as the power was severed from him by the spellcords. Jun viciously tightened the cords until they cut into his thin wrists. A glow of satisfaction lit the vampire's face as he finished. Then Jun dragged Stygean into the center of camp where two poles had been raised and bound his wrists and ankles to them so that he was painfully stretched out. They were punishing him like an adult.

He looked up and saw his father. Liuthan was too weak to stand and two lycans supported him between them. Liuthan's gaze met Stygean's and he seemed sad. Shame flooded the boy. He had promised his father that he would not cause trouble, and he had broken his word. "Father!"

Then the cat fell for the first time across Stygean's naked back. The boy stiffened and screamed, pulling

at his bonds. The second fell across the first as Haig laid them on, giving him a count of several breaths before the next so that he did not know for certain when it would fall and the anticipation was terrible. By the fifth fall of the hardened leather strip he was screaming himself hoarse and writhing in anguish. Stygean tried to catch his father's eyes, but Liuthan refused to watch. He felt as if his father had turned away from him.

With the pain came a deep exhaustion of the body and spirit. Stygean fought to raise his head as Haig delivered the final blows. He sagged in his bonds and, at the periphery of his vision, he saw his father collapse to the ground. Then darkness came for Stygean and he knew nothing more.

* * * *

Stygean awoke to soft fingers spreading a cool cream over his torn back. He turned his head and saw Randilyn, who had comforted him so often. "Randilyn?"

"Call me Randi, my friends do."

Stygean always found her voice sweet and easy on his ears. "Feels good, Randi. Thank you."

She smiled at him in a gentle, maternal fashion. "They told me that you were to be left to suffer for a few days, but I could not bear it."

Stygean thought about that. It still surprised him that a nibari should care. "My father?"

"Dawnreturning and Amiri reached him in time. He lives, although he's very weak. I don't know how much longer this can keep up."

Stygean felt sorry for the grief he had caused his father, but not for his defiance of Dawnreturning. *I am sa'necari. I am sa'necari. They cannot make me what I am not. They cannot take that away from me.*

When Randilyn finished with Stygean's back, she helped him reach his father's tent. Every movement set his back off, but he wanted desperately to see for himself that his father was all right. People watched their progress through the camp with hostile eyes. When the children he used to play ball with tried to approach him, their mothers—or another nibari—swept them up and walked away. Stygean felt very disheartened and his steps dragged more and more as he walked with Randilyn's hand around his shoulders.

"They have a right to feel that way," Randilyn said, watching his face. "We don't know who abused the others, but having done it to Nainee, you'll always be the first one suspected."

"It isn't fair. I didn't do the others."

"Then who did? Do you know who killed Nolly? If you know, you should tell me."

Stygean shook his head and lied. "I don't know."

"But you will come to me if you find out?"

Stygean shrugged. By then they had reached the tent and Randilyn held the flap open for him. Stygean staggered and nearly fell, but then she was there and supporting him again.

He knelt beside his father's cot and touched him lightly on the cheek. His father turned his head and opened his eyes. That was when Stygean saw the fresh marks on his neck and a cold rage started in his

middle.

"I'll be just outside when you need me," Randilyn said, slipping out of the tent.

"She fed," Stygean hissed. "You collapse and she feeds."

"Stygean, it was only a little. Just enough to reduce the Presence Pain that had contributed to my collapse. Dawnreturning says I would have died if she had not fed while they worked on me."

"I don't believe it. I hate them."

"I am too tired for this," Liuthan said simply.

Stygean quieted, hugging his father. "I am sorry."

"I don't have much breath for this. I don't want to keep telling you things I've already told you. I thought they were going to kill you. When you sagged in your bonds, I thought they had."

"Father..."

Liuthan pressed his finger to Stygean's lips. "No, listen. Don't wear me out before I can even speak."

"Yes, Father," Stygean said, struggling with his seething emotions.

"You broke your word to me. You promised you would obey their rules, that you would do what was necessary to stay alive."

Stygean's lips quivered and he brought his shoulders straight and his head up. "I am not afraid to die, father. I am sa'necari."

"That is not the point." Liuthan clutched at his arms. "I want you to live. I want you to grow old, find a woman to love, have children."

Stygean stiffened. "I don't want to talk about this."

Liuthan dropped his hands and closed his eyes. "Go away, Stygean. I don't have the strength to keep talking and you are breaking my heart."

"Father!"

"Go away."

Stygean left with his heart hurting as bad as his body. *I'll kill at least one of them. I will. I will. Someone important. I am sa'necari.*

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ONE MAN'S VICTORY

Stygean healed slowly as they rode north. His feeding on blood had been cut back severely with his secret exposed. His conversations with his father had become more and more awkward and uncomfortable. So he clove to Randilyn as his only friend, often helping her with the herbs and potions,

patiently grinding and stirring. Disharyl worked with them also and he seemed to feel her eyes on his back at every moment like daggers. He remembered Liuthan's words about distrusting her.

Randilyn walked him to his tent each evening with Disharyl, whom she dropped off last. Jingen was always waiting for him. Stygean went in and immediately curled up with his pillow clutching it as tightly as a younger child might a beloved stuffed animal in a desperate moment. "I hate them," Stygean moaned. "I hate them."

"Will you stop saying that?" Jingen grumbled, looking up from his book. "If you're not going to do anything about it, why say it?"

Jingen put the book away and blew out the lamp. Then he stretched out.

Stygean slowly uncurled. "I hate them. Their eyes follow me everywhere."

Jingen yawned, partly in sleep, but largely in boredom, with contempt dripping around the edges of it. "So you keep saying."

"I'd like to kill them."

Jingen rolled again onto his elbow and faced Stygean. "No, you wouldn't. You haven't the nerve. You're letting that Renunciate turn you into one of the cattle."

"No, I'm sa'necari."

"You wouldn't know it most times. That's what my mother says." He yawned widely. "Furthermore, this *mess* is all your father's fault. Had he sent for his sa'necari all at once, we would have overpowered the furry little bitch. Instead, he sent for us all night long, a few at a time, until all of us were either dead or taken."

Stygean felt chilled. "I didn't know."

"Well at this point he probably parrots out whatever words she puts there. She can do that, you know. So you shouldn't take anything your father says too seriously."

Stygean couldn't think. *Father*.... "I want to kill them."

Jingen gave a soft laugh. "First you'd have to have a blade. Preferably a hellblade of some kind. Talk to my mother if you're really not one of the cattle. She knows where they keep them. They watch her too closely for *her* to get to them."

Stygean nodded, his eyes troubled. "I will."

* * * *

Randilyn and Disharyl arrived at Stygean's tent and headed for Amiri's wagons. Disharyl kept smiling at Stygean fondly and it made his skin crawl. She tousled his hair and wrapped her arm around his shoulders the same way she did Jingen. Stygean thought for a moment that he would be sick and cringed inside at the touch of her.

"Stygean is a good boy," Disharyl said. "Just like my Jingen."

"Yes, Stygean is," Randilyn said.

When they reached the wagons, Amiri already had several things for the morning's work set out. Disharyl

filled several kettles with water in which to boil the leaves of certain plants; the herbal infusions that resulted would be bottled.

Amiri left them after they had everything going to attend her morning meeting with Isranon and the other leaders. Randilyn trusted Stygean and took a moment to climb into the wagon for something that had been forgotten: neither sa'necari were going to escape from a camp this size.

"So, little sa'necari," Disharyl hissed in his ear as he bent over the fire near her. "Do you really have the nerve to strike at them?"

Stygean tensed, wishing she would not get so close to him. Her breath on his ear made the hairs rise on his neck. "Yes."

Disharyl ran her hand down his back. "You are much like your father was ... before the Beast took him."

Stygean shivered, moved a step away from her and she moved with him. "Thank you."

"You know where they keep the blades, don't you?"

Stygean's eyes widened and he focused on the boiling pot. "No."

"In that black chest with the orange banding."

"In the wagon?"

Disharyl nodded. "Wouldn't you love to punish them?"

Stygean ceased stirring and backed away from her. She caught his hand and pressed something into it.

"Is something wrong?" Randilyn asked, noticing them as she emerged from the wagon.

"No, not at all," Stygean replied, shoving the small package into his pocket.

Stygean could not believe his ears. All of the hellblades had been placed in a chest in the third wagon, which carried various things belonging to Amiri. When Randilyn walked him back to his tent, Stygean felt more hopeful of the plan. He lay down on his bedroll, staring at the canvas ceiling.

"Well, did you speak to my mother?" Jingen asked, rolling onto his side to look at his tent mate.

"Yes."

"Well, out with it! What did she say?"

"That all the captured hellblades are kept in a certain trunk of Amiri's." Stygean pulled the package from his pocket and unwrapped a set of lockpicks.

Jingen's eyes brightened and he sat up. "So who are you going to stick first?"

Stygean grew thoughtful. "Anksha. That would free my father."

"Wrong move," Jingen said. "Anksha's too tough. You'd end up a blood-slave in a trice. Dawnreturning. Without him, they would drive her out or turn on her. They're as afraid of her as everyone else."

Stygean's head sank. He thought of all the kindnesses that Dawnreturning had done for him, arranging for the visits to his father, the birthday party last summer—as poor as it had been—had still been a party and he was responsible for it, and training with Nevin. "I don't know.... Maybe Nans."

"The yuwenghau? Don't be foolish. Kill the Renunciate, avenge your mother."

Stygean's breath began to heave, sucking in large gulps of air. "I don't...."

"Are you sa'necari or are you cattle?" Jingen demanded. "Get me a blade and I'll do it."

Stygean's stomach began to churn and clench. "No. No, I'll do it."

Jingen grinned. "While you're stealing one blade, get me one too."

"I will. We're in this together, aren't we?"

"Of course we are." Jingen shifted on his bedroll and folded his arms behind his head. "We definitely are."

* * * *

Isranon had lost track of many things, having to focus so heavily on simple survival over the past weeks. Sitting at the table in his tent, Isranon folded the letter closed that he had received that morning from Lord Evarde in Ildyrsetts by way of Windfolk couriers. The aging loremaster seemed to have as many ears as a spymaster. He had sent word that Isranon would be welcomed in Ildyrsetts, that he was re-opening an unused section of his manorhouse, and that he expected everyone to share their stories so that he could write them down.

One thought led to another, and Isranon's brow furrowed as he realized how long it had been since he last heard from Claw and Merissa.

"I saw the courier take wing." Nevin sauntered into the tent. "News from Claw at last?"

"No. Edvarde. He knows we're coming and sends welcome." Concern deepened Isranon's frown. "When's the last time we heard from Claw?"

Nevin turned a chair backwards and straddled it. "Nothing since Ocealay. That's not like him."

"Over three months. It worries me."

"I usually got them every few weeks." An edge of regret entered Nevin's features. "I should have started giving them to you sooner."

"That's past. I'm worried about now."

"Why don't I send Olin to Claw? Then he can tell them what has been happening here and vice versa. I'm certain he will be glad of some time at home after all these years."

Isranon smiled. "That's a good idea. Olin should enjoy that."

"Then I'll get him on his way before sundown."

* * * *

Stygean spent days watching for his chance. Disharyl kept making him uneasy, putting her hands on him, rubbing him, patting him. When the opportunity came, he was certain that Disharyl had created it. She dumped part of a kettle of boiling water on herself. Randilyn immediately began dragging the soaked clothes from Disharyl's body. Stygean slipped inside the wagon. He found the chest easily. It was shoved to the front. They probably thought they had everything well guarded. He picked the lock and popped

the lid open. *So many blades!* They dazzled his eyes. He dug through it swiftly. How would he ever find his father's or his mother's blades? It had to be theirs to be a fitting act of retribution. Half way through he found it. He tucked his father's blade into his belt and pulled his jerkin around it. Then he snatched a second one for Jingen as he had promised and slipped out.

He was shaking when he got back to Randilyn and Disharyl. Disharyl gave him a thin knowing smile and he swallowed. Then with a slight nod to Disharyl, he asked Randilyn, "Can I help?"

"No, we have it under control. She's blistered, but not dangerously. I'm going to walk her back. You'll have to come with us, since Amiri hasn't returned yet."

"That's fine. I want to lie down and read anyway. I'm not feeling well today myself."

Randilyn immediately felt his forehead. "No fever. Well, okay. Take a day off."

Jingen was waiting for him when he got back. He jumped from his bedroll and grabbed Stygean's arm. "Did you get them?"

Stygean nodded. His throat felt tight. So did his chest. "Yes."

"Well, let's see them."

Stygean heaved a sigh. This was harder than he realized it would be. He pulled the two blades out and extended them for Jingen's inspection. "The red one is my father's."

"Nice. Mine's a dueling blade. Very deadly." Jingen snatched the other from Stygean's hand and whirled around the tent, making humping and stabbing gestures. Stygean just stood and watched him. Jingen frowned at Stygean's lack of enthusiasm. "You're not going to chicken out, are you?"

Stygean shook his head.

Jingen seemed unconvinced as he grabbed Stygean's arm again, his hands tightening roughly. "We're sa'necari. At least I am. I am beginning to wonder about you. You can't let them make you into cattle. You must embrace your heritage and resist."

Stygean stared at his feet. "I will. I will."

"Then you're going to stick the Renunciate. Just remember, when sa'necari kill sa'necari, they do it well. Be certain to do it well."

Stygean tensed as Jingen brought his blade level with Stygean's chest.

"Shove it in right there; twist it hard, and then no more Renunciate. Your parents and home are avenged. You will reclaim your father's honor."

"I know." Stygean stretched out with the blade beside him, hidden by the folds of his bedroll. He pulled out his book. He should have found a different reason for coming back. Randilyn would probably return to check on him.

Stygean had barely snuggled down well with his book when he heard Randilyn at the entrance to the tent. Jingen's eyes widened and he ran to his pack, shoving his blade inside to hide it, and then ran out past Randilyn, nearly bumping into her.

"Can I come in?" Randilyn asked.

Stygean groaned softly. Randilyn was always polite, even though she did not have to be. She could simply have entered since Dawnreturning's rules gave her more rank than he had. "Yes."

Randilyn looked at him with such concern that he almost told her what he had done in a rush of guilt. Yet he held back. He had to do this. He absolutely had to. Vengeance was necessary, even if they killed him. He was sa'necari. *I am sa'necari.*

Stygean tried to look ill as she touched his forehead with her cool hands and then put the backs of them to his cheeks.

"No fever, but I'll fetch Isranon anyway." Then she left him. Stygean's stomach soured steadily while he waited for them.

When Randilyn returned with Isranon, she remained outside so that the small tent would not become too crowded. She also wanted to give them some privacy. Isranon knelt beside Stygean and brushed the black curls away from the boy's face. Then he took Stygean's wrist and Read him. "I don't find anything wrong. Tell me about it?"

"It's my stomach," Stygean lied quickly.

"Perhaps you're stressed? Things haven't been easy for you. I hated having to order you flogged, but you gave me no choice. The rules hold for all of us. Even myself."

Stygean kept looking into those eyes, seeing all the kindness and compassion there. He thought of all the things that Isranon had done for him; and knew that if he waited very long, he would lose his nerve. His hand stole to the side and grasped the hilt of the blade. "I have something for you."

Isranon started to draw back, frowning. "What?"

"This." He whipped out his father's bane-blade, runed for terrible deeds. The last time Stygean had seen his father use it was when he rited Imra. The sensation of feeling Isranon's flesh part before the blade, the faint sucking sound of muscle around metal, caused Stygean's stomach to tighten.

Isranon's body shuddered and he grabbed Stygean's wrist as the blade entered his flesh. He looked into Stygean's eyes, uncertain of what he saw there. Isranon could have stopped the blade from going deeper, instead he released Stygean's wrist as a sea of emotions washed across his face: shock, betrayal, accusation, forgiveness, which all melted back into his usually compassionate expression.

Stygean lunged upward, driving the blade all the way to the quillons into Isranon's chest at an angle and gave it a hard twist as Jingen and Disharyl had instructed him to. The blade grated on the bones in a sickening manner.

Isranon blinked, gasping and swaying. The runes on the blade burned inside him. "Gods..." He shuddered again, his skin paled, and sweat broke out across his face.

Stygean saw that his own inner turmoil had caused him to stick Isranon on the right, instead of the left where his heart lay. He needed to stab him again, maybe several times—Stygean clenched up inside at the knowledge.

Isranon settled on his heels, staring down at the hilt protruding from him. His eyes flickered closed as he fought the pain of his wound, and his sa'necari powers struggled vainly to try and heal it. His lips parted and he stared into Stygean's eyes. "Why?"

Stygean winced and released the blade. He scrambled into a crouch, gazing at his work with wild eyes,

the blood spreading around his father's blade, through Isranon's blue robe. He snatched the blade abruptly from Isranon's body, shaking, unable to speak. Isranon had let him do it. It made no sense.

Isranon's body fought to close around the wound, but the embedded spells resisted it. His shoulders sagged as they found an opening and tore through him. Isranon lowered his hands to the ground to support himself, still clasping Warrior. His breathing grew choppy. It would be simple to kill the boy. So many people had advised him to kill Stygean, to take no chances with him because of the boy's age and level of indoctrination, but Isranon had not wanted to give up on Stygean. Now—now they might be right.

The pain worsened and Isranon swallowed back a groan, yet his eyes remained on Stygean. "You ... hate me?"

Finally the words tore from Stygean's throat in defiance. "Yes, I hate you! I hate everything you are. I—" Stygean drew back to stick him again, and hesitated as Isranon made no move to prevent him.

Isranon shook his head, resting on one hand as his fingers dug in around the wound. He forced himself to his knees, using Warrior to drag himself up. Isranon pulled his robe open, exposing his scarred chest as he pointed to his heart. "There."

Stygean stared at the scars that should not have been there, at the blood mixed with a white froth wheezing from the wound with each breath that Isranon took. He lifted his gaze and met Isranon's eyes; eyes that looked at him with sorrow, but not anger. The boy began to tremble. "Why?"

Isranon drew on Warrior's power for the strength to keep speaking, his words underlined with unwavering serenity as they emerged hoarse and whispery in slow cadences. "If by dying ... I can make you ... understand that what you are doing is wrong..." A fit of coughing interrupted Isranon's words. He spit blood and froth on the ground, and forced the rest of his words out. "Then my death will have been ... an easy price ... to pay for ... your enlightenment."

"Isranon—" Randilyn entered the tent and saw them. She screamed.

Stygean glanced at her, suddenly aware that he had betrayed his last remaining friend as well as Dawnreturning. Shame, guilt, and finally panic raced through him, for people would be coming and this time they would execute him. All those days of saying he was not afraid to die, had been simple bravado.

Isranon shook his head at her. "Randi, stay back. Let no one inside."

Stygean watched Randilyn back away with a horrified expression. She went to the tent flap, and motioned people away. Randilyn would never speak to him again. Now he had no one, except his dying father. His stomach felt suddenly empty as his world crumbled. He put the blade's point where he could shove it through Isranon's heart and pricked the skin. Blood beaded around the blade. A few inches more and it would be over. Why was it so hard? His trembling worsened.

"Why?" He breathed the word out, unable to raise his voice.

Isranon's face tightened in a grimace, and he pressed his forehead against the staff as his body threatened to sag to the ground again. "Love and compassion will always ... always be more powerful ... than hatred. It's your choice..." Isranon coughed up more blood. "Your choice ... whether to be loved ... or be hated."

Stygean's hand began to shake violently. He pulled the blade and held it waveringly before Isranon. The kindness and serenity of Isranon frightened him strangely. The mon's words made him hungry for the love

that had died with his mother, was dying with his damaged father. It was all going away and here he sat having stabbed the only person besides Randilyn who had freely offered it to him.

"Choose," Isranon said again. "Choose whether you ... want to live in a world of trust ... or a world of distrust ... built only upon how ... strong you are.... Having to always watch your back..." Isranon grimaced, riding out another wave of pain. "...wondering when some other ... sa'necari is going to ... shove the blade in ... to take what you have. Or to throw you ... across his altar ... and rite you."

Stygean lowered the blade, wavering.

"Choose: love or hate, trust or distrust."

Stygean flung the blade away, his eyes filling with tears. "I want to be loved. My mother loved me.... My father loves me...."

"I love you. So does Randilyn."

Randilyn sucked air. "I love you, Stygean. Always have. Always will."

Isranon swayed, mastered the pain in his body, and dragged the boy into his arms, holding him tightly while Stygean wept. He coughed and blood came up, running from a corner of his mouth. Isranon wiped it away with the back of his hand and swallowed. His breathing worsened until he had to fight for each breath. Then Isranon's arms came loose from Stygean as he folded up, twisted to the side, and settled in a heap, groaning softly. His eyes closed.

Randilyn gave a small cry and rushed to Isranon. Stygean pushed up his sleeve and shoved his wrist into Isranon's mouth. "That won't help," Randilyn told him.

"But blood—he's sa'necari!"

"It won't help him. Your blood isn't strong enough. He's full of divinator spells. They're killing him."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know...." "Stygean looked helpless and frightened, stricken by the knowledge that he had just harmed someone precious and irreplaceable.

"Run quick, get Nevin and Amiri. Don't tell anyone what you did."

Stygean nodded and ran out. A crowd had gathered in response to Randilyn's scream. Stygean tried to squeeze through them, but they clutched at him. "I have to fetch Amiri, let me go."

Two guardsmyn forced a path for him and he ran on. He could not understand why Randilyn and Isranon would want to shield him from this deed, but he felt deeply grateful that they did.

He returned with Nevin and Amiri in a few minutes. Randilyn sat with Isranon's head in her lap. "There was an accident. It's brought on another attack."

Isranon looked ghastly. Stygean felt close to a fresh wave of tears. *Attack?* Dawnreturning was ill and fighting it; and now Stygean had made it worse by trying to kill him. *What if he dies? What have I done?*

Amiri unshouldered her satchel and produced a bottle of Sanguine Rose. Then she shifted Isranon to her own arms and poured a small quantity into his mouth. She manipulated his throat to make him swallow and then repeated it three more times. Yet he showed no signs of regaining consciousness. Stygean fled the tent.

He ran past Nainee who tried to grab him. He raced away from Farris, who looked at him with concern.

For the first time in weeks, Stygean saw Iyan. The boy reached out his hands to him. "Stygean? What's wrong?"

Stygean's eyes widened and he shook his head at Iyan, running faster now. He found his way, staggering and out of breath, to the tents of the blood-slaves and reached his father.

Liuthan lay on his cot, looking tired and ill. Lines of pain were etched into Liuthan's face, and he kept dabbing weakly at a corner of his mouth where drool escaped. Skin hung loose on Liuthan's once handsome face and arms. He had lost weight until he was little more than a skeleton with skin over it. Liuthan turned his face to his son. "What is it?"

"You look so tired, father," Stygean said, not knowing how to voice his fear, admit what he had done.

Liuthan stretched out his hand and Stygean grasped it. "It will be better tomorrow, Stygean. Every seventh day it gets better."

At first Stygean could not understand what his father could possibly refer to, and then it hit him: every seventh day, Isranon and Amiri visited his father. He had seen Isranon heal those children. Stygean shook his head as the tears started. "Dawnreturning isn't coming tomorrow."

Liuthan's eyes widened just a bit. "So you know about that. He asked that I not tell, because then the others would want the same and he could not do so. Could not afford to spend so heavily of his powers and strengths when he might, at any time, be called upon to fight."

"It's my fault. I was angry at Anksha. So I stabbed him with your blade."

Liuthan looked horrified. "Did you kill him?"

"I don't know. He—he looked terrible when they took him away."

"Pray he doesn't die."

Stygean gasped. "Pray? Pray to who? Who listens to sa'necari?"

Liuthan was silent a moment, riding out his own pain until he could speak. "Kalirion."

Stygean's mind whirled. "Kalirion? But—"

"Kalirion. He accepted Dawnreturning. He will accept you if you are true. Ask his forgiveness and beg his aid for his paladin."

Shaken, Stygean found himself unable to argue. "I will, father. I swear it."

* * * *

That night, Liuthan came down ill from the withering and had worsened by morning. Nainee excused Stygean from classes and chores so that he could sit with his father. No one mentioned what he had done, but he felt as if they all knew. The rest of the children refused to have anything to do with him. Too many had seen their lord carried from Stygean's tent, those who had seen told those who hadn't. Speculation was rife.

Stygean sat cross-legged upon the ground beside his father's cot, sorrow heavy in his eyes. He had tried to get Liuthan to take both water and blood. However, although his father remained lucid, he could no

longer swallow.

"You'll listen to him from now on." Liuthan's eyes closed and his breathing shallowed. "No matter how hard it is, you'll do what he says."

"Yes, father."

"Swear it."

Stygean's tears increased. "I swear it, father. I will do everything that Lord Dawnreturning tells me."

"Good." Then Liuthan's breath abandoned him, never to return. His heart stopped beating. Desperately, Stygean searched his father with his necromantic senses and found nothing. His father was dead. Stygean flung himself across his father's body and wept bitter tears. This would never have happened if he had not broken his word to his father. He would keep his promise and never break it again. "I swear it, father. I swear it."

* * * *

Nevin sat up with Isranon during the night so that Anksha could rest. Amiri's swift intervention with the Sanguine Rose had closed the wound in Isranon's chest, but the re-created wounds from the embedded spells still oozed. The mage lay quiet, floating in the warm sea of muted sensation from the Sanguine Rose. Pale and weak, Isranon had drunk a large quantity of it to distance himself from the pain.

"You took a terrible chance, my brother," Nevin said to Isranon, his words sibilant as his breath passed over the permanently split upper lip.

Isranon sighed, a faraway note in his whispered words. "There was no other way to reach him. I had to take that chance. I saw in his eyes that he wavered."

Nevin shook his shaggy head. "You have too much courage."

"It was not courage. I had to get through to him. My life is nothing if I cannot reach these children and others. My life is my example. I refuse to live in the world that was given to me, but in the world I am attempting to create."

"Like with Gaeatyra when you risked her stabbing you if she found you not clean enough."

"Yes, like Gaeatyra. Only then I was weary of spirit. Anksha tried to make me promise never to do it again, but I couldn't and I told her so. It appears that I have now won him over as I did Gaeatyra and the Taladrim."

"Be careful, my brother."

"I will. Judging from the way he wavers, someone besides myself has gained his confidence. Someone who does not wish me to teach him. Someone who would use him as a weapon against me."

Nevin pulled at his scarred upper lip. "I have noticed the way he seems torn."

"Then it wasn't just me?"

"No. It is either one of the other children or one of the blood-slaves or both."

"Jingen?"

"If it's Jingen, then it's Disharyl."

"Disharyl primes her son and her son primes Stygean. It makes sense. Jingen never argues with anyone. Stygean argues with everyone."

"All the more reason not to trust Jingen."

Isranon considered that. "I cannot keep holding Jingen back from his earned rewards. Not in light of what happened."

"Keep your enemies closer than your friends," Nevin growled softly. "Let me train Jingen with Stygean and judge them by each other."

"Then I will make the same offer to Jingen, but I will give it to Stygean first. I have refused consistently to meet with Disharyl privately. She throws herself at me."

Nevin raised a woolly eyebrow. "Even if my taste ran to females, I would not wish to find that one in my bed."

Isranon chuckled softly. The Sanguine Rose was calling him into sleep and he could not hold much longer against it. "Tomorrow then. More talk tomorrow. His father is dead. And that is enough punishing of him."

"He caused it himself."

"He knows.... I am certain he knows." Then Isranon drifted into sleep.

* * * *

"Stygean?"

The boy glanced from his father's body when he heard his name called and saw Nainee. "Go away. I want to be alone with him."

"We need to prepare his body for burning. The camp must move on."

Stygean's face screwed up in an effort to stop his tears and he pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. The kindness in her voice made him wince. "How can you stand to look at me? I was passion-dancing you like the vampires!"

"To be nibari is to understand the masters and their needs. And no you weren't. There was no vampiric obsession in what you were doing. You singled me out because you were angry." The rebuke was gently given, but she would not grant him a way out in this conversation.

"I assume there are others outside?" Stygean lowered his hands from his eyes and straightened from laying across his father's body.

Nainee nodded. "I would not have come alone after what you did to me and Dawnreturning."

Fresh tears rushed into Stygean's eyes. "I'm sorry."

"You should be. Especially since your father would still be alive had you not injured Dawnreturning. He was keeping Liuthan alive, which was more than you deserved."

Stygean winced. "Does everyone know?"

Nainee shook head her. "Only the commanders and their aides. However, everyone saw Dawnreturning carried from your tent and he has not been moving about the camp, so I assume that would lead people to suspect. After all, Randilyn's scream carried a long way."

Stygean began to cry and Nainee wrapped her arms around him. "Come on, I didn't come here to argue with you. Dawnreturning wishes to see you."

Haig, Olin, and Daree were waiting outside. More than enough to have subdued a grown sa'necari, much less one sa'necari stripling. Stygean felt their eyes upon him and pressed himself against Nainee, inexplicably comforted by the nibari's presence. He could almost taste their condemnation and only the fact that he had lost his father as a result of his actions mitigated their desire for vengeance. By their own laws they would have been within their rights to kill him for stabbing their liege-lord. Yet as he considered it, he wondered what really held them back. He imagined being drained to death by Haig or having his heart torn from his living body by the lycans.

"Are they going to kill me?" Stygean asked in a small voice as they crossed the camp to the center where Isranon's tent and wagons lay.

"It was discussed," Nainee replied. "It was also suggested that if you're old enough to prey upon others, then you're old enough to become a blood-slave."

The specter of being taken by Anksha sent a shiver up his spine. "What are they going to do with me?"

"Nothing."

That startled Stygean. "What do you mean nothing?"

"Lord Dawnreturning refuses to allow it."

"Why?"

"You will have to ask him."

Anksha was in the wagon when Nainee and Stygean climbed in. She bared her fangs at the boy, which made his stomach tighten. The mage lay on the bed, looking pale and worn. Anksha straightened the coverlet, drawing it up to Isranon's chin with a pat that made him smile—which suggested he did not intend to leave it there long. Stygean could not entirely grasp how he could have hurt him that badly.

"Leave us alone please," Isranon said.

Nainee left and Anksha followed reluctantly. She growled at Stygean, "Don't touch him. Don't touch him. Hurt him again and you'll end like your father."

Stygean paled.

"Anksha!" Isranon said sharply and she left. "Come here, Stygean. I'm sorry about your father."

Stygean sat on the folding stool by the bed and nodded. "It's my fault. Blind vengeance is not the way."

"Nor is blind pacifism."

Stygean swallowed and nodded. His eyes leaked around the edges. Isranon touched the tears gently, then twisted abruptly onto his side, grimacing.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Stygean cried out, frightened that he was about to lose Dawnreturning also.

"The medicine—half a measure. In the drawer," he added as Stygean spun around looking for the bottle.

Stygean found the preserving bottle and read the label automatically: Sanguine Rose. Then he poured a measure into a glass and tilted Isranon's head up to drink it. "I am sorry. I am so hell-assed sorry," he said as the shifting of Isranon's body exposed his chest. There were old scars and bandages across his chest, stomach, and arms. "How?"

Isranon closed his eyes and spoke softly, as if from a distance; trying to relax while the drugs and troll's blood took effect. "The old wounds re-create themselves whenever they can. I was able to block most of it. That's another reason I was knocked too far down to save your father."

Stygean saw that Isranon was even more scarred than his father had been at the end. He reached before he could stop himself and touched an ugly scar on Isranon's shoulder, where it looked as if someone or something with fangs had nearly bitten a piece from him. "Anksha?"

"No. The sa'necari that ambushed me. Some of those scars go back to when I was your age."

"My age...." Stygean blinked, trying to get his mind around that. He had believed himself ill-treated, but it began to seem like nothing before what Isranon had experienced.

"I am going to tell you about my life. But first, I want to say this. Prove yourself to me, and I will take the collar off and make you my apprentice."

"Apprentice?" Stygean gasped. "After what I did to you?"

"Yes. Now listen. I'm dying. Only a few know it. But I intend to teach you everything I know while I still can. You must learn fast and you must learn well."

Stygean felt as if his heart was being ripped from his chest. "Isn't there a cure?"

Isranon grasped Stygean's hands. "Mortgiefan. I refuse to live at that price, which is why Kalirion was willing to choose me as his mage-paladin. He prophesied at the time I pledged to him, that I would not live to see my children grown."

Stygean swallowed back a fresh bout of sobbing and his voice cracked. "How long?"

"I have, at most, a handful of years left—if that."

"The divinator spells?"

"You know about them?"

Stygean nodded. "Randilyn said so. When you collapsed I put my wrist in your mouth to revive you...."

"Only the Sanguine Rose heals my injuries and repairs the damage the embedded spells cause. Although your blood would be food, it would never be medicine."

"But isn't there a way to fix it?"

"No. Only a lifemage can heal me. And a master at that," Isranon said. "I am the only master. The other five are in Rowanhart. Even if they could help me, they would never do so. I am sa'necari."

"But that's wrong," Stygean protested.

"There are many injustices in the world, Stygean. But that is no reason to add to them. Besides, what

people believe of me is not as important as what I believe of people. I believe that others deserve my help and compassion."

"I understand."

"Now let me tell you my story while I have the strength to. Then I must rest again. When we finish, send Anksha or Nevin back." Isranon began to tell Stygean his tale and for the first time the boy actually listened.

* * * *

"So you really stuck him?" Jingen asked nonchalantly, sitting in the tent he shared with Stygean. "I suspected so when I saw him carried out of here. Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm not proud of it," Stygean told the younger boy.

"Have you lost your stomach for vengeance, Stygean? Have they finally cowed you? I'm going to grow up to be a real sa'necari, not a make-believe one like Dawnreturning. It's a shame you didn't manage to kill him." Jingen drew his own hellblade from its hiding place in his pack and played with it. "I have made my blade my own. It didn't want a new owner, but I forced my will on it."

The blades were made by capturing a soul inside it in the rites. Some times the blades resisted passing into the hands of someone who was not of the lineage of their creators. But there were ways to overcome that. Jingen had been feeding the blade his own blood every day since it came into his possession, and now it was his.

"I don't want to talk about it," Stygean replied, walking away from him toward the tent flap.

Jingen put his blade away and followed Stygean to the entrance. "But you're the one kept us all hot to do it. You can't just walk away now."

"I can if I want to."

"No, you can't," Jingen snarled. "And you'll tell no one about my blade either."

"I'm not a snitch." Stygean's brow furrowed. "Use it and you'll deal with me."

"Oh, right. Like you're any threat?" Jingen fluttered his hands and made a disparaging noise. "You were an ass not to kill the Renunciate and then to let them just take yours. Cross me, and I'll rite you, Stygean."

Stygean felt suddenly ill, his sphincter tightened at the thought of having Jingen's cock up his ass and a blade in his ribs. His people were just as Isranon had said. Then his old defiance reared up. "Try it," Stygean snarled. "Just try it."

"I won't try. I'll just do it."

"Bastard." Stygean punched Jingen in the face, sending him into the dirt, and then darted out and ran.

"I will, Stygean!" Jingen rubbed his face, glowering. "You hear me, I will!"

Stygean did not stop running until he had reached Amiri and Randilyn's wagon. He composed himself, straightened his tunic, and waited. Randilyn emerged from the wagon and regarded him.

"Are you ready, Stygean?"

He nodded. Randilyn stayed close to him and held his hand as they walked across the camp to a large meadow where a pyre had been built. His father lay atop the pile of brush, clothed in one of Isranon's best robes with a sword in his folded hands. She took Stygean up to the pyre and stayed with him. He kissed his father's forehead, cheeks, and lips in formal farewell and then stepped back.

Nevin stood nearby to give a small eulogy. Stygean knew they were doing this for him, rather than for his lost father. He met Nevin's eyes and found a warm forgiveness there that comforted him.

"This day," Nevin began. "This day we return the body of Liuthan Loosestrife to the earth and his spirit to the gods that made it. I will not pretend that Liuthan was a good mon...."

A roar of disparagement rippled through the ranks of onlookers, making Stygean uncomfortable. Randilyn's hand closed on his shoulder and she squeezed gently. He looked up and she smiled at him. Stygean sucked in a breath and continued to listen to Nevin, focusing his attention away from the crowds.

"Liuthan was sa'necari. He practiced the rites; he took lives out of appetite and for pleasure. I am not here to say that it was not so," Nevin said. "However, even the worst of myn sometimes have redeeming qualities. Liuthan loved his wife, Chinisi, and his son, Stygean. And they loved him. After his wife died...." "Nevin waited for the noise to die down again and lifted his hands to indicate the watchers should be silent. No one needed to be reminded that Anksha had killed and eaten Stygean's mother. "He encouraged his son to follow the enlightened ways of our Lord Dawnreturning. On his deathbed, Liuthan asked his son to swear allegiance to Dawnreturning, and the boy did so. Out of respect for this kindness, out of consideration for his ability to love, I ask that the gods have mercy upon the soul of Liuthan Loosestrife."

Silence settled as Nevin finished. He gestured and a torch was placed in Stygean's hands. The boy circled the pyre, setting it ablaze. Randilyn walked with him. As the flames roared up, the smith, who had placed the slave collar around Stygean's neck late last spring, came forward with a large set of pliers.

The smith glanced from Stygean to Nevin; and Nevin nodded. "Open your tunic and stand very still," the smith said.

Stygean wondered what this meant while unbuttoning his collar and tunic. Randilyn pulled the tunic open wide, settling it around Stygean's shoulders. He saw tears in her eyes and tried to read her expression, a mixture of joy, concern, and sorrow. The smith slid the pliers under Stygean's iron collar and broke the links holding it in place. Stygean's eyes watered, realizing what had happened. The collar slipped away from his neck. He caught it wordlessly and stared at it in his hands.

"This day, Stygean, you are free," said Nevin, then he raised his voice like the lawgiver he had been and the battle clan chieftain he now was to make the proclamation. "Let it be known, from this day forward, Stygean Loosestrife, son of Liuthan and Chinisi Loosestrife, is a free mon. Stygean Loosestrife, do you now accept the position of apprentice with Lord Dawnreturning?"

A glow of victory mingled with the sorrow in Stygean's face and he smiled through his tears. "Yes I do. I pledge my life, my gifts, and all my heart to Lord Dawnreturning in full faith."

The lycans cheered and that forced a grudging applause from the other watchers. Stygean knew he still had far to go to earn their trust, but he was determined to do so.

"Then this day you are a man, Stygean," Nevin decreed.

"Thank you."

Randilyn hugged him and he leaned into the embrace. “I am glad that there is some happiness amidst your sorrows, Stygean,” she said.

THE END

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