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LYCAN BLOOD: VOLUME THREE

IF TRUTH DIES

BY

JANRAE FRANK

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IF TRUTH DIES  
And if Truth Dies,  
Then all that is left of life  
Is Darkness and lies.  
-Padruig "Fireborn Law" Caimbeul

### THE EXILE'S CURSE

When the Serpent comes, they all shall perish,  
The Redhands fall like sheaves of grain,  
Until only the Exile shall remain  
Of those who own their name.  
When Fireborn law breathes hot upon the root  
One born of fire shall perish for the truth  
The exile's victory shall be his pardon  
Those he claims will rule  
The prince from shadows shall emerge  
To sit a blood drenched throne  
... Alistar Weems' dying words.

## The First Mothers

[The lycans have a primarily oral tradition, although increasing numbers of them are becoming literate.  
This is the first poem that a young boy apprenticed to a lawgiver learns.]

We howled to the moon one winter's night  
And she howled back to give us might  
From all the packs gathered 'neath her light  
She chose among us one single wight  
Tala took that male to her silvery home  
She told the packs to hide, not roam  
From that mating, Navaryn came  
To make us men in more than name  
Navaryn, first mother to us all  
By her blood our shapes are tall  
Pandeena, second mother to us all  
When they howl, heed their call  
They gave us laws, the ways, and speech  
They changed all things within our reach  
The ways of culture we were taught  
To bring us from old Skawtsslund fraught  
By dangers vile and dangers fell  
So goes the ancient, ancient tale  
Navaryn, first mother to us all  
By her blood, our shapes are tall  
The woodland god, at their pleading,  
Opened a Gate Arcane to end our bleeding  
On the strands of Skawtsslund fraught  
With the dangers mankind brought  
Pandeena, second mother to us all  
When she howls heed well her call  
We passed between the pillars tall  
To these new lands beyond man's pall  
We settled here and built our lives  
Where lycan kind can grow and thrive  
In a new world of hope and promise  
Beyond the reach of murdering Thomas.

### THE THREE BROTHERS

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

-St. Tarmus of Lorendon

## CHAPTER ONE

### DEAD WHORES

At the time of year when the heat of summer wars against the chill invasion of autumn for custody of the land; a strong wind rose without warning, sending dark clouds skidding across the skies above the Waejontori town of Hell's Widow. Thunder growled and roared, followed by the dance of multi-colored lightning. The heavens opened and rain cascaded down in a blinding rush that drove all, save the most stalwart, from the streets to seek shelter wherever it could be found.

Alexander Jondries grimaced at the rain, bowed his head to keep the water from his eyes, and continued along Skull Road. He knew better than to keep Lord Heironim Traxton waiting without an excellent excuse, and bad weather did not classify as such. A spindleshanks of a mon, the whores at the Crimson Lady Brothel often complained that they got poked harder by Jondries hipbones than his cock.

Most people in Hell's Widow referred to this section of the town as the Blood District. In the beginning, the name had risen from the fact that the blood-drinking sa'necari aristocracy had built their elaborate homes and temples here. Over the past thirty years, the Sharani occupiers—sword-wielding viragoes—had either massacred or driven off all of the sa'necari from this region. The temples had been torn down, and the mansions and estates fallen to ruin, yet the name stuck as the surviving buildings were given over to far different purposes. Prostitution ruled. The surviving mansions had been turned into businesses such as the Scarlet Petticoats Brothel and the Red Buttocks, a bondage parlor.

The Crimson Lady reigned as Queen of the District; the largest, finest brothel in the whole of southeastern Waejontor.

The brothels were a gaudy island surrounded by the dregs of Hell's Widow's population. Every third house was derelict and the rest were rotting on their foundations. Stray dogs and cats took refuge from the rain beneath the cracked boards of neglected porches. Jondries noted with dour satisfaction that the rain had driven the rats from alleys and the drunks from the gutters and walkways.

Jondries had developed a distaste for drunks, addicts of every stripe, and all varieties of the homeless. A sa'necari-born, Jondries had gained his fangs and appetites at puberty, and required a generous daily helping of blood straight from the veins in addition to regular food and drink to stay healthy. When he, Dorjan, and Nelek made the trip to Hell's Widow from the Tyrins' estates in the north, the need for secrecy had been so great that the blood supplement to his diet had come almost entirely from drunks, addicts, and homeless; which had left the fastidious Jondries with a strong aversion to them.

The Blood District had begun dying long before Heironim moved in. Drugs, drink, and crime had been taking their tolls for decades; but now death haunted the streets with greater frequency and savagery than it had ever known. Even the Sharani occupiers rarely walked these streets. The sa'necari had returned to Hell's Widow, using it as a secret base to attack Clan Red Wolf across the Eirlys River and spy upon the Sharani garrison for signs of troop movements.

Heironim had sent Jondries a message to meet him for dinner at the Crimson Lady. The brothel had a bar and a fine restaurant as well as three dozen exquisite whores in residence. *Well*, mused Jondries, *there are worse places for a meeting, and I can get my cock sucked when we finish.*

Jondries had a fair idea of why Heironim had called this meeting and why he had decided to hold it at the Crimson Lady. Two weeks ago, Heironim's favorite whore had vanished with only her jewelry and none of her clothing. Jondries had suggested to him that, being lycan, Ellie might simply have dumped her jewelry in a bag and wolfed it. However, Heironim refused to accept that Ellie would abandon him that

way; and so here Jondries was on his way to yet another meeting over her disappearance. He wished Heironim would simply find himself a new favorite and get on with the important stuff.

Caught up in his thoughts, he failed to see the drunk come barreling out of an abandoned house until they collided and went tumbling into the muddy street together. Jondries knocked the mon aside and sat up, outrage heightening the color in his copper-skinned face.

"What the hell?" Jondries grimaced at the ragged mon, and then at the mud coating the front his good clothes. "Look where you're going, you stupid piece of shit."

The drunk scrambled away from Jondries with the kind of clarity in his blood-shot eyes that suggested something had scared him sober. "I-I'm sorry. Really, I am."

"You ought to be."

The drunk waved his bottle, mud oozing from the bottom of it, in wild gesticulation. "M-murder ... tied to the bedposts...."

That got Jondries' attention. His people enhanced their powers through rites of rape and murder called mortgiefan. 'Tied to the bedposts' sounded like it might be a sa'necari kill. The Butchering Serpent had passed down instructions through Heironim that all evidence of their presence in Hell's Widow had to be destroyed or covered up. They could not risk the Sharani guardsmyn stumbling upon it. He seized him by the shoulders and shook him. "Shut up."

The drunk blinked and cringed. "There's been a murder."

"Yes, yes. You've said that." Jondries pulled a tenpence from his pocket, which was enough to buy three bottles of cheap liquor, and waved it at the drunk. "Show me, and I'll give you this."

A crafty gleam replaced the fear in the drunk's eyes as he grabbed at the coin.

Jondries closed his fist around it and drew his hand back. "After you show me."

The drunk pointed at a house.

"Don't point. Show me." Jondries got to his feet and jerked the drunk up by his collar. "What's your name?"

"Timothy."

"Okay, Timothy. Show me the body and I'll give you the coin."

Timothy led Jondries to an abandoned house. The steps of the long covered porch creaked beneath Jondries' feet. Timothy slipped inside after motioning Jondries to follow him. Jondries paused and peered through a grimy window, wondering what had happened to the people there. His sharp eyes made out the edges of the furniture. Whoever had once lived here must have departed suddenly, leaving with only the clothes on their backs because nothing looked out of order. Jondries stepped over the threshold and found Timothy standing in the middle of the living room, trying to wipe the mud off the rim of his bottle.

"Where?" Jondries demanded, his nose wrinkling at the thick layer of dust laying over everything and the odor of mold giving signs of the long absence of the inhabitants. He wandered into the kitchen and spied a pot on the wood stove. The contents of the pot had turned into a dry green dust. The possibility that this might be a trap occurred to Jondries. He extended his necromantic senses in a low-level scan and found nothing larger than rats in the house.



Timothy trailed in after him.

"Where is it?"

"In the bedroom."

Jondries shook his head in weary contempt. "Show me."

Timothy led him into a room and pointed at a bed that had huge sturdy posts and a canopy. In the middle of a disheveled pile of blood stained comforters lay a badly decomposed body fastened spread-eagle to the posts.

"Pay me."

"Ah yes. Payment." Jondries threw a lean arm around Timothy, pinioning him. Timothy's eyes sauced as he struggled to get loose. Jondries' incredible strength held the drunk easily. He drew his long belt knife and shoved it into Timothy's side, hitting the kidneys with the perfection of long experience.

Timothy gave a grunt of anguish, shuddered, and went limp in Jondries' grasp. He pulled his blade out and wiped it clean on Timothy's clothes before letting the dying drunk fall.

"Well, well." Jondries stepped over Timothy, moving to the bedside. He stared down at the maggot pond that had once been a living being and shook his head in distaste. Jondries had never liked dealing with the disgusting remnants, which was why he had never learned to create zombies and other forms of undead chattel favored by his peers.

He extended his necromantic gifts in a focused scan of the remains. A dry chuckle followed his determination of the dead man's identity. "Well, well. Heironim will be so happy to hear I found you, Ellie. Now I'll not have to put up with anymore of these tiresome meetings."

\* \* \* \*

Silkie Faggini, the Madam of the Crimson Lady Brothel, had once been one of the most beautiful courtesans in Waejontor. At forty-four years old, the angles of her light-bronze face had hardened, and the lines radiating around her eyes and the corners of her mouth had been etched deep by the harshness of the life she had lived. Yet enough traces of her fading aristocratic beauty remained to make her striking to look upon.

She maintained an attitude of arrogant indifference, indurate to the vicissitudes of life while Heironim Traxton raged through her office, throwing books and papers about, smashing her fragile treasures. She clutched her murdered lover's words to her heart: 'Don't let them see you cry.'

"Where's Ellie?" Heironim seized a delicate blown-glass bird from a shelf.

Silkie planted her gaze on the door as her stomach soured—her son given her that bird when he was nine. Cullen had taken their son shopping to buy her a birthday present. She remembered the joy on their faces as they had watched her unwrap it. *I'm not going to cry, Cullen. I promised you I wouldn't let them see me cry.* "I don't know."

"Who was her last customer?" Heironim smashed the bird against the wall.

"I told you. Eideard Doyle."

"Did Kynyr Maguire send him to talk to her?"

"How would I know?"

"You spent an hour talking to him."

"He wanted to know about Cullen. I didn't tell him anything."

"Doesn't matter whether you did or didn't." A thin sneer crossed Heironim's face. "Kynyr Maguire is dead."

Silkie's tough façade cracked. "You killed him."

"Of course."

She spit in Heironim's face.

Heironim raised his hand to strike her and Silkie laughed at him. "I'm pregnant, remember? The Serpent will not be happy if you cause me to miscarry his son."

"Bitch!"

"I wish." Silkie turned the insult into a double entendre, because lycans called their females bitches.

"Heironim!" Jondries entered the office and stared at the destruction. "I found Ellie."

Heironim lowered his hand and turned toward his lieutenant. "Where is she?"

"Dead."

Disbelief flashed across Silkie's face and then she began to laugh.

Heironim glared at her. "What are you laughing at?"

"An eye for an eye. No one does it better than a lycan."

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Heironim and Jondries left, Silkie kicked her way through the debris and dropped the bar across her office door. Her throat felt tight and tears lurked behind her eyes, telling her that she was not as tough as she had once believed.

At twelve, Silkie had fled her sa'necari family who planned to sacrifice her to the hellgod Bellocar for failing to inherit the recessive sa'necari gene, and had become a child prostitute. By the time that Silkie reached the age of thirty, she had become hardened and calculating. She established the Crimson Lady and felt completely safe and beyond the reach of her family and the rest of the sa'necari.

But then she had made a mistake. Silkie had fallen in love with a lycan courier, Cullen Blackwood, eleven years ago, borne him a son named Cooley, and counted herself happy. Three months ago, the sa'necari returned to Hell's Widow. Heironim and his employer, the Butchering Serpent—whose face she had never seen—tortured and murdered Cullen in front of her. She had sent their son, Cooley, to Cullen's friend Kynyr Maguire, begging for help just before Heironim's net closed like a spider's web around her, robbing her of contact with the outside world. Kynyr came two weeks ago, and promised to return with sufficient help to get her out. But Heironim killed him.

"An eye for an eye, Heironim."

Silkie reached her desk, shaking so hard at the memories, that she could barely lower herself into her

chair. With Kynyr dead, the only options left to her were measures so desperate that she had always prayed that she would never need them.

She jerked open the middle drawer of her desk, causing it to land in her lap with a thunk. The drawer was shorter than the shelf that held it. She shoved the drawer onto the floor with a flash of anger, leaned down, and fished around the back of the shelf until her fingers brushed against what she was looking for: a black velvet pouch that contained a wooden box.

In her youth, Silkie had risen to the highest levels that a prostitute could hope to reach, and become the highest priced courtesan in Torment Lake, the ancient capital of Waejontor. Her clients and lovers had included mages of every stripe and the magic-obsessed aristocracy. They had all given her gifts, dangerous gifts—and they were all in that box.

Silkie grasped the drawstrings on the pouch, and drew it out of its hiding place. She took the ornate box from its velvet shielding and set it on the table before her. Silkie's hands trembled as she stroked the leaves, vines, and flowers carved into the lid. A sense of melancholy resignation replaced her anger and her fear as she spoke the word that would release the mage-lock on the box.

The lid came free.

"You told me that one day it would come to this, Brandrahoon—my undead dragon of damnation. I did not want to believe you then. Now I know you were right."

Beneath a layer of enchanted jewelry and arcane stones, rested nine vials wrapped in black cloth. One by one she unwrapped them, lingering over a vial of crimson fluid with an elegant 'B' and runes of preservation upon it.

She remembered his words and the look in his eye as the oldest and greatest of the Lemyari vampires handed her that bottle.

*"You are so beautiful, My Silkanna, My Lady of Silken Grace. When the vicissitudes of life engulf you beyond all hope, drink this and die. Then come to me and I will vanquish your enemies and wrap you in my love, forever. You are my Amalthea returned to life."*

She sucked in a deep breath to steady herself, twisted the golden top of the vial to break the seal, and drank it. The liquid burned her throat, yet she swallowed every drop of it. Silkie tasted more than blood in it. She tasted something sharp and sweet, and the tingling of a spell at the back of her throat.

"Brandrahoon ... what did you put in it?"

Silkie tried to remember everything he had said when he gave it to her. *Forever young ... forever mine.*

A sensation of first dizziness, and then a searing joy spread through Silkie so intense that she could find nothing to compare it to.

*"Drink it and then choose a way to die."*

She swayed in her seat as the fire lit her veins. A surge of anger cleared away the disorientation.

"The sa'necari be damned. Let them face the wrath of the blood of Brandrahoon."

Silkie returned the contents to the box, closed the lid, and slipped it back into the velvet pouch. She tied the strings to her belt, reached into another drawer, and brought forth a long dagger.

Rising from her chair, Silkie faced the wall behind it and spoke the word that would reveal and open the spiritdoor. A panel of the wall shimmered, became transparent, showing a comfortable room with thick carpets behind it.

Silkie entered the room and sealed it once more with a word. She lay down upon the floor, slit her wrists, and closed her eyes to await death and the transformation that Brandrahoon had promised her.

"Soon, you bastards ... I'll be coming for you. Silkanna Mircala de Waejonan will have her vengeance."

As blood loss dragged her toward oblivion, Silkie dreamed of Cullen and smiled.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A PASSION FOR KADY

Lieutenant Kynyr Maguire slept, stirring restlessly without waking, his fists clenching and unclenching in his troubled dreams. His long, thick golden hair covered the pillows like a sunburst, circling his handsome face, now marred with the traces of illness from his wounds. A narrow fringe of close-cropped golden beard framed his face from sideburns to an inch from his chin. His lantern jaw, pronounced cheekbones with dramatic hollows beneath them, and cleft chin made Kynyr Maguire the visual epitome of lycan masculinity. Yet the image was flawed now by dark circles beneath his eyes, and the handsome angles had given way to a gauntness that aged his visage well beyond his nearly twenty-one years.

Toward morning, his leg always began to throb and hurt. The poppy milk wore off, the muscles tightened around his wounds, and his leg stiffened. Then the pain led inexorably into nightmares before it released him into wakefulness. That morning was no exception.

*"I see them! Whip those horses up!" Ramsey shouted.*

*Kynyr slapped the long reins across the hindquarters of the horses and the wagon lurched as the startled horses broke into a run. Retreat was not an option. He knew he would never get the wagon turned. His only choice was to try and drive over them, break through to the bridge around the bend.*

*Kynyr spotted a man standing among the trees with a long bow. He brought the crossbow up, laid it across his forearm, and fired. The archer went down with a scream. He tossed the bow at his feet, grabbed the other bow, and fired at another. A hailstorm of arrows fell around them. Several struck Kynyr in the chest, and failed to pierce his armor. The wicked shafts hit his horses, sending the wounded beasts into panicked flight. The wagon careened out of control into the dip in the road near the turn.*

Kynyr writhed in his sleep, groaning. "No. Nooooo!"

*Three arrows protruded from his thigh and two from his calf. Three of the shafts were black with crimson and brown fletching; the others were red shafted with blue and red feathers. He clutched his leg. Archers had one principal reason for coding their arrows: poison.*

*Kynyr tried to reload the crossbow, but the out of control wagon seemed to hit every rough spot in the road, jarring him.*

Far back in his mind, submerged within the nightmare, Kynyr knew what was coming next; yet could not free himself from it.

*Eideard tumbled from the saddle and the wagon rattled past his still form. Kynyr cried out in rage at seeing his friend fall. Then the acrid scent of dark power swept over Kynyr and he glanced to the right. While he had no magic gifts, he could see the patterns of arcane energy—and he saw the bolt of death strike his horses. They stumbled and fell. The wagon tongue struck the ground and the next instant Kynyr was tumbling through the air as the wagon heaved over.*

*Kynyr struck hard, skidding into a roll. The arrows twisted in his wounds as the shafts broke off close to the skin, leaving just the heads embedded in his flesh. The pain nearly caused him to black out. He tried to drag himself up, but his wounded leg would not support him. Pain seared through him as if his veins were on fire. His chest felt tight, as if a fist pressed down on his heart and lungs. He recognized what was happening. "Devil's Silver."*

He saw Ramsey fall with arrows in his chest and back. "No!"

Finn had nearly broken free, when he saw that Kynyr had been hit and turned back.

"No, Finn! Keep going! Keep going!"

"Kynyr!" Finn sprang from the saddle, and ran toward him. "I can't leave you behind."

Barely three yards from Kynyr, Finn stiffened and stared down at his mid section as three arrows punched through his ribs and a fourth hit him in the belly. He swayed a moment before collapsing where he lay unmoving.

*"Finn.... "Kynyr choked on the name. He crawled forward. His fingers brushed Finn's face. "I loved you ... brother."*

The scene melted into another memory as Kynyr tossed and turned.

*Ramsey's face was flushed with fever and his breathing stertorous. His round cheeks had become sunken and the bones in his face stood out as if all the muscles beneath his skin had melted away.*

*"Ah, gods, Ramsey. Not you too."*

Ramsey's eyes fluttered open. "K-Kynyr ... I been waitin' for ... you." Ramsey shuddered, struggling for breath. "Get those ... assholes ... for me."

"Yeah, Ramsey. I'll get them. Whoever's behind this ... I'll get them."

*Ramsey's body stiffened in pain for an instant and then his features went slack. Kynyr clutched his friend to his chest, but it was too late. A long howl of grief erupted from Kynyr's throat and shivered through the building as he held his dead friend.*

Kynyr lurched upright in his bed, clutching his leg. He blinked away the cobwebs in his mind and saw that Kady had left him a dose of poppy milk on the nightstand, knowing that he still woke in pain each day. Kady, always so thoughtful and kind; Kynyr envisioned her at her tasks and her image pushed away the unhappiness that lingered from his troubling dreams. He drank the drug, stretched out, and waited for his leg to ease.

The door opened and his grandfather entered. Todd Sinclair had a strong, hearty face. The folded lines running from the wings of his nostrils to the outer edges of his lips were deep; the crinkles around his dark blue eyes were crevices in the stalwart earthiness of his features; his heavy eyelids did not lend themselves to clear expression of emotion, making any effort to read his features difficult even for those who knew him well. His calm, centered mien suggested a man who did not go looking for trouble, but once it found him would be utterly relentless in dealing with it.

Todd pulled a chair over to the bedside. "We should talk."

"About Kady?"

"Among other things. You made me a promise, Kynyr. It's time to collect on it." Todd's heavy-lidded eyes narrowed to slits. His voice remained even. Todd did not have to raise his voice; Kynyr was sensitive to the subtle nuances that outsiders missed. In that much, Todd reminded Kynyr of his father, Branduff—Bran to the family—who had learned it from Todd.

"What promise?"

"To tell me everything that happened at Hell's Widow."

Kynyr's fingers dug into the healing wound in his thigh as he sat up again. Todd left his chair, snagged the pillows from the far side of the big bed, and piled them high behind Kynyr.

"We got to Hell's Widow without a hitch. There was no one on the road that day. I briefed Eideard and Ramsey on what Claw expected."

"Find out who killed Cullen?"

"Yeah. Eideard began to speculate about Ellie Remus ... saying she must have helped the sa'necari capture Cullen."

"Did he say why he thought that?" Todd returned to his chair and settled in, his thick wrists draped casually across the chair arms with his elbows sticking out.

"Not in so many words." Kynyr's eyes went distanced with reflection. "I told them about Cooley ... Eideard insisted that we pledge ourselves as Cooley's uncles ... fill the place left vacant by his father's death."

"Eideard was a good mon."

"Mostly."

"You still think he killed Ellie?"

"He could hardly have left her alive after stealing her jewelry." Kynyr sucked in a breath. "I assume it's her jewelry you found on Eideard."

"I planned on packing it up and sending it to a friend in Creeya to sell. Set Cooley up a bank account in Havensword."

"Can I see it?"

Todd gave a curt nod and fetched it.

Kynyr's eyes widened in surprise as Todd laid the casket of jewels next to him. The box was a foot and a half long, eight inches deep, and eight inches wide. Kynyr lifted the lid and set it on the other side of the bed. "I had no idea there was so much of it."

"It filled four pouches and one saddle bag." Todd watched Kynyr sort through the jewelry. "There's at least ten thousand crowns there."

"Wergild. Ellie drugged Cullen so they would take him without a fight."

"Did Eideard know that?"

"Yes." Kynyr came across a simple gold necklace set with jasper and obsidian. "This is her jewelry. I recognize this piece."

"You should not have told him." Todd took a heavy ring from the box; a piece of jade shaped like a temple.

"I expected him to obey orders."

Todd turned the ring over and thumbed a complex button in the underside. "This is how she did it." A bloodstained needle emerged.

"Cullen's blood?"

"That's what Cahira says. It's coated with Yellow Moon. Hit's the blood stream fast."

"Are you thinking of sending Cooley to Creeya?"

"If it gets too dangerous for him here ... Either to Tiderider or StealsThunder."

Kynyr considered while he returned the jewelry to the box. "If Ellie had all this, why did she continue working as a whore?"

"Find the one she worked for and you'll know."

"You mean the sa'necari?"

"Ayup."

"I must go back to Hell's Widow. I promised Silkier I'd get her out."

"Finish the story."

Kynyr told Todd about arriving in Hell's Widow and staying at the Three Candles Inn. The lycan who owned it, Amos Raggat, informed them that Ellie had been spending money in conspicuous amounts, leading him to wonder if she had been paid for betraying Cullen and perhaps a bit more. Flavio, the clerk at the Crimson Lady, had tried to prevent Kynyr from seeing Silkier, until Kynyr brandished Claw's name at him. Once Kynyr got in to see Silkier, the madam told him that Ellie had betrayed Cullen, confirmed that Ellie had not done so as a result of intimidation, and promised to reveal the name of the sa'necari behind it if Kynyr would help her escape.

"You should have kept your mouth shut about Claw." Todd glanced down and stared at a point on the floor, his lips tight.

"You think that's why they ambushed us?"

"Maybe. The only way to know for certain is to go back."

"I intend to. My friends ... deserve their vengeance."

"Then you haven't lost your nerve."

A spark of anger flashed in Kynyr's eyes. "Why would you even wonder about that?"

"I know about the nightmares. You talk in your sleep ... loudly."

"Just because I..." Kynyr's calf spasmed and he grabbed it, grimacing.

Todd threw the covers back. "Let go."

Kynyr drew the edge of his blanket across his loins and left the leg exposed.

Todd's big, powerful hands worked on the cramp. When it eased, he studied the fading lines crossing his grandson's stomach. "You were lucky. If Pandeena and I had gotten there a fraction later, they'd have had your organs out."



Kynyr suppressed a shudder.

Picking up Kynyr's cane, Todd examined the tip which wore a thick layer of cloth bound in place with a rawhide strip. Todd's bushy red eyebrows quirked. "So that's how you've been sneaking up on Kady?"

Kynyr flushed. Kady Wiggins was the only thing in his life that could completely throw him off stride and demolish all traces of maturity in a rush of dismay. He had always been an alpha male in his circles—except in relation to Todd—and yet a bitch was bringing him to his knees in a way he had never experienced before. His primal instincts wanted to chase her howling as if he had lost his mind. Restraint seemed impossible at times, and yet he held it back with a two-fisted tenacity, and said quietly, "She started it."

"Kady? Don't lie to me, Kynyr." Todd's quiet, measuring gaze pinned Kynyr as securely as a mounting tack through a butterfly.

"I'm not lying. She kissed me first." Kynyr's flush deepened to crimson, making his hair look more yellow than gold.

"When?"

"When I first woke up ... she kissed me." Kynyr remembered waking in the darkness, not knowing where he was and how he had gotten there, feverish and in pain from his wounds, thinking all his friends were dead—and then Kady came in like a pale-haired angel bringing comfort, and kissed him.

Todd looked dubious. "One kiss and you're stalking her through the house?"

Kynyr hated it when Todd put him on the spot with that gentle disapprobation. There were only two people who could make Kynyr feel defensive and flustered: his grandfather Todd Sinclair and his father, Branduff Maguire. Kynyr never wanted to disappoint either of them; or appear the fool in front of them. However, stir Kady Wiggins into the mix, and Kynyr felt like he was in over his head. Todd had taken Kady to the Willodarian Shrine and pledged himself as her *guurmondru*—an archaic term that had fallen mostly into disuse, which combined a number of roles that included father, brother, mentor, and until Kady completed her training in the arts of war, protector. All of that ran through Kynyr's mind as he tried to decide how to explain his behavior. "Uhhmn. She kissed me again the day of Ramsey's funeral. And she said she'd go to the Faire with me."

"That could have been just a kindness, Kynyr. You shouldn't make so much of it."

"There's something we weren't going to tell you." Kynyr shifted on the bed, and sucked in a breath, feeling as if someone had taken a straight razor to his pride.

"Tell it." Todd crossed his arms and sat back in his chair.

"The day of Ramsey's funeral, Preece Malloy attacked Kady. I chased him off ... Kady helped." Kynyr looked more embarrassed by the minute. "Kady thought I couldn't take care of myself ... what with this damned leg. I came round the bushes, and Preece had her pinned on the ground ... and she..." Kynyr swallowed, his lips tightening for an instant. His tattered audacity wavered, making it all the harder to speak of the event. "Well, Kady ... screamed at me to go away ... that Preece would kill me."

A knowing look came in Todd's eyes and his arms relaxed. "And then what?"

"I kicked him. He staggered back ... my damned leg buckled ... and then Kady tackled him around the knees and took him down. She hit him a good one in the grapes and landed one in his face."

Todd chuckled. "So you went to her rescue and she ended up rescuing you?"

"Basically." Kynyr lowered his head, unable to meet Todd's bemused eyes. "And then she wouldn't stop kissing me and telling me how worried she was about me. After that, I just sort of figured ... well, maybe it was okay to steal kisses." Kynyr's words came out faster and faster, jammed together between breathless pauses.

"Keep one thing in mind, Kynyr. While a dog has a right to ask, a bitch also has a right to say no. Unwanted sexual advances—and kisses aren't innocent when they are unwanted—is a subtle humiliation for a bitch."

Kynyr felt as if he had been slapped. Kady alone kept the nightmares at bay that haunted the silences and lurked in the quiet moments since the ambush. "If she hits me, I'll take that as a no and stop. Will that satisfy you?"

Todd looked thoughtful. "Don't cross the line with Kady. She's had enough grief." A tiny smile arrived to soften the seriousness of Todd's tone. "Otherwise I'd have to take you over my knee."

"As if you could." Kynyr's teasing grin covered some of his embarrassment. He had padded the cane so that it would make no noise when he snuck up to Kady and stole a kiss. He had become bolder after the day she kissed him, hidden in the trees following Ramsey's funeral. It had added a taste of sweet to the sour of grief, and mitigated the guilt edging his thoughts that day.

Todd gave him an askance look. "As if I couldn't."

Kynyr's jaw clenched and then his grin broke through again. "I'm younger than you are."

"I'm better than you are. The student is not yet the master."

"There's that."

"Remember, Kynyr. Kady's taken a lot of rough handling. The Greenlea brothers and their friends raped her."

"She's seemed a lot more like her old self since she killed Cormic Parry." Kynyr pressed for agreement on that. He needed her whole, wanted more than her kisses, wanted a full-blown courtship and he could not have that if Todd decided to stand in his way as her protector.

"She did a righteous job of it. You should have seen her." A note of satisfaction entered Todd's voice. "Cormic dragged her out of the chair, and the next instant she had knocked him down and was kicking the shit out of him."

Kynyr lifted his eyebrows. Todd rarely resorted to foul language. "She's got her confidence back."

"Just in time."

"What do you mean?"

"Lawgiver's got myn repairing the scaffolds. Sentence has been passed on Donald Greenlea and Iollen Newell."

"You think Caimbeul will hang them?"

"Attempted kidnapping is not a hanging crime. Maximum sentence is one hundred lashes. I doubt Caimbeul will order that."

"Why not? They deserve it." Kynyr had mixed feelings about the situation. The night before he left for Hell's Widow, he had promised Kady that he would avenge her honor when he returned. Kady, Todd, and now Caimbeul, had done it instead. Although Kynyr knew intellectually that there was nothing he could have done following the ambush and his wounding, he still felt as if he had let Kady down by not doing it himself.

"They're village toughs who think pulling down a helpless bitch makes them big dogs."

"I'd order a hundred."

"Fifty would probably kill them, knowing the way Caimbeul likes to see the blows delivered."

"I doubt that."

"Caimbeul uses silver. High-grade silver spikes braided into each of the lashes."

"Ouch." Kynyr flinched at the thought.

"Kady needs to be there when Donald and Iollen receive their punishment. She needs to let all the wet-tailed dogs know she's not weak ... that what happened to Cormic was not pure luck."

"I'll talk to her."

"Good." Todd stood up to leave.

"Wait. I have a question."

"What?"

"Do you think twenty-one is too young to settle down ... get married? I mean ... you were in your thirties when you and Gram..."

"Only because it took me ten years to track her down. You have someone in mind?"

Kynyr had always found the story of how Todd had searched for Cahira romantic. The disastrous conclusion to the Lycan Rebellion had separated them, and yet Todd had kept searching until he found her again. "Kady."

"Are you certain this isn't just a taste of the Wild Cousins?"

"I'm certain. I just need to convince her."

"Well, don't do it the way I did your Gram." A naughty boy smile erased the years from Todd's lined face. "I switched her herbs and landed her one in the belly."

"Uncle Trevor?"

"She still held out until two months before he was due. She looked like an overripe melon walking up the aisle."

\* \* \* \*

The skull of Ellie Remus, cleaned and glazed by the best artisan in Hell's Widow, rested upon a shelf of the bookcase in Heironim's office as a memento mori. Alexander Jondries surreptitiously studied the room, masking his irritation behind long lashed eyes half-closed as he tapped his steepled forefingers against his lips. Heironim had turned the office into a macabre shrine to his murdered whore. Before

Jondries found Ellie's remains, the room had been decorated in Heironim's usual shades of greens and mustards; now everything was black from the carpets to the curtains and the cushions on the chairs and sofas.

Heironim spent more time obsessing on Ellie, than on the twenty-five myn they had lost to Kynyr Maguire's as yet unidentified rescuers. Jondries had lost two close friends, Dorjan and Nelek, in that ambush gone wrong. He wanted answers and Heironim showed no interest in looking for them.

"You can't be certain that Doyle killed her."

"He was her last customer that night." Heironim drummed his fingers on his desk and stared at her skull. "He did it."

"No one saw either of them leave the Crimson Lady."

"They went out the window ... obviously."

Jondries leaned back in his chair. "What if one of them survived? What if Ellie told Doyle your name? She was tortured ... after all ... I assume interrogated. I think you should keep off the streets, Heironim."

"Malthus is coming in two days. We'll know then." Heironim rose and went to the bookcase. He took Ellie's skull down and kissed it. "Murdering bastards. If any of them are still alive, I'll get them."

A skeptical frown lined Jondries' narrow forehead. "I can't understand why you're getting so upset over a lycan whore."

Heironim spun about and glared at Jondries. "I loved her."

Jondries fell silent for several minutes. He disliked lycans almost as much as he did the gutter trash he had once been forced to feed upon. Coupling with them seemed like bestiality to Jondries. "You don't have enough myn to achieve anything. We have only fifteen myn and five sa'necari besides ourselves. Our soldiers barely classify as veteran and the sa'necari can't even be considered middle rank. Sidera sent them so we could finish their training ourselves. It would be suicide to throw them at the lycans."

Heironim's scowl deepened. "I have the will, so there must be a way."

The defeat of his units under Dorjan at the bend in Pendarke Road—which the lycans called Cataract Road—where they had ambushed Kynyr Maguire had hurt Heironim's endeavors in Hell's Widow, putting an end to his efforts to close the road to travel. He could have recruited a few wandering sa'necari through the waystation concealed in the Devil's Dance Inn; however, Malthus had forbidden it. The only sa'necari recruited had to come by way of Sidera Tyrins' estate in the far north, vetted and trained by her. Messengers had been sent to Sidera, but no replies had arrived yet.

Although Flavio and Heironim's other spies in the Crimson Lady kept him informed about Silkie, he chafed under the restraints placed on him by Jondries' logic. Until they could ascertain whether any of Maguire's party had survived the ambush, and if they had, how much they knew about Heironim's operation, he did not dare show his face in public. He had considered having her brought to him, but that would have entailed risking her learning the identities of his people.

Heironim felt certain that Silkie was playing some kind of lone hand against him, but there was nothing to do about it until consulting Malthus.

"Jondries, let Flavio know that I wish to be informed of any irregularities in Silkie's behavior. And she is not permitted to have visits from lycans."

"So you will stay out of sight for the time being?"

"As much as I can."

"You need a rite to steady yourself. Shall I have one prepared for you?"

"Yes. I'll be down to the altars shortly. Put it all in order."

\* \* \* \*

Kady Wiggins had done everything she could think of to make herself less attractive since becoming Cahira Sinclair's apprentice. She had cut her flaxen hair two inches all over, only to have it turn into a mop of curls as soon as she washed it the first time. She had switched from wearing dresses to going about in loose drawstring trousers and baggy shirts. However the broad leather belt that supported her pair of fighting knives and pouches cinched the shirt in and revealed her small waist and the generous curves of her classic hourglass figure.

She sat at the kitchen table, reading a book. Kady knew that she risked discovery by bringing it with her, but she had a basket of knitting close to hand where she could shove the book into hiding if anyone walked in. She found it hard to stop reading, even though it contained many large words that she had absolutely no idea what they meant. Instead, she kept a small tablet with a list of the words penciled in that she failed to recognize.

Kady closed it at the sound of footsteps. They turned away and she glanced down at the title stamped in gold leaf across the top:

*Early Lycan Marriage and Sexual Customs.*

The volume had a long ribbon attached to the top with which to mark her place. Kynyr was getting entirely too pushy; he kept stalking her, stealing kisses, sometimes going as far as to brush his finger across her nipples, and he had already proposed marriage twice.

She did not want to lose him; nor did she wish to give in too easily. She held fast to the old dictum that a dog had a right to ask and a bitch had a right to say no. Kady wanted to find the most complex ancient courtship custom that ever existed, and use it to slow Kynyr down. She was not ready to either get married or open her legs to him. The rapes still bothered her more than she wished to admit to. Killing Cormic had brought her a sense of limited closure—a closure that would be complete when the rest of her attackers were laid in their graves: Donald Greenlea, Iollen Newell, and Gorgarty Burr.

Having to constantly look words up in that huge dictionary that Cahira kept in the library, where the elder bitch did most of her translations, slowed Kady's search down a great deal. She would read a section, make a list of the words, look them up, and then re-read with the meanings in mind.

"*The Wild Cousins Courtship, as stipulated in Divine Law, handed down by the First Mother.* That looks promising." Kady added three more words to her list.

"What are you reading, Kady?" Kynyr limped in with his cane.

Kady straightened and covered the book with a dishtowel, edged it to her basket and shoved it under a bright red square of knitting.

Kynyr raised an eyebrow and reached for the basket. "Are you hiding one of Todd's naughty books? Hmmmm?"

"None of your business." She slapped his hand.

Kynyr reached again for the basket. "Bribe me."

Kady tangled her hand in his long hair and kissed him thoroughly. "Satisfied?"

"Yeah." Kynyr grinned, and settled on the opposite side of the table. "Now I know it's a naughty book."

"You know nothing of the sort," Kady said tartly, stood up, grabbed the basket, and carried it to the counter where she set it close to the stove. Using a towel, she jerked the oven door down and took out a nicely baked pan of meat pies.

\* \* \* \*

Cahira removed the bar and unlocked the door of her shop. As the tiny mage stepped out onto the boardwalk to greet the day, a tiger-striped cat darted into the shop. She blinked, startled by the creature's boldness, and followed it inside.

The cat wrapped around her legs, purring.

Tossing her long graying braid of blonde hair over her shoulder, she knelt and stroked him, scratched behind his ears. "My but you're a big boy. And so pretty."

The cat reared up, put his paws on her shoulder, and licked her face.

"I wonder what your name is?" Cahira extended her powers to see if there was any residue of a past owner and a name tickled her thoughts. "Kerry. Someone called you Kerry. It's a nice name."

She picked him up and he clung to her shoulder as she carried him upstairs to the kitchen. "Such a pretty, pretty."

Kerry's rumbling purr sounded pleasant to Cahira's ear.

She set him on the floor. Kady turned from cutting slices of salt pork up to add into a pot of beans for flavoring. "What have you got there, Gram?"

"A cat."

"Well, I know he's a cat ... he's the biggest cat I've ever seen, except for Kenly of course."

"His name is Kerry."

"Another K." Kady chuckled, cut off some extra pork, and dropped it in a dish, which she placed on the floor for the cat.

"You know how Kenly got his name, don't you?"

"How?" Kady squatted and watched the cat gobble the pork up.

"Darmyk wanted to name his cat Kynyr, but couldn't pronounce it. So it came out Kenly. The cub has always adored Kynyr."

Kady laughed. "That still doesn't explain Kerry here."

"I touched him with power and found that name hovering around him. So Kerry must be his name."

The teakettle had steam pouring from the spout. Kady took it off the fire, filled the teapot with hot water, and put the lid in place to hold the heat in while the tea steeped. "What does power feel like?"

"Why are you asking?"

Kady felt suddenly uncomfortable. 'Why' seemed to be Cahira's and Todd's favorite word. "Because I think I've felt it sometimes."

"When did this start?"

"The day of Eideard's funeral. I went to check on Kynyr, and I found Malthus standing over him with his fingers on Kynyr's chest. And the room felt strange."

Cahira's eyes darkened. "He has some kind of mage or Reader's gift. He tried to Read me and I slapped his face. Reading someone without their permission is quite rude."

The cat stopped eating and stared up at the two bitches with sharp interest.

"Do you think he's sa'necari?" Kady persisted.

"Anything is possible with those monsters. He's been Read by many and no one has detected his being anything but human. Otherwise, he'd be spellcorded like the others."

"But could he be sa'necari?"

Cahira poured a cup of tea, adding cream and sugar. Her eyes went distant as if trying to put her finger upon an odd and elusive fact. "Yes. According to some works I have translated, the mage Brandrahoon created rings of concealment for his brother Waejonan to protect the leaders of the sa'necari cult from being detected while they were working to conquer the tribes of Waejontor."

"The same Brandrahoon that became a vampire?"

"Kady, your lack of knowledge appalls me. There has only been one Brandrahoon. The sa'necari regarded his evil as so terrible they declared that his name could never be given to another. According to St. Tarmus of Lorendon, Brandrahoon's name—which means fire-dragon in an ancient tongue—became a brand of infamy that would stand forever."

"He must be terrible indeed if even the sa'necari fear him."

"He is and they do. I have never completely bought into the belief that to say the true name of the beast was to draw his attention. However, I don't bandy it about either. Best to call him simply Hoon. I studied for a year with the foremost expert on Hoon. One day I will tell you all of it."

The cat bolted across the room to the kitchen window and leaped out of it.

Kady laughed. "I think all this talk of sa'necari and vampires has scared the cat."

"He probably saw a bird." Cahira extended her hand. "Put your hand in mine. Have you ever been Read for the gift?"

"No." Kady placed her hand in Cahira's. "Will it hurt?"

"Not at all. However, from now on I must endeavor to cure your ignorance. Whenever you run out of tasks in the shop, I want you to read. But I'll pick the books." Cahira's Readers gift examined Kady with greater thoroughness than ever before.

Kady felt the searching magic tingle through her muscles, warm her veins, and tickle like a profusion of butterflies in her stomach.

"You have the gifts in profusion, Kady. You have a fully developed mage-net; several of your shaukras are very well developed. The secondary nervous system is very strong."

Kady sucked in an uncomfortable breath. "Are you saying I'm a mage?"

"That's precisely what I'm saying."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus Estrobian needed to put several matters in order before his next visit to Hell's Widow to check on his units there—or what was left of them. He had walked the line of heads tacked to the scaffolds on the Commons three weeks ago and recognized several of his best operatives. He had not managed to learn precisely what went wrong. Four elite units had been sent out, comprised of five sa'necari officers and twenty Waejontori humans, to ambush four lycan guardsmyn returning from Hell's Widow. Two of the lycans had died, and the other two, although wounded, had survived. One of the survivors had been that thorn in his side, Kynyr Maguire. Maguire's grandfather, Todd Sinclair, and his mage wife Cahira, claimed responsibility for wiping out the force that attacked their grandson. A broad spectrum Jump had brought the wagon and all of the dead and wounded from the bend in Pendarke Road to the street in front of Cahira's shop. Their story seemed off, but Malthus could not discover the missing component to it.

In an attempt to fit in better among the lycans, Malthus had adopted many of their styles; wearing his silken black hair in a tail at his neck, rather than oiled and braided like his own people; and kept his oak leaf beard and long mustaches well-groomed. However, there were many things that he could not change, such as the color of his skin: a dark bronze that made him stick out among the fair-skinned lycans like the proverbial sore thumb. Even the light olive complexion of the so-called "black" lycans looked pale compared to Malthus.

The chieftain's hatred of the sa'necari ran bone-deep. His two sons had been captured and executed by the sa'necari following a lycan rebellion eighty years ago that had been efficiently crushed. Malthus stroked the unadorned golden band on his right hand, which he never removed. If they did decide to gaze in his direction, the powerful spell of concealment on the ring would cause him to be Read as human, preventing the foolish lycans from realizing that he was one of the hated sa'necari. Spellcording him would not affect the ring because it was an inanimate object. Even if a yuwenghau Read him, they would not be able to pierce the enchantment, for a yuwenghau had embedded it into the metal.

He shook himself free of those musings. He had schooled himself into ignoring the ring in public as if it were nothing important, nothing to draw the eye to it.

Only a male lycan could rule Clan Red Wolf, Merissa, her mother, and her aunts were effectively removed from inheriting Claw's title. Darmyk could not inherit it because, although he was Claw's grandson, the boy had been born sa'necari like his father. Malthus, passing for human, could not rule either; however, his influence in the household had grown. He had disguised the genetics of his children growing inside Merissa's lovely belly, making them appear to the Readers as lycan.

The logical male to be given regency for Merissa's children was Belgair, Claw's Captain of the Guard. Malthus had Belgair in his pocket, and figured that he had all the angles worked out. All that remained to be done was to kill Claw in a way that could not be traced back to him.

Doubt whispered through his thoughts, reminding Malthus that there were other claimants. He doubted that Brock Redhand, Claw's brother, would return; and even if he did, Brock was nearly as old as Claw—just another feeble old lycan easily disposed of. Kynyr Maguire was another matter. If push came to shove before Malthus got an opportunity to kill him, the illegitimacy of his father's birth would work



against them just as Malthus' own bastardy had disallowed his claim to the titles and estates of his father Lord Feodras.

He had been promised lands, great wealth, and a title of nobility by the Waejontori Queen, Tomyrilen, through her agent and advisor, Lord Brandrahoon in exchange for subjugating the lycans here and assassinating the ruling Redhand family. They had not specified how he should do it, but a large force of arms had been provided to him and were currently raiding the northern hamlets and steadings. Malthus planned to rule this valley, and with Claw dead, the rest would be easy.

He opened a drawer in his desk and took out a chain with a set of globes on it in various colors. Malthus selected the green one, tapped it twice with a word of command, and three small crates appeared on the desk. He looked through the contents of one crate and pulled out six bottles of Tormuth Whiskey, a Creeyan single malt that had a well-deserved reputation for smoothness, flavor, and potency. More deadly presents to give his father-in-law.

Malthus sketched a rune—actually a sa'necari ideogram—on each bottle. His magic flared and the rune burned brightly for a moment before fading into invisibility. The curse on the bottles was very specific: it only affected Claw Redhand, the chieftain. Anyone else who drank it would experience no ill effects; however, the death spells were slowly accumulating in Claw's body like poison, and contributing to his heart problems.

He sent everything back into the green globe except for the whiskey. Then Malthus placed the bottles in a satchel and walked out with them. His father-in-law could usually be found in the Blue Room at that time of day, so Malthus went there first.

Of the dozen drawing rooms in the manor, the Redhands used the Blue Room most often. It was decorated in shades of blue: rugs, furniture cushions, and curtains. A long row of built-in cabinets—another thing borrowed from the humans—lined the south wall. A dining table that could seat forty stretched its stout polished surface near the west windows, which were open to cope with the lingering heat. The hearth on the north end had not been lit in months, and a cluster of chairs with end tables and a pair of sofas framed its heavy bricks. A square table that normally sat off to the side had been moved over to the chairs, and the checkers and board rested in the middle.

Claw sat at the table near the hearth with his checkerboard, stacking and unstacking the wooden rounds in a preoccupied manner. He grimaced, pressing his palm into the left side of his chest. Malthus knew that Claw's chest pains had worsened steadily over the past month.

"More presents from my mother."

Claw looked up, his dark cobalt eyes brightening in his lined jowly face. He scratched at the grizzled stubble on his chin. "What have you got for me this time?"

Malthus put the bottles on the table and waited for Claw's reaction.

The chieftain turned the first one and read the label. "Tormuth Whiskey! That's the best there is."

"Nothing but the best for you is what my mother says."

"Grab some glasses."

Malthus fetched them from the cabinet and Claw poured for both of them.

"You play checkers, Malthus?"

"Not well."

"That bloody ambush cost me my checkers partner—at least until Kynyr's wounds heal enough for him to come back."

Malthus stiffened for an instant and covered it up with a sip from his glass. The young guardsman had made Malthus' courtship with Merissa difficult—until Preece put a knife in Kynyr's back during a riot at the Camp. "I would be happy to play checkers with you until Kynyr returns. We all miss him here."

"Do we?" Claw snarled, his expression turning dour.

"We put our differences behind us, Claw."

"Set up the board."

\* \* \* \*

The Difficult Horse Tavern, called that because of its sign featuring a horse sitting on its rump while a man tugged the reins before it, stood on Main Street across from the village common. The dark wood of the wainscoted interior contributed to the pleasant simplicity of the tavern. Barrels with spigots jutting from them lined the rear wall behind a polished bar of walnut heartwood. Sturdy chairs circled the round tables placed throughout the common room.

Preece Malloy swaggered up to the bar and propped his elbows on the counter. Years of working in the sun had weathered his fair skin to a nut brown. Preece's drawstring pants slouched around his lanky hips and if they had been any looser would have slid to his member. A pair of long fighting knives hung from a worn leather belt, the sheaths lashed to his thighs for an easy draw, and his pants legs bunched around them. While his sturdy bones could easily have carried more weight, Preece did not lack for muscle and the long curves of his biceps looked like hammered steel. A length of leather held his long, mustard brown hair in a tail at his neck.

He regarded Hereward Wiggins, owner of the Difficult Horse Tavern, with dead, jaded eyes and an indolent smile. "Hey, Hereward. I want a private word with you."

The stout tavern master viewed Preece with suspicion. "What about?"

"Not out here. There's gold in it. I have a proposition to make you."

Hereward inclined his head toward the back room. "Come on then."

Once there, Hereward poured them both a whiskey. "What's this about now?"

"I want to marry your daughter." Preece sounded dry and flat, almost indifferent. "I can offer a large bride price."

"For which one?"

"Kady."

"Kady? You saw what she did to Cormic Parry?"

Preece sneered. "Yah, I saw that. I'll give you one hundred gold for her."

"Five hundred."

"Two."

"Four."

"Three hundred?"

"Done." Hereward's eyes glittered. "You can have her. But there's a hitch."

Preece downed his whiskey. "What do you mean?"

"The priest here would never agree to it. You'd have to carry her off to another village to do it."

"Will you help?"

"Of course. I'll be glad to be rid of her. She's unnatural."

"She won't be when I'm done with her." Preece poured himself another glass, and examined the label. "Tormuth Whiskey. Very smooth."

"And the bride price?"

"Half when we get her to the other village. Half once the marriage has been consummated."

"It will be difficult getting her away from Todd Sinclair. He's a tough one."

Preece shrugged, his dead cold eyes showed a flicker of interest. "Not from the back."

Hereward blanched. "You're talking murder."

"You got a problem with that?"

"I feel like I'm making a deal with a devil."

"You are." Preece leaned back in his chair and drank his whiskey. "It's going to take a devil to break that trolleymog daughter of yours."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus stepped through the door into the yard and heard children's voices. Ros' sweet laughter carried clear and high to his ears. He heard Lyrri giggle, and knew that both of his nieces were in the garden. A smile touched his lips and he stole between the low hedges with an expression of boyish mischief on his thirty-six year old face.

As penniless orphans and daughters of a Waejontori noble house whose estates had been destroyed by the Sharani, seven-year-old Ros and her six-year-old sister Lyrri had been bounced from one set of relatives to the next until Malthus had taken them in.

Ros had her back to him braiding a chain of late-blooming snow jasmine. A large bloom, white with streaks of azure, had been tucked into her hair with the long stem behind her ear. It contrasted against her black locks.

A pretty child; Malthus could already see the signs of her becoming a beautiful young mon. He imagined having to beat her suitors off with a stick by the time she reached marriageable age at fourteen.

He spied Erskine Faraday seated upon a boulder beneath the shadows of an oak tree, watching over the girls. The lycans thought they were keeping the girls safe from the vampire that had attacked Ros two months ago; however, Erskine would not even slow Sergei down should he decide to make another grab at Ros. Sergei Wraithsbane had been a battlemage before Brandrahoon turned him—and Lemyari

vampires always retained whatever powers and abilities they had possessed before becoming undead.

Erskine noticed him and started to speak. Malthus put a finger to his lips and shook his head. Erskine looked away with a small smile.

Malthus' hands clamped onto Ros' shoulders. "Booga-booga."

Ros flinched and hit him with a bolt of power. Malthus turned it with a thought, laughing.

The lycans could not see the patterns of power and so Erskine had no idea of what had happened. Lyrri could and she dropped her flowers.

Ros glanced up at Malthus, her eyes serious, and a look of exasperated disapprobation filled her face. "Uncle Malthus! You scared me."

"I could not resist." He kissed her forehead. "I'm going to Hell's Widow day after tomorrow. Is there anything you would like me to bring back?"

Ros looked mollified. "The cherry candies?"

"Lyrri?"

"Taffy sticks."

"Consider it done."

Erskine sauntered over. "Should you be going? It's not safe."

"I should be safe enough. The bandits were decimated. If there's anymore out there, they're probably still licking their wounds." *I'd like to know how they managed to kill so many of my myn. Heironim had better have the answers.*

"I suppose." Erskine shrugged and returned to his rock.

Malthus straightened. "Well I'm off to the Difficult Horse.

### CHAPTER THREE

#### MESSAGES

Jondries rose from his bath into the arms of the nibari that he had purchased from Dymier at the Devil's Dance Inn, which served as a hidden waystation for sa'necari stealing through the Sharani-occupied sections of Waejontor. The two females wore breastbands and loincloths. The stud wore nothing at all. Jondries considered them a good start for a promising herd. The nibari were genetically altered human stock, bred for utter docility over the course of thousands of years. Jondries' nibari were flawless, unmarked by the whips usually employed by sa'necari and vampire masters. He regarded them as pets as much as slaves.

The females, which he had named Lotus and Jasmine, towed him dry. Lotus' face had a betraying ruddiness and her neck looked puffy, suggesting the early stages of Blood-Bloat; a potentially fatal condition among the nibari that resulted from going too long without being bled.

Jondries stroked Lotus' face. "A few more weeks, pet, and I'll relieve your discomfort."

"Thank you, Master Jondries." Lotus averted her large, dark eyes with a timid smile that Jondries found charming.

He settled at his dressing table. Jasmine towed his long ebony hair dry, and braided it. The stud, Diddler, brought Jondries his black robe and scarlet sash. Jondries always bathed before and after the rites of mortgiefan. While the odors of sex mingled with fresh death aroused him, he disliked going around smelling of it afterwards.

He dressed, kissed Jasmine's forehead, and patted Diddler's back. "Jasmine will be in season in another week. See that you do well by her, Diddler."

Nibari had ninety-day fertility cycles, unlike the twenty-eight days of normal humans, and Jondries kept precise records on Jasmine and Lotus in preparation for breeding them to Diddler.

"I will, Master Jondries," responded Diddler.

Alexander Jondries fetched Lord Heironim Traxton's ritual robe and carried it to his office. Heironim sat at his desk still brooding and stroking Ellie's skull. Jondries suppressed a twitch of irritation at the sight, laying the robe and sash across the desk.

"We're ready, Heironim."

"We?" Heironim changed clothing.

Jondries leaned his shoulder against the wall. "I had three offerings prepared. One for each of us."

"And the third?"

"To be effective, we need to bring the others up in power ... closer to first rank. That means more rites."

"How's the larder holding up?" Heironim adjusted his sash, returned Ellie's skull to its niche, and walked out with Jondries trailing after him.

"We have at least twenty myn in it. Mostly homeless." Jondries lips screwed up in distaste. "A few resisters. Three or four lycans. Nothing special."

"Females?"

"About a third of them."

The second door south from Heironim's office opened on a private stairwell reserved for the sa'necari. The reddish black walls had been painted with blood using large brushes. Signs of warding and concealment shimmered on the doors, walls, ceiling, and floors.

"After today, Alex, limit our myn to one rite a month. Use up the males first. I want a safety assessment before we refill the larder."

"As you wish."

They walked down two floors into the basement and followed a long hallway to the east quadrant. Heironim put his hand to the door and unlocked it with a word of command. Pushing it open, they entered the ambulatory along the edge of their Temple to the Hellgod. Red and black candles burned in niches along the walls. A section of aisles and pews, where they gathered their soldiers once a month to receive the Sacrament of Bellocar, lay to their left. Despite the efforts of the Sharani occupiers, the Waejontori people had begun to return to the old beliefs since the rise of the Bastard Queen, the illegitimate daughter of Prince Shintar and a Sharani Banewitch.

Nine altars, simple basalt slabs, stood upon a three-tiered dais at the north end, ringed by candles and incense burners on high stands. Small worktables for the implements of the rites sat catty-corner to each altar. The central altar occupied the highest dais with ornate screens on three sides and a statue of Bellocar the Hellgod in a pose called Bellocar Magnus, holding a knife in one hand and a severed head in the other.

Jondries lit the candles and incense while Heironim climbed to the top. In Malthus' absence, the High Altar belonged to Heironim.

Three myn lay upon their backs on the uppermost altars—females—their wrists and ankles shackled to the floor, all of their hair shaved, except for the long strands on their heads. Tools filled the worktables beside each slab.

Heironim paused to gaze at the lycan bitch on the lower altar. She looked to be no more than fourteen; her white blonde hair glowed in the candlelight as it hung from the altar. Spellcords on her wrists kept her in human form. The bitch whimpered when she saw them, knowing her time approached.

"She reminds me of Ellie." Heironim ran his finger around her nipple. She turned her face away, twisting from his touch as much as her shackles would allow.

Jondries kept his expression schooled into neutrality. "She's mine."

"I thought you didn't like wolf meat." Heironim rested his hand on the spout of a blood groove protruding above a large basin.

"She's an exception. Her father is uncooperative."

Interest flickered in Heironim's eyes. He stroked her nude body, smiling at her whimpers. "What's her name?"

"Sainy. Amos Raggat's youngest."

"The Innkeeper?"

"The deadline I gave him passed last night. So I had Timocratus snatch her."

"Virgin?"

"Yes."

"All the better." Heironim continued on to the central altar. The mon there was Waejontori. Her black hair spread across the slab and hung to the ground like a shimmering black waterfall. Her eyes held the haunted calm of resignation to her fate. She appeared to be a younger version of Silkie and he smiled. "A good choice."

"Full rite?" Jondries asked.

"Yes."

Jondries took a small pot of scented oil mixed thick with black pigments from the table beside the altar, and drew a symbol in black pigment where her loins met her belly, and another in the middle of her stomach. Tears crept from her eyes, yet she made no sounds as Jondries searched her body with his necromantic senses, located each of her organs precisely, and marked them with symbols.

Heironim shrugged out of his robe, folded, and laid it over one end of the worktable. He stroked his member as he studied the blades that Jondries had laid out for him.

Calm melted into anguish, glazing her eyes. Sweat gleamed upon her bronze skin.

Jondries lit the incense and walked widdershins around the victim swinging the censer and chanting.

Power shimmered in the air.

Heironim selected a hellblade runed to his preferences. His member hardened to full attention as he stepped between her legs. Jondries waited until Heironim had gotten both his cock and his blade into her, and then returned to his lycan.

Jondries could taste Sainy's terror, rising like a shimmer of heat distortion from her body. He removed his robe and marked her flesh with symbols as he had Heironim's victim. In his late twenties, Jondries had begun to recognize the first signs of the progressive infertility typical of sa'necari in himself. It had been six years since he had managed to impregnate a female, and it took longer for him to ejaculate—even when a death was involved. He had gotten four children on Sidera's nibari, but only one of them had been sa'necari-born—which meant that legally he had only one offspring.

His thoughts drifted to Malthus. The mon's fertility awed Jondries; thirty-six years old, getting children at every mating and all of them sa'necari-born. *I should be so lucky.*

Jondries selected his blade from the table, deciding upon a long, thin one. He liked precision in these matters.

He stroked his cock as he approached her and stood between her legs, glancing across her body. "I feel like I'm fucking a dog ... or a pig."

Jondries sniffed her stomach. The scented oils he had ordered her smeared with earlier could not mask the lycan muskiness. Jondries' wrinkled his nose in distaste. The only good thing about taking a lycan was that they were tougher than humans and took longer to die. Jondries' aversion to lycans was so great that he had to focus on other matters in order to maintain his erection. So he started talking to her and thinking aloud.

"It's your father's fault."

"Please ... have mercy." Tears rolled from her eyes.

"Don't beg. It's tiresome."

He took a deep breath, grasped his cock, and pushed it into her moist hole. Her maidenhead tore. Blood coated his member, and the scent of it steadied Jondries to his task.

Sainy shrieked and writhed.

"Hold still, you filthy beast!" Jondries put his hand between her breasts to hold her in place, and popped the blade into her ribcage with a smooth flick of his wrist. "There we go. That went in nicely."

Her shrieks changed to screams.

The auric charge of her pain and despair aroused Jondries' necromantic hunger as it spread outward from her body. The iron and copper smell of her blood tickled his nostrils.

"Sweet and tight..." *Better than I expected it to be.*

His aversion lessened and Sainy became just another meal.

He dragged the blade along the inside of her right thigh and then the left, expanding his senses to savor her suffering. The first wounds were to cause pain alone, whetting his appetite and feeding him on a psychic level.

"I'd like ... to see ... your father's face..." Jondries' grunts punctuated his words as he thrust in and out. "When he ... finds your ... body."

He harmonized the rhythm of the increasingly brutal copulation to the pattern of his blade work as he cut and stabbed. She flinched and jerked satisfyingly, her voice hoarsening. When he tired of her noises, he split her kidneys open and paralyzed her with pain. The intensity of the bitch's physical anguish sent a dizzying wave of ecstasy sweeping through Jondries.

"Sweet ... sweet bitch," Jondries moaned as Sainy started to die beneath him.

He savored the way her heart struggled to continue beating, fluttering erratically. Feeling the glow of approaching orgasm, Jondries poised the blade above her heart. He shoved the blade into the organ with a rending twist that stilled it as he exploded inside her. The bitch's soul shattered and he sucked up the pieces, feeling satiated and drunk.

"Bellocar's Balls." Jondries blinked at the rush Sainy's death had given him, understanding for the first time why so many of his kind favored lycans for the rites.

He withdrew his spent member from her corpse, moved to the worktable, and cleaned his blade before slipping his robe on and tying it closed.

Heironim descended from the upper dais looking far better than he had since the discovery of Ellie's body. He poked his finger into the heart wound in Sainy's chest and licked it clean.

Jondries smirked at him. "This should bring Raggat to heel."

"It's the strongest message we can send him." Heironim shoved his finger into the wound again and sucked on it. "It's time they learned we own the ghettos."



"Past time."

"Who do you wish to give the third to, Alex?"

"Timocratus. He's served us well."

"So be it."

\* \* \* \*

Padruig Caimbeul, a huge grizzled lycan, stout and muscular beneath his aging paunch, weighed three hundred pounds. There were few wolves as large as Caimbeul, or as powerful as he had been in his youth. The average lycan life span was one hundred and twenty years; Caimbeul was five hundred. His paternal grandmother had been a fireborn, which gave him both his lifespan and the *nond ger* he was known by in his youth: Fireborn Law.

He had never expected to be a lawgiver again until his ex-wife, Pandeena Moonbow, showed up at his hovel and convinced him to leave Running Horse and move to Wolffgard. He had refused right up until she told him about Cullen Blackwood's murder. Caimbeul had been one of the few people who had genuinely liked Cullen and put up with his endless talk of whores and horses.

The lawgiver went to the big bookcase and glanced across the titles on a shelf of law books. It had occurred to him that he was running on instinct and knowledge that might be outdated or done differently in Red Wolf than it had been in Silverpaw. Two matters had begun preying on his mind.

Kady Wiggins, now calling herself Kady Sinclair, had been repeatedly dragged out of taverns and raped by a small gang and assorted others simply because she had a reputation as a slut. A possibly unfounded reputation. Damaged reputations were nearly impossible to repair. Six of them, led by Cormic Parry, the tanner's son, had tried to force Kady from the Difficult Horse tavern while her estranged father ignored the proceedings. Kady killed Cormic—kicked him to death—and her guurmondru, Todd Sinclair killed Keith Greenlea with a single blow. Now Caimbeul had two, Donald Greenlea, Keith's older brother, and Iollen Newell in the dungeons of the Lawgiver House, awaiting punishment for attempted kidnapping with intent to commit rape, and he was having the scaffolds readied to make a public example of them. It probably would not stop the growing number of rapes in Wolffgard, but it might give the rest of the scoundrels pause to think before pulling down another bitch.

The second pressing matter was the fact that someone had forced the females at the Sanctuary Refugee Camp—lycan, human, and sa'necari—into sexual servitude. Shalto Beggins had presented himself as the leader on that, but Caimbeul suspected that Shalto was a front for someone else; possibly Malthus. Brothels were illegal in Clan territory because prostitutes and sluts were regarded as troublemakers that caused fighting among the young wolves. Customs had either changed or were changing.

"Well, one at a time. Kady first."

The custom of the Wild Cousins had originally been a means of determining whether a bitch was fertile or not before marriage, since divorces were not easy to get and the risk of finding oneself stuck with an infertile wife when large families were required to make farming sustainable was often a life or death matter. Without sons to help with the farm work, a lycan farmer could easily work himself to death and still barely scrape by.

Technically, a slut was someone who had several lovers at the same time, or simply bounced from lover to lover in quick succession. However, with the increasing emphasis on bride price, female virginity before marriage was becoming highly prized, and the practitioners of the Wild Cousins custom were more and more being defined as sluts.

Caimbeul located the volume on Family and Sexual laws, pulled it off the shelf, and carried it over to the table in the study. He laid the book down, and headed for the kitchen, wishing that he had started keeping liquor all over the house like Todd did.

His thoughts strayed to Pandeena as he got the bottle of Dragonsbreath Whiskey from the cabinet and a glass before returning to the study. In the back of his mind, Caimbeul could hear the echo of Pandeena complaining that he drank too much and too early.

He shoved Pandeena out of his mind. The last time he had gone to her home, he had smelled sex on her and knew that she had made good on her intentions to seduce Kynyr Maguire. She was outside the laws. Pandeena Moonbow was yuwenghau—a demigod; one of the first mothers of the Lycan race; as well as being Caimbeul's ex-wife. He wished he could have said that it did not bother him that she was sleeping with Kynyr; but Caimbeul refused to lie to himself. The sexual allure of the yuwenghau was something most poor mortals could not resist. Kynyr did not know what she was; yet he had succumbed to it just as had all the others before him.

Caimbeul poured himself a glass of whiskey and sipped at it as he opened the book, thumbing through to the page he wanted to read. All of the entries were followed by blank pages so that they could be updated by the current lawgiver.

*The Wild Cousins:*

*History. Originally intended as a means of establishing the relative fertility of a female prior to marriage because of the difficulties involved in securing a divorce. It has since that period evolved into a form of serial unwed monogamy. Probably because skilled Readers can now establish fertility, compatibility, and parentage. However as the term has become applied to adulterous circumstances, popular opinion has begun to more and more associate Wild Cousins with sluttishness.*

Caimbeul's eye trailed over to the side and read a handwritten notation in the margin: *see concubines and definitions of sluts.*

Two different hands had written in notes and thoughts. The first hand was open and confident, making Caimbeul suspect that those notations must have been made by Nevin. The Lawgiver Nevin Scarface had stayed meticulously on topic, listing cases and decisions that had been made since the book was assembled.

The second was cramped except for a loopy T that Caimbeul had long ago learned to associate with insecurity. That had to be Nikko Softpaws' writing.

Padruig Caimbeul thumbed through and at the end of the section on sluts; he found an interesting entry in Nikko's script that was dated around the time that the young lawgiver vanished.

*"What constitutes a brothel? Or a slut for that matter? Within the sanctum of our minds, are we not all sluts at one time or another? Is it only in the actions and intentions that a slut is defined? Or is it also in our fantasies?"*

*"I visited Beth Ryan to ask her about the allegations regarding her recent reputation as a slut. My responsibility to the community demanded that I have her removed from the village if this was true. They were true. She snatched open my pants and shoved them around my knees before I could stop her. I fled out the door, only to find myself faced with Malthus, Shalto, and Oswyl who accused me of being a hypocrite because I was tying my pants closed."*

"The more I think on it, the more certain I am that they set me up so that I could no longer complain about what I was witnessing around the camp in regard to the females. The bitter irony is that I have not yet lain with a bitch, despite being nineteen, and yet my reputation is soiled by innuendo.

*"Furthermore, although I have no proof yet, I suspect that Malthus is behind all the strange happenings at the camp. All of the young dogs there idolize him. The next time that Malthus rides off to hunt alone, I intend to follow him and see what I can discover."*

Caimbeul skipped to the next section.

*Male Rights and responsibilities:*

*Responsibility for birth control is that of the male, owing to practices of withdrawal and the use of eelskins.*

*Any children are the legal responsibility of the male once a Reader has established paternity.*

At the end was a question in Nikko's script.

*"Are they doing this to elude responsibility?"*

"Nikko, did you keep diaries? If I found your diaries, what would I discover? Would they contain the name of the mon who tried to kill you? Who would know? Who could I ask?" Caimbeul poured a second whiskey and knocked it back, wiping his mouth off on his shirtsleeve. "Kynyr. Start with Kynyr and find out who your friends were."

The lawgiver took the bottle and the glass with him when he went down to the dungeons beneath the house. He snagged the ring of keys from the nail in the wall and opened the first cell.

Donald Greenlea hung nude from the ceiling by his shackled wrists, spellcordinated, his ankles chained to hooks in the floor.

On a long table of gray weathered wood lay a variety of whips, a jug and a glass of vinegar, and a couple of truncheons. Caimbeul put his bottle of whiskey and his glass on the table. He chose a cat-o-nine-tails of braided leather strips with silver spikes woven through it.

"Hello, Donald. The advocate your parents hired did a poor job of it. The elders found you guilty and sentencing has been left up to me."

"Bastard! Kady's a slut. We only gave her what she wanted. You can't do this."

Caimbeul walked around and stood behind Donald. "I can do anything I want."

He considered the whip in his hands and struck Donald across the back. The spikes dug into Donald's flesh as the lash opened a long tear in his skin. Caimbeul gave it a jerk to free the spikes.

Donald screamed.

"Whose idea was it to pull Kady down the first time?"

"Cormic ... it was Cormic's idea."

Caimbeul struck Donald again with the spiked lash. "And where did Cormic get that idea?"

Donald let out another scream that died away into hiccupping and gasping. "Hereward ... Cormic heard

Hereward ... saying he intended ... to throw her ... to the wolves and ... Cormic wanted to test it."

"What happened then?"

"She took some trash out. We followed her. Hereward stood and watched us taking turns ... he turned around ... and went back inside. Cormic said ... that indicated permission ... that we had her da's permission to rape her."

"He say why?"

"Cullen. She'd been fucking that little cock-happy freak."

Caimbeul struck him with the whip again.

Donald shrieked. "I answered your damned question."

"I liked Cullen."

"Aww, shit."

"Getting back to your previous statement, are you now willing to admit it was rape?"

"It was rape. At least the first time. She kept begging and pleading. Every time she opened her mouth or squirmed too much, Cormic hit her. Kady was pretty messed up by the time he stopped. After that she didn't fight it as much whenever we grabbed her."

Caimbeul walked over to the table and laid the whip down. He had another glass of whiskey. "I'll be back. It's time to check on the scaffolds. You'll be getting fifty lashes with my favorite as soon as the flogging posts are finished."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus frequented the Difficult Horse Tavern more than the other four establishments in Wolffgard because of its popularity. He had no desire to be labeled a gutter-crawler by spending too much time in disreputable places. He gestured at seventeen-year-old Larena Wiggins, Hereward's second-oldest daughter, as he stepped inside. "The usual."

"Right with you." Larena gave him a flirtatious wink and headed for the bar.

Malthus watched her. The locals called Hereward's daughters the Forbidden Fruit. They flirted to an outrageous degree for tips, and never let anyone taste their wares—except Kady. Kady had been sampled by most of the dogs in Malthus' outer circle.

He scanned the room and spied Preece having a drink in a darkened corner at their favorite table, which had been a compromise since both Preece and Malthus preferred to have their backs to a wall. Malthus joined him, and slipped into his usual seat, leaning back in his chair until it tilted against wood paneling.

Larena arrived, placed a tankard of mead in front of Malthus, and accepted the two pence he dropped on her tray. The mounds of her pale breasts peeked above the neck of her tight-bodice. Hereward dressed his daughters for coquetry to sell more liquor, and then applied a spiked club to anyone who tried to touch them inappropriately.

"Seconds, Preece?"

"And thirds. I'm in a good mood, Larena."

Malthus considered Preece. The lycan's eyes were as dead cold as ever despite the suggestion of a smile. He waited until Larena had gone out of earshot before he spoke. "What has you in a *good mood*?"

Preece tilted his head, half-lowered, his smile settling into a sly sneer. "Congratulate me."

"For what?"

"I'm getting married." Preece tossed the words off as if they held little importance.

"To whom?"

"I offered bride price for Kady. Hereward accepted."

"Don't tell me you're in love." Malthus matched Preece's sneer.

"Not hardly."

"Lust?"

Preece snorted. "Not that either."

"Why?"

"Because I want to see the look in Pretty Boy Maguire's eyes when I break his bitch."

"He'll kill you."

Preece shrugged his indifference. "He'll try."

"You hate him that much?" Malthus wondered where Preece's growing obsession with Kynyr came from. So far as he knew the two myn had never had any direct encounters other than the one at the funeral. Malthus did not count the time Preece plunged a blade into Kynyr's back, because Kynyr still did not know who had done it.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Don't ask so many questions, Malthus. You might not like the answers."

\* \* \* \*

What Jordi MacFie lacked in intelligence, he made up for in commonsense. He had found Sainy's corpse on the back steps in a bloodstained canvas sack, removed it to the storeroom beside the barn, and then fetched Amos. A note had been pinned to the sack, but Jordi could neither read nor write, and he had to wait for Amos to tell him what it said.

Despair settled over the Three Candles Inn, and even the customers were silent. The small lycan community of Hell's Widow had more cohesion than the larger human areas of the town. The brutal murder of Sainy Raggat left them feeling as if a blow had been struck to their heart. Nainsi Raggat, Sainy's mother, had been so grief-stricken that their local healer had sedated and put her to bed.

Jordi wandered through the deserted common room around midnight, lit a candle, and stared down into the coffin. Sainy looked peaceful in her best, Taladay-go-to-Temple clothes. Her sisters had bathed her mutilated body, wrapped her tightly in linen, and then clothed her. Jordi's heart ached. Little Sainy had

been everyone's favorite. Which was probably why those butchering sa'necari had chosen her. Jordi kissed her forehead, cheeks, and lips in the farewell to the dead. He felt hollow and numb. He had known Sainy since she was four years old, when he first came to work for her father as the inn's hostler.

In the quiet, the little noises that went unnoticed sounded loud; all the creaks and groans of the settling wood frame of the inn became conspicuous to Jordi's ears. The sound of weeping drew Jordi to the keg room behind the bar and he wondered which of the family was still awake at that hour.

Jordi opened the door and saw Amos Raggat drunk and sobbing. He sat down across from him, turning the bottle around to have a look at the label: a dragon breathing flames into a tankard. "Dragonsbreath. Strong stuff, Amos."

Dragonsbreath was imported from Iradrim and more famous for its potency than its taste.

Jordi nodded a question at the bottle of Dragonsbreath and Amos nodded an answer back. So Jordi poured himself a drink.

He knocked it back and patted his employer on the shoulder. "I'm sorry 'bout Sainy."

"They wanted names and addresses ... local and clan. I refused." Amos released a long keening cry that made Jordi shiver. "They rited her, Jordi. Ate her soul."

Jordi ached for a way to ease Amos' mind and heart. "If there's anything I can do?"

"It's dangerous." The short innkeeper, fat as an apple dumpling, patted a piece of paper that, until then, Jordi had not noticed.

"What?" Jordi poured a second drink.

"A letter to Kynyr Maguire." Amos slid the paper across the table. "But you have to go the back way. Do you know it?"

Jordi snorted. "Know it? My brother lives right next to it. I got kin all through Langtree. You think Maguire will do something about these murdering thomases?"

"I know he will."

"Okay. It's going to take me a couple of weeks. Three days down to Langtree, Another day to get across Blacktooth Falls, and then three days back up to Wolffgard."

"Do it."

"I'll be out of here by morning."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PURSUIT

Jondries slept in an elegant bedroom snuggled beneath a quilted eiderdown comforter; his windows opened just enough to let the refreshingly sharp autumn breeze blow through across him. Except for the days when it stormed, autumn was his favorite season. He dreamed of Sainy's exquisite death and woke hungry for another lycan, musing that they must be addictive. Flicking back the burnt orange comforter, Jondries sat up and let the sheets and coverlets slide from his lean nudity.

A book lay upon the nightstand beside his bed: *The Twenty-Six Positions of Surrender* by Statyranis. The book was considered to be the ultimate manual for training nibari. His nibari had known only the first five positions when he purchased them. Jondries had taught them the next five, which completed the primary positions. His eyes glanced across the gold lettering on the black bound book, and he considered for a moment whether to start them on the mid-level positions today. If he had time, he would work with Diddler that afternoon.

Jondries slipped out of bed and stretched, an unexpected yawn on his lips. His fangs descended from their sheaths and he ran his tongue across them. The back of his throat itched. Crossing the floor to his dressing table, Jondries regarded himself in the mirror and sighed at his bony hips. His chest seemed decent enough, but the hips would have suited a scarecrow. *No wonder the whores complain when I fuck them.*

Bottles of assorted sizes and colors filled the dresser top. Jondries hovered over them as he decided which scent to wear that day. His hand went to a sapphire bottle with a tall stopper. He splashed the tangy fragrance called Lake Mist liberally across his chest and neck, patting some into his armpits.

Satisfied, Jondries took a silver bell from the dressing table and rang it sharply twice.

The door opened and Jasmine entered.

"First position, Jasmine."

She slipped out of her robe and knelt between Jondries' legs, her wrists crossed behind her back, her head tilted to the side until it nearly touched her shoulder, exposing her long biteable neck.

Jondries' fangs came down. "Very good, pet."

She shuddered with a faint whimper as his fangs broke the skin on her neck, and then steadied as he began to suck.

Jondries fondled her womanly bits, imagining himself as Diddler, feeling her egg connect with his sperm. He pulled his fangs from her neck and licked the wound closed so that it would not scar. *I'd give up everything if I could be fecund again. I wanted a son, and I got a daughter. And now nothing at all after six years of trying.*

He patted her head with a sigh. *Why this accursed infertility? I hate it.*

The door burst open and a tall human in drawstring trousers and shirt of crude wool rushed in. "Master Jondries!"

Jondries turned, glaring at the mon who had dared to interrupt at such a moment. "What is it?"

"Amos Raggat's hostler has ridden out toward Langtree."

*If it's not one thing, it's a dozen.* "Tell Andreas to take you and two others after the hostler. Find out where he's going. When you know that, kill him and the people he has gone to see."

\* \* \* \*

Half a day south of Hell's Widow, the flatlands of Waejontor gave way to rocky hills thick with birches and rowan as it descended into the glens of Clan MacLachlan, the smallest of the lycan clans. Their six villages and dozens of isolated holdings on the west side of the Eirlys River bordered Clan Red Wolf. They were proud folk, stalwart and true; ruled by Laird Duncan MacLachlan. The MacLachlans were kin to the MacFie, Duncan having married Jordi's grandfather's sister.

An insular folk, Jordi MacFie was one of the few wolves from MacLachlan to live beyond their enclave. He knew he was slow, but slow did not mean stupid, and Jordi had left MacLachlan to prove to himself and his overprotective family that he could do well on his own.

He rode his old Bessy at a calculated pace, making good time down Oxmoor Road. Bessy was a stocky, fifteen-year-old blue roan with heavy hindquarters, built more for cutting a cow out of a herd than racing, although she did well in short bursts. Jordi sat easy in his sturdy lycan saddle with a horn and many straps for carrying equipment. Since Jordi had never been good with a bow, nothing rested beneath the bow flap. He carried the long lycan fighting knives strapped to his thighs for an easy draw as his only weapon. He had never been much of a fighter and his thoughts strayed to Siusan MacFie, his oldest brother Fergus' wife. She used to take a broom handle to anyone who got rough with Jordi growing up and it tickled him to see it.

Amos had offered to let Jordi take the pick of his small stable, the fastest horses he owned; however Jordi had thanked him 'kindly' and took his own old Bessy. She might not be as fast as the others, but she was smarter. Some folks claimed that Jordi was a horsewhisperer; but the ones who called it magic got closer to the truth. Jordi had one of those tiny talents that showed up from time to time, mostly among those with the simplest and most direct minds: he could talk to horses.

Bessy knew the way to his brother's home near Langtree. They made the trip a couple times each year for family reunions. She had been bred there.

Riding through a thick stretch of birches, Bessy began whickering and Jordi reached out to her with his talents. Bessy insisted she heard more horses.

He reined Bessy into the concealment of the birches and waited to see whether the horses meant simply more travelers, or if he was being followed. Jordi waited and waited and waited, yet the riders never passed him.

"I got a bad feeling about this, Bessy," he said as he ventured back onto the road.

She whickered her agreement.

\* \* \* \*

Jondries sat at the table in Amos Raggat's keg room with two myn standing behind him, bodyguards in case of trouble. He crossed his legs and folded his arms, leaning back and regarding Amos. "Anything I want is on the house, right?"

Amos nodded.

"Then get me a bottle of Tormuth Whiskey and pour me a drink."

Amos went to the cabinet and returned with four glasses and the bottle of his most expensive whiskey.



He poured without speaking. His eyes were swollen and red.

"Did you like my little present?"

Amos shook his head.

"Thank me, Amos. Thank me for returning her corpse in one piece instead of many."

Amos shuddered, fresh tears dripping from his eyes, his voice so tight the words could barely escape his throat. "Thank you, Master Jondries."

"You need to hire another hostler."

The Innkeeper stiffened. "What do you mean?"

"I killed the one you sent to Langtree."

Amos blanched. "Jordi."

"Squealed like a stuck pig." The Waejontori bodyguard hooked his thumbs in his belt and described murdering Jordi in great detail.

Amos looked as if he had had the wind knocked out of him.

Jondries waved his men to silence with a chuckle. *One more twist of the knife and he'll break.* "Are you ready to give me that list? Or would you rather bury another daughter?"

"The list. I'll give you the list."

When Jondries departed an hour later, he had four sheets of paper stuck in his pouches and a pleased expression on his face. He waited until they were nearly to the Green Sheaves before he asked the question. "When did you catch Jordi MacFie, Bones?"

Mario 'Bones' Casale grinned. "Haven't. Andreas is still following him."

## CHAPTER FIVE AWAKENING

Heironim stalked through the Crimson Lady with Flavio the clerk following at his heels like a frightened puppy, and Jondries trailing them. Standing five foot eleven inches, with broad powerful shoulders, Heironim possessed an uncommon build among the sa'necari-born. He moved with an assumed arrogance, which only relaxed when he was playing another role or socializing with Malthus, his closest friend.

"How long has it been since you last saw her?" Heironim glanced down at Flavio.

"Three, maybe four days." Flavio breathed rapidly, hyperventilating with stress.

They reached the door to Silkie's office and Heironim tried the knob, finding it locked. Heironim broke the knob off and pushed at the door. It still refused to open. "She's dropped the bar. Get some axes and break it down."

Jondries scowled deeply. "You think she killed herself?"

"Possibly. I would never have believed her to be the suicidal type."

"They aren't until they are."

Heironim half-closed one eye with an indolent sneer. "So I've heard, Jondries."

Several of the guards employed by the brothel arrived and began ripping the door apart with axes. The effort went slowly because Silkie's door was thick and tough.

Heironim sucked in a deep breath. "Malthus will be very disappointed if Silkie is dead. He wanted that child she carried."

"She wasn't as tough as we thought she was, Heironim. Malthus can't fault you for it." Jondries sidestepped as a chunk of door flew in his direction.

"He won't fault me. He'll fault you. We still don't know what she told Maguire ... or what Ellie might have confessed to Doyle ... or if any of them are alive to tell of it."

\* \* \* \*

Silkanna's eyes snapped open at the sound of thudding axes, feeling curious. She smelled something delicious, filled with iron and copper, and pulsing in pleasant rivers. Her fangs came down and she ran her tongue across them. Flexing her fingers, her secondary nails emerged beneath her primaries dripping golden venom. Eventually it would turn green and increase in potency until it became the most deadly venom on the continent.

She glanced at the box dangling from her belt and opened it. A squeal of delight escaped her lips when she saw all the beautiful jewelry and sensed the vibrations of magic clinging to all of it. "Gifts, my Brandrahoon, for me?"

In a rush of girlish vanity, Silkanna Mircala de Waejonan slipped the enchanted rings upon her fingers, the bracelets onto her wrists, and hung all of the necklaces around her neck in a gaudy display. The unset stones and the vials of strange liquids were left in the box, which she returned to the velvet pouch hanging from her belt. Her thoughts moved in lazy circles, half in the present, and half in the long ago.

The outer door gave with a shriek of splintering wood and myn stomped through. She listened to them talking, as if it were the music of some half-forgotten ball.

Rising to her feet, Silkanna straightened her dress, and wondered why it was so loose. No matter. She would change into something better after she had met her guests.

The spiritpanel dissolved at a spoken word and Silkanna stepped through it. The face of the one with broad shoulders seemed familiar and she soon placed his name: Heironim.

Seeing her emerge, Heironim gestured his myn aside, and considered her with his head half turned in speculation and uncertainty. "Silkie? Is that you?"

"You don't recognize me?" She sounded shocked and vaguely insulted.

"Of course I do."

"Where is Brandrahoon? Has he arrived yet?" Her nostrils flared. She could smell the blood pulsing in the veins of the myn, hear the rapid fear driven beating of their hearts. It excited her.

"Brandrahoon?" Heironim spoke the name in a hushed voice. He sent a low-level necromantic scan across her and sensed nothing. It was as if no one stood there. "Silkie?"

"Don't be impertinent. I am Silkanna Mircala de Waejonan and my beloved Lord Brandrahoon awaits me."

The guardsmyn began backing out of the room, making signs against evil.

"De Waejonan..." Heironim took a step back as she approached him.

Silkanna's gaze settled upon Flavio standing at Heironim's side. Flavio trembled as she pointed at him, face ashen with terror, unable to move.

"I'm hungry. Come here." A small frown creased her forehead as she tried to remember his name. It seeped into her mind as from a great distance. "Flavio," she purred. "Come here. I'm hungry."

Flavio remained rooted to the spot.

"Heironim, pass me my dinner." Her mouth opened wide enough for Heironim to see her distinctive fangs with the tiny hooks on the end.

*Lemyari ... how can this be?* The sa'necari shivered beneath the caress of Silkanna's eyes, seized Flavio, and shoved him stumbling toward her.

She caught Flavio, held him close, and sank her fangs into his throat. Silkanna dragged the life out of the hapless clerk in huge, starving pulls. He jerked and writhed, screaming. His voice trailed off as his heart began to flutter and finally stopped.

Heironim seized upon that moment of distraction to throw his strongest spells of undeath denial at her in an effort to rip the soul from her body. Her jewelry flashed in reaction to his magic and the spells never reached her—they dissolved into nothingness as if they had struck shields and wards of almost godlike power. "Damnation's teats."

He took another step backwards, glancing for an avenue of escape.

"That was not nice." Silkanna dropped Flavio's corpse and turned on Heironim with an arch glance, a

casual arrogance, and the utter confidence of a peerless predator. She regained the present with a rush of anger. "You killed my love ... shoved a silver blade in my wolf's belly as I watched.

Panic seized Heironim. He turned to flee.

"Die, bastard!" Silkanna crossed the distance between them like a striking cobra, grabbed his arms from behind, sank all ten of her claws into him, and pumped her venom through his arteries and muscles.

He screamed as if he had lost his mind. His face contorted into a rictus of anguish. She held onto Heironim as he convulsed, his body trembling and spasming. When every last drop of her venom had been injected into him, Silkanna released Heironim. He dropped to the floor, his eyes rolled up into his head, and a bloody froth ran from his mouth with each struggling breath.

Silkanna knelt beside him, glanced across the rings she wore and pulled off the silver ring with the large piece of circular obsidian that had a tendriled rune cut into it.

She pressed the rune to Heironim's chest and his flesh smoked. He shrieked and thrashed and finally stilled. Silkanna returned the ring to her finger. The rune was now burned into Heironim's flesh.

"Lemyari!" Jondries shrieked.

Those who had remained in the room, including Jondries, broke and fled.

Silkanna blinked and lost touch with the present again. The eighteen-year-old girl—who had enchanted Lord Brandrahoon with her beauty, wit, and bedroom audacity—stared at the debris and felt an indescribable sense of loss without being able to remember why she would feel that way. Screams from the hallway drew her to the door. She stepped over the threshold and watched people fleeing from the rooms and down the corridor. Everything Silkanna saw seemed both strange and familiar as if viewed through a shroud of *déjà vu*.

The back of her throat itched for the taste of more blood, and the hunger of the newborn nagged Silkanna. She tried to decide which of the fleeing meals to go after, but the chaos of shrieking, terrified people left her confused. Opportunity made the decision for her when a door opened and a half-naked prostitute bolted into the corridor practically under her nose. Silkanna's hand shot out. She caught the hapless mon by the arm, jerking her close. The whore rained desperate, ineffectual blows upon Silkanna, who leaned in and bit her. Her dinner's resistance ended as her blood filled Silkanna's mouth. The corridor cleared while Silkanna fed. She dropped the corpse when she finished and walked on, blood dripping from her chin onto her nubile breasts.

As Silkanna started to pass another door, a whiff of memory drew her into the room. A huge ornate bed dominated the left-hand corner, curtained with olive green velvet. She sat down on it, brushing her long fingered hands across the softness of the black velvet bedspread. A name came unbidden to her lips. "Cullen?"

She frowned, trying to remember his face, trying to understand why the name filled her with both joy and sorrow.

"Cullen."

His face and all the memories attached to his name escaped her grasp and Silkanna sighed. She went to the wardrobe standing to the far side of the door and threw it open.

Three large traveling bags lay in an untidy heap at the bottom. She tossed them into the middle of the room, and then carried one to her dresser.

Pausing for a moment to consider the lovely, exquisite angles of her face in the mirror, Silkanna smiled. Her hand brushed her flat abdomen, and a flutter of memory told her that something was missing. She sat on the dressing stool, wiped her mouth on a hanky, and applied her make up with a skilled touch. Then she dumped the contents of all her jewelry boxes into the bag.

Pulling a chest of drawers from against the wall as if it weighed nothing, Silkanna opened the safe behind it. Several heavy sacks of coins lay there as well as certificates of deposit drawn on banks in six countries. All of that joined her jewelry in the bag.

Silkanna filled the remaining bags with clothing and changed from her dress into leather and wool riding clothes and tall boots.

"I'm going to find my Brandrahoon and nothing is going to stop me."

\* \* \* \*

Alexander Jondries, having gone out the nearest window, huddled upon the roof of the veranda that circled the mansion. The night air carried a promise of rain and a hint of frost to come. He listened to the screaming and shouting die down. All the information on the Lemyari that he had read over the years swirled through his mind in chaotic patterns. While the humans in places like Creeya had only recently discovered the dominant vampires were Lemyari—a breed exterminated during the last godwar and recreated by an escaped hellgod—the sa'necari had always known about them.

His loyalty to Heironim kept Jondries from jumping to the ground and escaping into the darkness. Sidera Tyrins had trained that kind of devotion into the orphaned and abandoned sa'necari-born children she had succored during the years of the Sharani Occupation, turning them into what she called the 'Band of Friends.'

Peeping over the edge, Jondries saw that Silkie was nowhere to be seen and decided to take a chance on returning. He climbed back into the corridor, and ran to Silkie's office.

Heironim lay unmoving on the carpet amid the debris from four days ago. The wing from a shattered glass bird rested beside Heironim's head. Jondries kicked a path to his friend's side and knelt. Touching his friend's neck, Jondries discovered that Lord Traxton was alive, but comatose. Exerting all of his sa'necari strength, Jondries settled Heironim across his shoulders in a hunter's carry, and fled back to the window, onto the roof of the veranda, and into the night.

"Thank Bellocar, her venom was still immature."

The encounter with Silkie tore at Jondries' nerves. He had not known fear like this since before his first rite of mortgiefan at age twelve. Jondries had always believed that he would handle his first inevitable encounter with a Lemyari far better than he had facing Silkie.

He kept to the alleys and darkened side streets with his burden, making his way west and then south to the warehouse district.

If Heironim died, he would rise undead in three days, as a necari; a dangerous slave to his appetites. Sa'necari would not obey their undead equivalent; instead the necari were generally deployed as shock troops. A slim possibility existed that the trauma of death by Lemyari venom could turn Heironim into a near mindless and uncontrollable revenant. No matter what the outcome, Jondries would lose him, lose his leadership and companionship. *Might as well be dead as undead.*

Word had already reached the Green Sheaves when Jondries arrived there. Soldiers and their five surviving sa'necari had deployed around the building. Two myn, seeing his burden, took Heironim from

Jondries.

"Put him to bed and tell Lysander to tend him."

They carried Heironim inside, as Timocratus and two of his myn fell into step beside Jondries.

A soldier grabbed the door, holding it open for them.

"Timocratus, go back to the Crimson Lady and keep an eye out for Silkie. Don't get close enough to engage her."

\* \* \* \*

Silkanna strode through the corridors of the empty building, down the stairs, and out onto the veranda. A feeling of loathing seized her. She paced up and down, kicking furniture into the yard. Cullen's face flashed through her mind. Every fiber of her being tensed.

*Four myn in masks shoved Silkie and Ellie into a large, windowless room. Mirrors covered the ceiling and the walls, and a highly polished mirrored tile covered the floor. A square table occupied the northeast corner, four chairs surrounded it, a bottle of whiskey, and several glasses sat in the middle of it. Two rough mattresses lay in the northwest corner along with a pair of ratty quilts. She wondered why they had brought her here until she turned about and saw him.*

*Cullen sat in a crude chair. His shoulders, hips, wrists, and ankles had been nailed to the wood with long silver spikes. All of the hair had been shaved from his body except for the thatch atop his head. They had broken his arms and legs in several places, and fragments of bone jutted through his right arm, and both of his calves. His fingers and toes had been crushed and mangled; his nose had been shattered. Bruises covered him. Spellcord on his wrists prevented him from changing shape.*

A scream formed in Silkie's throat. She swallowed it back before it could escape, hiding her reactions between her tough habitual mask.

Heironim paced back and forth before him, wearing a cloth mask that did not deceive Silkie for an instant. "One last time, Cullen. Who are the other couriers? How does the clan get messages out?"

"Go to hell. I'm cadhbair imhaig." Cullen's voice was hoarse and rasping.

*Silkie could tell that he must have been screaming his lungs out for days as they hurt him.*

"Dead mon walking? I assume that's your final answer?"

"Bastard."

Heironim gestured and two myn set out a table near Cullen, placing an array of blades—many of them silver—on it. He gestured at someone standing behind Silkie's tortured lover, the father of her only child.

A mon shoved rolls of hard leather behind Cullen's lower back, forcing his chest up and out.

The knowledge of what was coming sickened Silkie. She had witnessed many scenes such as this one, growing up in a sa'necari family—she was, after all, half-sister to the current queen—but never before had the victim been someone she loved.

Heironim stroked Cullen's chest. "A fine angle. But perhaps a bit more?"

Two more rolls were shoved behind Cullen. He groaned.

Ellie went pale when she saw what they had done to Cullen, and a strangled sob escaped her and she muttered under her breath. "Forgive me. Forgive me. I had to do it."

Silkie knew that he was searching with his arcane senses for the best spot to insert it.

"I am." Casual calculation added distance to Heironim's eyes. "There."

He popped the blade into Cullen's belly with a flick of his wrist, working it in all the way to the quillions with small twists.

Cullen jerked and gasped.

Silkie flinched as a long, ululating howl of anguish broke from Cullen. Her lips tightened, but she gave no other sign that what she saw bothered her; although her heart had broken.

Ellie shoved her knuckles into her mouth to keep from screaming with him.

"It can take as long as four or five days for a lycan to die of a wound like this," Heironim explained in a detached voice. He adjusted the angle of the blade, bringing another scream from Cullen, and left it inside him. "You'll be our guests until then."

*Cullen sagged forward as much as the spikes would allow, breathing hard, making animal noises in his throat.*

"Cullen."

Rage built in Silkanna, bringing other memories. The knowledge of what each piece of her jewelry did returned to her. She stepped off the porch and moved to the middle of the yard before facing the old mansion she had turned into an elegant brothel.

Silkanna cocked her head and reached to touch a huge square-cut ruby dangling from a silver chain around her neck. With a word and a gesture, she sent a wave of fire to engulf the Crimson Lady, turned and headed for the barns.

Most of the horses were gone, but Silkanna located a sturdy proud-cut gelding and two pack horses. She saddled the gelding and got the pack frames onto the other two animals. Once she had her bags tied down, Silkanna mounted and rode out into the night, heading north where instinct told her she would find her Brandrahoon. And then they would pay.

\* \* \* \*

Jordi rode Bessy down into an elm hollow, leaving the road behind in early afternoon on the third day.

He had suspected that he was being followed, but had resisted an impulse to try and lose them before reaching an area that he and Bessy knew well. It would have defeated his purpose if he found himself cut off and cornered.

Sunlight breaking through the patches in the leafy canopy sparkled like diamonds on the thick black mulch covering the ground. Birdsong filled the air in a farewell to summer as the cold nights alerted the migratory flocks that their time of departure had arrived. Seeing them swirling together in skies always left Jordi wishing he had wings.

Bessy communicated danger to Jordi and bolted into a run before he could even begin to locate it. Arrows whizzed around them. Shooting from horseback was an inexact science, which weighed against Bessy's talent for evasion made them a hard target to hit. She darted through thickets so dense it would

have challenged a fox to traverse, slid down the side of a hill on her rump, and ran again.

The cleared pastures of his brother's farm opened before them, dotted with cows, and beyond that a field of tall wheat waved in the afternoon breeze marked off by a low stone fence. Their attackers had a clear line of fire. Jordi threw a command to Bessy who put on a burst of speed, and zigzagged across the open ground. He stiffened in pain, his eyes widening in shock as the arrows struck him in the back. One pierced his shoulder and the second went through his back and lodged in his right lung. He sagged in the saddle, his chest and shoulder burning as if they were on fire, and Jordi clutched the saddle horn to stay on Bessy.

His horse sensed his distress through their link, and put all of her heart and soul into running. Bessy jumped the fence and dashed into the concealment of the wheat, heading for the house beyond it.

A horn sounded, piercing Jordi's diminishing awareness. He realized that his brother's family had to be out in the fields working—and if they were carrying war horns, then they were probably armed as well.

A cry went up as Jordi's assailants came down the hillside.

Bessy trotted into the yard of the house and stopped. Jordi stumbled as he dismounted, staggered three steps, and sank to his knees, clutching at wounds. He saw Siusan and one of his nieces running toward him. Jordi coughed hard, bringing up blood and froth that dribbled down his chin and dripped onto his bloody shirt. Blinking in an attempt to clear the gathering darkness from his eyes; Jordi tried to rise, extending one shaking hand to Siusan. He swayed and collapsed on his face, crawled forward. The damp earth felt chill to his fingers as Jordi dug his nails into it and dragged himself another few feet.

"Be still, Jordi," said a sweet, feminine voice thick with concern. "We have you."

He went limp in the dirt as she touched him, turned his head, and blinked at her, his mouth working hard to form words. "Siusan."

His sister-in-law broke the shafts off and he fainted.

\* \* \* \*

The cozy room had a fire going in the hearth to fend off the evening chill. Braided rag rugs covered the floor. A single chest of drawers and a nightstand bracketed the narrow bed that Jordi lay on. A basin of water sat on the nightstand, discolored by the bloody rags tossed into it.

Siusan MacFie had wrestled Jordi into one of her husband's nightshirts after digging the arrows out of him and bandaging his wounds. It worried her that, after all the rough handling, Jordi had still not woken. She tucked a quilt around him and settled into a chair near the bed, pulling at a strand of her long, straw-colored hair.

A sturdy, square-built mon, his craggy features lined and worn to the texture of leather by long hours laboring in the harshness of the elements, entered, and dragged another chair over to Siusan's side. He straddled it and draped his arms across the back. "None of them got away."

She averted her eyes as a tear slipped down her cheek. "Why would they shoot Jordi? He never hurt anyone in his life."

Fergus MacFie, Jordi's oldest brother and Siusan's husband, shook his head. "No idea. But we're going to find out. We took one alive. Sa'necari. I've sent Artair for the lawgiver and Eanruig for Father Gileaus."

Siusan's gentle cornflower eyes filled with concern. "I hope Father Gileaus comes soon. I fear the arrows



were poisoned."

"If Jordi dies, the MacFies will pay Hell to the Widow."

"I dread the thought of war ... seeing our men ride off ... some of them not coming back."

Fergus ran his hand along her hair. "It's either stop them now, or let them pick us off one by one."

Siusan shivered and bit her lower lip, her eyes going distant with reflection. "It frightens me."

"It takes two to make a war, Siusan. But only one to make a massacre if we refuse to fight back."

## CHAPTER SIX

### FLAMES AND PASSION

The Shrine to Willodarus and Tala in their joint roles as protectors of the wolves and lycans, a square box with two wings built of yellow stone and white pine, located in a shady yard with grass and flowering hedges, contained the priest's residence, the schoolroom, and the chapel. It occupied the southeast corner of the Sanctuary Refugee Camp near the fork in Cheshire Road. The land for the camp had been donated by a benefactor of the poor named Beth Ryan, who had perished early last summer under mysterious circumstances.

Pandeena Moonbow, the current priest, had three cozy rooms; a sitting room, kitchen, and bedroom. Generous donations from the faithful had filled the apartment with nice furniture, including a huge bed that dwarfed everything else. Although celibacy was not a requirement for priests of Willodarus and Tala, Pandeena often wondered why they had given the previous priest, Tempest Anstey such a large bed. Tempest, a favorite of Teakamon the Shepherd of the Wilds, had been ancient and long past having any use for a bed beyond sleeping in it.

As priests went, Pandeena Moonbow did not fit the mold. For one thing, Pandeena never wore priestly garments except when she performed the rites of worship each Taladay. Instead, she wore freeranger-style dark green leathers, trousers and jerkin with a pale brown shirt; carrying a Sharani longsword at her shoulder and a pair of lycan fighting knives at her hips. Pandeena was beautiful, as befitted a granddaughter of the Moon God, Tala, Mistress of Wolves and the Hunt. Padruig Caimbeul, her ex-husband, was the only person in the village who knew her divine origins, and he kept his mouth shut about it.

Pandeena stood in a morning shadow cast from the west side of the shrine. The arrival of autumn, although they still had some warm days left, meant that Sanctuary's animals would require better shelter for the coming winter, which would take weeks to build. The young lycan males who worked here were busy splitting logs with hammers and wedges to improve the barns.

Shalto Beggins, a bland-faced and unprepossessing young wolf, saw her and frowned. Pandeena winked at him and enjoyed the way he flinched. At halfway to seventeen, Shalto served as foreman for the work crews. Although lycans were moderately long lived as compared to humans, capable of living into the middle of their second century, few actually achieved it. Overwork, which was the price of survival especially on the farms, and diseases counted for many of them. The depredations of their former masters, the sa'necari also tended to thin their ranks. Like the humans, circumstances made life short for most of their kind, which led each culture to set the age of legal adulthood around fourteen. Lycans could marry, hold office, sign documents, and own land at fourteen. So it had been no surprise to Pandeena to see a sixteen year old in charge of the camp's maintenance.

However, there were always some drawbacks to it. In Pandeena's case, it had been when Shalto and Oswyl came swaggering into her apartment and attempted to treat her like a slut. She had broken Shalto's right arm and his nose, both of Oswyl's legs and tossed them out. Pandeena had also warned them that if she got any complaints about them from the women at the camp, the next beating would be far worse.

Her eyes met Shalto's and she could tell by the speed with which he looked away that he was thinking about the beating also.

On a whim, Pandeena walked past him, pausing just long enough to say in a low voice, "Don't give me any trouble, Shalto, and I won't give you any."

Then she stalked back inside her apartments. Standing with her hands on her hips and staring at a meaningless point on the wall of her living room, Pandeena decided to go to her mother's house to bathe and breakfast. Lifting her arms, she summoned her power and vanished in a shimmer of golden light.

The home of Navaryn Moonbow nestled in a tiny dell that had only one outlet, a narrow neck in the stone that required myn to pass single file. A sheer cliff blocked the back with a waterfall descending from its heights to feed the stream running through the center of the little valley. Her gifts concealed the entrance from those who had been not been given permission to approach her. Elms and maples shrouded the garden and the yard. Goats and sheep bleated in the pasturage behind the house. Two pony-sized dogs with boxy-heads, square muzzles, and hanging jowls patrolled the yard. When they saw Pandeena appear, they bounded to her with excited, happy noises.

The silent indifference and outright snubs, that Pandeena received from the denizens of the refugee camp, had become tedious. If she went hunting and bagged two deer, while Malthus caught only one, the refugees would fall all over themselves telling him how wonderful he was and say nothing to her. Not even so much as a thank you. So she had stopped hunting to fill their larders.

They had stopped coming to Taladay services each week. The shrine was half-empty and only those among the villagers who were most devoted bothered with the long walk to the shrine. There was even talk of building a temple in the village proper, and yet no one had asked her to be the priest there. She considered throwing a fit over it, but held back because she had chosen not to inform them of the fact that she was not just one of their priests, but one of their gods.

Alerted by her dogs, Navaryn emerged onto the veranda as Pandeena reached it. Navaryn toyed with a long length of her pale, silvery hair, smiling with a twitch of amusement. "I wondered when you were coming home."

Pandeena embraced her mother. "I'm only here to grab a bath, breakfast, and to check on Nikko."

"He's improving. The little dog is good for him."

"His memory?"

"There's no sign of it returning."

They entered the large, airy house through an expansive foyer. To their left opened a long, deep sitting room and ahead of them waited the kitchens and the hallway leading to more rooms and a stairway to the second floor.

Ever since Dynanna the God of Cussedness and Perversity had hired twenty yuwenghau—demi-gods—to find and protect the last descendant of her slain brother, Isranon the Dawnhand; Navaryn's living room was rarely empty. The assembled divines had established their headquarters in her home, bringing with them their armed retainers and paladins.

Pandeena stepped into the living room to see who was in residence. The two she most wanted to find were absent. Dark brown polished furniture filled the airy room, contrasting pleasantly with the whitewashed walls and blue carpets. Linen curtains fluttered in the breeze from seven huge windows. Sofas, heavy chairs, and long, low tables filled it.

Despite the obvious stoutness of the furniture, only the largest chair at the far end felt comfortable to seven-foot Teakamon, the Shepherd of the Wilds. He shook back his leaf-green hair, rose from his chair and went to her, looking like he had been carved from mahogany wood and polished with every muscle sharply defined.

"Welcome home."

She grasped Teakamon's long-fingered hand and then hugged him in reply. "Have any of you seen Dynanna? She said she would be in Wolffgard by the equinox."

"That's still four weeks away." Diminutive, dark-skinned Toniaqua Nightsbane, granddaughter of Hadyjs the Dark Judge, leaned forward on the sofa to see Pandeena around the towering frame of Teakamon.

"I'm getting impatient ... I know. But I need her. Where is Lokynen?"

"There's war in the Northwest of Red Wolf, Pandeena."

"War?" She frowned at Toniaqua.

"Steadings and hamlets have been burned ... their people butchered. Lokynen, Hathura, and Meleajys have gone to look into it."

Teakamon patted Pandeena's shoulder. "If anyone can take on an army, it's those three."

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr's healing leg still refused to take his full weight for long. He despised the cane. It lay across his knee as he sat in a chair by his bedroom window, staring out at the street. Cooley rode past, returning from exercising Bucky, Kynyr's warhorse. The Autumn Eve Faire would arrive in three weeks and the cub had already refused several offers to hire him as a jockey for the races at the Faire. Claw Redhand kept sweetening his offer, and Kynyr wondered if Cooley were simply holding out for the best he could get. The canny cub seemed to have inherited his sense of business from his mother, Silkie Faggini.

The cub rode like his father, Cullen Blackwood, and people were starting to notice. *Cooley cannot keep his mouth shut to save his life. I must have another talk with him.*

Inactivity had never set well with Kynyr. Grasping the cane firmly, Kynyr gave the kendaryl gryphon on its head a twist and drew the slender sword out. He swished the sword around, liking the balance, bored with it quickly as his restlessness worsened, and returned it to its hard wood concealment. Dark thoughts crept in: memories of Cullen, Ramsey, and Eideard; deaths that should never have happened. Kynyr tried to shake them off without much success.

Deciding that he needed a cure for melancholy, Kynyr levered himself out of the chair with the cane and went looking for Kady—the only thing that took his mind off his dead friends. She had not hit him yet, but she had threatened him with both a frying pan of scrambled eggs and a broom.

He opened the door to the infirmary as softly as he could and peered inside. Kady stood next to Finn's bed, filling dosing glasses with more of the medicines that Kynyr's grandmother had brewed up to keep down infection. Finn looked better than Kynyr had seen him since the ambush. The color had returned to Finn's fair skin.

Like all of the male MacIvers, Finn had a strong nose reminiscent of a hound dog's and much too prominent for his long, narrow face. His silken hair, more white than blond, hung loose past his shoulder blades. His lean body made him a greyhound when compared to the more leonine Kynyr.

Finn spotted Kynyr and grinned.

Kynyr put his finger to his mouth and shook his head.

An impish curve teased the corners of Finn's mouth, drawing his thin lower lip to near vanishment beneath

his full upper one. "Look out, Kady! Here comes Kynyr."

"Damn it, Finn!" Kynyr stopped dead in his tracks as Kady set the glasses down and whirled to face him.

"Kynyr," she said in a stern voice. "Put your hands where they don't belong and I'll deck you."

Kynyr let his shoulders droop and lowered his head in his best imitation of a whipped puppy.

Kady did not buy it for an instant. Sparks flashed in her eyes; flint striking steel. "Kynyr, either give me a Wild Cousins Courtship, or stop chasing me."

She stalked past him with her hands on her hips and left the room.

Kynyr's lips parted, and he blinked. "Finn? What's a Wild Cousins Courtship?"

Finn shrugged. "I don't know. I've never heard them mentioned in the same breath before. Wild Cousins is just ... well ... playing Jack in the Orchard. I don't see how anyone could get a courtship out of that."

"Well it must mean something." Kynyr's brow furrowed in perplexity.

"Ask Todd. He might know."

"Maybe there's no such thing."

"Uh uh. If Kady said it, then she found the term somewhere." Finn shot Kynyr a glance sharp with suspicion. "What are your intentions toward Kady? If you're just trying to get her legs open, you'll have to go through me first."

Kynyr blinked in surprise at the protectiveness in Finn's voice, and then averted his eyes. "I asked her to marry me."

"And what did she say?"

"To stop being silly." Kynyr exhaled heavily. "I can't seem to convince her that I'm serious."

"That's a first. Bitches are usually falling all over you."

"I want Kady. She's sweet ... feisty ... and she'd spit fire at the devil."

Finn's mouth spread into the biggest grin Kynyr had ever seen on his friend's face. "Sounds like love, all right."

"It is."

"What about Pandeena? Are you still slipping her the bone?"

"I'll break it off with her." Kynyr wished he had not shared that bit of information with Finn. Old habits died hard, and he had been confiding things to Finn since they were toddlers. "I told her I didn't love her. But she's a hard one to say no to."

"I bet. You got the most beautiful bitch in nine kingdoms crawling between the sheets with you ... and you'd rather have Kady?"

"I love Kady. Pandeena ... she's overpowering ... like the Dreaded Horde."

Finn chuckled at the name that he and Kynyr had given to their combined sisters, Kynyr's six and Finn's

eight. Two only sons with an overabundance of sisters, Kynyr and Finn had been natural allies from birth, and spiritbrothers as soon as they were old enough to know what the term meant. Their sisters used to join forces against them at the first whiff of mischief in the air.

The door slammed open and Todd came in. "Kynyr. Finn. Come outside. It looks like Hell's Widow is burning."

Finn slid off the bed and followed Kynyr and Todd outside. They stood in the middle of Elmind Street amid a crowd of onlookers, all pointing at the huge smoke cloud in the distance. It looked as if half the town had to be burning to produce that monstrous sooty blight in the sky.

A flash of intuition swept through Kynyr. "The Crimson Lady. They're burning the brothels to cover up what they did ... so Claw can't send someone else to ask questions about Cullen."

"Ayup." Todd stood with his hands on the hilts of his long fighting knives. "That's my guess."

Kynyr's hand tightened upon the head of his cane until his knuckles whitened. "I'll never know what Eideard Doyle tried to tell me before he died."

"When you're dealing with sa'necari, expect treachery." Todd quoted the old lycan proverb without a trace of feeling.

Kynyr glanced at his grandfather. The mon was so self-contained that it spooked Kynyr at times.

They watched for a bit longer while the crowd grew thick around them. Kynyr's leg began to throb from standing too long, and he gestured for Todd to follow him back inside. "I need to ask you something."

Kynyr headed for the table, sat down, and propped his leg on an adjacent chair.

Todd grabbed glasses and a bottle of whiskey from a cabinet, and settled at the table in the rear. He poured for three, expecting Finn to return soon. "What about?"

"What's a Wild Cousins Courtship?"

"A venerable old custom. Why?"

"So there really is such a thing?" Kynyr picked up his glass and sipped his whiskey. The liquor was as smooth as silk and went down his throat easily. His grandfather had connections in Creeya who brought it to him; and as a result, Todd often had better whiskey than their chieftain Claw Redhand. "But what is it?"

"Courtship and mating in wolf form. It isn't as common as it used to be. It started dying out long before I was born. Why are you asking?"

"Just curious. What does it involve? Any special rituals?"

"A few. Mainly it's a rite of chase and capture. The bitch initiates it and flees into the forest. The dog pursues. If the chase begins in the daylight, the dog has until dusk to catch her and mate. If it starts during the night, he has until sunrise."

"Then they get married?"

"No. Not exactly. Once courtship is called, the male is not allowed to change first. He waits upon her pleasure."

Kynyr scratched at his sideburns. "But once he catches her that's it?"

"No."

"What do you mean no?"

Todd heaved an uncharacteristic sigh. "Kynyr, she's not obligated to marry him until he fills her belly. And that can take quite a few tries. Furthermore, the bitch will make it as hard as possible to be caught. That's the whole point of it. It's a test of the male's strength, cleverness, stamina, and audacity in pursuit of his lady."

Kynyr's expression turned unhappy. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Claw and Aisha are probably the best recent example of the custom."

"Recent? They've been married close to a century."

"I told you it's rare. Claw kept pestering her with proposals of marriage. Finally she called courtship on him. Aisha was a very resourceful young bitch. It took Claw nearly a year to catch her the first time; and another six months before he managed to land Tarrant and Logan in her belly."

"Any pointers?"

"Convince her to change."

"Anything else?"

"You'll have to tell me why you need to know before I tell you anything else."

"I'll think about it."

"Another thing, Kynyr. There's a time limit on it. You have a year and a day from the moment that courtship is called to catch her the first time. Then you are granted a year and a day from the time you first caught her to get her pregnant. If you fail, then you are forbidden to ever touch her again. And the courtship must be filed with the temple."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is. That's probably why it's fallen out of favor. However, the instincts for this kind of courtship lie deep within our primal natures. I suspect that much of our current problems with sex and relationships could be cured by returning to the custom."

"I'll think about that."

"Does this have anything to do with Kady?"

"Maybe." Kynyr walked off, pondering where Kady could have found the information, and just why—out of all the possible customs to invoke—she had picked that one.

\* \* \* \*

Rory Scott's bare feet padded softly through the hallways of Cahira Sinclair's home. He would be ten years old in two weeks and looked forward to it eagerly. Rory and his younger brother Hamish, who was eight, worked half a day, five days a week, each week for the Sinclairs. When he turned ten, Cahira intended to accept him as an apprentice and he would live here with them. That would make life far easier on his widowed mother, who supported herself and the two cubs by working as a laundress. He

no longer remembered his father, who had died when Rory was five, but he had made himself the man of the house and did his best to contribute to the family.

He ran errands and did odd jobs for people, but he never begged. Rory was the town sneak, always turning up where least expected. That was how he managed to be in the right place at the right time and saved Kynyr Maguire's life. Although Cahira had never said so directly, Rory knew that his actions in rescuing her grandson was what had led to his being given this grand opportunity to make something of himself. He had no intention of wasting his good fortune, and determined to grasp it with both hands and hang on for dear life by making himself indispensable to the family.

The smoke from the fires had carried ash throughout Wolffgard, and he had expected that his friend Cooley Sinclair would have been out with the rest watching it. When Cooley failed to appear on the street, Rory went looking for him. He reached the stairs in the servants' section and climbed up to the rooftop garden that Cahira maintained. He walked the rows and the alcoves formed by the pots and boxes of plants, most of which he had not yet learned the name of.

Rory heard sniffing as he neared the family shrine to Willodarus. The south end of the roof had been devoted to Willodarus, Lord of the Wild Creatures, and the north to Tala, Mistress of Wolves and the Hunt.

Cooley curled up on the roof among Cahira's potted plants and cried.

Rory came and squatted next to him. "Cahira's looking for..." He reached out and touched Cooley. "What's wrong?"

"They killed my Ma. Sa'necari..."

"I thought you were an orphan." Rory's lips pursed in perplexity, once more finding Cooley to be a puzzle box without a key.

"I am now."

"You been saying things that don't match up ever since you got here. First you say you're from Three Stones. Then you say your ma is a madam and you're a city wolf. There's nothing real about you ... except the way you ride horses."

"I can't tell you."

Rory frowned. "I'm your spiritbrother. You can tell me."

"I told Lani O'Connor and look what happened."

"I'm not like Lani."

"If they find out about me, they'll kill me as dead as a rolled john."

"A what? Who?" Rory's frown deepened. "I wanna help, but you gotta tell me the truth."

Cooley dug his palms into his eyes and fought back a fresh wave of tears. "My Da was Cullen Blackwood. Ma was Silkie Faggini. I'm from Hell's Widow."

"You can't know she's dead."

"She is." Cooley reached in his pocket and produced a black stone. "Ma gave me this. Until four days ago it was white."



Then the truth finally poured out of Cooley. The sa'necari tortured his father to death, and raped his mother. They would have killed him too, if it had not been for Amos Raggat, the owner of the Three Candles Inn. Amos stained Larkspur black, put Cooley up on her, and sent him off with a letter and his father's ring to find Kynyr Maguire. Some myn had chased him down Pendarke Road, but Larkspur outran them.

Rory hugged his friend. "You should have told me. That's why you're so scared of Malthus, isn't it?"

"I think he's one of them."

"We gotta keep watching him."

\* \* \* \*

Kady sat in Cahira's library with her book and word list, tears of frustration filling her eyes as she discovered that more and more of the words on her list were not in the dictionary. "Why in the unholy hell did I have to spit out the first thing that entered my head?"

She slammed her fist down on the entry for *The Wild Cousins' Courtship*. "I can't find the words."

The table wobbled after being struck and Kady cast a worried glance at it.

"What words, Kady?" Cahira came in with a tray of tea and pastries.

Kady flinched and sat her basket on top of the book. "That's okay. I'm managing."

"That doesn't sound like it." Cahira set the tray on the large square table in the middle of the room, and reached for the basket. "Let me see?"

Kady flushed, looked away, and cringed. "You don't want to know."

"Maybe I don't. But I'm going to look any way," said Cahira in a tone that brooked no disagreement. She moved Kady's basket. "Why on Daverana are you reading this?"

"Curiosity?"

Cahira picked up Kady's word list. "I see you're keeping a list like I suggested." She walked over to a shelf and took down a large book, which she brought over and laid next to Kady's dictionary. "The words are in here. That's ancient Engla-Yurpan. What we currently call the Common Tongue evolved out of Engla-Yurpan, which was the surviving language spoken across this continent at the time of the previous godwar. It's the oldest extant language on Daverana."

"Oh." Kady's shoulders drooped. "What I've been doing must be close to impossible."

"Nonsense. Write out your translation and I'll go over it when you're ready for me to. I'll correct it and you'll have learned a great deal."

"Thank you."

Kynyr limped into the library and started scanning the shelves.

Kady covered the book with some papers, her color deepening.

"Gram, don't you have a book on ancient courtship customs? I can't find it."

Cahira quirked an eyebrow at Kady and covered the book with more papers.

Kynyr turned about, running his gaze across the titles in another bookcase. He slid his eyes to Kady, and a sly smile touched the edges of his mouth. "Gram, do any of these books have something in them about the Wild Cousins' Courtship?"

"Yes, actually. Several." Cahira went and pulled three books off the shelf and carried them to Kynyr. She dropped them in his hands. "Go read somewhere else; I'm helping Kady with her translations."

"Okay." Kynyr tucked the books under his arm and left.

Cahira waited until the door closed behind Kynyr and then turned to Kady with a look of concern bordering on alarm. "Did you Call Courtship on Kynyr?"

Kady cast her eyes down and blushed. "He kept pestering me. So I said the first thing that popped into my head."

"What did you say to him? I want the exact words. This is very important."

"I said 'either give me a Wild Cousins' Courtship or quit chasing me.' How much trouble am I in?"

"That's the opening challenge almost verbatim."

"How much trouble am I in?" Kady repeated in a faint voice.

"Enough to get you pregnant and married before winter solstice."

"To Kynyr?"

"Yes. Has Kynyr accepted the challenge yet?"

"Accepted?"

"The male must accept the challenge within seven days or cease and desist from all romantic attentions and intentions toward the bitch who issued the challenge. When did you issue challenge?"

"This morning." Kady flinched. "Is there information about it in those books Kynyr left with?"

"Kady, it's the most written about, the most controversial—among scholars—lycan courtship custom. Fortunately, those books are scholarly tomes and Kynyr will have to slog through them to figure it all out. What you have here is the key text. Make sure that Kynyr does not get hold of it. I'll help you with your translation."

"Couldn't you just read it to me?" Kady tried to sound as meek and miserable as possible.

"I could. However, I won't. You got yourself into this predicament. Therefore, you will do the translation and learn to think before you speak. Meanwhile, I'm going to have to quit translating that ancient medical text, and start searching old books to see if there's an escape clause for you."

"Can't you give me a hint about it?"

Cahira gave Kady a stern look. "You agreed to let Kynyr get you pregnant."

"Oh shit." What Cahira had said first finally clicked in Kady's mind. "You mean pregnant first and then married?"

"Precisely."

"Shit, shit, shit." Kady grabbed her word list and opened the Engla-Yurpan dictionary. "I'm not ready for this."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus sat in the chair beside Merissa's, holding her hand. In her third month of pregnancy with their twins, Merissa was noticeably swollen. She wore a light-blue traditional robe with the sash tied just beneath her breasts.

Fianait sat at her loom, patiently weaving, her eyes distant and a peaceful smile as if she were lost in a pleasant reverie. Aisha sat beside the hearth knitting baby booties.

Malthus glanced around the Great Hall. "Where's Searlait? I never see her here in the mornings."

Aisha looked up from her knitting. "No one knows. Searlait gets up very early and sneaks out for a few hours each morning. She's been doing it for years. No one has ever found out where she goes. Actually, now that I think about ... I suspect that Kynyr knows. He took to disappearing around that time and walking back with her."

"What do you suppose they do there? Talk? Or other ... things."

"Malthus!" Merissa pulled her hand free and stared at him indignantly. "Searlait is my aunt."

"What I'm implying, darling, is that Kynyr is a very handsome young dog and your aunt is an older and very vulnerable bitch. It would not be the first time in history that a young dog sought to better himself by seducing an elderly dowager."

Robert Morcar leaned forward in his chair. "Kynyr wouldn't do that."

"He certainly wouldn't. Kynyr is a fine young mon. I won't have you implying such things." Aisha bristled at Malthus.

Merissa cringed at the anger in her mother's voice. "Does anyone know when Kynyr will return?"

Robert pulled at his lower lip. "Shouldn't be long. He's not using the crutches any longer. His leg has gotten strong enough for him to switch to a cane. Another thing, Finn told me that Kynyr has proposed marriage to Kady Wiggins."

"Has she given him an answer yet?" asked Merissa.

"Not yet. However, knowing Kynyr's effect on bitches, I can't imagine she'll refuse him."

Malthus lowered his head to mask a frown. *Preece wants Kady ... what will he do when he hears about this? Put a knife in Kynyr's back ... only do it right this time? I'll have to tell Preece about it.*

Elwiss, one of the grooms, ran into the great Hall agitated. "Hell's Widow is burning. You can see the smoke from the yard."

Everyone rushed out. As the word spread, their nibari slaves joined them; guards left their posts to stand in the road and stare; the grooms and herdsmyrn came.

Robert Morcar shook his head at it. "I hope the woods don't catch. We'd have one devil of a time keeping it away from the manor."

Malthus took one look at the smoke gathering in the distance and ran for the barn. "Georgie! Saddle my

horse!"

Georgie frowned. "Yessir, Master Malthus."

"Malthus! Please don't go. It's dangerous." Merissa went after him. "Please, you saw what happened to Kynyr."

Malthus put his arm around Merissa and kissed her. "Someone has to go. If it looks like the fire is going to spread to the forest, I'll come straight back and warn everyone."

"Malthus..."

"I'll be careful. I promise."

Georgie brought out Malthus' big black gelding, Devilton. Malthus snatched the reins from Georgie and sprang into the saddle, racing out of the yard.

Once he was past the bridge and out of sight of the lycans, Malthus slowed to a gentle trot. His swift departure had been made to impress the lycans. He had a bad feeling about that fire, but Malthus had no intention of killing his horse to get there.

He thought of his boyhood friend and said a quiet prayer to Bellocar the Hellgod. "Be safe, Heironim. Please be safe."

\* \* \* \*

Kady shivered. It had taken half a day, but she now had the first two paragraphs translated properly. Many of the words that she thought meant one thing turned out to mean something entirely different. Cahira had excused Kady from all of her duties except the cooking, allowing her to put most of her efforts into the translation. Cahira had corrected her grammar and a few of her interpretations.

"Dear gods, what have I gotten myself into?"

She stared at the paragraph and felt angry tears gather behind her eyes.

*The custom of Wild Cousins Courtship is the oldest courtship ritual. It serves three purposes and four facets as defined by Navaryn Moonbow, the First Mother of the lycan race. 1) It serves as a test of the male's cleverness, stamina, determination and audacity; his ability to track and bring down his prey, which will make him a good provider for his cubs and bitch. 2) It resolves all question regarding the female's fertility. 3) It establishes male dominance and female submission. There are six steps: Issue the courtship challenge; Male acceptance of the challenge; Call Courtship; Chase and Capture; Impregnation; Marriage.*

*The female issues the courtship challenge to a suitor. The male has seven days to accept the challenge or remove himself from all relationship with the bitch, and relegate himself to the role of either brother or friend. Then she must Call Courtship within thirty days; once courtship is called, the period of chase and capture (see section on the etiquette of the chase) begins, during which the bitch does her utmost to avoid capture by the male. If after a year and a day, the male has not captured the female, he must remove himself from all contact with her. However, once captured, the bitch must submit to mating. Once mating has occurred, the period of courtship is extended by a year and a day. Chase and capture continues until the bitch becomes pregnant, at which point they are allowed to marry. If the bitch does not become pregnant within a year and a day from her first capture, then the male must remove himself from all contact with her for the rest of their lives.*

Kady put the red ribbon in place and closed the book with a sinking feeling in her stomach. There had to be a loophole somewhere to get her out of this. Cahira was searching the old texts, but had found nothing useful so far.

She left the library and headed for the back stairs in the servants' section of the building. It stood empty, since Cahira had neither servants nor nibari. Kady climbed the servants' stair to the rooftop garden. Small trees sat in pots scattered about. Herbs and spices dominated the deep boxes along the rows, screening the rooftop from the street and dividing the roof into small alcoves. Kady was still learning the names and uses of each of them, and feeling a bit envious at times of the way that Rory could already rattle them all off.

Rory would be coming to live with them soon as Cahira's apprentice. Miz Scott had already signed his apprenticeship papers and they had been filed with the Clerk of Records. Rory would turn ten in a week and that was the minimum age to enter service as an apprentice.

Kady caught the sound of softly spoken prayers and peered around the end of one row of flower boxes to see who it was.

Kynyr knelt before the little statue to Willodarus that served as a family shrine. His features were taut, his eyes filled with sorrow, and his hands pressed together in supplication.

She joined him at the altar, made the sign of the bear, and knelt beside him.

Kynyr noted her with a glance and finished his prayers. He sat back on his heels, head lowered.

She stroked his cheek and his hair in a gesture of comfort. "Praying for Eideard and Ramsey."

"And Cullen."

"You miss them?"

"Don't you?"

"Very much."

Kynyr's eyes kept that distant haunted look as he spoke, and Kady could tell that he was hurting.

He tried to smile, but it came out crooked. "The day we rode to Hell's Widow, I told them about Cooley ... You know he's Cullen's son?"

"I suspected it." Kady felt a brief pang of sadness, remembering Cullen, her first lover.

"Well, Eideard said that we would all be Cooley's uncles, and fill that place left empty by Cullen's death. Only ... the next day Eideard was dead and a short time later so was Ramsey."

"They were good myn."

"I got them killed. I was in command and I got them killed. I keep thinking of things that I could have done differently ... that if I had, they would still be alive. I was so new to command ... yet I thought ... with all the training I've had from Todd, all the preparations ... I should have known what to do."

Kady wrapped her arms around Kynyr and held him tight. He clung to her, a sob escaping. The canine side of their nature made them passionate and emotionally expressive; although many of their males were acquiring the human trait of holding it back more. "Do you accept challenge?"

"Challenge?" Kynyr pulled away from her. "What do you mean?"

"Wild Cousins' Courtship. You have to accept my challenge within seven days or stop stealing kisses forever."

Kynyr blinked, his lips parted, and he looked stunned. "Right. I accept challenge. What now? I've barely started reading about it. Todd explained it a bit, but not nearly enough. He wanted to know why I asked about it."

"Go ahead and tell him, Kynyr. Tell anyone you wish to." Kady could see the improvement in his gaze, the way he steadied when she distracted him from his grief, and it warmed her heart to see it.

"What do we do next?"

"I have to Call Courtship, which I'm not ready to do yet. But I'll do it soon, I promise."

"Then we mate."

"If you can catch me, Kynyr. I don't intend to make it easy on you."

"I'll catch you so fast it will take your breath away."

"I'm sure you will." Kady kissed him.

\* \* \* \*

The closer Malthus got to Hell's Widow, the thicker the smoke became. His necromancer gifts could not tell him how close the fire was or how strong it had become; however, he could make fairly accurate guesses based upon the nearness of the living and the dead. Malthus extended his powers in a broad, high-level scan, practically daring the mages attached to the Sharani garrison to detect his presence. With the death of Prince Mephistis de Waejonan four years ago, Malthus Tyrins had become recognized as the most powerful sa'necari in existence, possibly the most powerful since Waejonan himself. His fears for Heironim gave rise to anger.

"If someone set this fire to harm him, they'll pay with their souls as well as their lives."

Malthus' scan found no fire-killed animals, which suggested the fire had not spread to the forest.

He had known Heironim since they were both unblooded boys hungry for their first rites. Like himself, Heironim was a bastard; but unlike Malthus, Heironim had been gotten on one of Sidera's pleasure slaves by a high caste sa'necari who was visiting at the time. Heironim's father, Lord Traxton, never bothered to recognize him, although the mon had had a habit of requesting guest right with slaves and nibari who were in season so that he could leave a string of bastards in his wake. While the getting of bastards was a common practice among the sa'necari, who tended to be infertile by age thirty; the refusal to legitimize their offspring was not.

Heironim had worked for or with Malthus from the time that they first mastered human weapons. Mastering the weapons of their adversaries had been Sidera's idea. Malthus respected and loved his mother for her brilliance. It had served both myn well. When Heironim's father refused to recognize him, the two myn, who were just thirteen-year-old boys at the time, ambushed Lord Traxton, and shot him so full of poisoned arrows that his body bristled like a porcupine. As Lord Traxton lay dying, Malthus had instructed Heironim in one of the more arcane versions of mortgiefan, acted as his assistant, and helped him take fully three-quarters of his father's shattered soul and all of his powers. Afterward Heironim had gratefully become Malthus' sworn mon, pledging fealty to him as he were a lord of old. Malthus had accepted that and then stepped beyond it by pledging himself to Heironim as his spiritbrother.

Malthus reached the outskirts of the town late in the afternoon and found a barricade formed of wagons drawn across the street. Six huge Sharani guardsmyn manned it. One of them stepped forward with her hand outstretched to halt him.

"You can't go in. The fire is still out of control."

"I need to find out if my brother is all right."

"Which section is he in?"

"The warehouse district."

"Fire hasn't spread that far yet. You can go in, but you'll have to swing wide. Six square blocks have gone up."

"Where did the fire start?"

"Red Lantern section of the Blood District. Garrison mages are saying it had arcane origins."

*Arcane origins? Have our enemies found us?*

At a gesture from the sergeant in charge, the barricade opened to let him pass, and Malthus entered the burning town. Water wagons trundled past him. Mages and soldiers in the gold and green of Danae Mar'ajante moved about there. Malthus kept his head down. The ring of concealment that Brandrahoon had given him had so far stood up to all attempts to find the sa'necari beneath his human guise. However, it paid to be cautious.

He left Main Street at the earliest possible moment, and moved deeper into the city. When he was far enough west to avoid the fire crews, Malthus turned south and headed for the warehouse district. He came at length to the Green Sheaf, formerly the Green Sheaves, a grain warehouse owned by Heironim as a front for their other activities. Wind-blown soot and ash coated the two-story wooden building and lay like a blanket of dirty snow across the ground. He rode into the yard and dismounted. A groom emerged from the barn to the side of the building and took his horse.

Malthus stalked into the warehouse.

The first room formed a receiving area for customers. The walls were bare and a large desk with a stand for ledgers in the right hand corner stood at the rear. A clerk in canvas work clothes sat at the desk. Malthus guessed the mon must be new as he failed to recognize him.

"Where's Heironim?"

The clerk swallowed and looked uncomfortable. "Lord Traxton is in bed. He was badly wounded."

"Damn it all, what happened?"

"You'll have to ask Master Jondries."

"I'll do that."

"Shall I ask someone to show you the way?"

"I know the way." Malthus walked past him.

\* \* \* \*

Siusan sat at Jordi's bedside, bathing his sweat-drenched face. His eyes never seemed to focus, and although she spoke to him whenever his eyes were open, Jordi never responded. He gave a wheezing cough. Blood and greenish phlegm dribbled from the corners of his mouth. She wiped his mouth and chin, and then rinsed the rag off.

Gileaus Hawthorne, the healer-priest to Willodarus, had ridden from Heather Heights, fetched by Jordi's brother Eanruig. The young priest, a mere forty-four years old, sat on the other side of the bed holding Jordi's wrist as he Read him.

She feared the worst as Gileaus' expression turned grave.

He lowered Jordi's wrist to the bed and made the sign of the bear. "You were right, Siusan. The wounds are poisoned."

"How bad?"

"The only thing you can do is keep him comfortable. I'm sorry."

Siusan's face clouded over. "He's such a sweet mon ... this isn't fair."

"Does he have a wife that we should send to?"

"Jordi is coshorach." She used the polite word for homosexual, rather than a questionable euphemism. Siusan had once beaten a mon off their property with a broom handle for calling Jordi a nancidawg. She remembered how startled Jordi had looked that day, and fought back a fresh wave of weeping. "Father Gileaus, he keeps muttering about a letter. That one I think." She pointed to the nightstand.

The priest picked the letter up and read the name written on the outside. "Kynyr Maguire. Hmmn. There are no Maguires around here. There are a few across the Falls at Chandler's Rock. I'll have Brother Malcolm take the letter there."

"Should you read it first?"

Gileaus shook his head. "It would be wrong to invade the mon's privacy. Thrust me, Brother Malcolm will find this Kynyr Maguire."

"It's not fair. It's just not fair." Her voice broke and she choked up.

He rose, walked around to Siusan, and hugged her. "I'll be at the shrine in Langtree ... when you need me."

*When.* Siusan clenched her eyes shut and fought for control of her voice, which shook in spite of her efforts. "You'll hold the service for him?"

"Certainly. Has the one they caught said anything?"

"I have no idea. You'll have to ask Fergus. He's been reticent with me ... about it."

\* \* \* \*

Fergus sat at a sturdy rough-hewn table in the kitchen, drinking whiskey with his feet propped on an adjacent chair. The corners of his dark green eyes slid to the side as he heard Father Gileaus enter. "What's the word on Jordi?"

Father Gileaus settled into a chair across from Fergus. "Dying."



Fergus covered his grief with a glower and inhaled heavily. "How long does he have?"

"A day ... two at most. The arrows had Devil's Silver on them and other nasty things."

A string of curses exploded from Fergus' lips. "They came to kill lycans."

"Duncan has always said they would come after us eventually. MacLachlan is too small..."

"A wolf's courage counts for more than his size in a fight. Does the wolverine turn aside for the bear? Or the bear for him?"

Gileaus tilted his head back. "Have you gotten any information from the mon you captured?"

"Enough to sprout hair on my arms."

The priest poured himself a drink and let silence yawn between them for a bit. "Details, Fergus. Details."

"They shot Jordi to steal the letter. Whoever this Kynyr Maguire is, he must worry them." Fergus stared into his glass, pensive and distanced. He poured it down his throat and refilled the glass. "They're planning to kill all the lycans in Hell's Widow."

"Genocide."

Fergus' glower became a glare of irritation, resenting it when the priest used words that he did not know. "Aye, that."

"You will send word to Duncan?"

"I'll send Artair first thing in the morning. He's had more schooling than the rest of us and knows how to talk it up." He knocked another glass of whiskey down, and poured again. "I promised our mother that I would look after Jordi. I tried to dissuade him from seeking work in Hell's Widow. I don't understand the attraction of towns. I knew those bastards would be back. I knew it in my gut. It was only a matter of time before the sa'necari returned. Gods damn them all."

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### CONTEMPLATIONS OF VENGEANCE

Kynyr waited for his grandfather to finish working through his forms on the reed mats that took up a third of the large salle. Bare to the waist, massive scars showed on Todd's chest and mid-section. Few things could scar a lycan, but it looked as if Todd had encountered most of them—and lived to speak of it.

Mirrors lined one wall. Two tall cabinets bracketed the weapon racks along the opposite side. A square table with four chairs occupied the center of the clear space fronting the door. A bottle of whiskey and four glasses stood in the middle of the table. Even by lycan standards, Todd had an obscene tolerance for and enjoyment of liquor.

The big lycan stood six foot five inches and weighed two fifty; yet despite his one hundred and seven years of age, Todd Sinclair was still mostly muscle and rock hard. His bright red hair was as much a Sinclair trait as was his size. Family legend held that the Sinclairs could trace their lineage all the way back for thousands of years to a hero of the first godwar—a mon who was regarded by most as little more than a myth—Aristotle Sinclair. Kynyr had never disparaged Todd's claims, although the older he got, the more it seemed like humoring the man.

The old mon had trained in the Fae, Creeyan, Assassins' Guild, and Sharani forms as well as the lycan arts. Kynyr suspected that there were others, because of several vague allusions that Todd had made over the years. He had trained his children and his grandchildren with a mix of discipline and patience like an iron hand in a velvet glove. As a result of that, Todd and Cahira's huge extended family was the closest thing to a Battle-Clan that the village of Longbranch possessed.

Todd finished and gave Kynyr a nod to join him.

Kynyr undressed down to his small clothes, bowed to the mat before stepping onto it, and then stretched out on his back. Todd squatted next to him and examined Kynyr's leg. He lifted and manipulated the leg, getting a grimace from Kynyr. "It's healing nicely. The muscles aren't as stiff. Give it another week or two and you won't need the cane."

"Good. I'm sick of the thing."

"I know."

Kynyr did his exercises while Todd watched.

"Todd, Kady and I ... we're having a ... a Wild Cousins' Courtship."

Todd clapped him on the shoulder. "Excellent. I'll make some armsheaths for her."

"Why?"

"You can't hang a knife belt around a melon-belly."

Kynyr looked like he'd been pole-axed, as the image of Kady so swollen that she seemed ready to pop crossed his mind. "Can she still train?"

"A bitch can train up until her seventh month."

"I'll have to write Leeny about her. Leeny will adore Kady." Kynyr remembered the last time he had seen his sister Kathleen "Leeny." It had been the day she married Wallace Callaghan. Leeny had been a

radiant bride, and now she was close to term with her first child.

"The whole family will adore her. Kady is easy to love. Has she Called Courtship yet?"

"She says she will soon."

"You need to go down and register the courtship with the Shrine. At that point it will become a capital offense for anyone but you to touch her. She'll be safe from the likes of Preece Malloy."

"I'll discuss it with her."

"Kady has no woodcraft. She'll never be able to elude you for long." Todd's lips took on a naughty curve. "You'll have her up the stick in no time."

"Ask Gram to start planning the wedding?"

"I'll ask her. Meanwhile, buy Kady presents. First you need to coax her to Call Courtship. Then you need to coax her to change. The bitch is given a head start before the dog goes after her. That tests your tracking skills. The entire ritual is constructed to prove that a male is worthy, that he will make a good protector and provider for his cubs and mate."

"It's all done in wolf form?"

"Yes. Now go on and get her a present. Start coaxing."

"I'll do that."

\* \* \* \*

Heironim's quarters encompassed most of the northeast corner of the warehouse second floor. The bedroom had two windows, a table in one corner, three wardrobes, a dressing table, and a bed that dwarfed everything else. The room was done in olive green and mustard yellow, from the drapes to the carpet, from chair cushions to bed curtains.

Malthus shook his head at the abysmal choice of colors that Heironim favored. *Some things never change.*

Heironim lay unmoving beneath a light coverlet, his face ashen. Jondries leaned his shoulder against the wall as Malthus approached the bed. He sat down on the edge of it and stroked Heironim's sweat drenched face, his eyes blending concern and a deep fondness. "My brother ... can you hear me?"

Alexander Jondries pushed off from the wall and moved closer. "He's been comatose for two days."

"Have you been able to get any blood into him, Alex?" Malthus drew one of Heironim's arms from beneath the covers, turning it when he saw the first puncture and noted the blackened flesh around it. He counted five punctures and then checked the other arm. *Ten punctures. The beast gave him the full load.* Malthus gripped Heironim's wrist and Read him, detecting the same type of lingering paralysis that he had discovered in Ros after Sergei Wraithsbane attacked her. *Lemyari. That confirms it.*

"A little. He sucks, but he doesn't waken. Blood doesn't seem to help his condition."

"It takes strong blood to even begin to heal something like this." Malthus lowered Heironim's wrist to the bed and stroked his face again.

"I've given him mine. The other sa'necari have fed him also."

"It's not strong enough. What was the beast's name that did this to him?"

"Lemyari." Jondries' mouth tightened into a sour line.

"Yes, but which one? What was his name?"

"Silkie."

"How?" Malthus felt shocked to his core. To his knowledge there were no Lemyari in Hell's Widow. The Lemyari were the only serious rivals to the sa'necari within the dark ranks. A tenuous alliance existed simply because Brandrahoon was the godfather to the queen. Had Brandrahoon double-crossed him? Malthus shook that off. It could have been a rogue that turned Silkie ... but if so, where had he come from?

"No one knows. She locked herself into her office for three days. We broke down the door and she had become a Lemyari."

Rage became a bonfire within Malthus. His unborn child was dead. When a pregnant woman became Lemyari, she absorbed the child she carried. "I'm not going to let Heironim die. When I catch up to Silkie, I'll kill her."

"He'll rise won't he?"

Malthus opened Heironim's robe and pointed at the imprint of a strange tendriled brand. "If he dies, he's truly dead. Silkie robbed him of access to his undead side after death."

Jondries looked horrified. "That's possible?"

"The Lemyari have been doing it for centuries. They found a way to create a sigil that mimics the soul severance practiced by Anksha, the Beast of Brandrahoon." Malthus used Anksha's full sobriquet to emphasize his statement.

"What can we do?"

"Sanguine Rose," said Malthus. "That's the only thing that might save him."

"What's that?"

"Trolls Blood base. Get pen and paper. I'll spell it out. If you'll get the ingredients I require, I will make it up for him."

"How long can you stay?"

"As long as it takes. Everything else be damned. He's my spiritbrother. Now get on with it."

Jondries fetched ink, quill, and paper from Heironim's study and laid them out on the table. "I'm ready."

Malthus rattled off the list of ingredients, and punctuated it with a question. "Where did the fire start? I was told it had arcane origins."

"The Crimson Lady. Timocratus saw Silkie set the fire. She used some kind of gem on a necklace."

"Why would she do that?" Malthus pulled at his beard.

"To hide something?"

\* \* \* \*

After a week of getting all the sex he could, whenever and wherever he could, Caimbeul's appetites had tapered off to almost nothing and remained that way. The missing component in his life was not sex, like he had first believed, but companionship. He had not realized how lonely he had been, living in an isolated hovel with the bottle as his only companion for close to fifty years, until Pandeena plunged him back into village life by bringing him to Wolffgard. Caimbeul knew, in retrospect, that his retreat had begun with the murder of his son, Gwythyr. Pandeena divorced him soon after that, partly because he had refused to tell her the details of what had led up to Gwythyr's death and how it had happened.

Caimbeul kneaded the tight muscles in his thick neck, and poured another glass of whiskey. Like it or not, he was getting old; and his descent into the bottle had not helped at all. Eighty years ago, Caimbeul could have gone toe to toe against Todd Sinclair, and have had a fair chance of winning. All that was left of the mon he had been was a reawakened desire for justice and truth, and a need to give something back to his people before he died—currently defined as cleaning the rot from Wolffgard and stopping the Butchering Serpent.

He wandered over to the bookcase. So far as Caimbeul could tell, the only books here had belonged to Nevin Scarface, not the young lawgiver, Nikko Softpaws, who replaced him. Caimbeul's gaze fell upon a book that he had not noticed before and now wished he had never noticed it.

*THE WISDOM OF FIREBORN LAW: the sayings of Padruig Caimbeul.*

He snatched the book off the shelf and threw it across the room. The book smashed into the far wall and landed in an untidy heap.

"What wisdom? It was all hubris. I was a bloody fool."

Caimbeul stalked to the book and ripped the pages out, crumpling and throwing them in all directions. "I'll not stand accused by my own words."

He stared at the empty binding and the ragged edges that remained to speak of its mutilation, feeling mortified by his own past, torn between wishing he could have it all back and wishing none of it had ever happened. Shame crept in. Shame for the outrageous pride that had cost him everything that had meaning. Once Caimbeul had believed himself the wisest, the most clever, the strongest, and most brilliant mind in all of lycandom. Honors and accolades had been heaped upon him and he had accepted them as his due. He had had the most beautiful wife in nine kingdoms, and a son who had worshipped him as a hero.

Caimbeul clenched his eyes shut against the memories the book had triggered, letting it drop from his fingers. He opened his eyes. Consumed by a fit of self-loathing, he ground it into the floor with his heel before stalking from the library.

Once in his bedroom, he stood in front of the mirror and changed into the human-like version of the fireborn. His hips narrowed and his paunch vanished. His shoulders broadened and his body re-formed into the persona he had begun calling 'Patton' in his dealings with the Lycamornots, a mostly juvenile gang of lycans associated with the refugee camp. He had been taxing his fireborn gifts to the limits and a night's sleep was no longer enough of a restorative.

His eyes drifted down to the Godmark on his chest over his heart. That was the only thing he could not alter. No matter what form he took, the arcane brand remained burned into his flesh. He scratched around the red wolf's head mark. Pandeena had wanted to mark him during their marriage and Caimbeul always refused. The first day in Wolffgard, he had asked her to do it. The mark was a link through which he could call out to her if he needed her in dire circumstances. He had not yet tested it, but could not

explain his reticence.

It had been decades since Caimbeul had been able to achieve the full transformation into a gigantic firebird that the Valdren called the 'Qua.' He doubted he could do it any longer even if he tried.

He had done all he could for Kady until the renovations he had designed for the scaffolds on the Commons were finished. Now, Caimbeul needed to return to his investigations of the Sanctuary Refugee Camp and the Lycamornots who appeared to be running it with Clodagh's reluctant cooperation.

Shalto Beggins claimed to be in charge, but Caimbeul had a gut instinct that someone was giving Shalto orders and suspected that person was Malthus.

He slipped out the back door unseen, and started walking toward the Camp at the end of Cheshire Road. Riding would have gotten him there faster, but his horses were too well known.

He had narrowed his focus to a single female. The only bitch connected to the Camp other than Pandeena. The rest of the females dwelling there were twenty human women and five sa'necari.

The only time he ever found the yard empty was dark of the moon, when the lycans did their best to stay indoors because it was considered ill omened to be out on a night without a moon. He had never decided whether that was superstition or fact.

Dozens of young wolves stole across the ground of Sanctuary, pretending not to notice each other. They went to the doors of the longhouses and knocked. When the doors opened, the same phrase was given by all.

"I'm told you can see to my needs."

"Enter, but I have company coming."

Caimbeul stood before the central longhouse which belonged to the young bitch who oversaw the Camp. Clodagh Demarist had spent most of her life helping the poor and less fortunate, which was why Claw Redhand placed her in charge of the camp. However, all that had been achieved was to make her the same kind of victim that her predecessor, Beth Ryan had become.

Clodagh answered his knock in the nude, smelling of sex. Her young face had lines of exhaustion that showed Caimbeul that she had already been roughly handled for a few hours. Her blue eyes held the haunted ghosts of nightmares past and present lurking in their depths.

"On the floor or in the bed?" Clodagh asked without waiting for him to speak, weary resignation underlined her words. She lifted her eyes to his face and a hint of a smile touched her lips. "Padruig."

Caimbeul put a finger to his lips. "Patton."

She stepped aside and let him in.

"Are you alone, Clodagh?"

"Preece and Yren just left."

Caimbeul dropped the bar. "Let's sit on the sofa?"

Clodagh opened a bottle of whiskey and placed it with glasses on the low table before the sofa, and then curled up against the arm looking pensive.

Caimbeul settled beside her and put his arm around her shoulders, cuddling her. "They're hard on you."

"Some times they hurt me."

"Why don't you give it up?"

A look of terror flashed across Clodagh's face and she whimpered like a beaten dog.

"Forget I asked." Caimbeul wrapped her in the comfort of his fireborn aura, soothing her without words. She did not know what he did, but she was becoming acclimated to the experience.

They talked late into the night when Clodagh fell asleep in his arms. Before, he had used sex to disguise his intrusions into her mind. Lately he had begun to use sleep.

Her mind had been touched by someone with great skill and ability. It was a warren of sways, triggers, and coercions. Caimbeul moved through them delicately, not wanting to leave traces of his passage. It made his heart ache that someone as kind and gentle as Clodagh had been savaged. He found a shadowy, faceless form in the surface memories.

He feared to go too deeply, lest he set off the wards he detected. His greatest fear was that he would locate a death command—a type of ward that would kill her instantly if she spoke something that had been forbidden, like the name of the mon who had done this to her.

He studied her pregnancy. She appeared to be three months along. It had to have happened around the time that the previous lawgiver vanished. Psychic scarring was present in her womb. The child she carried was the product of a violent rape. He found something odd, however, about the genetics: they were blurred. He had no way to tell if the fetus was lycan or not, which made him suspicious. If he peeled away the layers, would he find a sa'necari-born growing in Clodagh's womb?

Caimbeul spent the entire night with her, letting her rest while he chased the other wolves off who came to bed her.

"I wish I could take you away from here." He kissed her forehead without waking her. "But I can't risk alerting the Serpent that I have found his traces."

\* \* \* \*

They had been taking turns; never leaving Jordi alone. That night, Fergus felt a tug on his heart that drew him back to Jordi's bedside even though it was Siusan's turn to sit with him.

He walked in just as Jordi's eyes fluttered open and, for the first time since his brother was wounded, his eyes were clear and focused. Somehow, in ways that Fergus could never explain later, he knew from the clarity in Jordi's eyes that the end had come. Jordi had never been the brightest member of the family, but he had always been the sweetest and kindest—and best loved of Fergus' four brothers.

Siusan started when Jordi's hand closed upon hers.

"Green Sheaf ... killed Sainy Raggat ... tell Kynyr ... Ma..." Jordi's voice trailed off, his head listed to the side, and his hand fell away from Siusan's.

She let out a long keening cry, clutching him. "Jordi ... oh, Jordi."

Fergus put his arm around his sobbing wife when he saw that his brother was gone. "We'll get them, Jordi."

"Why Jordi? Why would anyone want to kill poor Jordi?"

Fergus looked grim, holding his grief at arm's length. "The letter is why they killed him."

Siusan released Jordi's body and gazed at her husband. "What do you mean?"

"Amos Raggat sent a plea for help. Jordi carried it. The enemy followed him with orders to kill Jordi and us ... all of us. The sa'necari are planning to butcher all the lycans in Hell's Widow."

Siusan shoved her knuckles into her mouth with a sharp intake of breath. "Oh gods, no."

"Laird Duncan has already sent for the levies. It will take time for us to gather; but once we've assembled, we're riding to Hell's Widow. We're going to give the Widow Hell."

"What about the Sharani Garrison?"

"To hell with them. If they won't protect our people, we will."

"What about this Kynyr Maguire?"

Fergus snarled, hair sprouting along his arms. "He's from Red Wolf. Can't expect anything from them. That old bastard Claw Redhand ... He lost his nerve when they killed his sons. We haven't."



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### PREPARATIONS FOR MURDER

When Malthus had first been summoned to the court of Queen Tomyrilen the Bastard, then hidden in the fastnesses of the Eiralyskali Mountains, he had been offered his choice of assignments by Lord General Daemon Lunekos. Daemon had revealed himself to Malthus last summer as Lord Brandrahoon, the ancient vampire.

Not all of the sa'necari aristocracy had sided with the queen. A few families had held out hope of rescuing the twin sons of the late Prince Mephistis de Waejonan from the King of Rowanhart, and placing one of them upon the throne. Brandrahoon wanted the boys, aged five, butchered. Malthus turned it down, not that he had any qualms about killing children, but because he had his eye on larger prizes.

He had a fetish for lycans.

The Queen interdicted lycan travel through the Hellblade Corridor, effectively preventing the two largest clans, Silverpaw and Red Wolf, from going to each other's aid. While Heironim infiltrated Hell's Widow with the intention of disrupting contact between Red Wolf and the Sharani Garrison there; Malthus' lieutenants, Egidius and Laetus Estrobian slipped south from the Hellblade Corridor into the northwestern edge of Red Wolf territory. Two months ago, Laetus had taken a third of Malthus' army and formed an eastern wing with the ultimate goal of cutting Red Wolf off from their allies in Creeya. Malthus counted upon the insularity of the dwarves of Iradrim to keep those stalwarts out of the fight until long past too late.

The base camp of the eastern wing of Malthus' army, commanded by Laetus Estrobian, spread across the ruined wheat fields behind the last cluster of steadings they had raided. The army comprised thirty sa'necari in addition to Laetus, fourteen Rakshasas, nine Brukulacos, a dozen lamiae, and two hundred human soldiers; more than enough to take towns and villages.

Laetus had grown tired of the hit and run tactics that Malthus insisted upon, disgusted with all the limits that Malthus placed upon him. Laetus had begun to wonder if Malthus was being too cautious. So far the Battle-Clan they had massacred at Iudris Meadows had been the strongest opposition they had encountered.

As the youngest son of a youngest son, Laetus had money, but no influence. The war offered him a chance at glory; and when his cousin Egidius had approached him about joining Malthus' campaign against Red Wolf, he had leaped at it.

Laetus had appropriated the finest of the four houses for his command center, housing himself and his officers there. Having finished his daily tour of the camp, Laetus settled upon the wind-smoothed surface of a small boulder.

Hoots of appreciation drew Laetus' attention to his left and he saw a Lemyari messenger strutting toward him. She was slender with wheaten hair hanging loose down her back, high full breasts, and tight shapely buttocks that swayed suggestively as she walked.

"Zinzi again," he muttered. Lord Daemon had placed two of his best couriers at their disposal and Laetus disliked both of them: Zinzi because of the way that she flaunted herself at his myn and officers; Sergei because he had twice broken into their supply of lycan children and killed several to sate his pedophilic appetites. The children were too valuable to be wasted like that. Laetus knew Malthus would throw a fit if he learned it had happened and Laetus would bear the brunt of it.

Zinzi stopped in front of him, took an envelope from her pouch, and handed it to him.

He nodded at her. "Get something to eat. We still have a few lycans left in our larder. Don't tear them. Their hides are worth a hundred gold each."

Zinzi gave him a bright smile. "It's a shame you're sa'necari." Then she walked off toward the 'larder,' a small roped off area containing six lycans chained and spellcorded.

Laetus watched her go. "Vampire slut," he muttered. One day even the vampires would be forced to bow before the sa'necari. Laetus' people would rule the world. The hellgods would return and the light would be crushed as it had been in the first godwar before the coming of the young gods of light on winter's solstice.

He tore the envelope open and started reading. A greasy strand came loose from one of the three braids he wore coated in scented oils. It tickled his nose and he flicked it behind his ear irritably. That lycan bitch he had warming his bed had not done as good a job with his hair as she usually did. Laetus decided to have her beaten for it.

*My Dear Laetus,*

*The time has come for you to take Three Stones. However, Malthus has a second job he wishes done at the same time. There is a lycan schoolteacher named Branduff Maguire in Longbranch. He's the head of a bastard branch of the Redhands. Malthus wants you to kill him and all of his family, including infants and children. Leave no survivors. I append directions to find them. This must be done the same day that you attack Three Stones. Otherwise they might try to flee the area.*

Laetus rested his forefinger against his temple and chewed on the nail of his middle finger. His initial joy at finally being allowed to deploy his forces against a village of substantial size faded into thoughtfulness. This would take a fine degree of coordination.

He gestured at a soldier standing nearby. "Tell my officers there will be a meeting in an hour to discuss strategy."

"We finally gonna be moving out, Lord Laetus? Get us some fresh whores?"

"Yes, soldier. That's exactly what we'll be doing."

Laetus walked back to the house, thinking hard. Once the lycans were purged from this valley, humans would be settled in it under a sa'necari overlord, as well as several large nibari ranches. A few lycan enclaves might be allowed to exist, but they would never again hold power in this valley. This time the sa'necari would keep them beaten down like they did the humans.

The house had two stories, an attic, and a basement, which had been divided into holding pens for those lycan captives that were scheduled to be moved to Carrion Crevasse or sold at the slave markets in the City of Torment Lake.

Three soldiers lounged on a bench outside the house. Laetus quirked his finger at one to follow him. Crates were stacked along the walls of the foyer, waiting to be carted to the main encampment along the banks of the Eirlys River. All of them held sealed earthenware containers of lycan organs spelled against spoilage by Laetus' most talented sa'necari. The crates would go out tomorrow morning along with his and Egidius' share of the children destined for the slave markets and the females that had started to swell after repeated couplings with his soldiers which Malthus wanted for his planned breeding program.

Nothing else in the villages was worth enough to bother with and he allowed his myn to loot as they went.

Squealing and the smell of fresh blood made Laetus glance at the kitchen door as they passed it. A pair of rakshashas giggled while they ripped up a struggling pig and dumped chunks of the animal into a large kettle on the wood stove. He halted, glowering at them. "Next time kill it in the yard. Clean your mess up when you're finished."

They sobered and one of them said, "Yes, Lord."

"They're just having a bit of fun." The soldier shared a wink with the tiger-striped females before trotting to catch up with Laetus who had moved on.

"My sanguiner uses that kitchen. He likes it clean when he's blending blood and wine."

"Yes, Lord Laetus."

They climbed the stairs to the second floor without a word spoken between them. Reaching the second floor landing, they turned to the left and walked around a corner. Laetus had the largest bedroom in the house.

The bloodstains on the floorboards had resisted all efforts to clean them up. Laetus gaze flicked across them and continued on to the dark-haired lycan bitch curled nude on his bed where he had ordered her to remain. He had chosen her because the so-called 'black' lycans were a rarity. She had had a name when he caught her, but he had forgotten it. Now she answered to "Cuntkin." She had been a virgin until Laetus forced himself inside her after killing her father, whose blood had left the stains on the floor. The stupid lycan had taken a lot of killing and his hide had been completely spoiled by the time that Laetus managed to dispatch him. Spellcord bound each of Cuntkin's wrists separately, blocking her ability to change shape. Laetus pointed at her as he turned to the soldier.

"Beat her bloody."

"What did I do?" she cried out, trying to crawl away from the soldier, who snatched her off the bed by the arm.

Laetus gave her a look of infinite weariness and flicked the strand of black hair that had come loose at her. "This is what you did."

The soldier took a small whip from his belt and struck her across the back, opening a long tear. She screamed.

Laetus folded his arms and watched, laughing as the beating proceeded. "If you keep displeasing me, bitch, you'll end on my altar."

"Oh gods, mercy."

Laetus turned to the soldier with languid indifference. "You have my permission to enjoy her while I'm gone."

The soldier grinned. "Thank you my lord."

\* \* \* \*

Laetus unrolled a map and laid it out on the table with some stones to hold it flat and in place. He summoned his lieutenants and captains with a gesture and began explaining how they would hit the village from both ends, with a skirmish line on the perimeters in case any of the villagers attempted to flee into

the nearby forest. This would be pleasant, simple, and over quickly.

This would be his first large scale action. Raiding isolated steadings had been too easy. Egidius and Malthus had been holding him back for months, not giving him his own command until now. Laetus would show them both that he had grown into a sa'necari to be reckoned with.

Captain Yulus Savakis, an unusually dour mon for a sa'necari, had been a career officer in the army of the late king Baaltrystan. Although having been born sa'necari, his mixed blood showed in his height—just over six feet—and his heavy features. He came to the table flanked by his aide-de-camp, Pio Vadis, who had been made sa'necari by Yulus; and his lieutenant Tarchon Giuliani, a sa'necari-born from the lower classes.

Yulus had just started to study the map when Laetus interrupted him. "Not that one. I have a special task for your units, Yulus."

"If you're thinking about leaving me out of the fighting..." Yulus' bared his fangs in sour disdain.

"Not at all." Laetus extended a rolled map at Yulus.

The captain took it, pulled the string holding it closed, opened, and scanned it. "This is Longbranch."

"So it is." Laetus pursed his lips with an impish gleam in his eyes. "Malthus wants you to kill a school teacher and his family."

"Faugh! A schoolteacher? You're sending my units after some nancidawg chalk merchant?"

"He's Tarrant Redhand's bastard."

\* \* \* \*

Brother Malcolm was a wiry, energetic wolf from the Monastery of St. Albans who had been assigned to Father Gileaus as an aide. He wore his hair trimmed neatly level with the bottom of his earlobes and tonsured. A member of the Order of St. Tarnus, devoted to the preservation of history and literature, he wore a forest green robe and hooded cowl symbolizing his devotion to the natural world. A wide leather belt cinched his waist, holding his pouches; and a prayer belt of carved wooden beads in the form of scrolls and books rested around his hips. His 'runes' of Willodarus and Tala hung on a slender chain around his neck. The long straps of a pair of satchels crisscrossed his lean chest and a large knapsack rested on his back.

He stood at the side of Blacktooth Falls, watching the rushing waters. The ferry was on the other side, and knowing Gavin MacLoud, it was probably there for the day. MacLoud enjoyed sitting in the taverns, gossiping and drinking at every opportunity.

He glanced up at the rope bridge suspended between two towering chestnut trees and considered it. A merchants consortium had built the rope bridge and maintained it for the purpose of sending someone over on foot to drag MacLoud out of the taverns when they needed the ferry.

Malcolm felt thankful that he had chosen to come on foot and could use the bridge without having to abandon a horse. He fiddled with the end of his belt of beads and seeds.

Grasping the stout rope ladder, he tested it, knowing that it paid to be careful and remembering the nasty prank that the Brownlea cubs had once played on Eldeward Gooseberry by cutting through the ropes at the top. Malcolm climbed quickly despite the weight he carried and scrambled onto the bridge. Wooden planks, fastened to the rope frame, creaked beneath his feet and the bridge swayed under his weight as he crossed. Despite years of using the bridge, it still filled his stomach with butterflies to see the swift

water frothing around the scattered stones beneath him.

Once on the other side, Brother Malcolm leaned against the base of a broad oak tree and waited for his legs to realize they were on solid ground again. Then he scampered down the road toward Chandler's Rock.

He reached Chandler's Rock as dusk settled in and headed for the Broken Wheel Inn owned by Lily Maguire, which she ran with the aid of her two sons. If there was a Kynyr Maguire in Chandler's Rock, the old Widow Maguire would know where to find him.

Chandler's Rock was the largest town in Red Wolf because it nestled in the foothills of a spur of the Iradrim Mountains with a bend in the Eirlys River where it widened enough to allow water-going traffic. Two hundred years ago, the town was a small trading post and now it bristled with travelers and merchants coming from Iradrim, Waejontor, and the Aluintri Mar'ajanate of Shaurone as well as the towns and villages of Red Wolf and MacLachlan.

The Broken Wheel stood three stories high, painted white with a brown trim. Flower beds and trees graced the yard. Brother Malcolm entered the pleasant, white-washed interior of the Common Room and sat down at a square table near the bar.

Esyllit Maguire, a pretty bitch with light brown hair and a sweet smile, came to his table. "What will you have?"

"Ale. I need to speak with your Gram, if I may?" He extended a coin to her.

Esyllit refused his coin with a shake of her head and made the sign of the bear. "Your presence blesses us, Brother Malcolm. I'll tell Gram you wish to speak with her."

Lily Maguire hobbled in on her cane, looking more frail and fragile than ever. Her face crinkled into a mass of wrinkles and folds as she lowered herself smiling into a chair across from Brother Malcolm and her granddaughter set a tankard of ale in front of him. "Heavens smile upon you, Brother Malcolm."

"And may they smile upon you also, Widow Maguire."

"I'm a hundred and thirty-three years old, and the feeling in my bones tells me I've seen my last spring."

"Willodarus will take you in his arms and hold you dear, Widow Maguire."

"To be sure. I've been a gods-loving bitch all my life. How may I help you?"

"I bear a letter for one Kynyr Maguire. I believe it to be a plea for assistance as the original bearer was shot dead by a sa'necari."

A frown deepened the lines around her mouth. "Sa'necari don't shoot."

"This one did."

"How odd." She tapped a finger to her lips. "There is a Kynyr Maguire in Chandler's Rock, but he's nearly as old as I am. He was a carpenter until his arthritis got bad."

"I doubt he's the one."

"Agreed. You should speak to Gowan Maguire in Fifeshire. He's my cousin, fathered a large brood, and outlived three wives. If anyone would know this Kynyr, it's Gowan."

"I'll do that."

"Will you overnight here and breakfast with my family? We would consider ourselves blessed by your presence, Brother Malcolm."

"Surely."

\* \* \* \*

The MacFie clan had gathered for Jordi's funeral, two hundred of them, counting bitches and cubs as well as the dog wolves. Anger simmered in the air alongside grief. The cubs were quiet and reverent as if sensing the mood of their elders. The bitches, except for six battle-bitches who had come armed and armored, were teary-eyed and solemn. The dog wolves were taciturn and dour, scenting war in the offing and come to greet it.

Fergus held his weeping wife in the circle of his arm as they lowered Jordi's coffin into the ground. The fires of rage had begun to burn the moment he first looked upon the face of his dying brother, and as they spiraled out of control, the noise of his emotions drowned out the words of Father Gileaus speaking the service for the dead.

He started from his thoughts as Father Gileaus pressed a clod of dirt into his hand. Fergus stared at the dark, rich soil he held, and flung it into the grave with a wild yell. Jumping onto a boulder, he exhorted the grieving crowd.

"Do we wait for them to kill us all one by one? Or do we take the war to them?"

"Give them hell, Fergus!"

"Aye, we fight!"

Fergus waited for the shouting of the crowd to die down. "Red Wolf has lost its nerve, Clan MacFie has not. Clan MacLachlan has not. Vengeance for Jordi. Glory or death!"

"Bring Hell to the Widow," the crowd shouted back.

Fergus glared a challenge to Father Gileaus. "What say you? Are you with us?"

"I will ride with you, but I won't fight." Gileaus regarded the gathered clansfolk, a man of peace with troubled eyes, resigned to the violence to come. "I'll tend the wounded and whatever else needs to be done. I'll bless your arms and efforts."

A cheer went up and the funeral resumed.

\* \* \* \*

Padruig Caimbeul stood before his mirror as he did each night, drawing on his fireborn blood inherited from his granddam to alter his primarily lycan body into a third form. He dropped twenty years from his grizzled visage, narrowed his chin, turned his gray hair black, gained height, and lost his paunch. In moments, Caimbeul had become the handsome freelance, Patton. He dressed in a black traditional lycan robe that could be easily shed to accommodate changing into a wolf.

Then he stole from his home, heading for the refugee camp where he intended to spend part of the night with Clodagh. He kept to the trees and the dark places as he traveled, not wishing to be seen. In either wolf form or hybrid shape, the lycans had little need of street lamps, and so there were none to expose him. Only the light of the waning moon and that thrown from the windows of the houses along his path would have made his features clear to people passing by.

The people dwelling in the camp were mostly vulnerable women, all human except for five sa'necari and Clodagh the single lycan, along with their children. They had fled the war raging throughout the rest of Waejontor as the bastard daughter of the late prince Shintar attempted to take the realm back from its Sharani conquerors. In this place where they should have been safe, someone had turned their sanctuary into a brothel and forced them all to open their legs to whatever male came calling.

Caimbeul knew that the Lycamornots, led by Shalto, had something to do with it, but he suspected that they were only a small part of it. He knew of seven who were counted among the core gang, but he always saw far more dog wolves moving among the cabins, longhouses, and sheelings in the camp than just those few. And, of those few none of them seemed old enough or experienced enough to have created this set up. Furthermore, he had detected traces of artificial compulsions that stank of sa'necari magic in all of the females he had slept with.

What he was doing was dangerous. If the Lycamornots, or their various friends connected him to the lawgiver, much less suspected that Patton and Caimbeul were the same person, it would place his life in jeopardy.

He went to Clodagh's longhouse that had once belonged to Beth, the bitch that founded the refugee camp called Sanctuary, and knocked. Clodagh answered her door nude with an unhappy expression on her face. While the lycans had no nudity taboos, few of them would have answered the door like this; especially in an area that had humans around it. She looked tired. Caimbeul guessed that the young dogs must have already been using her, and he wished he had come earlier to chase them off, but he had had matters to attend to in his function as lawgiver.

He disliked admitting it, but he had become fond of her and protective, although he could not yet take action on her behalf. At least not until he had completed his investigation. Caimbeul's heart warmed when he watched her eyes light up at seeing him.

Caimbeul stepped inside the longhouse, which had a room at either end, separated by half walls with a curtained doorway and a window that looked out into the rest of the house. Unlike the rest of the longhouses at Sanctuary, Clodagh had a hearth rather than a simple firepit, and carpeting over the dirt floor. She had nice cabinets beside the hearth and a hand carved table with ornate chairs. Caimbeul had wondered, at first, what could have made her move into the Sanctuary when she had had a much nicer home in one of the better sections of the village. But, then, she had probably not moved here of her own free will. He needed to examine her mind more deeply, but scanning her on the sly while distracting her with sex was not always easy. Over the past weeks, Caimbeul had caught glimpses what he suspected were death commands in both hers and Kandaishée's neural nets.

Then he turned and dropped the bar across her door. "You're not taking any more customers tonight, Clodagh."

She trembled when Caimbeul put his arms around her. "He'll be angry with me."

Caimbeul remembered his first time with her. She had opened her legs, turned her face away so that she would not have to look at him, and told him to get it over with. Caimbeul had known from that moment that the bitches in the camp were not doing it voluntarily.

Caimbeul felt certain that he was closing on the Serpent and that it was only a matter of time before he uncovered him. He had narrowed his focus to two females here: a sa'necari named Kandaishée and Clodagh, the lycan who ran the camp. Both were pregnant and he had sensed the psychic scarring in their bodies of a violent rape that occurred around the time that someone got into their heads with needles of power. The normal sa'necari pattern under circumstances like these was to place a death

command in their brains to be triggered if anyone tried to tamper with the coercions and compulsions, or otherwise force them to speak the secrets they held.

Finally he found what he had been searching for: the death command he had suspected was there. If Clodagh mentioned the Serpent or spoke his true name, she would die instantly of a cerebral hemorrhage. Worse, it was too well set for him to try getting it out, and Caimbeul did not want to risk Clodagh's life.



## CHAPTER NINE

### THE PRICE OF FRIENDSHIP

The day had turned stormy and overcast. Rain shook the leaves on the trees and pounded a rhythm on the roof. Kynyr carried a small wooden box tucked under his arm. He opened the kitchen door and glanced about.

Cahira sat at the table, pouring tea into a frosted glass cup. She tilted her head. "What have you got there?"

Kynyr put the box behind him with a guilty smile. "Is Kady around?"

"She's in the shop."

"Thanks."

Kynyr ducked out and headed for the stairs. Todd emerged from the bathing room, running his fingers through his long, damp hair to get the tangles out. Kynyr put the box behind his back again.

"A coaxing present?"

"You said to start coaxing her." The guardsmon grinned at his grandfather.

Todd chuckled. "Get on it."

Kynyr took the stairs as quick as his leg would allow him.

Cahira's Potions and Notions had display cabinets along two sides with wall to ceiling shelves and drawers behind them and along the back. A table with seven chairs stood at the rear, where customers could discuss their choices and pay for the purchases. The standard merchandise included medicines, salves, creams, and cosmetics on one side and sewing needs on their other. The rest of it changed from time to time as Cahira's suppliers found assorted items of limited availability to offer her. A stack of 'pressed' books occupied the end of one display counter. The city of Havensword in Creeya had three of the new printing presses imported from Iradrim; Red Wolf had none. Whenever a supplier offered her a crate of pressed books, Cahira bought the lot of them, appropriating what looked like a good addition to her own library; then Todd went through to see if any 'naughty' books had been included and made off with those he had not acquired yet; and the remainder were sold in the shop.

The newest addition to the shop, a one time deal, was an array of imported Creeyan blades; high quality swords, daggers, and axes that sold out fast.

Kynyr found the three cubs sitting at the table. Cooley had a collection of jars and bottles in front of him, totaling the cost up with an abacus. He wrote the amounts down on two slips of paper, handed one slip and a portion of the bottles to Hamish; and then the rest of the jars and bottles along with a slip of paper to Rory. The two Scott cubs filled their delivery sacks, pulled the hood of the oilskin rain capes Cahira had given them around their scruffy faces, and ran out the door.

"Don't run!" Kynyr shouted at them. "Walk or you might stumble and break something."

"They ain't stumbled yet," said Cooley.

"Haven't."

Cooley frowned. "They haven't stumbled yet."

"There's always a first time. Is Kady around?"

"Back room."

Kynyr found Kady grinding herbs with mortar and pestle. Two huge jars sat in front of her. One with the raw herbs and the other with the powdered form.

"Hello, Kady." Kynyr sidled up and kissed her.

Kady set her pestle down and smiled in bemused suspicion. "What have you got there?"

"An 'I love you' gift." He placed the silk wrapped bundle in front of her.

Kady opened it. Two long knives in ornate leather sheaths with arm straps lay before her. She pulled one knife and then the other, staring incredulously at blue-violet blades. "Kendaryl?"

"Yes."

"Where did you find them?" She returned the blades to their sheaths and fastened them to her arms. Everything was perfect.

"Same supplier as the one who brought those blades we have for sale."

"They're incredible, Kynyr."

He leaned in and stole another kiss, his finger brushing her nipples.

Kady looked askance at his hands. "You're not getting my legs open until I Call Courtship."

Kynyr flushed with guilt. "Call Courtship, Kady. Please."

"Soon, Kynyr. Soon."

"Then at least allow me to announce it, like an engagement. I want people to know that you're mine."

"Not yet, Kynyr. Announce it after I Call Courtship?"

"Whatever you want is fine with me." Kynyr sat down and watched Kady grinding herbs for a while. "There's a house for sale ... it's an estate really. One hundred acres of orchards. The house is lovely. Nine bedrooms in the family section and eight in the servants' wing. Maldwyn Softpaws designed it and it's one of his best. If you like it, I'll buy it."

Kady stopped grinding and gazed at Kynyr as if re-assessing him. She thought she had fallen in love with a simple guardsman, but she was steadily discovering that there was far more to Kynyr than she dreamed. "You have that kind of money?"

"I have a very large trust fund. My family is not poor farmers, although we do farm."

"You have so many secrets, Kynyr. Some times I wonder if I really know you."

"There are things I can't tell you, Kady. But on my word of honor, there's nothing dark or evil in it. You do believe me?"

Kady leaned over and kissed him. "Yes, I believe you."

"Would you like to look at the house with me? It's close to the manor and it would be a nice place to raise children."

"I'll be happy to look at it." Kady's head swam at the thought of living in such a place. She had expected a small house that would quickly be filled with children, something barely larger than a traditional longhouse. "But if it's so big, I'll never be able to take care it."

"I'll purchase five or six nibari."

"Can we look at it tomorrow?" *A house ... a huge house with servants and orchards. Imagine that.*

"I'll make the arrangements. You'll love it, Kady."

\* \* \* \*

Baroucha looked more like an old white-haired toad than a lycan as she prepared the foxglove extract that Robert Morcar would be picking up in a few hours. She reached into the drawer, brought out the arcane poison that Malthus had given her, and added the prescribed number of drops to Claw's medicine. Malthus had assured her that it was undetectable. She had fantasized for years about Claw's death. She would have poisoned him long ago if she had not been afraid of getting caught.

The Redhands had killed her beloved Alistar Weems, the father of her only cub. Tarrant Redhand and Todd Sinclair had staked Alistar nude over an anthill, driven silver spikes through his wrists and ankles, and then put a silver spike runed with terrible magics through his belly. Alistar died screaming.

She wondered sometimes what had become of her cub, which she had abandoned at a monastery when she and Cahira had fled the final battle of the Lycan Rebellion. Later she learned that the difficult birth had left her womb too scarred to produce another.

Malthus had promised to kill all the Redhands, including the bastard son of Tarrant Redhand and all of his offspring, including Kynyr.

Claw had sent for Sheradyn Kelly to be Merissa's personal physician during her pregnancy. Baroucha hated Sheradyn almost as much as she hated the Redhands. Once Sheradyn got there, Claw would be getting his medicine from either Atreius Ivanstern's apothecary or from Cahira. Baroucha would no longer be able to get the poison into the chieftain. That thought prompted her to pull the stopper out again and double the amount of poison. "Die you old bastard."

The bell on her door rang, telling her someone had entered the shop. She hid the poison in a drawer, grabbed the medicine for Claw, and walked out.

Robert Morcar stood waiting. "Hello, Baroucha. I'm here for Claw's medicine."

"You're early."

"Claw has run out of it." He raked a hand through his coarse close-clipped raven hair.

"I have it right here." She handed him the bottle. "This will help."

"What are you treating him for?"

"That's none of your business."

"I think it is. Everything that affects Claw, affects us all."

Baroucha got a sly look. "It's his heart. He's heading for a heart attack. There's no way to prevent it."

Robert frowned, drawing deep lines across his forehead and pushing his eyebrows together. "If he dies before Merissa's babes are born ... I don't know who the elders would put in charge. There's no male heirs."

"That would be unfortunate, wouldn't it?"

"If Merissa had married a lycan, then her husband would be the obvious choice."

"However, she married a human. What a shame."

"I need to get back."

"Morcar, tell Claw that if he's in too much pain, he can double the dosage."

"I'll do that."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus glanced at the window and could see how far the sun had moved, telling him that morning had fled. He had now been in Hell's Widow for three days, most of it spent sitting with Heironim. His wrists and arms were covered with punctures and bruises from using his own blood to keep his friend alive while he had waited for the final ingredients to create the Sanguine Rose. In the normal course of affairs, Malthus insisted upon being dominant in all matters. He took orders only so far as he agreed with them or saw some advantage to be gained from obedience.

He had always been the one who mounted, never the one who *was* mounted.

He had always been the one who bit, not the one who *was* bitten.

He had always been the master, and never the slave; rejecting all acts of submission that others demanded of him.

Yet, he willingly gave of himself to save first Ros, and now Heironim—and a few times he had grudgingly fed Zinzi as payment for her services. His blood was stronger than the others because he had rited sa'nevari nobles who carried substantial legacies. A legacy of souls passed from parent to child, when the younger rited the older usually when the parent was too old, ill, or injured to survive.

Malthus lifted Heironim's head and poured another swallow of Sanguine Rose into his mouth. Brandrahoon had given him the recipe when he entered his service.

The blood awakened Heironim's autonomic nervous system and he swallowed. More color came into Heironim's face. Malthus patiently poured another drop into his mouth.

Slowly, swallow by swallow, Heironim returned to consciousness.

"Malthus?" Heironim's voice sounded raspy and struggling. "You're here."

"Yes, my brother. I'm here. I came as soon as I saw the smoke."

"Did Jondries tell you about the yuwenghau?"

Malthus frowned. "No. What yuwenghau?"

"There was a yuwenghau's vibrations on the earth where my myn ambushed Maguire. Is he dead?"

"Maguire?"

"Yes."

"He's alive. So is Finn MacIver."

"I want them both dead, Malthus. They killed Ellie."

"I'll take care of it."

"Thank you."

"Now I need to get back. Jondries has the recipe for the medicine that will help you heal." Malthus kissed Heironim's forehead. "Rest, brother. Regain your health."

Malthus rose and walked from the room. He found Jondries waiting in the antechamber. "He'll live."

"Thank Bellocar!"

"Do you have letters for me? Or a shipment?"

"Both."

\* \* \* \*

Claw sat alone in his study with the door closed. In the middle of his heavy oaken desk, a cobalt blue, cut-crystal whiskey glass flanked a bottle of the expensive whiskey that Malthus had given him. The bottle of foxglove extract that Robert had picked up for him stood at the opposite side of the desk. Other than that, the desktop was bare. Claw abhorred a cluttered desk. It made him feel hemmed in. Therefore, everything went back into the drawers when Claw finished with them.

Day by day, the pain and pressure worsened in his chest and he had begun retreating here when it became too severe to conceal, because he did not want to worry Aisha. Claw wondered how much longer it would be before they found him dead. He had begun trying to write a will, but the wording never satisfied him and his attempts were marred by line-throughs. He needed to protect Merissa and Darmyk, Aisha and his sisters. But most of all he wanted to be certain that his son-in-law did not benefit by his death. More and more, Claw suspected that the rest of his family would not be safe if Malthus got control of Red Wolf.

He felt like stones had been piled in his chest, making it hard to breathe. Claw poured a large, more than double, measure of the medicine into the whiskey glass, drank it down, and followed that with an equal measure of liquor. The Chieftain waited for the discomfort to ease, but this time it did not.

Pain as sharp as the bite of a blade shot through him. Claw clutched his chest with a groan. The room tilted and spun. Claw collapsed, falling forward across his desk as consciousness deserted him.

\* \* \* \*

Nine myn formed the at-large group of guardsmyn, nicknamed the Bitch Brigade, which existed to add a random factor into Claw's defenses that included watching over his bitches, Aisha, Fianait, and Searlait, as well as grandson Darmyk, and Malthus' nieces Ros and Lyrri. They took them shopping, watched over them when they went walking in the garden, and one of them always sat with them in the Great Hall. Kynyr was their officer, and Finn MacIver served as his second. They were four down in strength with Ramsey and Eideard dead, and Kynyr and Finn still on sick leave following the ambush at Pendarke Bend. Claw had refused Erskine's requests to increase their numbers back to full strength before Kynyr returned to duty, leaving them stretched thin.

Erskine had charge of the unit and had made Vayle Stewart his second while they waited for Kynyr's

return. One of the things that made the unit unique among Claw's guardsmyn was that all of them could read and write. Kynyr had insisted upon that.

Erskine had his logbook open, and begun his end of the day debriefings of the unit—another practice that Kynyr had created—when Robert Morcar entered.

Robert had a tense look as he settled into the chair across from Erskine's desk.

"Something bothering you, Rob?"

Robert sucked the side of his cheek in and stared at his hands. After several breaths, he lifted his head and met Erskine's eyes. "Claw doesn't want me talking about this ... but it seems too important not to."

"Spill it."

"For the past two months, Claw's sent me to pick up a bottle of medicine from Baroucha every two weeks. Today I asked her what it was for."

Erskine waited patiently and when Robert was not forthcoming asked him, "So what did she say?"

"Heart trouble. It's foxglove. Baroucha said..." Robert stared at the ceiling for a bit. "She said that Claw is dying."

"And you believed her?"

"Yeah. I know you don't think much of her ... but I've seen how Claw keeps rubbing his chest and kneading his arm. That's what my Da kept doing just before the heart attack that killed him."

"Don't spread it around. Sheradyn Kelly is supposed to get here in three days. He's finally put all his affairs in order. He knows his business and I'll trust his take on it more than I will Baroucha's."

"Okay, I'll keep my mouth shut."

A noise in the hall drew Erskine's gaze to the door and he scowled to see that it was slightly ajar. "Close the door."

"I thought I had." Robert Morcar closed it better and returned to his chair.

\* \* \* \*

Gorgarty Burr had the juiciest piece of gossip that he had gotten in weeks. He heard Erskine tell Morcar to close the door; and hurried off to conceal himself in the curve of the stairwell in case Robert decided to have a look in the hallway.

They all thought he was stupid, but Gorgarty knew he was not. This tidbit would restore his standing, which had been soiled by his dealings with Kady Wiggins. The little slut had screamed rape after he had given her the best jacking she had ever had in her life. Kady wanted him. He knew she did. But that hadn't stopped Erskine Faraday, Robert Morcar, and Vayle Stewart from administering a severe beating to him.

Hereward had always protected his pretty daughters to such a degree that they were like forbidden fruit begging to be tasted. All the dogs wanted them; and none of them had the courage to beard the tavernmaster in his den for a taste. When he withdrew his protection from Kady, all the young wolves had salivated at the thought of tasting her previously verboten wares and the boldest of them had gotten their bones into her at the first opportunity.

He tried to decide who to share this interesting bit with and decided on Belgair Doherty, the Captain of the Guard. Gorgarty walked through the hallway that connected the barracks wing to the family wing and went upstairs to Belgair's office.

Belgair's office had a tense simplicity to it. A bare wooden floor, a single, half-empty bookcase, a desk with three simple wooden chairs in front of it. The only luxury in the place was the modest carpet beneath the desk. Belgair had been Captain of the Guard for two decades and was in his late fifties. Still young for a lycan. He was stout and sturdy with sandy hair that he kept close-cropped in a Gormandi cut.

Gorgarty Burr swaggered in without knocking, sat down in the chair nearest to Belgair's desk, and laid one ham sized fist on the desk. "I got something you ought ta know."

Belgair's large cornflower eyes narrowed at Gorgarty's presumptuous entry, and the corners of his mouth twitched irritably. "If you've come to tell me another story about Kady, forget it. I've heard more than enough."

"Nah, this is about Claw."

"Really?" Belgair asked dryly. "What about him?"

"He's got heart trouble. Baroucha's treating him for it, but she says he's dying."

"And where did you hear this?"

"Morcar and Faraday were discussing it. I listened at the door."

Belgair pulled at the stubble on his chin. "There's no adult male heir. In fact, there's no male heir until Merissa's twins are born ... assuming they're lycan."

"Is it worth anything to you?"

Belgair reached into his drawer, brought out a silver half-noble, and tossed it to Gorgarty. "Go get drunk."

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr slept nude because air felt good on his skin. The blue crystal that he wore on a long white gold chain lay on the pillow amidst a nest of long golden hair. Cahira had placed an accommodation spell on the chain so that no matter what form he took—wolf, human, hybrid—the crystal remained around his neck. He could see, hear, taste, and smell magic. Cahira called it a sensitivity. Kynyr had no mage gifts and lacked the secondary nervous system called a mage-net, although some of his shaukras were as well developed as a mage's. Any cubs that Kady bore him would have the gifts in full measure.

The honeysuckle scent of Pandeena's magic awakened Kynyr. He sat up, fumbled for the box of lucifers on the nightstand, and struck one. Removing the glass chimney, he lit the lamp.

She stood there in a long filmy robe that revealed everything. The musky scent of her arousal filled his nostrils as she sat down on his bed and opened her robe.

His body reacted to her and he wished, fervently, that it would not. "Pandeena, we can't do this any longer."

"Why not?" She reached under the sheets and fondled him.

Kynyr grasped her hand and pushed it away from him. "I don't want you."

"We agreed that it was just Wild Cousins...."

"Kady. I told you it was a maybe. But it isn't maybe any longer. She challenged me to a Wild Cousins' Courtship. I accepted challenge and now I'm just waiting for her to Call Courtship."

"I see." Pandeena closed her robes, and moved to a chair. Her voice was more resigned than irritated. "You're the second mortal to ever reject my advances. The first was your grandfather, Tarrant Redhand."

"What do you mean, 'mortal?' What are you, Pandeena?"

"Long-lived. That's all that I'll tell you."

"I see." Kynyr drew the sheets around his waist securely and tucked the sides behind his hips.

Pandeena laughed softly. "I have ways to overwhelm your senses and force you to mount me."

Kynyr sucked in an uneasy breath. "You wouldn't do that, would you?"

"Of course not. I'm not into that kind of thing. Although some of my relatives are. Especially my grandmother."

"Who is your grandmother?"

"Now that would be telling." Pandeena wagged a finger at him.

"Is she one of the forever young?"

"Yes."

"How old are you?"

"I'm not answering that. However ... if you wish to know more about this custom that Kady has invoked, just ask me. I had it explained to me by the one who created it."

Kynyr's grip on reality tilted and spun. "You've met Navaryn? The First Mother?"

"We're old friends."

"You're not just named for Pandeena Moonbow, you're HER aren't you?"

"The Second Mother? If I were, I would already have solved all your problems, wouldn't I?"

Kynyr nodded. "She would have come here and ripped the place apart considering all that's gone on."

"Of course she would."

\* \* \* \*

Fergus MacFie emerged from his home, wearing a chain mail hauberk with his broadsword at his hip and a fighting knife on the other side. Before him forty myn sat their horses, all of his uncles, brothers, and cousins, including half a dozen battle-bitches, all armed, armored and ready.

He mounted his horse and they intended ride hard for Castle MacLachlan. His youngest brother Artair carried the banner of House MacFie with the butt resting in a lance cup.

The bitches stood holding their scarves to wave them on. Siusan ran forward and put her hand on Fergus' leg. She looked up at him, concern and pride in her face.



"Give them hell, Fergus." A single tear slid down her cheek. She placed her scarf in his hand. "Wear my colors for luck and come home to me."

"We'll clothe ourselves in glory or we'll die, but we won't wait for them to take us one at a time." He tied her scarf around his bicep. "Whatever happens, remember that I love you, Siusan."

"Forever, Fergus."

Then he gave the signal and led the warriors of his house from the yard and down the road. He thought not of the battles to come, but of his wife; his fiery loving Siusan. They were second cousins and had known each other from birth. Fondness had matured into love. The day he saw her knock a dog down with a broomstick for harassing Jordi, he said to his father, "That's the bitch I'm going to marry."

The only ones left behind were the bitches, and those too old or young to fight.

House MacFie was going to war.

## CHAPTER TEN

### PUNISHMENT AND DEFIANCE

Kynyr sat at the table, keeping Kady company as she worked. "Did you like the house, Kady?"

"It's beautiful."

"Shall I buy it?"

"Kynyr..." Kady hesitated, feeling overwhelmed by it all. "Yes, buy it. I don't like the color they painted the nursery."

"I'll pay for it tomorrow and you can start redecorating."

"It's going to be a large undertaking."

"I'll hire Erwin Twelvetoes. He studied under Maldwyn Softpaws."

"It sounds good, Kynyr."

"Call Courtship, Kady. The sooner we're married, the sooner we can move in."

Rory Scott raced into the shop, breathless and bug-eyed. "The scaffolds on the common are ready and a new flogging post's been raised."

Kady's face went pale; her hands shook, forcing her to stop filling the small jars with Cahira's herbal blends.

Rory unshouldered his delivery sack on the table and glanced back and forth between Kady and Kynyr. "There's guards all over down there. Erskine told me they'd be bringing Donald and Iollen out for their punishment in an hour. People are already starting to gather. If you want a good view, you'd better go now."

"Caimbeul's decided on the punishment for Donald Greenlea and Iollen Newell." Kynyr reached across and patted Kady's hand. "You ought to be there, Kady. I'll go with you."

Cahira agreed to watch the shop, allowing Todd and Kynyr to escort Kady and the three cubs to observe the punishment that the lawgiver would be meting out to the miscreants.

The Common stood close enough to the shop that Kynyr and Kady could walk there. Todd followed with Cooley on his shoulders, while Rory and Hamish rushed ahead of them. Cubs sat in the upper branches of the trees scattered across the green to get a better view of the proceedings. Peddlers' two wheeled pushcarts dotted the edges of the Common, selling everything from fruit, candy, Eccles cakes, and meat pies to liquor and wine. A viewing box stood on the north side for the gentry. Claw and Aisha sat there conversing with the village elders.

The scaffolds had originally been four platforms, each of them twenty feet square, with steps along the sides, and a frame across the top to hold the hangmon's nooses. Claw had built them four and a half years ago to execute the outlaws his guardsmyn captured when they ran those renegades to earth. It had been Kynyr's baptism of battle, and he had acquitted himself well, although he had been barely past sixteen at the time.

Caimbeul's alterations to the scaffolds made Kynyr wonder how much trouble the lawgiver was

anticipating. There were now eight square platforms. The side steps had been removed from each, and a long sturdy walkway connected them in the rear broad enough for three guardsmyn to march the length of it abreast. A log skirt beneath the walkway prevented anyone from seeing what went on behind it with the only steps up to the scaffolds at either end of the walkway. T-shaped flogging posts had been erected on the two central squares.

Guardsmyn stood along the base of the scaffolds to provide crowd control, if such became necessary, and the steps were guarded. Caimbeul stood on the scaffold with his arms folded, looking stern as death. Beside him, a burly chastisemon in a black leather mask waited for the miscreants to be brought forth.

Two guardsmyn propelled Donald Greenlea up the steps to the nearest flogging post. They fastened the wrists of his outstretched arms to the crosspiece, ran a stout rope around his waist and the post, and tied his ankles to the base. They repeated the process with Iollen Newell. The miscreants' backs faced the crowd so that the spectators could watch them bleed.

The chastisemon stroked his cat-o'-nine-tails, made of braided rawhide strips with slender spikes of high-grade silver woven through each strand.

Caimbeul stepped forward to pronounce sentence.

"Donald Greenlea. Iollen Newell. You have been found guilty of attempted kidnapping with intent to commit rape. The maximum sentence for which is one hundred lashes. However, since this is a first offense, we have decided to be merciful. Fifty lashes each. Begin."

Donald shuddered in silence under the first stroke of the lash. By the tenth his screams mingled with the jeering shouts and insults from the crowd.

Kady pressed her knuckles into her mouth. "I never liked watching this stuff."

Kynyr switched his cane to the other hand, put his arm around her, and held her close. "They deserve it."

"I know ... but watching it ... I-I pity them."

"When you cross the line, you take your chances." Todd watched, his face as calm as still water. Cooley sat on his shoulders and Todd grasped his ankles together in one big hand, anchoring the cub in place.

Donald's cries hoarsened, became little more than rasping grunts. He sagged in his bonds, his head lolling back.

"Thirty-three. I'm surprised he lasted that long." Todd glanced up at the cub. "Have you seen enough yet, Cooley?"

"No. I want to see both of them whipped," the cub answered in a small voice. "What will they do with him?"

Todd shrugged. "Give him a week to heal up and then finish the sentence."

Iollen started screaming with the first kiss of the whip.

Kady cringed. "I want to go home, Kynyr."

"Not yet." Kynyr pressed his lips into Kady's curly hair. "You don't want them to think you're weak."

That hit a nerve. Kady straightened and pulled away from him. "I'm not weak. We'll stay for all of it."

Two guardsmyn cut Donald down and dragged him away. They threw him in the back of a wagon and left him there under guard.

Iollen lasted only until the twenty-sixth blow before losing consciousness and joining Donald in the wagon.

Kynyr leaned close to Kady and whispered in her ear. "Call Courtship, Kady."

"What?" Kady stared into his face.

"Call Courtship. You proposed it and now you have to declare it."

Kady could smell Kynyr's desperation and need. Lycans learned to filter out and ignore scent clues much as humans did noises; otherwise it would overload their senses. However, sometimes scent became so strong that it could not be overlooked, especially when it came from someone they were close to. "Oh. Oh, right. I will. Not today, but maybe tomorrow. I'll do it real soon."

"I love you, Kady."

A smile flickered across her lips. "I know."

\* \* \* \*

Preece Malloy lounged against an elm tree, arms loosely folded, and his expression harsh. "Stupid is as stupid does."

"What do you mean, Thorn?" Rheu leaned from the branch he straddled, a stick in hand as he poked at an abandoned oriole nest that hung from the drooping end like a sun faded brown sack.

"They shouldn't've tried to take her in a public place."

Shalto sauntered over, thumbs hooked on his belt, his bland face trying and failing to achieve a stern look. "It ain't fair. Kady's a slut."

Preece's eyes narrowed. He gazed at Shalto with sour speculation, unimpressed as always by his attempts to appear as the tough leader of the Lycamornots. Preece knew that Shalto had given the silly adolescent name to their little gang. If Malthus had not bribed Preece to join, he would have stayed out of it. "That lawgiver don't belong here."

"Nothing we can do about it." Shalto produced an apple from his pocket and took a bite from it. "Claw put him in charge."

"Someone ought to knife him."

Shalto's nostrils flared and he sucked air through them, thrown off stride by the casual threat in Preece's voice.

"Claw or Caimbeul?" asked a familiar voice from behind them.

Preece glanced back and saw Malthus. "Come for the show?"

"More or less." Malthus lowered his head to conceal a tiny sneer. "So, which one, Preece?"

"Both. Caimbeul for ordering this. Claw for sending for him."

"You're lucky, Preece. If Kady had pressed charges that would be you up there." Malthus pulled at his

oak leaf beard. "Be careful."

"Always am."

"From what I hear, she's Kynyr's whore now."

Preece's lips curled back from his teeth and he spit on the ground. "I offered Hereward for her."

"What happened?"

"Sinclair got her ownership papers changed. Went to the temple."

"That's a shame." Malthus spoke in a silky tone, filled with contempt. "So, Todd's mounting her also. Maybe Kynyr and Todd are two upping her."

Shalto moved away from the two myn, a nervous glint in his eye. They seemed to be baiting each other and it made him uncomfortable.

"What do you want, Malthus?" Preece pushed off from the tree and faced him.

"What do *you* want? That's the real question, Preece."

Preece shrugged. "This isn't the place to tell you."

"The cottage?"

"Sundown."

"Alone."

A large tiger-striped cat lay in the branches of the tree, far above Rheu's perch, and watched them leave.

\* \* \* \*

The crowds began to melt away once Iollen was taken down from the scaffold. Kynyr let them thin a bit before leaving with Kady. The long time standing had made his leg sore. It cramped, sending him stumbling to his knees. Kady cried out and caught his arm as he went down.

"Kynyr!"

"Give me a moment, Kady. Just give me a moment." Kynyr shifted into a sitting position and kneaded his calf.

Todd noticed and returned to stand over them. He lowered Cooley to the ground and knelt beside Kynyr. "How bad?"

"Got to get the cramp out."

"Let me." Todd grasped Kynyr's leg. His huge hands, strong and gentle, worked the muscles in Kynyr's calf. "That help?"

The cramp eased under Todd's steady ministrations. The grimace faded from Kynyr's face with the lessening pain. He glanced over Todd's shoulder and saw Preece watching them.

Preece mouthed the word "cripple" at him. Kynyr jerked his leg from Todd's grasp and shoved himself to his feet with his cane. "I'm okay."

Robert Morcar and Erskine Faraday rode up. Erskine dismounted and extended the reins to Kynyr. "You look like you need a ride. I'll walk Kady home."

Preece elbowed Shalto in the ribs and pointed at Kynyr. They started laughing and walked off.

Erskine and Robert followed Kynyr's gaze to Preece and then glanced at each other. Morcar's expression hardened. "Take a ride, Kynyr. Forcing it is not going to make it heal faster."

"Do what he says, boy." Todd's tone and look suggested to Kynyr that no arguments would be allowed.

"Okay." Kynyr climbed into the saddle.

Kynyr and Robert rode ahead. Todd followed with Cooley.

Kady started after them and Erskine caught her shoulder to delay her so that they fell behind. He offered her his arm. Kady accepted it.

"You're in love with him, Kady."

She blushed. "It shows?"

"Yup. You look at him the way my wife used to look at me."

"You must miss her a lot."

Erskine's smile was brittle and edged with sorrow. "Always will. In six days, it will have been ten years since she died."

"I'm so sorry. It was in childbirth, wasn't it?"

Silence reigned until they reached the boardwalk on the far side of Main Street. "Lost Dympna and the cub both. Once in a while, when I get too lonely, I settle for a taste of the Wild Cousins ... but it never lasts. There's a place in my heart that no one else will ever be able to fill."

"Why are you telling me this?"

Erskine exhaled heavily. "Because life is fragile. If you haven't already told him, you ought to."

"It scares me."

"Then you'd better find some courage. Someone's out to get him. Next time, Kynyr might not be so lucky ... and you can't tell a dead man that you love him."

Kady's throat constricted until she could barely speak. "I'll tell him."

"Good girl." Erskine patted Kady's hand.

"Oh, damnit. You might as well know." Kady felt an itch of irritation at herself for trying to keep her growing relationship with Kynyr hidden; realizing that her demand for secrecy was another expression of her general insecurity with males. Her trust had been violated so many times that it had become fragile—yet Kynyr had never said anything to her that he did not mean. He would not abandon her once he had her; as she had always been half-afraid that Cullen would.

"Know what?"

"I Called Courtship on Kynyr. Wild Cousins' Courtship. You know what that is?"

"Ought to. My great-grandfather had one." Erskine's eyes gleamed. "So there's going to be a wedding?"

"Yes." Kady blushed.

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul glanced at the viewing stand and received a nod of approval from Claw. He clapped the chastisemon on the shoulder as he passed him. "You did good."

The crowds had begun to disperse. He saw Kady walking from the grounds with Erskine; and scanned the crowd for anyone else he recognized. He spied Malthus and Preece talking. The lawgiver walked to the steps and left the scaffolds. Barely six strides toward the street, someone called out to him.

"Lawgiver?"

He turned and saw a young bitch standing beside a sad-faced pubescent cub with a hugely swollen belly. "Can I help you?"

She had a careworn face and dressed in a traditional knee-length wraparound robe of homespun wool. "My daughter wants to talk to you. It's about Donald Greenlea."

Caimbeul regarded the thin, pinched face of the pregnant cub. "Come to the house with me."

"I'm Eveleen Dunne and this is my daughter, Aghavie. She's just turned twelve."

"Was she twelve yet when this happened?" Caimbeul pointed at the cub's belly.

"No."

"Donald Greenlea did it?"

Aghavie gave him a tiny nod, but said nothing.

Caimbeul let the subject drop until they reached the Lawgiver House. A nibari greeted them at the door and fetched pastries and liquor. He had requested two nibari from Claw for the day as he expected to be exhausted when it ended.

They sat on the sofa, the cub wringing her hands together.

"Tell him," urged Eveleen.

"I'm not going to hurt you. I just want your story." Caimbeul, tired as he was, extended his fireborn aura to ease the girl's fears.

"They raped me."

Caimbeul stroked her hair and expanded his comfort zone. "Tell me about it."

"I stayed late at a friend's house. We were stitching wedding clothes for her sister. As I was walking home, Donald stopped me. He said he wanted to talk to me. I didn't see the others until they grabbed me and pulled me into a vacant house."

Her mother put a protective arm around her daughter's shoulders. "They told her 'only a slut walks alone after dark.'"

The girl nodded. "Six of them raped me and beat me."

"Do you know who they were?" Caimbeul poured a glass of whiskey.

"Donald and his brother Keith. Cormic Parry and Iollen Newell. Preece Malloy and Shalto Beggins."

"They got you pregnant?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you take tansy?"

"We don't believe in abortion," her mother said.

"Thank you for telling me this. Take her to Cahira Sinclair for the birthing. Her hips aren't wide enough to give birth easily."

"We can't afford a midwife."

"I'll pay for it out of the Indigent Victim's Fund. Get her looked at today."

"I will. Thank you."

Caimbeul thought for a long time after they left. All of this had a tenuous connection to Malthus through Preece and Shalto. It was not yet enough to arrest Malthus, but it gave Caimbeul more to go on.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus' cottage lay on the far west side of the camp, beyond a dense stand of sheltering forest and almost upon the banks of the Bonnie Draw River. He had picked this spot for the privacy it gave him. The house was a human style dwelling and far nicer than the traditional longhouses that were going up elsewhere on the campgrounds. The large front room served as both kitchen and living room. Woven rugs covered the hardwood floor in bright patterns. The deep hearth had a brick baking shelf and an iron rod beneath it to hang a kettle on. Three cabinets stood against the east wall, the last one catty-corner to a hoghead of mead on a rack. It had two bedrooms and a study.

Malthus filled a pair of mismatched tankards with mead, and carried it to the square table in the living area, placing one in front of Preece and the other at his side of the table.

"I got back yesterday."

"I noticed." Preece propped his elbows on the table with the tankards in his hand. "You were gone long enough. What happened?"

"A friend of mine was injured in the fire. I stayed until I was certain that he was out of danger. I'm good to my friends, Preece."

"I'm no one's friend." Preece's voice carried a note of quiet disparagement.

"You're mine. If you got into trouble, I'd get you out."

"That would be a first."

"No one's ever helped you?" Malthus pulled at his oak-leaf beard, wondering why Preece always became so edgy whenever he made an overture of friendship.

"I've never needed anyone."



"Well, you probably do now."

"What do you mean?"

"Kynyr has proposed to Kady."

"He can't do that! Hereward promised her to me." Temper flared in Preece's voice and a flicker of emotion reached his usually chill eyes.

"Actually he can. Kady is of age. She and Todd Sinclair petitioned the temple for a dispensation." Malthus knew he had struck a nerve, because he so rarely saw real feeling in Preece's manner. It intrigued him.

"So he's fucking her too?"

"No, he filed for the status of guurmondru to her. That means Hereward doesn't own her any longer."

"Guurmondru? I've never heard of it." Preece recovered his stone-cold mask.

"It means mentor-protector. Kynyr has aced you and Hereward out."

Preece shrugged, saying in a dead voice, "I'll kill him."

"You can try."

"I'll do it."

"Not without help." Malthus disagreed with a slow shake of his head. "You need an equalizer."

"Can you provide that?"

"Of course, but it's going to take time. For now, be patient."

"I'm good at that."

*Yes, I imagine you are.* Malthus reached into his pocket and brought out a bottle, which he handed to Preece as another offering to cement their relationship. He could sense the fire raging beneath Preece's controlled exterior. If he could learn the source of it, he could tap into it and gain greater influence with Preece than money and drugs could ensure. Intimidation would not work with Preece, because the wolf was a natural born killer; a predator that rivaled Malthus' own kind.

"What's that?" Preece unstopped the bottle and sniffed it.

"Dreaming Angel. It's the most popular street drug in Creeya. You'll like it."

"As much as the White Fire I got at the Crimson Lady?"

"This is different. A little goes a long way. Use it when you can afford to lay in bed and bliss out."

"It's a bliss drug?"

"Yes." Malthus was unfamiliar with the lycan slang, and had accidentally put his finger on the right term.

"I want more White Fire. Can you get raw Enlokieyn?"

"I lost most of my sources for White Fire and Enlokieyn when the Blood District burned down, but I still

have access to shipments from Creeya."

Preece looked thoughtful. "Speaking of equalizers? Can you get Devil's Silver?"

"Possibly."

"Look into it. I want to give Maguire a little surprise."

"Why do you hate him?"

"I told you, you might not like it."

"Try me."

"My grandfather was Alistar Weems."

Everything clicked into place and Malthus realized how easily—and disastrously—he could have played Preece wrong. "I've heard of him. Are you mage-gifted, Preece?"

"Not that I know of." Preece settled back in his chair and took a long drink from his tankard, measuring Malthus carefully before he spoke again. "My mother was his youngest daughter ... youngest *legitimate* daughter. She was always cursing at me ... saying I was a thorn in her side ... because I was like her father."

"Are you?"

"How should I know? He was dead before I was born." A dry chuckle slipped from Preece's mouth. "When I couldn't take anymore, I killed her. So now we'll never know."

"If you're expecting me to be shocked, I'm afraid I'll have to disappoint you. You see, I killed my father Lord Feodras Iagaris."

Preece straightened and interest burned in his jaded eyes.

Malthus knew he had Preece then and decided to drop another tidbit of information. "I take it you know about Kynyr?"

"Know what?"

A hint of arrogant nonchalance touched the corners of Malthus' lips. "I uncovered something he wishes kept secret."

"Tell me."

"My guess is that you've gone after Kynyr because Todd Sinclair is his grandfather ... except that he isn't. Kynyr's father is Tarrant Redhand's bastard."

Preece snarled. "Tarrant killed my grandfather over a slut."

\* \* \* \*

Fergus MacFie stood on the walls of Castle MacLachlan. Beyond the walls, lay a sprawling encampment. They had raised an army of three hundred myn. Laird Duncan claimed that if they had had more time he could have doubled that, but the longer they waited the more lycans would die and lose their souls.

The death of gentle Jordi MacFie and the discovery of the plot by the sa'necari had driven the villages into a genocidal rage. All the humans had been rounded up, tested for the sa'necari taint, and the merest suspicion of complicity with their old enemies was enough to get them killed outright by the raging mobs.

They would first ensure the safety of their city brethren and then they would hunt down and kill the sa'necari and their human allies.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### COURTSHIP AND CHOCOLATE

The more that Kynyr read about the Wild Cousins' Courtship, the more unfair it seemed to him. Except for the initial set of permissions, the entire custom was weighted in his favor. Kynyr picked his tablet up with his notes on the Wild Cousins' Courtship, marked his place in the book with the attached ribbon, and headed down the hall to the infirmary.

Gram's big tiger-striped cat lay curled next to Finn, getting his ears scratched and purring loudly. The tip of Kerry's tail twitched when Kynyr walked in.

Finn caught the troubled look in Kynyr's eyes. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know what to make of this. You know that custom she invoked?"

"Kind of hard to forget."

"Well..." Kynyr sucked in a breath and hesitated. "What it comes down to is ... ummn ... well; Kady's challenged me to get her pregnant."

"That doesn't sound like Kady at all."

"I know. That's what bothers me." Kynyr handed his tablet to Finn.

His spiritbrother read it, his eyes growing large as saucers. Then he chuckled. "This looks like fun. Kady has no woodcraft. You'll pull her down before she gets a hundred paces."

"I don't know if it's right or not." Kynyr's lips compressed into a tight knot of rueful dismay. "It isn't that I don't want her, Finn. I want her so bad every inch of me aches. It's just ... once she Calls Courtship ... it's no contest. It would take her years to get as good as I am."

"There's no law says you can't teach her ... after the wedding." Finn read further. "Did you accept the challenge?"

"What else could I do? I had to accept or lose Kady."

"Then it's very simple. You either jack the holy shit out of Kady." Finn paused to grin. "Or you step aside and I'll marry her."

"You wouldn't..."

"Oh yes I would. Kady's the best thing since chocolate."

"What's chocolate?"

"Go down to Donegal Candy Shop over on Parrot Street. It sells out fast whenever old John gets it in. Expensive as hell, but heaven on your tongue."

"That good, eh?"

"Yeah."

Kynyr's face lit up. "It's going to be hard chasing Kady once my sick leave is up ... I need to do everything I can right now. I've bought her presents."

"What have you bought her so far?"

"Ummn. A set of kendaryl knives, with tooled armsheaths, a white gold bracelet, and a house."

Finn's eyes widened. "A house?"

"The old McCain place."

Finn whistled. "That's some house."

"Kady's redecorating."

"Hell, Kynyr! You're acting married already."

Kynyr's cheeks reddened. "You think so?"

"She'll be Calling Courtship any day now."

"You think so?"

"Yeah, you're as good as married, Old Dog."

Kerry stood, stretched, and jumped down. Kynyr opened the door for him and the cat ran out of the room.

Finn laughed. "Now you've made the dang cat horny."

\* \* \* \*

Seeing the despair in Clodagh's face night after night, not being able to take her away from there because it would endanger his investigation made Caimbeul's blood boil.

The deaths of Cormic Parry and Keith Greenlea combined with the flogging administered to Donald Greenlea and Iollen Newell had brought an outpouring of responses from the community. More and more bitches came forward to inform him that they had been raped. They knew it was too late to press charges, but they wanted him to know about it, to know how prevalent rape had become. Their stories nauseated him.

The factor that most disturbed Caimbeul was that the same names kept coming up over and over again: Cormic Parry, Keith and Donald Greenlea, Iollen Newell, Preece Malloy, Shalto and Oswyl Beggins, Yren Maddox, Torquil Anderson. All of them had either social or working contact with Malthus Estrobian—in a few cases both. However, that was not enough of a connection to arrest Malthus and put him to the question.

What Caimbeul intended to do was outside the law as he interpreted it; but he needed to send the harshest message possible to all the slaving dogs who were pulling the young bitches down and making it unsafe for them to travel the village alone after dark. The smell of rot in lycan society left him feeling heartsick and revolted.

He took the ring of keys from the nail it dangled from, and went to Donald Greenlea's cell.

Donald hung nude in his chains. The wounds from the last beating inflicted upon Donald had filled with pus.

Caimbeul picked up the whip with the silver spikes. "I've decided to administer the rest of your sentence privately."

"Why?" Distrust thickened in Donald's voice. "Why are you doing this?"

"I'm going to beat you ... to death."

"You can't do that. It's against the law."

"I am the law."

Donald began screaming before the lash met his flesh. "I won't do it again ... I swear I won't."

Caimbeul laid the first stripes across Donald's back. "Remember Aghavie Dunne? She was only eleven years old."

Donald flinched, shrieking. He grabbed at the chains supporting his shackles, writhing away from the succession of blows, yet unable to avoid them.

Caimbeul's stomach clenched and he hesitated, watching the blood run down Donald's back. He knew he had lost his edge. Seeing it done and doing it himself were far different matters—especially when his intentions were cold-blooded murder. Caimbeul walked over to the table and poured a double whiskey, drank it down, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and fortified himself by remembering what Donald had done to those bitches, three of them as young as Aghavie had been, ruining them and rendering many unable to ever trust a male again. He hardened his heart and renewed the flogging without warning.

Donald panted, his cries of pain turned hoarse and rasping. His head sank forward and he sagged in his bonds.

Caimbeul put the whip down, poured another whiskey, and walked around to the front of Donald. The lawgiver grasped Donald's hair and pulled his head up, then rested two fingers on his neck, reading him. He gave a curt nod, set his glass aside, lifted a pail of water, and dashed Donald with it. Donald Greenlea returned to consciousness with a jerk and a grunt.

Caimbeul set the pail down and started in with the whip once more. He got in ten strokes, before he saw Donald start to lose it again. Caimbeul laid the whip aside and patted Donald's torn shoulder, getting a wince from him.

"I'll return in an hour or two. I'm going to get lunch at the Difficult Horse. When I get back, we'll finish up."

After changing his clothes, Caimbeul left for the tavern. He took most of his meals out. Money was not a problem as a percentage of the tax money went to maintain the Lawgiver House and the lawgivers. Nikko Softpaws had been thrifty and a lot of gold had accumulated in the local bank account for the lawgiver. Several of the local widows had begun bringing him covered dishes and baked goods, trying to woo him with their cooking. Caimbeul thanked them, but did not encourage them.

\* \* \* \*

Kady sat at the table in the shop, measuring out doses of highly refined willow bark powder into small paper squares that she then folded so that the powder could not escape the package. She put them all in a jar and closed the lid.

"Rory, I have Miz Softpaws order ready. You need to deliver it."

The cub stopped stocking the shelves, snatched up his carrying sack, and regarded the collection of jars and bottles. "Big order."

"Yes, it is. Collect thirty pence from her." Kady wore her black tunic and trousers, which were her favorite. All of her dresses had long ago been ripped up and turned into pants, shirts, and tunics as part of her determined efforts to recreate herself.

Rory whistled. "Okay."

As soon as Rory left, Kady took her book and her word list out of the knitting basket. A strong hand clamped down on her wrist, startling her. Her arm came up to drive an elbow into him and saw that it was Kynyr. She lowered her arm.

"Aha! You have the book." Kynyr crowed triumphantly in her ear.

"Kynyr!" Kady gave him a look that would melt stone. "Where did you come from?"

"The backroom."

"You've been watching me!"

"Ayup. I dug through the library looking for it and when I didn't find it, I figured you had it." Kynyr opened the book to a random page and read it. "You can have it back tomorrow."

"You can't possibly read it that fast."

"It's just Engla-Yurpan. I've been reading that language since I was seven."

Awe entered Kady's eyes. Kynyr had to be the most extraordinary person she had ever met. "You must know everything."

Kynyr shook his head. "I'm just good with languages."

"And your weapons."

"Yeah." Kynyr took his hand from behind his back and laid a bag on the table. "This is for you."

"What is it?" Kady opened the bag and stared at the brown blobs in wax paper twists.

"Chocolate. Try it. It's good."

"It's expensive."

"So?"

Kady unwrapped a piece by pulling the ends of the waxed paper. She touched her tongue to it tentatively and smiled. "It's good." She put the piece in her mouth. "Oh, this is delicious."

She kissed Kynyr.

"Call Courtship, Kady. I'm ready for you."

Kady blushed. "When I'm ready."

Kynyr covered his disappointment at her reticence to take the next step—but she had seen it. Guilt ate at her.

"I apologize for being so pushy, Kady. Touching you, being near you, even just thinking about you ... it makes me feel good."

"I know." Kady stroked his head and shoulders in a comforting gesture. Sex was often an antidote to grief and stress among her people; yet it was getting shoved into tight corners as the lycans adopted more and more human customs.

"I'm done with the horses...." Cooley pushed the front door open and stared at them. "Have you started dancing the mattress with Kady? She's as bright-faced as a new whore."

"Shut up, Cooley." Kady growled. "Watch the store. Kynyr, let's talk in the back where Mister Big Mouth can't hear us."

She rose, snatched up the bag of chocolates, and headed for the door. Kady felt guilty for keeping Kynyr at arms length, and refusing to Call Courtship. She could smell the disappointment on him.

Kynyr trailed after her. "What can you expect? He grew up in a whorehouse."

"I know. Lock the door?"

"Huh?" Kynyr limped over and locked it.

"Keep your bone in your pants."

Kynyr turned around and gaped. Kady was nude from the waist up. Kynyr sucked in a breath. "Your breasts are beautiful, Kady."

"I thought you'd like them." Kady settled on a sofa in the far back, and patted the spot beside her. Kynyr joined her. Despite the fact that he had not been a virgin since age fourteen. Kynyr felt nervous and excited.

He cherished her breasts, squeezing and licking, sucking her nipples until she moaned. Then Kynyr eased her onto her back and laid down atop her, dry humping until he exploded in his pants.

He looked down and saw that Kady was crying. Kynyr slid off her, lifted her up, and cuddled her. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'll be okay. I promise."

"It's Gorgarty and the others standing between us?"

"I'm trying to get over it, Kynyr. I really am. The memories start flooding back into me sometimes and I can't stop them."

"If any of them so much as looks at you wrong, I'll kill them." His arm tightened protectively around her shoulders.

Kady nestled against his chest, composing her words to the best of her ability, and wishing she could speak as well as Cahira. "My reputation will always haunt us. It isn't going to change simply because we wish it to. This isn't going to be easy, Kynyr. It isn't going to be easy at all. There's always going to be some wet-tailed dog wanting to try his luck."

"I can deal with that." He kissed her forehead. "I want to spend the rest of my life with you, Kady."

"I told Erwin Twelvetoos that I wanted our bedroom redone in blues; midnight and azure. Is that agreeable to you?"

"Sounds beautiful, Kady."



\* \* \* \*

Odhran Lafferty was a tinker by trade, but worked mostly as an oddjobber, doing anything and everything. He settled into a chair at the Difficult Horse wearing a heavy leather apron and a belt of carpenter's tools. Hereward sent his daughter over to the table to take Odhran's order.

He grinned at her. "There's a wedding in the air."

Larena Wiggins' eyes lit up. "Whose?"

"Kady and Kynyr. He just bought the old McCain place and Kady is redecorating it. I've been working over there since early this morning."

"Kady? He's marrying Kady?" Larena stamped her foot in a petulant fury. "My slut of a sister?"

"He paid cash for the McCain place. That's what old Elton McCain told me."

Hereward scowled. "Don't know why he'd want to marry her. Unless he's got her up the stick."

"Kynyr's never short on funds. The Maguires have money." Ezra gestured at Larena with his tankard for a refill. "Pregnant or not, I can't understand why, with his money, he'd marry a cheap slut like Kady. He'll have to have a Reader check every cub she produces to make sure it's his."

Caimbeul came in and the room went silent. "Hereward, I would like some lunch and whiskey."

"We've got haggis, potatoes in cream and Red Leicester cheese."

"That will be fine."

Hereward sent Larena running to the kitchen.

Caimbeul scanned the room with disapproving eyes. "I see a lot of guilty faces. Why?"

He settled at Odhran's table. "Well, Odhran? You've got the guiltiest face of all. What were you talking about?"

"Kynyr just bought the McCain place. He's marrying Kady cause she's pregnant."

"Not bloody likely."

Odhran gave Caimbeul a quizzical look. "What do you mean?"

"Kady and Kynyr are having a Wild Cousins' Courtship. Challenge has been issued, and accepted, but Kady hasn't Called Courtship yet."

"But they are getting married?"

"That's the usual outcome."

Hereward leaned across his bar. "What's a Wild Cousins' Courtship?"

"A venerable old custom." And then Caimbeul explained it with relish.

Preece, sitting in his usual corner, scowled.

\* \* \* \*

Kady wiped the dust off the shelves and cabinets with a soft cloth. She had nothing to translate until

Kynyr returned the book. Since Cahira had told her not to let Kynyr have the book in the first place, Kady had pleaded to be allowed to spend more time watching the shop as a break from her translating.

The bell hanging from the door rang and she looked up. Her sister Larena came in with a small sack and set it on the table.

"Hello, Kady. I brought my empties back. I want to get more of that skin cream."

"Any particular fragrance?"

"Rose of Creeya."

Kady folded the cloth and put it away behind the counter before taking the jar from the shelf. She carried it over to the table, took the sack from her sister, and counted the empties. The cream was pricey, but her flirtatious sister always made good tips. "You have a two pence credit for the empties. That brings the price of the cream down to six pence."

Larena had an eager look in her eye. "Kynyr's so handsome and well-mannered for a guardsmon."

"Yes, he is." *When he's not chasing my tail for all he's worth.*

"When's the wedding?"

"We haven't set a date yet." Kady tensed, wondering how many people Kynyr had told about it. *He promised me he would not announce a betrothal. When I get hold of you, Kynyr, I am giving you such a piece of my mind ... and a set of knuckle bumps.*

"If I were pregnant, I would have set the date immediately."

Kady's face flushed and fire flashed in her eyes. "Who said anything about pregnant?"

"It's all over the village. Kynyr got you pregnant and now he's going marry you."

"I'm not pregnant. I haven't even slept with him."

"Kady, you can tell me the truth. I'm not the enemy."

"That is the truth."

Larena reached over and patted Kady's hand. "Of course it is. When's the cub due?"

"I'm not pregnant. Pay for your cream and get out of here."

Larena made a moue and shoved six pence at Kady. Her eyes fell upon the white gold bracelet Kady wore. "Oooh! That's beautiful. Did Kynyr give you that?"

"Kady, I was wondering..." Kynyr limped in and Kady could tell that his leg was bothering him.

Larena jumped to her feet and sashayed up to him, wiggling her hips invitingly. "Hello, Kynyr. I was just telling Kady that we ought to get better acquainted."

Kynyr's brows knit and he glanced away from Larena. "Kady, I was looking at these swatches the furniture maker dropped off. What do you think of the burgundy for the sofas in the main hall?"

Larena put her hand on Kynyr's shoulder. "I've always liked you, Kynyr."

Kady moved around the table so quick and quiet that Larena failed to notice her.

Larena tapped Kynyr playfully on the chin with one finger, and ended up on the floor with Kady standing over her. "He's mine, Larena. You stay away from him."

Kynyr put his arm around Kady, and kissed the side of her head. "Forget about her, Kady. She's not good enough to lick your shoes clean."

Kady burst out laughing.

Larena scrambled to her feet, snatched up her purchase, and fled.

\* \* \* \*

"Hello, Donald. It's time to put paid to your accounts."

Donald thrashed in his chains. "No. Please. I'll never do it again."

Caimbeul studied the blood-crusted ruin of Donald's back. "Not much skin left. Would you like some whiskey?"

"Yes." Donald's pain-glazed eyes held a spark of hope.

Caimbeul poured a glass and carried it around. He held it to Donald's lips while he drank.

Donald looked pathetically grateful.

Caimbeul put the glass on the table and picked up a club with spikes on it the same precise size as those braided into his whip. He changed into his hybrid form to give his blows as much power as possible and hit Donald smartly in each side, rupturing his kidneys and spleen. Donald sagged, a tiny whimper in his throat.

"I'll collect your corpse in the morning."

He gathered his tools and his whiskey into a box that had a handle and locked the cell behind him. The lawgiver did not want Donald having visitors before he had time to die.

Caimbeul went around to Iollen's cell. Like Donald, he hung nude by his shackled wrists. Iollen looked sick. Caimbeul set his box down and lifted Iollen's head up. The whites of Iollen Newell's eyes had yellowed, and his un-focused gaze made it clear to Caimbeul that he was only half-conscious. The flesh around a long wound in his left shoulder had turned green with black edges, swollen and filled with pus. Caimbeul Read Iollen and shook his head. *Gangrene*.

Pinching the corners of his eyes, Caimbeul rubbed the bridge of his nose, and sighed. If he walked off and pretended he had not noticed this, then in a day or two Iollen would be dead as well.

"Since the gods have seen fit to visit this upon you, then your fate should be in their hands."

He had wanted to spend time with Clodagh that night, but it was increasingly clear that he would not be able to. Caimbeul freed Iollen of his shackles, lifted him in his arms, and carried him upstairs. After laying Iollen on the sofa in the living room, Caimbeul covered him with a light blanket against the early chill.

Caimbeul walked out of the Lawgiver House and over to Locust Street. The area was dingy by lycan standards, mostly old style longhouses with weed infested yards. He found the Newell home and knocked on the door. A cub opened it.

"Lawgiver?" She gave him a look mingled of doubt and worry.

Caimbeul tried to remember her name, but it eluded him. "I need to speak with your parents."

"Is it about Iollen?"

"Yes."

"Come inside, sit down, and I'll fetch them."

The house was not as rough as Caimbeul had expected. Woven reed mats covered the floor. The side to his right had the usual curtained half-wall, but the side to the left had been altered into a sitting area with a hallway. Cabinets lined the back wall and a worn but comfortable sofa flanked by two well-padded chairs with a low table occupied the center.

Caimbeul settled into a chair. He did not wait long.

Blaine and Moncha Newell were a worn looking couple. Caimbeul recalled that Blaine worked at the mill as a thresher.

"This is about our son?" Blaine asked.

Caimbeul glanced at the ceiling, trying to think how to phrase it. "I'm sorry I have to tell you this. Iollen's injuries from the flogging ... he's got gangrene."

Moncha burst into tears and her husband put his arm around her.

"Can we see him?" Blaine's hand tightened on his wife's arm.

"You can bring him home. Tell Cahira I said that anything you need for him ... I'll pay for it."

"He's dying?"

"I can't tell how far it's spread. At the very least, it's going to cost him his arm. That much, I'm certain of. Just get Cahira to have a look at him."

"If I hitch up the wagon, can I take him directly there?"

"I'll go with you."

\* \* \* \*

A loud pounding on the locked front door brought Kady, Cahira, and Todd all down to investigate. Kynyr and Finn were overseeing a sleepover party in the barn loft in honor of Rory turning ten. They were planning to stay up all night telling scary stories.

Caimbeul stood banging on the door. Behind him a wagon waited with an older couple on it. Kady unlocked the door and the lawgiver stepped inside.

"Sorry to wake you, but it's an emergency. Cahira, the patient is in the back of the wagon."

Kady gestured at the table. "Have a seat. Can I get you something? Whiskey or tea?"

"Whiskey."

She fetched the bottle and three glasses. "I baked some Eccles cakes earlier, if you'd like..." Her voice trailed off as Todd carried an unconscious man past her, followed closely by Cahira and the older

couple. Kady recognized the Newells and then Iollen's broad blunt face.

"That's Iollen Newell..." Kady's voice shook, edged with outrage and indignation. "Why are you bringing him here?"

"Put your feelings aside, Kady," Cahira snapped. "He's going to die if I don't remove his arm."

"You're going to cut his arm off?" Kady trailed after Cahira and Todd, her words faltering. "What happened to him?"

Todd led with Iollen in his arms. Cahira paused on the stairs. "His wounds from the lash ... gangrene ... fortunately not the kind Ramsey had."

The world seemed to spin around Kady, turning her perceptions inside out. She shivered at the thought of taking a knife to Iollen's arm, and it banished her anguish over the rape with a shock so profound it staggered Kady. Then her recent training kicked in; she dashed past them taking the stairs two at a time. "I'll get everything ready for you, Gram."

Caimbeul gestured for the Newells to sit with him and he poured whiskey for them. "Kady is good at rising to the occasion."

Blaine frowned. "That's the slut got my boy flogged?"

"Your boy got himself flogged. Furthermore, if he lives it will be as much due to Kady as to Cahira."

The Newells pulled their chairs close and leaned against each other.

Moncha hung her head. "What Iollen did ... it was wrong. If Kady helps save him ... I'll be eternally grateful."

A long scream of anguish came from the floor above them and Moncha clutched at her husband.

Caimbeul gave a rueful shake of his head, pushing glasses of whiskey at them. "Amputation is a bloody business. Just hope they caught it in time."

\* \* \* \*

Kady unwrapped the blanket from Iollen's body and wrestled him onto his stomach. The veins in his left arm were a spider web of crimson inflammation from shoulder to wrist; and the shoulder wound a gaping mouth of black and green necrotic flesh.

"If you need me, I'll be in the parlor." Todd left.

"Six fingers of Pollendine, Kady."

"That's a lot." Kady filled the dosing glass and turned Iollen on his side, helping him to swallow it.

"It probably won't be enough to keep him under once I start cutting." Cahira washed Iollen's arm and shoulder with antiseptic. "That book I'm translating talks of something called anesthesia and ether. I wish I knew what those things were and how to make them. So much priceless knowledge has been lost, Kady."

"It's a tragedy."

Cahira took a knife and began cutting. Kady's stomach heaved, but she managed not to spew. Cahira cored the shoulder as the arm came loose. The limb, now freed from Iollen's body, nearly fell in Cahira's

lap. "Get it out of my way, Kady."

She grabbed the still warm arm, felt her stomach rebel, and dropped it on the floor.

"Put it in the basin."

Donald's screams died down. Cahira stopped the bleeding with a touch of her Menders' gift and started removing infected tissue from Donald's shoulder.

"Fetch the Idyn Gold. Salve, not liquid."

\* \* \* \*

Ten cubs, of assorted ages from seven to thirteen, spread themselves across the generous chamber created by well-placed bails of hay in the barn loft. They were all male. Kynyr has insisted upon that; best not to set a precedent that could lead to trouble later. 'No bitches allowed' had been set in stone; although Kynyr refused to say why. He had lost his virginity in the loft of the MacIver's barn at fourteen when a bit of heavy petting got out of control and Kynyr ended up with his bone inside Finn's younger sister, Igrainne, who was thirteen at the time. It had resulted in the only serious fistfight Kynyr had ever gotten into with Finn; and the fallout would have been far worse, had Kynyr's sister, Mallory, not intervened with the information that she had been doing it with Finn.

Their farms had been near neighbors, but isolated from the village of Longbranch by twenty miles. The Dreaded Horde were the only easily available females when their hormones kicked in. Nevertheless, they swore off each others' sisters in short order.

It seemed wisest to establish rule of 'no bitches allowed' before hormones became an issue.

Most of Rory Scott's belongings had already been moved into a room in the servants' quarters. The majority of the birthday presents from Kynyr and his family had been practical items, such as the shoes Rory wore. He sat on a bale of hay, swinging his legs and pointing from time to time at the soft leather boots on his feet.

They all took turns telling stories, but Kynyr's and Finn's got the most reactions. Kynyr's tale of a troll that ate unsuspecting cubs caught fishing after dark, held their rapt attention.

Screams erupted from the house.

The cubs flinched at the sound and began screaming. Several of them tumbled over the back of the bails they were sitting on and cowered behind them.

"It's the troll," Hamish shrieked. "It's come to eat us."

That set off another round of screaming.

Kynyr and Finn exchanged glances. "I'll go see what's happening in the house. You get the cubs calmed down?"

Finn nodded. "You're not armed...."

Kynyr signed to Finn: *sword cane*.

He tucked the cane through his belt and went down the ladder. Emerging from the barn, Kynyr saw that the lights in the shop were lit.

He went into the building through the back door and into the shop just as Todd came downstairs. Kynyr

glanced from the Newells to Caimbeul to Todd. "What's going on?"

"Amputation." Todd turned from Kynyr to Blaine and his wife. "He's drugged to the gills and sleeping. Cahira says he'll live. They got all of it."

\* \* \* \*

Kady staggered from the infirmary, her stomach heaving. She tottered into the kitchen, grabbed the largest basin from beneath the counter and dropped to her knees in the middle of the floor, vomiting.

Kynyr limped in. "Are you all right? What's all the screaming?"

She glanced up at him, shaken to her soul. "Amputation."

Kynyr eased himself to his knees and put his arm around her. "Who's in there?"

"Iollen Newell."

"What the hell?"

"Kynyr, I pity him. I never expected that, but I do. Gram had to take part of his shoulder as well."

Kady's face twisted with distress. "I ... helped cut his ... arm off." She grabbed at the basin. "I'm going to throw up again."

"Take a deep breath. Hold it and count to six. Do it again. That's it."

Kady gave him a wan smile as she finally got past the urge to heave.

Kynyr removed the basin, dipped a cloth in cool water, and bathed Kady's face. "You need to go to bed."

"Kynyr..."

"To bed. Sleep."

Kynyr escorted Kady to her room, turned his back while she slipped into a nightgown, and then tucked her in. "Sleep."

\* \* \* \*

Ros stole through the servants' quarters at midnight in search of a snack. Her uncle had warned her that should the lycans discover that she was a prodigy, that she already had her fangs, appetites, and powers although she was only seven years old, they would spellcord her. Ros had never been spellcorded, but from her uncle's descriptions, she knew it was something to be feared.

However, her success with Darmyk had emboldened her. She slipped into one of the rooms and smiled. Kissie's son Timerly was nine years old. He had a bedroom to himself because Claw had decided to keep him as a stud. Ros knew the lycans somehow sterilized the unwanted males without removing their balls. It had made her curious, but so far no one had been willing to explain it to her.

The silly lycans referred to the nibari, the genetically altered humans that the sa'necari and the vampires had created as a tame food source, as servants, when in reality they were slaves. The nibari had been rendered too docile to survive on their own. Resistance, anger, all forms of aggressiveness, had been bred out of them.

Ros drew the blanket and sheet away from Timerly and examined his nude body. He had a few dark hairs sprouting around the edges of his member. She flicked it with her finger out of idle curiosity.

Timerly awoke with a start and stared up at her. "Ros?"

She let her needle like fangs descend from their sheaths. "Turn your head to the side."

Timerly shivered and obeyed. "You have fangs."

"You won't tell anyone."

"I promise. Are you going to suck me?"

"Yes."

Timerly closed his eyes tightly and waited.

Ros tangled her fingers in his hair and adjusted the angle of his head and neck until the big vein was at an appetizing angle. She breathed along his neck and then sank her fangs into him.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus sat at his desk thinking. He had decided to postpone taking action against Kynyr until he had received confirmation that the Maguires of Longbranch were all dead. Grief would weaken Kynyr. He had seen lycan funerals before, with the males howling and keening as loudly as the bitches; and he had seen Kynyr at Ramsey's funeral, as emotional as the rest of them. *The way lycans yammer at funerals, you'd think they'd all taken it up the ass. They aren't as tough as they think they are.*

He slipped from the manor at midnight while the household slept and walked in the garden as he did each night. Living at the manor made him privy to more information, but it had its drawbacks. There were too many people to observe him there, and he needed to be accessible at some point each day in case messages came from Lord Brandrahoon.

Malthus had not known that Lord Daemon, who had hired him to infiltrate the Red Wolf community and command the conquest of it, had actually been the ancient vampire—brother to Waejonan, founder of the kingdom and the sa'necari cult from which their race had risen. Brandrahoon had regained his lands and estates that had been seized four thousand years ago by Waejonan, who had exiled him. Queen Tomyrilen, who led the Waejontori rebellion against the Sharani occupying their land, rode with him at her right hand as her first advisor above all others.

Brandrahoon was rumored to have had a thousand aliases, and the one most frequently used was Lord Hoon. That was the name that Malthus most often thought of him as—Lord Hoon. The secret fear that most of the sa'necari held was that Brandrahoon might have survived. Now the dreaded vampire had emerged from the shadows and formed a tenuous alliance with their queen.

*Brandrahoon ... Merissa is mine. I'll not yield her up to you.*

Malthus paced into the trees, letting the deepest shadows envelop him. He should never have written that letter to Lord Hoon, telling him about Merissa and Darmyk. Hoon wanted them because they belonged to the last descendant of his brother Isranon Dawnhand. Malthus could almost consider giving Hoon the boy, but not Merissa. He loved Merissa; she had borne a sa'necari child. Usually the lycan gene was dominant over the sa'necari gene, and a child of such couplings was born lycan. But Merissa—No, Merissa was his. She already carried his twins—both sa'necari in her oh so fertile lycan womb. He would keep her belly filled continuously, deliciously. They would have a huge family, one that boasted of his unusual virility.

He had written his mother, and told her how well the potions and arcanes she had treated him with since adolescence had slowed the progressive infertility of his kind—if anything her efforts had enhanced his



fertility beyond anything his kind ever possessed. His mother Sidera Tyrins, currently employed as a toxicologist and bio-alchemist by Lord Hoon, had been quietly and systematically setting up laboratories in the dungeons of Carrion Crevasse, Malthus' hidden manor, in preparation for his return there. The Tyrins, a branch clan of the Romilay family, had specialized in poisons and venoms for generations, including the discovery and refining of Devil's Silver and experiments with genetically altered and enhanced breeds of vipers using a mutagenic arcane they had developed.

The flapping of wings in the trees above him drew Malthus from his thoughts. He tensed when he saw the bat, wondering if Sergei had returned. The Lemyari messenger had raped Malthus' seven-year-old niece Ros, and left her for dead with a small quantity of his venom in her blood stream. Malthus had managed to pull Ros out of the paralysis, but the child remained lame in one leg. It enraged him, and he raised power to rip the undead soul out of the messenger.

He opened his necromantic senses and threw a low-level scan into the trees. The bat up there was definitely undead and vampiric. "Come down, Sergei, and I'll rip your throat out."

The bat fluttered out of his reach to another cluster of trees, and Malthus followed, with a hand on his sword. In the shadows stood a slender mon, her lips curved into a sneer.

"Are you still obsessing on Sergei?" Zinzi asked, taking the messenger's pouch from her shoulder.

Malthus ignored the question, stepping cautiously toward the slender vampire. "What have you got for me?"

"Just this. Two letters. One from Egidius and one from my master." Zinzi extended the pouch to him.

Malthus took the pouch from Zinzi, removed the letters, and handed the pouch back. Hoon, like many of the older Lemyari, favored turning mages. Malthus wondered what kind of mage Zinzi might be, but then Lemyari mages tended to hide or disguise their talents, favoring discretion over display.

"Still obsessing on Sergei?" Zinzi repeated.

"If he comes back, I'll kill him."

Zinzi smirked. "I'm sure you'll try. I told him to stay away, but he just laughed at me."

"Sounds like Sergei." Malthus turned on his heel, walking toward the manor.

"My payment," Zinzi called after him.

Malthus paused and looked at her. He pushed up his sleeve and extended his wrist. "A couple of sips, and no more."

"A couple of sips, and no more." Zinzi mimicked him. "That's what you always say." Her fangs descended from their sheaths with the distinctive tiny hook at the bottom that marked her as vampire. Malthus did not flinch when she took his wrist and plunged her fangs into him. Zinzi took two strong pulls, hauling as much of his blood as she could in the sips allotted to her.

"That's enough," Malthus growled.

Zinzi withdrew, swiping her tongue over the wound to close it. "Delicious. You aren't bad looking. You could come to my bed anytime."

"I don't sleep with vampires." Malthus turned and left her.

"Rude bastard," Zinzi muttered, and changed.

Malthus walked back to the house, drawing his cloak more tightly around his shoulders. The first cool nights of autumn had arrived with the waning of summer. He let himself into the manor through a servants' door in the rear, passing with swift silence through the corridors, past the sleeping chambers of the nibari and those of the lycan servants. The guardsmyn, who might have been more alert to his passage, slept in another wing above the salle. Claw had expanded the manor over the last ten years, almost as if he were gathering his household for war.

*Well, he didn't do it fast enough. The war is upon him and he's not ready or strong enough to stop us.*

Malthus thought back to the increasing frequency that he saw Claw grimace and knead his left arm. Between the curse on his pipes, his liquor, and the poisoned medicine from Baroucha, the chieftain was dying.

He crossed the broad landing of the second floor staircase, heading for the study Claw had given over to him at his request. He opened the door and locked it behind him, easing down the bar that would prevent it being opened even if the mon on the other side had a key. Removing it would give him time to hide whatever he did not wish to be seen. He knelt at the fireplace and got a blaze going there, before settling at his oaken desk with the letters that Zinzi had brought him.

Three letters. One from Hoon, and one from Egidius. Zinzi must have been making a circuit, picking up payments at each stop.

Malthus popped the letter from Egidius open.

*Malthus,*

*Laetus is in position to destroy Three Stones and eliminate the schoolteacher. The Maguires will be feeding the crows within a week. As per our agreement, forty percent of the women and children captured will be sent on to Carrion Crevasse to await your pleasures, the other ten percent of your share will be held in the caves to meet your needs. Four from that last steading we burned are still available for use, although I admit I'm getting very hungry for a rite.*

*Egidius*

Malthus smiled in satisfaction after finishing the letter.

He folded the letter, took it to the fireplace, and shoved it into the flames.

*A rite. Yes, a rite would be so nice. I haven't felt a mon die beneath me in weeks.* Malthus' cock grew hard at the thought of slipping it into a dying body. That made him think of Merissa. He put Hoon's unread letter into a secret compartment at the bottom of his quiver of arrows, and then headed for the bedroom to wake his wife.

*Maybe I'll turn Preece loose on Kynyr. Give Preece something nice and deadly to stick him with. Or maybe I'll poison Maguire and watch him die.*

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul dragged home an hour before dawn and went down to check on Donald Greenlea. The moment that Caimbeul stepped into the cell he could see that Greenlea was dead. His legs were blue and his upper body a ghastly white. Donald sagged in his chains, his head thrown back, eyes closed and lips parted as if in mid-scream. Flies swarmed over the body. A smile of grim satisfaction crossed Caimbeul's

lips. That one would not be raping cubs any longer.

Caimbeul laid a stasis spell over Donald's corpse. The expenditure of his aging powers left Caimbeul feeling worn. He was doing it too often lately. A long day and a longer night and now another long day faced him. The lawgiver felt as if he was going on pure stubbornness, but he had to get through it before he could rest.

He carried Donald's body upstairs to the living room, fetched a blanket, and wrapped him up. Then Caimbeul hoisted Donald to his shoulder and took the corpse out the back door.

The groom that worked days at barn behind the Lawgiver House was already at work when Caimbeul carried the body out. "Get my gelding saddled and a pack horse."

The groom readied the horses and then helped Caimbeul drape the body across the packhorse. He flicked back the sheet from the face of the body as he tied it down. "Donald Greenlea."

"Heart failure I suspect. I decided to privately administer the rest of his sentence, but he wasn't strong enough to survive it."

"That's a shame. It is going to be hard on the family, losing both sons this way."

"I'm sure. That's why I won't insist upon hanging his body on the scaffolds to rot."

"Going to let them just bury him?"

"Not in consecrated ground. I ordered Cormic Parry and Keith Greenlea buried at the crossroads. Same for Donald."

"You're sending their souls straight to the Nine Hells of Hadjys."

"That's the idea."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### SHERADYN

"So you're moving back into the manor today?" Todd leaned against the doorframe watching Kynyr buckling his blades on.

"I can't put it off any longer." Kynyr adjusted the chocolate and claret tabard over his brown uniform. "Erskine says they need me. I must recruit two from the regular guard for my unit. It will be light duty at first. Erskine and Vayle will be doing most of it for me until my leg heals."

Todd's gaze went to the rack holding Kynyr's armor. "You ought to have at least some light chain on. I don't trust Malthus."

"Leg won't handle the weight yet. Rest of the unit is wearing it under their uniform. My orders."

"It won't stop a bolt or a cloth-yard-shaft."

"Robert's might. He inherited a full suit of rustrametan from his father."

"Kendaryl would."

Kynyr shook his head with a touch of rue on his lips. "Can't afford it ... even if I knew where to get enough to outfit them. Claw doesn't pay them enough." By custom, any armor and weapons beyond the basics, such as boiled leather, had to be purchased by the guardsmon himself.

"Kady have anything to do with you going back a week early?"

"Some times she doesn't mind me kissing her. Other times, she tenses up the moment I enter the room. She needs some space." Kynyr remembered that day in the backroom. She had been more on edge ever since.

Todd's eyes focused on the floor as he nodded. "Well then. You should come upstairs and see something first."

"What?" Kynyr grabbed his cane and limped over to the door.

"Presents."

"What kind?"

"Uh uh. Come and see." Todd's expression turned mysterious as he crooked a finger at Kynyr and then led the way upstairs.

The north storage room had once been a servant's bedroom. There were six of them. Whoever had owned the building before the Sinclairs had either had enough money to employ servants—or had owned slaves.

Todd swung the door open and gestured for Kynyr to enter first.

Kynyr gave his grandfather a questioning look and stepped inside. His eyes saucered and his mind reeled when he saw the piles of weapons and armor. "Holy ... I-I've never seen so much kendaryl in one place before."

Todd entered the room and stepped to the side. "It isn't all kendaryl. It's fairly evenly split between

kendaryl, rustrametan, and high quality steel."

Most of the weapons and armor were piled along the right side of the room; and an almost equal number were stacked on the opposite side. A long table acted as a divider between the two and it was covered in small boxes, bottles, and jars.

Kynyr lowered himself to the floor on the right side, and began examining the weapons. "Where did all this come from?"

"I've told you about the peddler who found me at Kinsdale Wood ... after I was left for dead."

"Yeah."

"Well, she wasn't a peddler." Todd's mouth tightened for an instant. "She was the Trickster."

"Dynanna?"

"Ayup. The God of Cussedness has opened her armories."

"Shit." Kynyr blinked and tapped the maker's mark on a broadsword. "Tell me this is a forgery. Please?"

"It's real. It's all real."

"But ... that's Eldarion Havenrain's mark."

"Ayup. So it is."

"Does it have a name?"

"Ayup. Every blade he forged had a name and a purpose."

"Do you know the name of this one?" Kynyr felt drawn to the blade, fascinated by it.

"That's Ladyfaith."

"It feels right in my hand." Kynyr drew his sword and replaced it with Ladyfaith. Then he gazed at the table. "What's all that?"

"Iradrim Fire, mostly."

"Explosives?"

"Ayup. Choose your weapons from the right hand side."

"Why?"

"Because Pandeena has not had time to vet the rest." Todd chuckled. "The chest the Trickster sent us must have had a translocation spell on it because the more we took out of it, the more of it there was inside. Once we got it empty, the chest vanished."

"She must remember you fondly."

"Ayup. Guess so."

Kynyr picked through, replacing his long knives and his sword with kendaryl blades, and got to his feet. "I'll not turn my nose up at all this. However, you know the old saying: the trouble she gets people into

and out of is both legion and legend. Be careful with this stuff."

"Ayup. We intend to."

"Are you going to sell any of it?"

"Depends on what it is. We're going to hold onto the kendaryl and the rustrametan ... and everything that's on this table." Todd swept his hand over the collection of bottles, jars, and boxes, settling on a set of bottles tied together with string. "This is probably the most dangerous thing in the room."

Kynyr limped closer. "What is it?"

"You pour the contents of the three bottles into a glass, give it a good stir, and drink it."

"What does it do?"

"It's a thing of legend, Kynyr. Those bottles contain the juice from the sacred trees of each of the Nine Elder Gods. Dynanna calls it 'be careful what you wish for.' It can turn a dragon into a mouse or man into a giant. It will give you your heart's desire. Unfortunately, most folk don't know what is really in their hearts, Kynyr. That's what makes it so dangerous."

"You should lock it up."

"Ayup. Cahira's going to take care of that today. She's going to ward and mage-lock the room."

"Good." A distracting aroma tickled Kynyr's nostrils, making his nose twitch, and a smile touched his lips. "I smell breakfast."

"Go on then. I'll find your Gram and meet you there."

Kynyr paused at the door. "Can I equip my unit out of this stuff?"

"Send them over."

Kynyr limped downstairs to the kitchen, and stood in the doorway watching Kady standing at the stove, stirring scrambled eggs. Pork strips sizzled on a cast iron griddle. The pale blue pants and shirt she wore failed to disguise the delicious curves of her body. Kady had not noticed him yet, which tickled his sense of whimsy, and lent him a feeling of smug naughtiness. His body reacted to the sight of her. Temptation flared with an irresistible urge to touch her. He remembered the way she had kissed him after they defeated Preece Malloy the day of Ramsey's funeral, and decided to take his chances with her. Kynyr stole up behind her. Her female musk wafted into his nostrils, intensifying the arousal of both his body and his instincts.

"Good morning, Kady." Kynyr kissed her neck. "Change for me, please. Call Courtship, Kady. I'm ready."

"Your leg isn't strong enough yet ... I...." Kady stiffened for an instant with the frying pan half-lifted as Kynyr's finger twitched across her nipple. "Put your hands where they don't belong, Kynyr ... and you'll be wearing your breakfast."

"I didn't do it." Kynyr flushed. "I mean ... they're gone!" Kynyr drew his hands back palms out. She had been a bit more testy since that day in the backroom, almost as if she regretted doing it.

"Humph, you were thinking about it." She carried the pan to the counter top beside the stove.

Kynyr followed her, and planted another kiss on her neck. "What dog wouldn't?"

"That's no excuse." Kady slid the eggs onto a platter and carried it to the table. A platter of fried pork strips followed. Then she grabbed a kitchen towel, jerked the oven door open, and brought out a pan of scones.

"You're pretty today, Kady. I like your hair." He flicked a flaxen curl.

Her eyes slued sidewise at him filled with bemused annoyance. "Breakfast is ready. Go sit down."

"Kiss me, Kady?" Kynyr pleaded, striking a mournful note.

"No." She made a moue at him. "Now sit down and eat."

Kynyr did his best impression of a whipped puppy, slinking to the table. His bad leg spoiled it by causing him to stumble as he tried to settle into a chair. Kady grabbed the chair and steadied it before both it and Kynyr could end up on the floor.

"Be careful!" She snapped at him. "If you break a leg, it will be that much longer until I Call Courtship. I can delay it due to..." She paused with her brow furrowed, and Kynyr could tell that she was looking for a word. "Extenuating circumstances."

"Yessum." Kynyr hung his head and muffled a chuckle.

While Kynyr filled his plate, Kady poured him tea. As she bent close to him, her face brushed against his.

He wrestled with fresh temptation. "I didn't know your hair was curly."

"Neither did I until I cut it."

"Kady?"

"What?" She turned to look at him, and Kynyr kissed her thoroughly, causing her to nearly drop the teapot.

"Please Call Courtship, Kady. I can't stop thinking about it."

"I tell you what. As soon as you don't need the cane, I'll Call Courtship. Okay?"

"Okay." Kynyr's face lit up. At least he had a firm date of sorts, and that made him feel better. "I was down at the house yesterday. They've finished with the master bedroom and started on the nursery."

"I know. Gram and I went over and had a look yesterday. She made some suggestions for the main hall. Wainscoting."

The doorknob turned.

Kady fled to the other side of the table, set the teapot on a woven hot pad, and tried to compose herself.

Todd held the door open for Cahira. He glanced from Kady's flushed cheeks to Kynyr's bemused smile and back again. "Smells good, Kady."

"Thank you."

"Umm. Kady's going to the Faire with me." Kynyr attempted to cover for the heat in Kady's face, but he knew from the twinkle in Todd's eyes that he had failed utterly.

"Ayup." Todd started filling his plate, his manner nonchalant. "Remember what your Gram told your father?"

Kynyr's face flushed with guilt and he stared fixedly at his plate. "Don't do it in the kitchen."

Kady giggled. "What was he doing in the kitchen?"

Cahira, Todd, and Kynyr looked at each other as if deciding which one of them ought to tell it.

Kynyr's flush deepened. "Gram ... she ... uh ... caught my Dad and Ma doing *it* on the kitchen floor one night."

Cahira's face took on a stern expression and she wagged her finger at Kynyr. "I'm telling you ... like I told them ... if you don't want to get caught, don't do it in the kitchen."

"I didn't do anything!" Kynyr made a fending off gesture and went scarlet to the roots of his hair. "I kissed her. Okay? That's all I did. I. Kissed. Kady."

Todd snorted. "Give the word, Kady, and I'll turn him over my knee."

"I don't think that will be necessary." Kady settled at the table with a smug expression.

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr rode Bucky into the yard of the manor. The place was silent, except for the singing of larks in the trees and the chirping of finches. He saw that the garden was empty, which was unusual for that time of morning. Then Georgie Rogan popped out of the barn with his uncanny promptness that always left Kynyr wondering if the ostler had eyes planted on the windowsill.

Georgie extended his hand to Kynyr. "Need help?"

"I can manage." Kynyr swung his right leg over the saddle, gripping the pommel and cantle to ease his weight on his healing leg in the dismount.

"It's good to have you back, Kynyr."

"Thanks, Georgie." Kynyr reached the ground with a wince, steadied himself, and drew his cane from the bow flap on the saddle. He limped over to a bench and sat down, kneading his calf.

"Hurting?" Georgie Rogan joined Kynyr on the bench.

"I can handle it."

"You know Cooley's stopped coming around."

"Why do you think that is?" Kynyr's eyes narrowed. He quit massaging his calf and swiveled on the bench to give Georgie a sharp look.

"I can guess."

"Tell me."

"You're putting me on the spot there, Kynyr." Georgie dropped his eyes, laced his fingers, and hooked them over his drawn up knee.

"I know."



Georgie sucked in a deep breath. "Malthus. Ever since Eideard's funeral, it's seemed like he was stalking the cub."

"He is."

"Why?"

"I don't know. There's something off-kilter about Malthus. Claw doesn't trust him and neither do I."

"Lots of folks don't trust him around here."

"Look, Georgie." Kynyr scratched his sideburns in an offhand manner. "If you see anything suspicious, you let me know."

"Sure."

"You come directly to me. No one else, you understand?"

"Yeah. You have my word on it."

Kynyr levered himself up with the cane, headed for the door, and let himself into the manor. Kissie stepped out of the kitchen, saw him, and rushed over.

"Oh, Master Kynyr, it's so good to see you back."

Kynyr brushed his lips across her cheek. "It's good to see you too, Kissie."

She ushered him into the Great Hall. "Master Kynyr's back!"

Aisha left her spinning wheel and reached Kynyr ahead of her sisters-in-law. She hugged him, a content, maternal smile on her lips as she whispered in his ear, "My Kynyr."

"Gram," Kynyr responded sotto voce, acknowledging their secret connection. He could smell the love on her and it filled him with warmth.

Kynyr's glance went to Fianait. She smiled at him as she clipped a strand of brown wool before tying on a green strand for the next row. Kynyr noticed—as he always did—that the ends of the scissors were blunt and rounded like children's scissors. Fianait carried pouches on her belt, but not so much as a small utility knife. The absence of a blade and the blunted scissors increased the air of fragility that clung to the elderly bitch in a way that Kynyr found difficult to define, but it drew him to her.

Fianait tucked a strand of thinning, white hair back into the bun at the base of her neck. Fair-skinned to begin with, she had become translucently pale with age, the veins showing violet beneath her skin. Her knuckles, like knobs on her long, slender fingers, bore the signs of arthritis; however, she rarely allowed it to slow her down. She left her loom and approached Kynyr with small, tentative steps.

Robert Morcar rose from his chair near the door and embraced Kynyr. "It's good to have you back, Old Dog."

"Thanks, Robert. It's good to be back."

Merissa came close and then hung back, her lips trembling with words she could not yet speak.

Searlait deserted her loom. "Kynyr!"

Searlait propelled him over to a chair as soon as she could free him from Aisha. Kynyr eased himself down and leaned his cane against the end table.

Fianait shoved a footstool to him and lifted his left leg onto it. "Does it hurt?"

"Nothing I can't handle."

Merissa averted her eyes from his and claimed the chair closest to him.

Kynyr took her hand. "I heard about the cub. Congratulations, Merissa."

She flushed and murmured low. "I know you don't like Malthus..."

Kynyr shrugged. "We have our differences."

"I'm ... I'm happy to be pregnant."

"Then that's what counts."

Kissie rushed into the room. "Sheradyn's just pulled up in the yard."

\* \* \* \*

Finn sat with his shirt off while Kady pushed on his belly and then his chest. Four of the arrows that struck Finn had been poisoned and he now had four puckered scars: one on his belly and three on his chest. "Tender?"

"No. I'm just fine." He flicked Kady's curls.

"Stop that."

"I can't. They're too cute." Finn gave her an easy-going grin, boyish mischievousness lurking in his pale eyes.

Kady gave him an annoyed look. "I wanted to look fierce and what do I get? Cute."

"You don't have to look fierce to be fierce, Kady. You should see the Dreaded Horde."

"I wish you'd stop calling your sisters that."

"They don't mind."

"I think you're ready to go back to the manor, but the decision is up to Gram."

"Good thing that."

"Why?"

"Because, with Kynyr gone, I can pick at you."

"You're a scoundrel, Finn MacIver."

"The Dreaded Horde's been saying that since Kynyr and I were in nappies."

"They were right." Kady walked off before he could answer. A folding screen extended between Finn and Iollen. Kady hesitated. Ever since helping with the amputation, Kady had been having nightmares filled with severed limbs. It had driven everything else from her mind. "Takes a nightmare to cure a

nightmare,” she muttered.

Kady walked around the screen and gazed at Iollen for several minutes. The bandaged stump of his shoulder made her stomach tighten. She forced herself past it, trying not to stare. Kady poured a measure of poppy milk into a dosing glass, lifted Iollen up, and helped him drink. She felt his forehead for fever and was gratified to find none.

He gazed up at her, his eyes dulled by the shock of what had happened to him. “Kady?”

“Yes?” Kady gave him a reassuring smile.

“My arm's gone.”

He said that to Kady every time he saw her and she knew he was simply too out of his head from drugs and pain to remember.

“I'm so sorry, Iollen, but it was the only way to keep you alive.”

“Gangrene?”

Kady nodded. The nightmare of cutting Iollen's gangrenous arm off had shocked Kady to the depths of her soul. She no longer had any dark feelings toward him. The amputation had overwhelmed all her past emotions. Kady felt distanced by it all.

“Ma says ... you helped save me. Why?”

“It's what I do.”

Iollen thought about that. “Kady ... I'm sorry for what I did to you.”

“I know.”

“When's the cub due?”

“I'm not pregnant.”

“But Finn said...”

“You've been talking to Finn?”

“He sits with me some times.”

“Well either Finn got it wrong, or you misunderstood. However, I'm going to ask Finn and if I get the wrong answer, he's going to be wearing a full set of knuckle bumps on his head.”

A rasping chuckle emerged from Iollen. “I'd like to see that.”

“Have your parents come by?”

“Ma was here earlier.” Iollen's face darkened. “Glasny came by ... I lost my job ... he said there was no work at the tannery for a one-armed mon.”

“I'm so sorry, Iollen.”

“At least I'm alive. I suppose that's something.”

"Where there is life, there is hope," she quoted the old proverb and watched Iollen's face closely.

"I have much to atone for, Kady. I keep thinking of all the things I should have done different."

"Now you're starting to sound like Kynyr. He's either chasing me or moping."

"The ambush was nasty. I'm sorry it happened."

"You can go home tomorrow."

"Go home? To be a burden on my folks?" Iollen's bitterness was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Do you think you could paint one-handed?"

"Like walls?"

"Exactly. You could live in the servants' quarters at my home and paint walls."

"You sure you'd want me after what I did?"

Kady snorted. "I cut your arm off. I'd say that makes us even."

"Clear it with Kynyr and I'll take the job."

"Done."

Kady started to walk off and Iollen stopped her with a gesture. "Kady, don't ask him. Glasny..."

"What?"

"He called me a cub-raper. From what Glasny said, it's all over the village."

Kady's hands went to her knife hilts as she faced Iollen, her head angled to the side. "Are you?"

Iollen sucked in an uneasy breath. "Not exactly."

"Spill it," she growled.

"I didn't poke Aghavie Dunne ... but I held her down for Donald. He was the one who ... always wanted the little ones."

"She's pregnant."

Iollen squeezed his eyes shut. "Tala demanded my arm or my life ... so I could never hurt another cub. I'll ... understand if you don't want to give me the job now."

Kady's expression eased. "You have a job. I'll talk to Kynyr."

\* \* \* \*

Sheradyn Kelly had been a russet brown in his youth, but his coat had changed in color to nearly white as he aged. The heavy white streaks in his beard and the close-cropped hair on his head reflected that. Yet he sat straight as a sword blade, wearing a precisely fitted pair of knee pants, tall boots, and a high-collared white silk shirt beneath a long black coat and a maroon velvet waistcoat. His exacting air masked a gentle nature that contrasted sharply with that of rumpled Gillivray Ashby who slouched next to him on the wagon seat in a simple russet robe and trousers.

His departure from Blue Rock had been delayed two weeks due to various last minute complications involved in turning over his medical practice to another Creeyan-trained physician. Had anyone other than the Chieftain himself asked Sheradyn to relocate to Wolffgard, the old lycan would have stoutly refused. However, matters being what they were, Claw's request had carried the weight of a command. Sheradyn comforted himself with the fact that it was all for the benefit of young Merissa, whom he remembered fondly.

He drove his buckboard into the yard of the manor house and a servant came forward to take the horses. Gillivray his assistant, who was also his lover of many years, jumped down, took Sheradyn's gold-headed walking stick, and helped him to the ground. The nearly eighty-year age gap between them showed in the fond manner with which Gillivray regarded him. The younger mon doted on the elder and was doted on back in a cloying sweetness of devotion.

Aisha Redhand came into the yard with Merissa following her.

Merissa had a bright smile for him. "Sheradyn, it's so wonderful that you have arrived."

Sheradyn gave her an affectionate look as he approached and they embraced. "Ah yes, the young mother-to-be. And this time there won't be all those tears, like the last time."

Merissa's mouth tightened for a flash of an instant, remembering how she had cried her way through her pregnancy with Darmyk over Isranon leaving her. "No tears this time."

Malthus joined Merissa, and she pointed at him. "Sheradyn, this is my husband Malthus, and you remember my mother?"

"A pleasure to meet you, sir," Sheradyn said, extending his hand.

Malthus shook Sheradyn's hand. "Merissa has told me a lot about you."

"All good I hope." Sheradyn smiled brightly. "And Aisha, how glad I am to see you again, young bitch."

Aisha flushed. "Thank you, Sheradyn. I hope that you will enjoy your stay in our household."

They went into the Great Hall and a young wolf in a guardsmon's chocolate and claret tabard rose. He limped to Sheradyn, leaning on an extraordinary cane. Sheradyn's eyes saucered as he gripped the mon's extended hand. "Tarrant!"

"Kynyr Maguire. I'm no relation to Tarrant Redhand. You know my grandmother, Cahira. She has a shop in Wolffgard and I'm certain she would enjoy seeing you again."

Gillivray slipped his arm around Sheradyn's shoulders and kissed his cheek. "Sit down and rest, darling. As soon as everything is unloaded, I'll go upstairs and unpack. You just relax." He gave Kynyr a flirtatious wink. "Yummy."

Kynyr winced at the thought of having some stray nancidawg chasing him, and returned to his chair. Fianait left her loom and pushed a footstool close to him. She lifted his leg onto it with a shy smile that recalled the young girl she had once been.

Sheradyn had a thousand questions run through his mind, but he only asked one. "What's wrong with your leg?"

"Wounds. It's healing slower than usual. Devil's Silver."

"You're lucky to be alive."

A shadow passed over Kynyr's chiseled features. "I know. Two of my friends were not so lucky."

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr found himself sitting in the Great Hall alone while everyone fussed over Sheradyn Kelly and Gillivray, helping them get settled into their room and catching up on old times.

Isbeth waddled in, her hands folded across her huge belly. "Is there something I can get you?"

"Shouldn't you be taking it easy?"

Isbeth's gentle smile lit her face. "I wanted to welcome you home."

"And you have. When's little one due?"

"Any day now. Please, let me get you something."

"Whiskey?"

"And make it two glasses, Isbeth." Malthus swaggered into the room with a smirk. "So the wounded hero is home at last."

Kynyr tensed. "I guess so."

"So what's the *prognosis*?"

Kynyr's mouth tightened, disliking the way that Malthus brandished his vocabulary as if looking for a word that Kynyr did not know. Kynyr sneered back at him and said in perfect Waejontori, "*Mon iamba sera ben face enos mas semanas.*" [My leg will be fine in a few more weeks.]

"*Argentum Diaboli fortam sustantiam es. Som sorpresus que claudicus no sas.*" [Devil's Silver is nasty stuff. I'm surprised you're not crippled.]

"*Volas.*" [You wish.]

"*Veram?*" [Do I?]

"*No mais scorum, Malthus. No podes laetare mi.*" [Cut the crap, Malthus. You can't fool me.]

Malthus' eyes widened at the total absence of the lycan brogue in Kynyr's pronunciation and then narrowed as he claimed the chair that Merissa had vacated. He switched to Sharani. "*Oste me duname exerki pa neom i gumnasia.*" [Then we can have another round in the salle.]

"*n'Apotelia thasi egala.*" [The outcome will be the same.]

"*Nunkou thanas tasso kalis ta itas, Kynyr. Oki me tasso pole asimi diabolou endou sou.*" [You'll never again be as good as you were, Kynyr. Not with that much Devil's Silver inside you.]

"*Oki mou anatimi. Sos thanas thalos peripon touto moli.*" [Don't underestimate me. It'll get you killed one day.]

"*Ala, tou thekane poti. Anamenno mi endiaphrou alom voltom me sou.*" [Oh, I'd never do that. I look forward to another round with you.]

Kynyr responded in Creeyan. "*Jari-dee tamakeen.*" [Happy to oblige.]

"Benyuu t'au koi yat'in daa Creeya?" [Have you ever actually been to Creeya?]

"Maka. Baanakong koon p'om keung say-ma la-kom." [Many times. Some of my best friends are Guild.]

Malthus tried Angrimer next. "*Din plaats is niet genes zo zeker, wer de denke dat zie is.*" [Your place is not as secure here as you think it is.]

"Dinnes oock niet." [Nor is yours.]

"*Claw is zieck. Robert Morcar saget gigne die menschen det it zin hart is ... det er daude giet. Vann er weg is, werde die dich nicht lenker nacher det schort von Aisha verstocken mogen. Ich werde regent for minne sonen.*" [Claw is sick. Robert Morcar is telling people it's his heart ... that he's dying. When he's gone, you won't be able to hide behind Aisha's skirts any longer. I'll be regent for my sons.]

Kynyr gave a bitter laugh. "*Die kanner den wederwolve niet genes zo gut. Der eldere gangen ene wederwolf anwesen als regent vann Claw det regentschip niet am inne endere richtiker wolf gift inn sin testament.*" [You don't know lycans very well. The elders will appoint a lycan as regent if Claw doesn't leave the regency to someone acceptable in his will.]

"*Det gift kinne mennelike ervenaren.*" [There are no male heirs.]

"*Det gift Brock Redhand.*" [There's Brock Redhand.]

"*Claw's Bruder?*" [Claw's brother?]

"*Der selve. Ick vorslage det die anvanget med dinne spulle zu packen end det die abhalt aus Red Wolf, Malthus.*" [Same. I suggest you start packing and get the hell out of Red Wolf, Malthus.]

"*Din plaats is niet zeker.*" [Your place is not secure.]

"*Est tienne?*" [Is yours?] Kynyr replied in the Freynese, the language of magic.

"*Merissa me donara le que je velo. Assi ton testa.*" [Merissa will give me whatever I ask for. Including your head.]

"*J'aie doute de la.*" [I doubt that.]

Malthus smirked, framing his words in Iradrimese. "*Moi mosta balshe razopyesne b washem. U Merisse radyl. Ona nigada pozvae eto Brock neprevat' mi.*" [My place is more secure than yours. Merissa is pregnant. She would never allow this Brock to throw me out.]

"*N'u tvoi uverenych. Sluchaem tso Brock neprostyny muz.*" [Don't count on it. From what I hear, Brock is an unforgiving mon.]

"*On nigdie prichae.*" [He'll never come.]

"*Kak ya myl, n'u tvoi uverenych.*" [Like I said, don't count on it.]

"*To nigdie sputse. Ya otsom Merissach deteme.*" [It won't happen. I'm the father of Merissa's children.]

"*Saba Claw non mai di zara,*" Kynyr said in Valdren. [So Claw doesn't need you any longer.]

"Impressive for an ignorant little guardsmon."

"My father's a schoolteacher and my Gram is a translator."

"You're over-educated for a simple sword fodder son of a no-name bastard."

Kynyr shrugged. "I like what I do."

Malthus' eyes narrowed. "Don't get in my way, Kynyr."

"*Kizmeigo*." Kynyr threw the Creeyan insult at Malthus in a dead tone of voice he had gotten from Todd.

"Braggart? Hardly."

"Full of shit."

Isbeth returned with the whiskey and two glasses.

Kynyr guessed that she must have sensed the tension in the room, or overheard part of what they had said, because she left without a word. He opened the bottle and poured for both of them.

"I'm warning you. Don't aggravate me, Kynyr."

"Don't push me."

"With that leg, you're an easy kill." Malthus raised his glass in mock salute. "I'll call you out."

Kynyr's eyes went steely. "Try me."

Aisha swept into the room, followed by Gillivray and Merissa, putting an end to their conversation.

Malthus smiled at them. "I was just telling Kynyr how happy I am to see him up and around."

"We all are." Merissa settled onto the nearest sofa.

Kynyr levered his leg up with the cane and managed to stand. He flicked a finger at Aisha. "I need to talk to you. Privately."

"Certainly. Will the Rose Room do?"

Aisha's private drawing room called the Rose Room was small—by the standards of the manor—decorated in deep shades of rose and mauve. A mural covered the south wall of lycans at a picnic in the middle of a rose garden the males in hybrid form and the females in human while true wolves romped around them. The wall hangings were all of pastoral scenes. Sofas and chairs formed half circles around three low tables, upholstered in matching rose brocades. A woven reed basket, containing knitting, occupied the corner of a sofa. Aisha settled on that sofa, moved her knitting to the floor, and adjusted her skirts.

Kynyr sank into a chair, leaned his cane against the low table in front of him, folded his hands together, and stared at them. Aisha was the only member of the Redhand family who knew his secret. Claw suspected, but only Aisha knew for certain. Kynyr only called her Gram aloud when no one else could hear.

"What's wrong?"



"Gram, someone told me that you and Claw had a Wild Cousins' Courtship."

"Yes we did. I made Claw work hard for his rights."

"That's why I need to talk to you."

"If you're thinking about having one, the male can't propose it, nor can he declare it. It's a bitch's prerogative."

"I know that much. I asked her to marry me and then she threw that at me."

"She?"

"Kady."

"I heard the rumor, but I was not certain whether to credit it or not. I approve of Kady."

"You do?"

"My father was a farmer. I wasn't high born, but I was well reared. I was considered a beauty when I was young and that's what caught Claw's eyes."

Kynyr looked thoughtful, trying to pick his words. "Why would a bitch want to Call Courtship?"

"I can't speak for Kady, but I can speak for myself. That may or may not help you."

"Tell me about it?"

Aisha smiled and patted his hand. "I had had a dozen proposals of marriage before Claw showed up at my father's farm to buy some stock. He noticed me and started trying to get me into bed with him. I kept refusing and finally he proposed marriage. But by that time I was feeling ... dyspeptic toward the entire notion of marriage ... so I proposed a Wild Cousins' Courtship. I was always very good in the forests and was certain that he would never be able to catch me."

"You didn't want him to catch you?"

"Absolutely not. I figured that I would lead him a merry chase through the woodlands for a year and then he would have to shut up and leave me alone."

"But I thought you loved him."

"I do. But not at first. Over the course of the chase, we became close. I started to care about him. The final day neared and soon we would never see each other again."

"What happened?"

"I pretended to stumble and landed in a bush. Claw mounted me and the rest is history."

"If I have any other questions, can I ask them?"

"Of course."

\* \* \* \*

"CAHIRAAAH!"

Kady flinched and nearly dropped the jar she held. She turned toward the door and stared at the finely

dressed old lycan standing just inside the door with a golden-headed walking stick in his hands. He wore a plum colored velvet waistcoat, a white silk shirt, black jacket, black knee pants and plum hose. She had never seen anyone dressed like that before in her life.

"Cahira!"

Kady put the jar down on the counter and approached him. "Can I help you?"

"I will speak to Cahira and I will speak to her now. Do you hear me? Now!" He pounded the floor with his walking stick.

"And who should I say..."

A half-strangled squeak came from the hallway door, dragging Kady's attention from the angry lycan. Cahira stood there, looking startled and ready to faint.

"Sheradyn, what are you doing here?"

"You lying little bitch." Sheradyn strode across the room and shook his walking stick at Cahira. "You didn't tell him."

"Who?"

"Kynyr! You didn't tell him that Tarrant was his grandfather."

*Tarrant? Tarrant Redhand?* Kady ducked her head and went back to shelving jars, trying to appear oblivious.

"Please calm down, Sheradyn. I have a perfectly good reason." Cahira fluttered her hands at him.

"You'd better or I'm going straight to Claw." He struck the floor again.

"Come upstairs with me and I'll make you some tea and we'll talk."

"I wouldn't mind a bit of sherry." Sheradyn stopped pounding the floor, and rubbed the rounded head of his stick, the anger fading from his expression.

"I've got brandy."

He sniffed and straightened his waistcoat. "That will have to do."

Sheradyn followed Cahira into the hallway. Kady stole a glance at them. Her head whirled. *If Tarrant is Kynyr's grandfather ... then Kynyr's a prince and I called courtship on him. I can't keep putting him off.*

The pieces started coming together. Kynyr was rich and educated because he was a prince. Kady felt as if she were walking in a dream. That was the secret he refused to tell her. All of her fears melted away and vanished into a Faery tale.

\* \* \* \*

Sheradyn leaned back in his chair, sipping his brandy. "Really, Cahira. I think you're taking this curse business much too seriously. Weems was in no shape to lay a curse when he spoke those words. He had a silver spike through his stomach, for Heaven's Sakes. He was out of his mind with pain."

"That's what Caimbeul said."

"He's here?"

Cahira nodded. "So's Baroucha."

"I knew about her."

"And Pandeena as well. She's long-lived. Hasn't changed a bit."

"Interesting. With all of us here, Cahira ... you won't be able to keep this under wraps forever."

"I can try. Some of the most deadly curses in history were laid by dying men, Sheradyn."

"Posh! The only thing you're accomplishing is to cheat Kynyr of his heritage. And Branduff for that matter."

"I'm keeping them alive."

"Who all knows about this, Cahira?"

"Only those who were there when I became pregnant by Tarrant."

"While I don't accept the curse, I will say that the hand of fate has touched Kynyr by bringing us together again. For good or ill, only the gods know."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus met the Lycamornots at the old cottage where he and his nieces had once lived in an isolated section of the land that had been ceded to the refugee camp by the previous owner, Beth. He had enjoyed Beth, taking her mind and body on his first night living in the camp. She had run this place with some help from the old Willodarian priest, Tempest Anstey. Malthus had murdered Tempest and, a little time later, his friend Egidius had rited Beth.

He delighted in the deception that Clodagh and Pandeena ran the compound and surrounding lands, when he actually did so. This place had been his first conquest, and Merissa had been his second, when all of her family were dead and he ruled through Merissa, then he would complete his conquest of the Red Wolf Clan.

The table they sat at had made for him by Shalto and Oswyl so that they would have one large enough for all of them to sit around it. Preece had his chair right up against that of fourteen-year-old Rheu, the smallest and youngest of them. Malthus suspected they were lovers, although they used the women also. Nesswen, a shaggy young blond, with watery blue eyes, and an overbite, watched the others over his tankard of mead. Torquil was the largest member, a huge strapping smith's apprentice. But Malthus' favorite was Yren who was sitting between Oswyl and Torquil. There was not much to Yren physically, he looked like a stick figure with a mop of reddish brown hair, but he made up for it in feistiness.

And he liked to hurt people.

They were all good with the long knives riding at their hips, but only Torquil could claim a moderate expertise with swords and axes. They wore simple wool drawstring pants, and knee length robes that wrapped loosely around their upper bodies in a variation of the traditional lycan garb that allowed them to switch freely into their powerful hybrid forms.

Malthus took a small jar from his pocket and gave it to Preece. "Here's that equalizer you wanted."

Preece took the jar and held it up to the light, frowning at the iridescent brown liquid. "Didn't expect it to

be this color."

"It's always been that color, Preece. Apply it to your blades in thin layers. Allow each layer to dry completely before applying the next."

Yren leaned close to Preece. "Is that Devil's Silver?"

"What do you think?" Preece held Yren's gaze until the youth was forced to look away.

"We going to start training again?" asked Torquil.

"Yes." Malthus lowered his head with a tilt to the side and pulled his beard. "Tomorrow afternoon."

"Why did you call us here?" Shalto took a drink from his tankard.

"To tell you all to be careful. Tell the others also. I've heard rumors that Donald Greenlea's death was not an accident. Nor was Iollen Newell's crippling."

"Bloody lawgiver," Torquil snarled.

Preece got that quiet smile that never reached his eyes as he said casually, "Someone should stick him."

Malthus pretended not to hear that. "Three myn are putting everything we are doing in jeopardy and must be dealt with."

"Who?" asked Shalto.

"Caimbeul, Pandeena, and Kynyr Maguire."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul, in his guise as Patton, went to the Difficult Horse to meet with Shalto. He had decided to let them ask the questions, and he would reply with a mix of truth and lies. So far, his deception had gone well and Shalto had accepted him as Patton. Shalto appeared to be one of a group of juvenile rogues, and Caimbeul doubted that they had thought up the scheme with the Sanctuary themselves. If he was going to find out who—and he suspected it would turn out to be Malthus—was behind it, then he needed to befriend them.

"Patton!" Shalto hollered, standing up and indicating that he should come and sit with them at their table. He had Oswyl, Torquil, and four others with him.

Caimbeul had expected to be meeting Shalto alone, so this surprised him. Although it probably should not have. No doubt Shalto wanted the others to help take Patton's measure.

He sauntered over and stood, regarding them. Shalto began making introductions. Nesswen, a shaggy young blond, had watery blue eyes, and an overbite. He swept his eyes over Caimbeul without smiling. Preece, looked a few years older than Shalto, but it was evident that Shalto was their leader. Rheu was the smallest, barely more than a cub. He kept his hands under the table although there was a mug in front of him.

They struck him as a bunch of thugs, not even good enough to be called rogues. Something was wrong about them. He could sense it.

"Sit down," Shalto said. "I'm glad you came, Patton."

"So am I," Caimbeul replied.

Yren, a russet-haired youth with thick brown sideburns, leaned close to Caimbeul and sniffed him suspiciously. "You smell odd."

Caimbeul chuckled. "I should. I was struck by lightning when I was twelve."

Silence swept around the table.

"You're pulling our tails," accused Rheu.

"Not at all." Caimbeul signaled for a servingmon. "I ran under a tree in a storm, that's not a good idea, you know."

Shalto laughed and the others joined in. "What brought you here, Patton?"

Caimbeul licked his lips. *The interrogation begins.* "Drifting. I heard about the war and came home. I imagine I'll find employment hereabouts. There's always work for a good blade in war time."

"You're a soldier?" Torquil took a drink from his tankard, studying him over the rim.

Caimbeul gave an indifferent shrug. "Of sorts. I've done some soldiering. Mostly I've worked as a bodyguard."

Preece's chill eyes were colder than stone. "Where?"

The lawgiver met Preece's gaze, refusing to flinch from it. *Now there is one who enjoys killing and has not a single qualm about it. He's already killed at least once. I can smell the blood on him.* "Most recently? Cherdon'datar. Guarding the king's harem. He prefers two legs for it."

Shalto frowned. "What do you mean?"

Padruig Caimbeul smiled with a tiny amusement at their ignorance. "He's a centaur."

Another laugh ran around the table.

"Nice little set-up you have at the camp. I got my wick wet nicely."

Shalto glared at him. "Not here. We don't talk about that here."

Caimbeul nodded. "Then where?"

Oswyl shifted uneasily and nudged Shalto.

"We'll let you know. For now you can keep oiling your rod there, just don't talk about it to any one."

Shalto gestured and the little group rose as one and followed him out.

Hereward the tavern master came from behind the bar and pulled a rag from his pocket, wiping the table down where Shalto and his friends had been sitting. He leaned in and whispered to Caimbeul. "I wouldn't get involved with them if I were you. The Lycamornots are trouble."

Caimbeul frowned. "Lycamornots?"

"Them as you've been sitting with. That's what they call themselves. Lycamornots."

Caimbeul pushed a gold coin to Hereward. "Thanks for the warning."

He finished his drink and left, musing about the way in which people were giving Patton more information than they had when he was asking around as Caimbeul.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus strode through the guardsmyn's wing of the manor, down the narrow stair at the far end and into the salle.

Belgair spotted him. "Going another round with us today, Malthus?"

Malthus crossed to Belgair and clapped the captain on the back. "The only times in my life that I've missed a day of training was when I was too busy fighting."

"Yah, you're good, kandoyarin. Real good for a gray badger."

Rocking back on his heels, Malthus grinned. Gray badger was a euphemism for kandoyarin—mercenary—which was what he had claimed to be since first arriving here; and it was not far from the truth since he was a bounty hunter and assassin by trade. He knew he had gained a measure of respect and standing in their eyes the moment they quit referring to him as 'that human.' "Well, I do believe that's my first compliment."

"You're right."

Malthus went three rounds with Belgair, winning each round while being careful not to display his sa'necari strength and speed which he had gained through the rites. He did not want to raise their suspicions and Belgair was not stupid.

When they finished and were splashing themselves with water to get some of the sweat off before changing into clean clothing, Malthus paused and turned to Belgair. "I worry about Claw."

"What do you mean?" Belgair asked, going suddenly suspicious.

Malthus frowned in concern. "He hasn't seemed well lately. Have you noticed?"

"Yaw. I noticed. He was breathing hard when he was trying to get the arch down. Odhran and I had to help him. We saw him leaning against it like he was dizzy."

"Really?" Malthus chewed his lower lip. "I've been noticing the same things. We should try to take more of the work off him. Make things easier on him."

"Claw's not getting any younger."

Malthus put his hand on Belgair's shoulder. "Just tell me what I can do, and I'll follow your lead. I don't want to be intrusive. I just want to help."

Belgair smiled. "You're a good mon, Malthus."

"So are you."

"I got a question."

"About Claw?"

"No. Maguire."

"Ask." Malthus wondered at the sudden edge in Belgair's voice. *Jealousy?*

"You think he's better than I am?"

"Not now."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul knocked on Clodagh's door. She opened it and stared at him. "Padruig..."

"Shh." He put his finger to her lips. "Don't call me that. I've been telling folks my name is Patton."

He slipped instead and dropped the bar.

"Padru—Patton. You can't do that."

"Why not? I'm going to stay all night."

"That's going to make Shalto angry at you."

"Let it." Caimbeul walked over to the cabinet, took glasses and a bottle of whiskey out, and headed for the table. "Sit down. How did you recognize me?"

Clodagh frowned curiously at him. "I've been seeing you in my dreams since I was just a cub."

"Your dreams?" Caimbeul sat down and filled two glasses with whiskey. "Like I am now? Not in some other form?"

Clodagh shook her head. "You have another form?"

Caimbeul knocked his whiskey back and poured another. "That answers that. Forget I said anything."

They spent the night together, just talking and cuddling. Caimbeul told her stories that made her laugh and the time passed too quickly. When dawn arrived and he departed for the Lawgiver House, Caimbeul realized that he had fallen in love again.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### BATTLE OF THREE STONES

Oak trees made a tremendous, spreading canopy along the edges of the road, their leaves not yet affected by the breath of the swiftly arriving autumn. The three yuwenghau, divine knights-errant, sons of the elder gods of light, Lokynen, Hathura, and Meleajys trotted down the road to Three Stones, making good time. They had tracked the people and monsters who burned the steadings near Three Stones for six days, alarm growing in them when they realized the sizeable force had circled back toward the village.

Hathura led. Slender to the point of appearing fragile, yet flaring through the shoulders, translucently pale skinned with white hair and silver eyes, the son of Willodarus and Thistlebit the Faery queen's Captain of the Guard, Hathura was a steel blade in a velvet sheath. Clad all in shades of green from forest to hunter, he carried his deadly golden fans folded and tucked into the yellow sash that crossed the leather belt holding his long bladed knife. A bow case rested at his hip.

Massive Lokynen dwarfed Hathura, with his barrel chest, and arms like temple columns, his legs like tree trunks. The son of the war god Badonth, Lokynen looked eagerly forward to battle, the palms of his hands itching to draw his tremendous broadsword, Justice, and cleave away at the dark and murderous creatures they stalked.

Meleajys, a dark-skinned blond, whose lanky build stretched his ropy muscles along a raw-boned frame, had a swinging stride that easily ate distance with a deceptive speed. He carried a longsword at his shoulder that had once belonged to his Sharani mother, and it was as sharp as his mother's spirit had been when she laid with his father Kalirion Lord of the Sun.

The last spoor they had happened on had been less than a day old and Hathura carried his bow strung and ready as they traveled. They came within sight of the village in the late afternoon. Clouds of smoke rose from burning buildings, gusting across the horizon in the stirring wind.

Lokynen's lips curled back, making his ugly scarred face uglier still. "Battle," he growled. "Bloody fangs."

Hathura swiftly retired his bow to the case, and stretched his arms to either side of him. "Take my hands, my brothers."

The two other yuwenghau grasped Hathura's hands and they crossed the distance in a single Jump, materializing in the middle of chaos. Dead lycans littered the edge, more struggled farther down. The lycans had rushed out with whatever weapons they had to hand, but they were clearly losing. Several houses had their doors broken inward, and the screams of women and children could be heard from inside them. The attackers had already turned to rape, thinking that the battle had been decided.

In the middle of the fighting stood a sa'necari shouting orders, and felling lycans with spells of death magic. That had to be their leader. Hathura reached for his bow and decided against it. He drew his fans, snapped them open, and charged the sa'necari. Felling their leader might throw the attackers into confusion. "You're mine!"

Laetus looked up and snarled. "I don't know where you came from, but you're dead, Fae."

The sa'necari swiftly wove a dark patterning in the air, and threw it at Hathura.

Hathura saw the energy of the spell, danced aside, and sliced through the spells with his fans, circling Laetus. White birds with flowing tails sped from his fans at Laetus. Golden hawks emerged and descended upon the sa'necari.



Laetus staggered backwards, unable to strike at his swift moving adversaries. Frantically he raised his shields, only to have them shattered by a thrust of glowing ivory spears of light. One arm thrown over his face, Laetus made a blind toss in several directions. Hathura lunged in, his fans flashing, one coming to guard as the other struck. The edge of a fan sliced Laetus across the throat, circling back from the strike as Hathura snapped the other fan closed and shoved it into Laetus' chest like a blade.

Laetus sank gurgling to his knees, mouthing the words, "what the hell—no." His hand went to his throat, trying to close the wound as his life bubbled out with his blood, but Laetus was not old enough in death magic and the rites to heal so terrible a wound.

Hathura jerked his fan out and thrust it back in, popping it open inside Laetus body to rip his heart in half.

The sa'necari's eyes bulged, his lips parted, and his head fell to the side. Hathura snapped the fan closed. Laetus' corpse collapsed on its back. Hathura hit him in the throat again, severing his head to be certain that Laetus could not be raised undead, and swirled into the battle again.

\* \* \* \*

Lokynen unsheathed his sword and began killing. He moved with efficiency. Ahead of him a mon dragged a lycan female from her home. Lokynen stepped to the side and chopped the mon's arms off with Justice the sword of thunder. Lightning crackled in the clear sky as Lokynen killed. There was no fight to it. The sword cut through meat and bone as if it were warm butter.

He heard screams coming from a side street and turned down it. A huge brukulaco stood there, a lycan in hybrid form raised high in his meaty fists.

"Put him down," Lokynen said.

The brukulaco tossed the lycan hard into the side of a building. The lycan slid down and lay stunned. "Meat," said the brukulaco. "Big meat."

Lokynen chuckled, bracing his feet. "Come on. Fight for your dinner."

The brute topped Lokynen by a foot, and outweighed him by a ton. Yet Lokynen merely smiled as the brukulaco pulled the club hanging from his belt and rushed him.

The club smashed downward in a blow that would have sent a lesser mon to his knees. Lokynen swung his big sword to block it. The two weapons met with resounding force. The club shattered. The monster dropped the splintered stub, grabbing for Lokynen's head. The yuwenghau dropped into a long, low lunge beneath the grab, his blade moving in a swift circle from block to thrust. The brukulaco missed Lokynen and the big mon's sword plunged deep into the monster's belly. The brukulaco's eyes bulged, and it staggered backwards, staring at the blade in its body. Lokynen jerked the sword free, leaping after the beast. It seized Lokynen by the shoulders, trying to pin the yuwenghau's arms at his sides.

Lokynen laughed and shrugged off the brukulaco's grip as easily as he would a small child's.

"Yuwenghau," the monster muttered, clutching the wound and retreating.

Lokynen could tell by the look in the creature's eyes that it knew he would have no compunctions about sheathing the blade in its back if it turned to run.

One long arm shot out and it grabbed Lokynen's wrist, then the other darted forward and closed on the yuwenghau's arm as the big blade came again. For an instant it held firm. Then Lokynen flexed his muscles and the sword began an inexorable rise. The brukulaco stared down at the blade inching toward its body and shuddered. Abruptly, Lokynen pulled his arms in and threw the creature off balance. As it

stumbled toward him, he thrust upward. The blade entered the monster at an angle, just under the sternum and into the chest. Lokynen rotated the blade with a sweep through the creature's heart. He yanked the sword out and prepared to stick the creature again if needed.

The brukulaco gave a despairing cry, released Lokynen's arm, and fell dead. Lokynen stepped to the side, raised his sword two-handed, and chopped off the creature's head.

"Who are you?" asked the lycan, who had been smashed into a wall earlier.

"Lokynen the Battle-Master."

The lycan's eyes widened in awe at a legend made flesh. "Thank you for saving me. I want to help."

"Either guard the women, or come along behind me with a blade and finish off the ones who go down."

\* \* \* \*

The lycans rallied behind Hathura and began to engage the enemy, block by block. So Meleajys headed for the opposite end of the hamlet, certain that the enemy must have hit it from both sides. He heard screaming coming from inside a house, and went in through the broken door that hung half off its hinges. Following the sounds to the kitchen, he found a lycan pinned by two myn, while a third rode her. A flick of his power jumped the concealed throwing blades from his arm sheaths into his hands in quick succession. He snapped the blades into the backs of the two holding her, and they fell dead before the third knew what was happening.

As the third mon turned, Meleajys saw his amaranthine eyes and snarled. "Sa'necari."

He summoned his sword from his shoulder, shoved the blade in, and gutted the sa'necari, who crawled up the enchanted blade as if nothing had happened to him. "Steeped in death...."

The sa'necari threw a spell in Meleajys' face, blinding him. A groan broke from the yuwenghau's throat. He extended his awareness along the sword to find the sa'necari still impaled upon it. The death-eater's hand closed on Meleajys' throat and the other slid into his shirt to jab a deadly spell into his heart.

"Die," snarled the sa'necari.

Meleajys broke the sa'necari's fingers that gripped his throat.

The sa'necari cried out and poured a tremendous surge of killing power into Meleajys' body.

Meleajys shuddered as the black energy pierced his chest, an animal noise of pain forced itself between his gritted teeth. A snap of his fingers brought his throwing knives back into his hand. He drove first one blade and then the other into the sa'necari's ribs. The power killing him doubled in strength. He knew then that this was a very old and steeped in death sa'necari.

Abruptly the power vanished and dead weight pulled on his blade. He heard the lycan sobbing.

"I killed him. I broke his neck."

Meleajys extended his hand, feeling for her. "He blinded me. Let me touch you."

She took his hand. "They have my children in the loft. Three of the monsters."

"Let me into your mind so I can use your eyes and I'll rescue them."

"Do it."

They went up the narrow stairs to the loft. Meleajys could hear a child weeping. Two lycan cubs huddled on a narrow bed in a corner, with a sa'necari guarding them. On another bed, two of them ravaged an adolescent female, one on his knees, feeding from her wrist and the other climaxing between her legs. Their mother was silent beside him, and Meleajys sensed the grim strength in her that kept her from reacting aloud. With a tremendous backhand strike, Meleajys split the spine of the one guarding the children. Their mother grabbed them and pushed them toward the door, without taking her eyes off the pair raping her daughter or allowing Meleajys to lose his hold upon her shoulder.

Meleajys gave a tiny nod of approval at her composure. He beheaded the one feeding from the adolescent bitch's wrist, swung his blade up as the third turned to fight him, and caught that one in the throat. Sa'necari blood fountained over the young lycan as the body collapsed atop her. She scrambled from beneath her rapist's corpse and ran to her siblings.

Meleajys blinked. His sight had begun to return, but his vision remained bleary. "Stay here. I must fight some more."

"But your eyes...."

"Are improving. They'll be fine by day's end."

"Yuwenghau?"

"Yes."

\* \* \* \*

Not satisfied with having turned the battle, the three yuwenghau hunted the fleeing survivors and killed them. Following the tracks the army had left, they located the camp and stood in the shadows of a tremendous chestnut tree to assess the situation.

Lokynen's fist tightened on the hilt of his sword. "There can't be more than fifty of them. If they've got captives, odds are they'll be in one of the houses."

"There's guards in front of that one." Hathura nocked an arrow to the string of his bow. "I will take the house. I am certain you and Meleajys will have no difficulty reducing their camp."

Hathura shot the two guards lounging in front of the house that Laetus had used for his command post, returned his bow to the case, and drew his fans. He vanished to reappear in front of the door.

Meleajys grinned at Lokynen. "Shall we?"

For answer, Lokynen drew his sword with a roar and charged.

Two sentries drew their blades while a third sounded the alarm. Lokynen sliced through the first two in one swing, while Meleajys spitted the third.

And then the killing began in earnest.

\* \* \* \*

Hathura kicked the door in and lunged into the house. A heavy weight landed on his back and claws dug into his shoulder. Hathura twisted and drove his elbow into the nose of the rakshasha, shattering it. He threw her off, snapped his fan open, and slashed her eyes, blinding her. She fell to the ground, clutching at her face and shrieking. Two more rakshashas charged from the kitchen.

His lips twisted with amused contempt. "Hello, ladies. Shall we dance?"

The rakshashas separated, trying to come at him from both sides.

"Faery shit," one of them hissed.

Hathura somersaulted over the one that came closest, stomped the blinded one in the middle of her back and took her head off with a flick of his right fan. He kicked the head under the feet of the second one. Claws flashed at his face and mid-section. His right fan came to guard as the left parried the strike at his face. The impact of the blow to his stomach knocked him backwards, shredded his tunic, but failed to penetrate the armor he wore beneath it.

The rakshasha yowled as her fingers went numb from striking the runed kendaryl chain mail. Hathura danced back out of her reach, and a twist of his fan brought forth a host of Death's White Birds. Their long tails enabled them to turn on a farthing as they dove, struck, and retreated to strike again. The rakshashas spun round and round in futile attempts to stop the attacking birds. Hathura darted low and slashed open the second one's side, ripping through her kidneys. She collapsed with a scream and lay paralyzed by pain as the birds tore her apart.

The third rakshasha lunged at Hathura, claws at full extension from their sheaths. Half her face had been ripped away by the white birds. Blood matted her hair. Yet, the hatred in her soul drove her on. Hathura threw himself to the side and sliced her arm to the bone, leaving it hanging useless at her side.

Her impressive cleavage made a direct strike to the heart with his folded fan questionable. Hathura parried a slash at his face and backhanded the fan across her belly. The rakshasha's entrails bulged through the opening in her stomach. She staggered, clutching at her belly. Hathura slashed the side of her neck open, severing the carotid artery. The Rakshasha collapsed on the floor.

Hathura dismissed his birds, which had been feeding on the corpse. Silence fell. Hathura entered the living room and saw the long table covered in maps and papers. He snapped his fans closed, and ran his eyes over the accumulation of documents. He gathered up all of that, spied a burlap sack, and tossed it inside.

Carrying the sack out to the hall, the Fae listened for noises in the building. He crept up the stairs and when he reached the top floor, he heard weeping. He checked the rest of the rooms first, and finding them empty, returned to the only room that had someone in it.

He found a battered-looking bitch curled in the middle of the bed. When she saw him, she retreated to the farthest corner of the bed.

"Please don't hurt me."

"I would not dream of it." Hathura snapped his fans closed and shoved them through his sash.

"Are ... you real?" She regarded him through eyes large with fear.

Startled by the question, Hathura tilted his head back and sideways, assessing her condition. Bruises marred her light olive skin. Savage bite marks showed on her neck, arms, breasts, and thighs—some of them the pin pricks of sa'necari fangs, and others clearly human. Blood coated the inside of her thighs, mixed with a pasty white crust that could only have been dried ejaculate. Spellcords adorned her wrists, the runed seals making it suicidal for her to attempt to remove them.

"My name is Hathura. What is yours?"

"The master calls me Cuntkin."

"The master is dead. I killed him. Tell me your name. Your real name."

A fit of violent trembling seized her and tears flowed from her eyes. "Izett. Izett Powell."

"Give me your wrist." Hathura extended his hand palm up.

Izett hesitated and then placed her hand in his.

He drew her to him with all the gentleness and care that he would have shown a small frightened animal. She crawled across the bed to him. Hathura could sense the first signs of trust in her. He grasped her arm and turned her wrist up where he could examine the seals on the spellcord encircling it.

"I can remove them." He stroked the seal on her left wrist. It opened and he laid it aside. Then he removed the other. With the seals gone, it was safe to cut the cords off and he did so.

Izett threw her arms around him, crying. "I'm free."

"Tell me what happened? Where are the others?"

Her face darkened as if in the grip of nightmares. "I'm the only one left. They butchered our males for their organs. The other bitches and cubs were taken to the slave markets. If Laetus had not chosen to make me his whore, I would be gone too."

Hathura fought down his rage at the injustices, putting a reassuring arm around her. "We'll take you to Three Stones. The people there will help you."

The Fae then searched the room and found Laetus' ledgers. He carried them down and added them to his sack of captured documents. Once he got Izett to safety, he would take them to Navaryn. She would know what to do with them.

\* \* \* \*

By the time that they returned, the villagers had already cleared the streets of bodies and begun burning the enemy dead. Phelan, the grizzled headmon of Three Stones, met them at the edge of the village and walked back to the square with them.

Hathura stood looking at the remains of the carnage, his nose screwing up at the smell of sa'necari flesh burning on a bonfire nearby. "I think we got them all."

"We need to send word to our chieftain," said Phelan, with his eyes narrowed and his mouth set in a grim line.

Lokynen nodded, pulling at his lower lip. "If one of you wants to walk there with me, we'll go to Wolffgard."

"I'll go." Phelan rubbed a weary hand over his eyes. "It's my place to ... under the circumstances."

Hathura nodded. "Meleajys and I will remain here and help them get a palisade up, then we'll follow you. I'll get word about this to Navaryn."

Knowing they were yuwenghau, the headmon made a shrewd guess. "The First Mother?"

"Yes," Hathura said, with a smile. "You're learning."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### TRAGEDIES

Trevor Sinclair, while large for a lycan, did not match his father, Todd, for size—although at six foot three, he came close. He trapped his heavy, cinnabar hair at his neck with a black suede thong. The hilt of a broadsword jutted above his shoulder, hung from the leather harness crisscrossing his muscular chest and a pair of long knives rode at his hips. A bemused smile of anticipation played across his face as he stepped into the little one room schoolhouse.

Although there were over a hundred children in Longbranch and more scattered through the surrounding farms, there were only twenty-three students in the room, ranging in age from six to sixteen. Literacy had still not taken a firm hold in the community. However, Trevor remembered that when his half-brother, Branduff Maguire, had started this school fifty years ago the number of students had been less than a quarter of what it was now.

The students sat on benches at long tables watching Branduff writing on the big slateboard that took up most of the wall behind his desk. Creeyan educated, Branduff formed each letter with a swift flourish. Slender and of average height, Branduff lacked the size and heavy musculature of his younger Sinclair half-brothers.

Trevor noted, with a twinge of irritation, that Branduff had not worn his blades into the classroom. Ever since the massacre at Iudris Meadow, Trevor had been pressing Branduff to wear his blades to school. Trevor had thought he had won that last round—yet there stood Bran, unarmed, and writing on the chalkboard.

"School's out!" Trevor ran his fingers through his cinnabar hair.

Branduff Maguire paused with a piece of chalk in his hands and glanced back over his shoulder. "What do you mean 'school's out'? I haven't finished giving the children their assignments."

"Ulicia's gone into labor, Big Brother. You're wanted at home."

Some of the children snickered at Trevor referring to Branduff as his 'big brother.'

Branduff sucked in a deep breath and turned to the children. "No homework. School's out. Neddie, call the rows. Everyone put your things away, nice and neat."

He placed his books and papers in his satchel, glancing at Trevor between each batch. "How's she doing?"

Trevor tilted his head to the side with a wry grin. "Mary says your son is giving her quite a battle." He caught the worried look in Branduff's eyes, walked over, and squeezed his brother's shoulders, certain that Branduff had to be thinking of Ulicia's sister who had died in childbirth last year. "Ulicia will be fine, Bran. Mary says she's not in any danger."

"We didn't plan this one, Trevor." Branduff slipped the strap of his satchel over his head and settled it across his chest. "I didn't want to risk Ulicia ... not after..."

"I know. Best laid plans and all. Maybe that's why you finally got another boy after all those girls."

"Maybe."

The jingle of harnesses and the pounding hooves of horses sent Trevor to the front door. He held his

hand out to stop the children from leaving. "What the hell? There's a unit of Waejontori cavalry riding into the yard."

Branduff gestured at the children. "Out the back door. Run for your homes and don't look back."

The children lined up at the back door, bolting out in pairs as they had been trained, siblings together.

Branduff's hand dropped to his sides and found nothing at his hips but a small belt knife. "Trevor, see that all the children get out. I'll try talking to them."

Trevor nodded, drew his sword, and moved to the line of fleeing children. "Be careful, Bran. I don't want to see Ulicia wind up a widow."

"Just get the children out."

Branduff walked out into the yard as the myn were dismounting.

The big mon who appeared to be the leader strode up to him; his eyes were the dark amaranthine of steeped-in-death sa'necari. "Branduff Maguire?"

"Yes." A chill swept through Branduff. He tried to focus on the officer even as the corners of his eyes observed the others moving first to the sides of him, and then disappearing from the reach of his vision as they stepped behind him. Within a scant few heartbeats, Branduff knew they had surrounded him. He lifted his head, thrust out his chin, and struggled to keep the fear out of his eyes. He had to keep them occupied until all of the children could get away. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Yes, there is. I'm Captain Yulus Savakis."

Yulus drew his sword, holding it point downward at a nonchalant angle. As if that were a signal all the soldiers surrounding Branduff drew theirs. His muscles crawled beneath his skin, his body tensed. They had blocked his every avenue of retreat. The teacher resisted glancing back to be certain the children had gotten away. He had to trust Trevor's wisdom there. Branduff clutched at the fact that he had heard no screams, interpreting that silence to mean that none of the soldiers had gone after the children. "If it's questions, I'll answer them. I'm a loyal mon."

"I'm sure you are, *prince*," Yulus sneered.

Branduff felt as if he'd been dropped on his head: they knew about his father—or suspected. "What do you want from me?"

"Your death." Yulus' lips parted just enough to show his teeth in contempt. With a small movement, eloquent in its economy of motion, he snapped the sword up and plunged it into Branduff's belly adding an efficient little twist to rip his guts beyond healing.

Branduff gasped, his eyes wide in shock and pain. He glanced down at the blade, mouth hanging open, and eyes as dull as that of the village idiot. "What ... what did I do?"

"You were born." Yulus yanked his sword free with a nod to his myn. "Finish him."

Blades plunged into Branduff's body from all directions. A long, lycan howl of pain that their people called the death scream broke from his throat and shivered in the air. He shuddered as the blades were jerked out of him, sank to his knees, and curled into a fetal ball, clutching his wounds as his blood pooled around him.

\* \* \* \*

Trevor's head snapped up at the sound of his brother's cry. He stared at the door. "They killed him."

The four remaining cubs hesitated, turning toward Trevor with trembling lips. He shoved them at the door. "Run. Fast! Don't look back."

Once all of them had left the building, Trevor headed for the front door with his sword drawn. He saw Bran lying in a widening puddle of blood in the dirt. Three myn stood over his brother talking while the rest mounted up. None of them moved to go after the fleeing cubs. Trevor knew then that they had come for a single reason: to kill Bran.

Yulus wiped his sword off with a bit of cloth and sheathed it. "Well, that's one dead prince. Now for the others. Which way did our scouts say the farm was?"

"Laetus wants his head." Pio toed Branduff over onto his back.

"Take it."

Pio sheathed his sword and drew the big hunting knife at his hip. He knelt, tangled his fingers in Branduff's hair, and pulled his head around to expose the lycan's throat so that he could see through it.

Rage and grief overrode Trevor's training. The big lycan charged from the schoolhouse.

Pio's knife came up to guard as he reached for his sword. Before the long blade could clear the sheath, Trevor's blade cut deep into his neck and struck bone. Pio fell across Bran.

Tarchon yelled a curse and, as Trevor swung around to face him, slashed Trevor's sword arm to the bone. Trevor cried out, his sword falling from his numb fingers. Yulus shoved his blade into Trevor's chest; and Tarchon's blade entered just below it at a cross-angle. Trevor stiffened for an instant, pain and weakness overwhelming him. The two sa'necari widened the wounds with a turn of their blades and yanked them free. Trevor's head bobbed as he sank to his knees, and then collapsed across his brother.

Something shattered inside Trevor that went beyond his heart and mind and body. It reached into his soul and kindled the talents he had so long repressed. His mother had always told him that she sensed a tiny vestige of her mage gifts within him, but they had never fully manifested until that moment. The talents had leaked around the edges at times, just enough to frighten him like a scary tale on a stormy night, and he had closed them down with ruthless resolve. Lying there across his dying brother, aware that he was also dying, Trevor's mind filled with the image of the one person who represented safety and healing: his mother, Cahira. Golden energy swept through him. It shimmered around him. Trevor, Bran, and Pio vanished.

Tarchon gave a startled yelp. "Mage."

"Dying mage. It's no matter. Mount up; we've six bitches and their cubs to kill."

\* \* \* \*

Since it had been a busy morning and someone needed to watch the shop, Cahira decided to have the afternoon tea at the table in the rear of the main room so that they could all be together. The three cubs sat at the end of the table and Todd sat at the head with Cahira at his right hand and Kady at his left. Finn sat on the other side of Kady. He would be returning to the manor tomorrow, although he would be kept on light duty for a few weeks more.

Finn tugged a strand of Kady's short hair. "Ran with the scissors, did you?"

She slapped his hand and he let go with an exaggerated yelp of dismay. "Stop that and pass the cookies



to the cubs.” Kady shoved the platter at him.

Finn slid the platter toward Cooley. All three cubs leaned forward in their chairs, hands poised to snag the crisp treats. Finn jerked the platter back at the last moment, wiggling his eyebrows at them as they glowered.

"Finn!" Kady punched him in the shoulder, careful to avoid areas still tender from his half-healed wounds. The Devil's Silver on the arrows that wounded Finn had slowed the healing process down to a crawl.

"Oh, all right." Finn pushed the plate of cookies down, shifted in his seat, and regarded Kady with an impish gleam in his eyes. "You know, even with the hatchet job on your hair ... you're still kind of pretty."

Kady bristled at that, turned more fully toward him with a non-sequitur poised on her lips, and let out a shrill scream, pointing at the center of the shop.

A pile of bleeding myn had materialized on the floor. Kady's chair toppled over as she jumped to her feet. Todd, however, reached them first, settled on the floor, and cradled his eldest son against his chest.

Trevor's eyes, dulled by pain and blood loss, fixed on his father's face. He coughed hard and blood ran from the corner of his mouth mixed with white froth. His lips moved, but no words emerged. Trevor's eyes closed and he sagged in his father's arms. Only the slight movement of his chest and the froth oozing from his wounds with each struggling breath showed that he lived.

Finn pulled Pio off Branduff, took one look at Pio's eyes, and cursed. "Bloody sa'necari." He snapped his fingers at Kady and opened his hand. "Give me your knife."

Kady laid her knife in his hands. "They rise don't they?"

"This one's not gonna." Finn set to finishing the job that Trevor's earlier blow had started.

The three cubs clustered behind Kady and Finn, watching with macabre fascination as Finn sawed through Pio's neck.

Todd looked stricken, but in command of himself. "Cooley, take Larkspur and find Pandeena."

Cooley ran out to the barn behind the house as if someone had set his tail on fire.

Cahira dropped to her knees and gathered Branduff in her arms, sobbing.

Branduff's eyes fluttered open and he gazed up at her, his lips moved, but she had to put her ear close to his mouth to understand all of it. "They knew ... asked for me ... by name. Called me prince. The girls ... they're going to kill ... the girls."

As if he had been clinging to life just to say those words, Branduff stilled as they left his mouth. Cahira felt the last flicker of life fade from her son's body. "Bran's gone."

Kady glanced at the door in time to see Cooley speed around the corner at a gallop and race past the shop, riding bareback as if he had been born to it. If anyone could reach Pandeena in time to make a difference, it would be Cooley on that greathearted mare whose speed and stamina was legendary in racing circles.

Todd brushed the strings of blood-matted hair from Trevor's face as his son's breathing worsened. "He's following his brother."

"No!" Cahira released Branduff's body and snatched Trevor from Todd's arms. "I'm not losing two sons."

I. Am. Not. Losing. Two. Sons.” Cahira shoved her fingers into the wounds in Trevor's chest and threw all the arcane energies she possessed into it, determined to save him even if it cost her life.

She did not Mend.

Cahira Healed.

The wound closed up around her fingers so fast that she had to jerk them out.

Cahira looked dazed and exhausted, the lines of age showing in her face more heavily than ever before, yet she reached for the wound in Trevor's arm. Kady saw her sway as if ready to collapse. She gently removed Cahira's hand from Trevor. “Enough. You've done enough.”

Todd shifted to his hybrid form and took Trevor from his wife's arms. He rose to his feet, carrying Trevor as if he weighed nothing, and headed for the stairs.

Kady helped Cahira to her feet and walked her to a chair. “Sit.”

Cahira gave a small nod.

Kady fetched whiskey and a glass, filled it, and wrapped Cahira's hands around it. “Stay here.”

Finn sat cursing, tears streaming down his face as he finished cutting all the flesh and sinew away from Pio's neck bone. Blood covered him. “They killed him.” A bitter sob broke from Finn's throat. “He wasn't even armed ... and they killed him.”

She went to Finn and patted him on the back, rubbing between his shoulder blades. “I know, Finn. I know.” Kady kissed his head. “I'll get a blanket to wrap him in.”

Rory and Hamish, not knowing what else to do, dragged their chairs next to Cahira's and sat patting and stroking her, making the familiar noises the adults used to comfort them when they cried.

Kady fetched a blanket. She straightened Branduff's body, threw the blanket over him, and rolled him up in it, making certain that his face was completely covered.

Todd reappeared. He lifted his stepson's body into his arms. “Finn, tack the asshole's head to the shop sign.” He glanced at his wife and then at Kady. “Kady, put Cahira to bed and dose her with a sedative. I'm going to put Bran in the guestroom for now.”

\* \* \* \*

Cooley rode like the proverbial bat out of hell down Main Street, scattering lycans from his path. He sat high up on Larkspur's withers where she could best carry his weight and fifty pounds of under-sized cub was not enough to slow her down. Cooley did not ask Larkspur to give him her all until they reached the stretch where Main Street turned into Cheshire Road. There, where the traffic thinned to almost nothing at that time of day, Cooley gave Larkspur her head and shouted encouragement to her.

Larkspur's stride lengthened, her long mane whipped about his face, and they raced the winds to the Willodarian shrine where Pandeena lived. He dropped from Larkspur's back near a water trough and let the reins fall from his hands. The mare was too well trained to wander.

Cooley pounded on the door to Pandeena's apartment on the east side of the shrine, calling her name in frantic tones.

The door opened and Pandeena settled on her haunches to look Cooley in the eye. “What's wrong?”

"Cahira needs you right now. They killed Kynyr's dad. They're gonna attack his sisters."

Pandeena's expression tightened. "Does Kynyr know?"

"I'm going there next."

"Well, you go then. I'll get there."

Cooley headed back at an easier pace. He had just had the ride of his life and now he wanted to spare Larkspur. Cooley knew only too well how far he could push her without hurting her. He rode through Wolffgard without stopping or turning toward the shop. One more person needed to know what had happened: Kynyr. He ached inside and tears ran down his face, remembering when his own father had been murdered by the sa'necari in Hell's Widow.

The cub entered the yard of the manor at a walk, patting and sweet-talking Larkspur.

Georgie Rogan came out of the barn and walked up to him. He grasped Cooley by the waist and helped him down. "What's this? No saddle?"

"I was in a hurry."

Georgie touched the wet streaks on Cooley's cheeks. "Bad news?"

The cub nodded, his lower lip trembling. "Gotta talk to Kynyr."

"I'll get Larkspur cooled off and rubbed down."

"Thank you." Cooley trudged to the door and knocked.

Kissie answered, saw the look on his face, and hugged him. "What's wrong?"

"Gotta talk ta Kynyr."

"He's in the Great Hall." She took him by the hand and led him there.

"Cooley? What's wrong?" Kynyr got up from his chair using his cane. His lingering limp had started to fade.

The cub sucked in a deep breath. "It's yer Da, Kynyr. He's dead. They killed him. Ya gotta get to Cahira's right now."

"He can't be dead. He can't be." Kynyr tensed and his eyes narrowed as he fought back a wave of disbelief. "He wasn't a threat to anyone ... He was a schoolteacher for gods' sakes. He never hurt anyone in his life."

Malthus leaned forward in his seat, head down to mask his reactions as he listened to the news. "When did it happen?"

"Just now. Right in the middle of Cahira's shop." Cooley put a hand over his mouth before he could say anything else. Malthus made him nervous, and Cooley wished he had not responded so quick. His habit of answering when an adult asked a question had gotten the better of him. Rory was always telling him to keep his mouth shut, and right then Cooley could see why.

"I thought he was in Longbranch," Malthus said.

Kynyr glanced at Malthus. "He is ... was. Cooley, what happened?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Cooley's lower lip trembled. "Todd sent me. Cahira's crying."

Sheradyn rose from his chair. "If you don't mind, Aisha, I'll go with him. Have Gillivray come for me there this evening."

Aisha's brows knitted and her lips came together into knot of concern. "Go ahead." She crossed the room, slipped her arm around Kynyr's shoulders, and hugged him. "If there is anything you or your family needs, just ask."

Kynyr turned his head away with an abbreviated nod of acknowledgement. "My mother..." He swallowed and straightened his shoulders. "She's expecting ... midwife says it's a boy ... last letters I got ... they were so happy, Aisha. So *very* happy...."

He jerked away from her in a sudden turn and hurried from the Great Hall. Cooley ran after him and trotted at his elbow, glancing up at Kynyr with the helpless concern of youth. Sheradyn followed.

"Georgie!" Kynyr shouted as he approached the barn.

The ostler and head groom poked his head out. "What's up?"

"Saddle Bucky and Glorygirl."

"What about the wagon?" Sheradyn looked uneasy.

"Can you ride?"

The aged healer looked uncertain. "Sort of."

"Then you can climb up behind Cooley. Wagon's too slow."

Sheradyn mounted behind Cooley with awkward trepidation. They took the road to Wolffgard at an easy canter. Kynyr wanted to give Bucky his head, but kept an easier pace out of consideration for Sheradyn. The old healer sat uneasily behind Cooley, clutching at the rear of the saddle. At least he knew enough to not clutch at Cooley.

\* \* \* \*

Pandeena shimmered into the shop and stared at the headless body on the floor, coated in congealing blood. She glanced around and spied Todd sitting alone at the table in the rear with his face pressed into his hands, his shoulders slumped. She glanced at the body. "Cooley told me what happened. I'm sorry."

Todd raised his head, his eyes speaking of the darkness that had settled on his soul. "I failed Tarrant. Bran ... might as well have been mine. I raised him. I failed him, too. Cahira may have damaged herself healing Trevor. My son ... may not survive ... he's lost too much blood. I don't know ... I just don't know."

A dull ache formed in Pandeena's chest at seeing Todd like this. "If they knew about Bran, then they know about his daughters ... they know about Kynyr." She kept her voice as even and calm as she could. "I'll do everything in my power to protect them. Enter rapport with me, Todd. I need a clear picture of where they are."

"You can't go alone." He stirred sluggishly and started to stand.

Pandeena pressed him back into his chair. "Cahira needs you here."

"One lone mon..."

"Todd, listen to me." Pandeena said gently. "I'm Moonbow, remember?"

His head came up. "I'll never forget it ... the only lycan ever to become a battlemage."

"Exactly, Todd." She touched his temples and reached into his mind. "I have it. I'll return when your family is safe."

Todd grabbed her arm. "Who told the enemy?"

"That should be obvious: Baroucha."

Then she vanished.

Two cubs, standing in the shadows of the door into the backroom, glanced at each other in silent conspiracy.

"Let's get her," said Rory Scott.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus walked to Wolffgard. He poked his head into the Difficult Horse and spotted Preece sitting with Shalto and Oswyl. He went inside and sat down at the table with them.

"Have you heard the news?"

"What news?" Preece leaned in.

Malthus raised his voice. "Raiders wiped out Kynyr Maguire's family in Longbranch."

"That's not what I heard." Sergeant Lon Anglesey straightened in his chair as an uproar started in the tavern. He raised his voice to be heard over the noise and pounded the table with his fist. "That's not what I heard."

The room quieted and all eyes turned toward him.

"And just what did you hear?" Malthus frowned at him.

"Well, to start with there's a sa'necari head nailed to the bottom of their shop sign. Kady told me that they killed Branduff Maguire and wounded Trevor Sinclair. That's a definite. However, Kady implied ... rather pointedly ... that any sa'necari going after the Maguires is likely to be fighting Guildsmyn as well as farmers."

*The Guild has involved itself?* Malthus lowered his head to hide his reaction. The Assassins' Guild had destroyed his estates sixteen years ago. They had planted a lycan operative in his midst, Dyllys. Malthus had become engaged to her, only to discover the night before they were to be married that she was Guild and had betrayed the location of his hidden laboratories to them. A lycan Battle-Clan and a unit of Guildsmyn tore the place apart. Malthus rited Dyllys and was pursued by a Guild investigator named Aramyn who almost caught him. A chill ran over Malthus at the thought of having the Guild sniffing his trail again.

Sucking in a deep breath, Malthus forced an air of relief. "I'm happy to hear that. Kynyr Maguire is a good mon. It would be a shame for him to lose his entire family."

"Wouldn't it though?" Preece studied Malthus for a moment, downed the rest of his tankard, and walked

out.

\* \* \* \*

Kady Wiggins set a bucket of soapy water near the edge of the drying blood and leaned a mop against the wall. She rubbed her arm across her forehead. Getting the blood off the floor might help the mood in the house a bit ... or so she hoped. Finn had dragged the sa'necari's headless corpse out into the street and, afterward, Kady convinced him to go and sit with Trevor. So far, Todd worried her the most. Kady had never seen him so shaken.

Rory and Hamish slipped into the room and stole over to the table, eyeing the abandoned remnants of the afternoon tea. They each snatched a cookie.

"Don't go filling up on cookies. I'm going to start dinner soon." She noticed the odd bulges in the sides of their pants and frowned in suspicion. "What have you got in your pockets?"

"Nothing." Rory attempted an innocent look that failed to convince Kady.

She stalked around the table and patted Rory's pockets. "Empty them on the table. I want to see what you've got."

Rory gulped, but obeyed. Dozens of rocks soon covered the end of the table. His sling followed and then three glass vials.

Kady opened one of the vials and her nose wrinkled in disgust. "Slime bombs! You're making slime bombs? Just what the unholy hell were you planning on doing?"

Rory's budding Adam's apple bobbed nervously. "Defend the shop."

"From what?"

"Monsters," Hamish piped up. "You never know."

Kady's instincts warred between taking it all away from them and an urge to hug them. She corked the bottle and put it with the rest of Rory's stuff. "If the shop needs defending, I'll defend it. I have enough to worry about without the two of you getting into trouble."

"Can I have my stuff back?" Rory stared at his feet as if his toes had suddenly become the most fascinating thing imaginable. "We're not going to get into trouble. Promise."

"Stay out of the way, but don't leave the shop without permission. I might need you both."

Rory shoved his armory back into his pockets. "Is it okay if we play checkers in the backroom?"

"Sure. That's fine." Kady tousled his hair. "You know where the board is?"

"Ayup," Rory said in perfect imitation of Todd.

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr repressed a wince as he put his weight on his bad leg to dismount from Bucky. Todd and Cahira insisted that even the limp would go away in time, but nothing before in his life had taken so long to heal and it irritated him. Once down, he dropped the reins in front of his grandmother's shop. Bucky lowered his head to pull at clumps of grass throwing up green spikes around the gray weathered legs of a water trough. Kynyr yanked his cane from beneath the saddle flap where a bow normally rested. Cooley swung his leg over the saddle and jumped down from Glorygirl's tall back. Sheradyn hesitated, so Kynyr limped

over, braced his feet, and gave the old healer a hand down.

Cooley pointed at the shop sign. "They nailed his head up."

"Whose?" Kynyr spun around a bit too fast and his knee nearly gave. He stared at the hanging head, half expecting it to be his father's and relieved to see it was not. "Sa'necari."

"That's the one killed your dad."

"It ... happened here?" Kynyr's voice caught.

"Not exactly. They just appeared in the shop. That one, your dad, and your Uncle Trevor." Cooley wrapped the reins of both horses around the tie rail, and trailed Kynyr into the shop.

"What did Trevor say?"

"Nuthin', he had a big bloody hole in his chest."

That information staggered Kynyr and his steps faltered. His family had always been close, tight-knit, and loving. "Is he dead too?"

Cooley swallowed hard. "He was close to it when I left."

Down on her hands and knees with a rag, Kady Wiggins scrubbed at the blood on the floor. The mop had proven less effective than she had hoped. She straightened and scrambled to her feet, dropping the rag in her bucket when she saw Kynyr, Cooley, and Sheradyn come in.

Kynyr stared at the blood. "Dad..."

His face twisted into a mask mingled of rage and grief. A long, keening howl shivered up from his throat as he threw his head back and released it.

Kady grabbed Kynyr and shook him. "Stop it."

"My father.... "He started to unleash another howl.

Kady slapped him, halting his second howl of grief before it could escape and disturb the rest of the house. Her gaze flicked to the ceiling as if listening for the reactions of those in the rooms above—no sounds came—so she stared Kynyr in the eyes. "You've got to be strong, Kynyr. Your Uncle Trevor is wounded. Gram is so exhausted and traumatized I had to dose her and put her to bed. You go to pieces and I'll beat the crap out of you. I'm at the end of my rope. Don't push me."

"Like hell!" Kynyr threw his cane across the shop. It hit a cabinet, breaking the glass.

Kady smacked him across the face again. He responded by knocking her aside and heading for the stairs. His leg hurt, but he focused on the pain as the only thing holding him together.

She started after him, but Rory and Hamish grabbed her.

"Let him go," Rory said softly in a tone of voice closer to twenty than ten. "He's hurtin' bad."

Hamish darted after Kynyr and climbed the stairs at his heels. Kynyr slammed his bad leg down hard with each step, gritting his teeth against the pain. "Why did this happen?"

Hamish patted Kynyr's arm. "Ones that did it said they'd killed a prince. Was your Da a prince?"

"Someone told the sa'necari." The look that came over Kynyr's face disturbed Hamish and he kept patting Kynyr's arm as he trailed after him.

"Umhm. Baroucha did."

"How do you know?" Kynyr halted and stared down at Hamish.

The cub shifted his feet uneasily, kicking at the edge of a step in soft thunks. "Well, she knows ... and she hates your family..."

"How do you know that?"

Hamish tried to look innocent.

"You're a pair of little sneaks." Kynyr said it without anger or accusation, but he might as well have slapped Hamish: the cub's mouth tightened into a twist of exasperation.

"Best in the village." Hamish rested his knuckles on his hips in a gesture that Kynyr suspected he had picked up from Todd.

Kynyr climbed to the top of the stairs, and paused, digging in his pocket. He put a silver coin in Hamish's hand. "Break her windows."

"You behave while I'm gone, Kynyr. Don't you go giving Kady grief."

Kynyr tousled Hamish's hair. "Sure thing."

Hamish ran back downstairs, patting his pockets filled with ammunition.

Kynyr stood in the hallway, looking up and down, trying to decide which direction to go, wondering where they would have put his father's body.

"Kynyr?"

He turned and saw Todd coming out of the infirmary. "Dad?"

"The guest room."

Kynyr went down the hall, past his own room, and opened the door to the guestroom. His father's body lay in the middle of the bed covered by a blood stained blanket. He flicked the blanket back from his father's face. Branduff looked peaceful, as if he only slept. Kynyr drew the blanket back further and his gut tightened. There were so many wounds that it looked as if his attackers had nearly torn Branduff in half. His hand trembled and he swallowed hard, averting his gaze. Todd took the blanket from Kynyr's grasp and covered his stepson again.

"Kynyr..."

"He never hurt anyone ... never in his whole life..." Kynyr's voice was hollow and he turned his face away, unable to look at Todd. "Ma ... she'd grab the paddle and turn me over her knee if I pushed it. Dad..." Kynyr shook his head and lifted his eyes to the ceiling, tracing the ceiling beams. "He just talked. He caught me fishing once ... I was supposed to be studying. He didn't get angry. He just talked ... and talked ... and when he finished I never wanted to disappoint him again."

Kynyr clenched his eyes shut as tears leaked from the corners. "I loved him."



Todd wrapped his arms around Kynyr and stroked his head. "We all did. I used to tell him he was too gentle for his own good. He learned everything I wanted to teach him ... but his heart was never in it."

"I think I disappointed him ... in the end ... becoming a guardsmon. It wasn't what he wanted me to do."

"He respected your decision, Kynyr. He said ... in the last letter we got from him ... that he was proud of you."

Kynyr swallowed back a sob and ground his palms into his eyes. "Baroucha ... gods damn her. Hamish said..." Kynyr sucked in a deep breath. "He said she told the enemy about Dad."

"Something must be done about her."

Kynyr straightened and pulled away from Todd. "I'll do it."

"Be careful."

"I will." Kynyr started for the door and stopped. "Todd, if she told the enemy about Dad, that means they know about me. The two attempts to kill me weren't coincidence. Why did it have to be Dad? He was a schoolteacher, for the gods' sakes. I'm a soldier." His eyes searched the ceiling as if his answers were written on the beams. "What about my sisters? My mother?"

"Pandeena went to protect them."

"You let her hare off alone?"

"She's more than capable of protecting herself and our family."

"She's good ... but..."

"Kynyr, listen to me." Todd gripped his shoulders and turned Kynyr about to face him. "Pandeena is long-lived. She's the same Moonbow who fought in the Rebellion."

"The battlemage?"

"Yes."

Kynyr's mouth screwed up and he wrestled with his reactions. He could not process the information. Coming on top of his father's death, it made his thoughts whirl and tilt in dizzy spirals. He could not decide whether it was good news or bad news and Kynyr did not want to go anywhere near it, did not want to try to understand all the possible ramifications. "I-I've been sleeping with her," he blurted out before he could stop himself. "I ... ummn ... I'll come back."

He spun about and fled the room; fled from a growing sense of guilt—had he not come to Wolffgard four years ago, the family secret might still be safe and his father might still be alive.

\* \* \* \*

Kady faced off in front of Sheradyn with her hands on her hips, remembering how he had roared into the shop yelling at Cahira the last time he came there. "Why are you here?"

Sheradyn ignored her tone. "Dear child, I'm here to help. Show me to your wounded and bring me a glass of that nice brandy Cahira keeps."

Kady sucked back a non-sequitur. He was such an old nancidawg that it grated on her nerves. Before she could respond, Kady caught sight of the three cubs edging toward the front door. "Where do you

think you're going?"

Hamish opened his hand, displaying the silver piece he held. "Errand for Kynyr."

"Okay, but stay out of trouble."

"We will."

Cooley and Rory gave her a couple of solemn nods as they rushed out the door behind Hamish.

"Come upstairs."

Kady led Sheradyn to the infirmary and placed a chair for him beside the bed. Finn, who had been sitting on the opposite side, moved across the room to a table and sat fiddling with the pieces on a chessboard. They had changed Trevor out of his bloody clothing into an old robe of Todd's. Trevor's bandaged arm lay atop the comforter. With summer fading into autumn, the nights were chill.

"Visual check first, I think." Sheradyn opened Trevor's robe. "Kady, Cooley mentioned a chest wound. I don't see any."

"There were two. Cahira healed them."

"I see." Sheradyn's finger traced two thin lines on Trevor's chest. "There?"

"Yes."

"Let's see the arm." Sheradyn settled into the chair and pointed at a small table against the near wall. "Can you bring that here?"

Kady set the table next to Sheradyn. He put his case on it, took a small pair of scissors out, and cut away the bandage.

"What's this salve you're using?" Sheradyn dipped his finger into the golden cream filling the long tear in Trevor's arm and sniffed it.

"Pandeena makes it. She calls it Idyn Gold."

"Drag another chair up and settle, child. I'll tell you if I need something."

Kady obeyed. "Todd doesn't think he'll make it. Too much blood loss."

"Has he been conscious at all?"

"No."

Sheradyn opened his satchel and took out a milky crystal. "Can you transcribe one of these?"

"What is it?"

"Well, that answers that. It's a memory stone. Gillivray will show you how to use it." Sheradyn closed his fingers around the stone and grasped Trevor's wrist with the other, his eyes going distant as he Read Trevor. "Level two blood loss."

"What are his chances?"

"Iffy," Sheradyn replied. "Very iffy."

Finn shifted around to straddle the chair he had been sitting on and faced Sheradyn and Kady. "If he don't make it, that's going to tear Mary up something awful."

"Mary?" Sheradyn got to his feet, leaning on his gold-headed walking stick as he crossed the room to stand beside Finn.

"His wife. They got four cubs. Youngest is six. Oldest is about ready to turn fourteen. Trevor married late."

"I see." Sheradyn pointed at Finn's arm.

Finn extended his arm and Sheradyn grasped his wrist, Reading him. "Pack your things. You're going back to the manor with me this evening. There's nothing wrong with you that Gillivray and I can't handle."

Sheradyn snapped his fingers at Kady. "Come with me. We'll check on Cahira now."

"Todd's with her."

"Then we'll check them both."

\* \* \* \*

The three cubs headed for Main Street, Hamish leading with a self-important stride, his hand closed tightly over the silver piece that Kynyr had given him.

Rory grabbed his brother's hand. "Gimme that I'm the leader."

"No!" Hamish twisted away from him. "Kynyr gave it to me. That makes me the leader."

"Which shop are we going to?" Cooley asked.

Hamish glanced around to see if anyone was watching them, eyes narrowed and lips set at a conspiratorial angle. "It's a mission."

"A mission?" Cooley looked confused.

"Ayup. Gotta get the gang together, pick up some war materials at the dry goods and the apothecary, and then attack the old stinker in her lair."

Cooley caught Hamish's shoulder and turned him about. He had been around the Scott cubs long enough to know that when they started using some of Todd's pet phrases that they had serious mischief planned. "We promised Kady to stay out of trouble."

"Mission's important."

"Kynyr actually asked you to do this?"

Hamish puffed his chest out and gave a solemn nod. "Now come on, let's get the stuff."

Rory poked Cooley in the back. "We was gonna do it anyways. Now we can do it better."

"Do what?" Cooley pushed Rory away from him. "Do what?"

Rory's expression flashed with irritated impatience. "Baroucha. She told the enemy about Kynyr's dad. You didn't see Cahira crying. I did. She's all tore up. Baroucha's gonna pay for it."

Cooley imagined Cahira's tears, felt a renewed flash of grief for the loss of his father and the loneliness

that had dogged him since his mother had sent him away. Legally he was now Cooley Sinclair, but in his heart the cub would always be Cooley Blackwood. "Yeah. Let's get her."

\* \* \* \*

Kady slipped inside the guestroom with an ewer of water, a basin, some clean cloths over one shoulder, and an old robe of Todd's over the other. She closed the door behind her with her foot, crossed the room, and laid the stuff she carried on the nightstand. Kady poured water into the basin and dipped a cloth into it. Then she settled into a chair and flicked the blanket back. She bathed the blood from Bran's cold face, shivering at the similarity between Bran and Kynyr. A sob caught in her throat. It was like looking at Kynyr laying dead there.

*Erskine exhaled heavily. "Because life is fragile. If you haven't already told him, you ought to."*

*"It scares me."*

*"Then you'd better find some courage. Someone's out to get him. Next time, Kynyr might not be so lucky ... and you can't tell a dead man that you love him."*

"I know, Erskine," Kady muttered to her memory.

She removed Bran's bloodstained clothing and washed his body. Laying some cloths across his wounds so they would not leak onto the clean robe, Kady dressed his body in Todd's robe and put a fresh coverlet over him. Impulsively she gave him the kiss of farewell, forehead, cheeks, and lips before covering his face.

"Kynyr told me so much about you ... I feel like I knew you."

"Kady! I need you!" Gillivray's voice carried through the hallways.

She sighed and headed for the infirmary.

\* \* \* \*

Iollen Newell sat on the threadbare couch with his cap in hand. The left arm of his shirt hung empty, pinned up so that it would not catch on things in passing. Eveleen and Gavin Dunne considered him with stern faces. He felt uneasy, but determined, telling himself that he had known how difficult this would be when he thought of doing it.

Aghavie's eyes glistened with tears and she sat on the edge of her chair watching him, her hands folded over her swollen belly.

"I've come to make amends." Iollen breathed deeply. "The gods took my arm, but spared my life. A debt is owed."

"I'll say it is," Gavin growled.

Iollen flinched. "I haven't a lot saved. But I have a bit. I am offering bride price for Aghavie. Her cub should have a father."

"Is it yours?" Eveleen asked.

"No. But I am the only one left alive who was there."

Gavin turned a stern glance on his daughter. "Is that true?"

"He was there, Da. But he didn't poke me." Aghavie watched Iollen's face with keen interest. Bearing a

cub out of wedlock shamed her family.

"Please, Gavin ... I'll be good to her. I'll cherish Aghavie and love her. I'll be kind and gentle. I'll provide for her."

"How when you don't have a job?"

Iollen lifted his head, snatching at what little pride remained to him. "I have a job. I'm working for Erwin Twelvetoos as a painter and Kynyr Maguire has given me a place to live in the servants' quarters of his new home."

"How much can you offer?"

"One hundred Sharani double gryphons." What Iollen did not add was that half the money had been a gift from Kady so that he could offer bride price for Aghavie.

Eveleen patted her daughter's hands. "What do you think?"

Aghavie managed to smile through her tears. "Can we make it a small wedding? Just go down to the Clerk of Records?"

Iollen put his hat down, reached out, and squeezed Aghavie's shoulder. "I'll roust him out of bed right this minute ... if you wish?"

Aghavie giggled and wiped the tears from her eyes. "Let's do it."

\* \* \* \*

Lost in a turbulent mix of emotions, Kynyr wandered through the streets of Wolffgard aimlessly in the darkness, unaware of where his footsteps carried him.

He ceased to notice the pain in his healing leg, which had become overshadowed by the pain in his heart and head. A name crept into his mind. Grief had driven his exchange with Hamish from his thoughts, but now that name crept back into his consciousness as he stood before Baroucha's shop. He wondered how many of the cubs had participated in the assault on the shop.

It looked like a gang of imps had attacked it. The windows had been shattered. Animal droppings had been piled in the doorway and splattered over the walls. A childish hand had written several crude slurs on the sides, uniformly misspelled: stunk-fase; peeg-zucker; auld stunker; lyar lyar; klaburnaner.

Kynyr walked to the door, reached for the knob and hesitated. He could hear cursing and weeping coming from the inside.

"Kill them all, Malthus ... kill them all." Baroucha sobbed.

*Malthus. What does he have to do with this?* Too many trails seemed to lead to Malthus. Fresh stirrings of rage kindled in his belly. He stepped inside. No candles or lamps had been lit, although twilight had begun to fade into full darkness. Baroucha huddled in the middle of the floor. Rotten food clung to her clothes and hair. A stench rose that went beyond the smell of ordinary filth, causing Kynyr's nostrils to wrinkle. The cubs had slime-bombed her. The Scott cubs were nothing, if not creative and resourceful when venting their ire.

Kynyr yanked Baroucha to her feet and propelled her into the backroom. "We need to talk."

"I have nothing to say to you, you filthy son of a whore."

A glance told Kynyr that the room fit his needs. There were no windows. The congested arrangement of cabinets and shelves would absorb sounds; therefore any screams Baroucha might release would never carry beyond this room.

"I have a lot to say to you." He shoved her onto the floor hard and closed the intervening door. "You killed my father."

"I never went anywhere near your father."

"You didn't stick the blades into him." Kynyr's voice sounded hollow and empty. "No, you just pointed the hands at him that held them."

"I hate all of you. Malthus will get you for this."

*Malthus again. Let him come after me for this. Let him come.* A wee voice in the back of his mind told him that he should go to the lawgiver; but there was no reason left in the cage of grief for Kynyr. He sat cross-legged beside her, jerked her tight against his chest with one arm around her shoulders, pinioning her. Grasping the neck of her dress, Kynyr ripped it open. "Cullen. Eideard. Ramsey. And now my father. You're to blame for all of them."

Baroucha shrieked and thrashed, but Kynyr kept yanking at the slime-dampened cloth until he had her bare all the way to the wispy strands of her gray genital hair. "You're going to kill me."

"Not killing you years ago was Todd's only mistake."

"Malthus'll kill Todd and Cahira. He'll kill all of you."

The brief twitch of rage he had experienced earlier faded as his sense of reality seemed to tilt and shift. His senses felt as if he had been wadded up in thick layers of cotton, dulled and distanced, his emotions so deadened that he felt neither joy nor shame nor rage nor satisfaction in what he did. Kynyr's awareness blurred and for a few moments it seemed as if he were someone else—as if he had become Eideard and the bitch he held was Ellie. He turned his face away, refusing to look into her eyes as he drew his knife.

"No ... please no." She writhed and pulled, but could not free herself from Kynyr's iron grasp.

Emotion flickered through him and vanished before he could identify what he felt. Kynyr shoved the blade into her body by feel alone. The hilt bumped the fatty tissue of her sagging breast as the blade entered her mid-section.

Baroucha's body tightened for an instant and she screamed. "Bastard." Baroucha's shriek gave way to coughing. "Malthus'll kill you."

"Killing you..." Kynyr stabbed her again, his teeth bared. "I'm sending him an invitation..." Another thrust of the knife into her yielding flesh. "To try." Kynyr twisted the knife. "I want him to try."

Each time the blade entered her, Baroucha released another anguished cry. Her noises pleased Kynyr—he wanted her to die in as much pain as his father had.

"He knows..." Baroucha sobbed, tears running down her face. "About Tarrant ... he knows."

"You told him."

Kynyr continued to plunge the blade into her in listless movements until she became silent and still. Then

he looked down at what he had done. The mangled mess that had been Baroucha would have turned his stomach at one time; yet the foulness of his deeds scarcely registered. He felt nothing. Not even satisfaction.

He let her slip from his arms, cleaned his knife on a bit of her skirt, and sheathed it. Kynyr fished around in the drawers of her desk until he found paper, ink, a quill, and a letter opener. He wrote a single word: Collaborator.

He pinned the note to her chest by driving her letter opener through it and into her. Then he stared at all the blood covering his clothing and fled into the darkness.

A large feline form slipped from the shadows and sat for a moment watching Kynyr's flight. Then he turned, pushed past the broken door, and went inside Baroucha's shop.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### SHOWDOWN AT LONGBRANCH

Pandeena materialized in the yard of a large, rambling farmhouse. At first glance it seemed no different from any other, and then the peculiarities registered. The wall that enclosed the roof top garden had arrow slits and merlons. The numerous plants were not hanging over the wall, but leaning through the openings and disguising them. The tall cupola in the rear was actually a watchtower. Except for the flowers in the garden beneath the windows and along the porch, there were no trees or shrubs close enough to offer concealment or be set afire and thus endanger the house.

Fields of grain waved in the morning breeze north of the house, lush orchards spread out behind it, and pastures dotted with cows, sheep, and horses lay to the south. She strode up the dirt path that led to the front porch, and climbed them. Just before knocking on the door, Pandeena shifted into the first stages of her hybrid form. Golden hair sprouted along her arms and across her cheeks. Considering the gravity of the news she carried, Pandeena wanted them to recognize her as lycan immediately. She pounded on the door.

A bitch, whose face reminded her of Kynyr's, opened the door and glanced at her. The bitch's belly was hugely swollen in the last stages of pregnancy. "Can I help you?"

"Get everyone inside. There's a Waejontori war-party headed this way."

The bitch gestured for Pandeena to enter, and stepped aside to let her pass. A large hunting horn hung over the mantle of the fireplace in the sitting room. She took that down, and walked outside with Pandeena following her. Putting it to her lips, Kynyr's sister blew the Fear, Fire, Foes call. Horn calls swiftly echoed from all corners of the farm. "I'm Kathleen Callaghan. Please, sit down." She waved at a sofa. "The others will be here soon. We'll need to get word to my father, Branduff."

Pandeena's eyes filled with sorrow. "They hit the school first. Your father is dead. Your Uncle Trevor is gravely wounded."

"The Mothers protect us." Fear and grief flashed across her face and faded before a steely resolve that reminded Pandeena of Todd in his youth. Expressions of grief would come later; once the immediate threat to their family had passed. "Those donkey-wallopers won't find us easy prey."

Pandeena followed Kathleen's gaze. Weapon racks covered the entire wall behind her.

A big, russet-haired lycan male strode into the room and started buckling on a broadsword. "What's going on, Kathleen?"

"Waejontori raiders are coming. They—they killed father, wounded Uncle Trevor. Cahira sent her to warn us."

He acknowledged Pandeena with a curt nod. A flash of grief swept across his features and vanished swiftly from his eyes as his jaw clenched. "We'll pay them. I've sent Jeremy to the MacIver's place and Mago to the cousins. They'll be here soon." He slung a bow case over his shoulder. "What's your name?"

"Pandeena."

"Any chance they'll try to hit the other farms?"

"They're after the Maguires, not the others. The enemy found out about Tarrant. That's why they killed Branduff."



"My father-in-law was a good mon. No one is going to hurt his family."

Kathleen pointed at him. "Pandeena, this is my husband, Wallace Callaghan."

The front door slammed open and a ten-year-old cub rushed in with a berry basket on her arm. She blurted out breathlessly. "I seen 'em! Counted forty all done up in mail, riding horses. They was crossing Willow Creek. I took the shortcut through Marston Wood and got here ahead of them."

"Grab your bow, Leigh. Get all the cubs on the roof."

More lycans entered the room, walked to the weapon racks, and armed themselves.

"Waejontori cavalry coming." Wallace scanned the gathered adults. "We'll talk tactics when the MacIvers and the Sinclairs get here. For now, I want everyone who can fight armed and in the front yard. They'll have heard our horn calls and may try something unexpected. Then again, those pompous assholes may just keep trotting down the road thinking there aren't enough of us to put up a fight."

A pretty, auburn haired bitch came into the room. "What's going on, Wallace?"

"Mary ... there's bad news." Wallace jabbed a finger at Pandeena. "Oh, hell. You tell her, Pandeena. She's Trevor's wife."

"Tell me what?" Suspicion entered Mary's eyes. She scanned the gathered myn. "Where are Trevor and Bran?"

Kathleen put her arm around Mary. "They aren't coming."

"What do you mean?" Mary's voice caught at the edge of alarm.

Pandeena crossed the room and grasped Mary's hands. "Bran is dead. Trevor's wounded. Cahira has done all that she can for him..." Pandeena's lips tightened. "But he isn't expected to survive. I'm sorry."

Mary swayed, closed her eyes, and inhaled deeply through her flaring nostrils. "Take me to him."

"That's impossible, Mary," Wallace cut in. "There's a unit of Waejontori cavalry headed this way. The same ones that attacked Bran and Trevor. You'd never get past them."

"I want my husband."

"What about Ulicia, Mary?" Kathleen patted her shoulder. "She's still in labor."

"I want my husband."

"I have a solution. I'll take Kathleen and Mary to Trevor; come back for Ulicia and any others that need to be evacuated; then I'll help you fight them off." Pandeena extended her hands to each of them.

"You'll never get back in time," Wallace growled.

"Just watch." Pandeena joined hands with Kathleen and Mary. Golden light shimmered around them and they vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Kady placed a bottle of brandy, a glass, and a bowl of stew on the larger table in the infirmary. "I'm glad you decided to spend the night, Gillivray. I was at my wit's end trying to deal with all of this alone."

"No problem. We'll take it in shifts."

Kady walked out and heard voices in the stairwell. She went to look and saw Pandeena climbing the stairs with two myn trailing after her that Kady did not recognize, although the Maguire stamp was on the face of the pregnant one. Pandeena quickened her steps when she saw Kady looking down at them.

"You'll have to make your own introductions, I need to get back. Kady, get a bed ready, the next one coming through is Kynyr's mother and she's in labor." Pandeena vanished.

"Where's my husband?" Mary demanded before anyone could speak. "Where's Trevor?"

Kady blinked and pointed. "Down the hallway to the end, turn left and the infirmary is the last room."

Mary rushed off without another word.

Kathleen extended her hand to Kady. "You'll have to pardon Mary. She's been in love with Trevor since she was knee-high to a badger. The thirty-five year age difference always bothered him more than it did her. They've always been so ... so close." Kathleen swallowed back a sob, and forced a smile at Kady's look of concern. "I'm not going to lose it. Not with so much that needs to be done. Forgive me; you don't even know who I am. I'm Kathleen Callaghan, Kynyr's sister."

"When are you due?"

"Any time now." Kathleen rubbed her eyes, forced another wavering smile. "The family has been teasing my sister Phoebe, mother, and me ... saying there must have been an awful lot of mating ... going on one night ... all of us due at the same time."

"If you'd like, we could sit in the kitchen and I could make you some tea."

Kathleen shook her head, her lips trembling again. "If it's all the same ... I'd like to see my father's body. I want to sit with him alone for a bit."

Kady pointed at the guestroom door and headed for the kitchen to clean up the remains of dinner. Then she remembered the broken glass in the shop where Kynyr had shattered that cabinet. "Well, one thing at a time."

She glanced out the window at the end of the hallway and saw that it was completely dark outside. Time had fled and there was still a lot to be done before morning.

Gillivray stuck his head out the door of the infirmary. "Kady! Where does Cahira keep her obstetrical forceps?"

"Her obstacle what?"

"Obstetrical forceps."

The irritation in Gillivray's voice hit her ears like the squeal of chalk across a slateboard and she sucked back an angry response. Kady strode down the hallway and into the infirmary. She banged on a wooden cabinet and then pointed at another at the far end of the room. "If she's got them, they're here or there."

Kady noticed that one of the folding screens had been extended at the far end and she heard a bitch moaning on the other side.

"Hot water and soap, Kady!" Gillivray shouted as he brandished a strange implement. "Cleanliness reduces the chance of infection."

Kady complied and when she returned she saw an older bitch on the bed, sweating through contractions, and another equally pregnant one patting her hand. Gillivray washed up and moved to stand between Ulicia's legs. They had her lying with her feet braced on the bedposts, scrunched down to the middle of the bed so that her knees were akimbo. Gillivray did a quick examination of Ulicia's female parts and then gently inserted the implement.

"There. There. I have him. Here he comes. Push, dear. You have to help me."

\* \* \* \*

Kathleen found a lamp and a box of lucifers sitting on a bureau beside the door. She lit the lamp and turned toward the bed. The sound of muffled weeping reached her ears and she walked to the far side of it.

Kynyr sat on the floor, curled into a tight ball, weeping. "It's my fault, Leeny. It's my fault he's dead. If I'd never come to Wolffgard..."

She tousled his hair. "I'd get down on the floor with you, Brubs, but I'd never be able to get back up again." Kathleen put the lamp on the nightstand to get a better look at her grieving brother, saw the blood on him, and her eyes widened. "Kynyr, are you hurt?"

"Not my blood. Hers. I killed her."

"Who?"

"The collaborator ... that got Dad killed."

"Are you sure she did it?"

"Yes." Kynyr straightened and got to his feet, unwilling to appear unmanned in front of his favorite sister.

"Get rid of that tunic, Kynyr. You don't want them seeing you like this. I—" Kathleen groaned and glanced down at her belly.

Kynyr jerked the tunic off, balled it up, and tossed it in a corner of the room. "Leeny? What's wrong?"

"My water broke." She swallowed and spoke in a hesitant manner. "Cramping ... contractions maybe. I've never felt anything like this before."

Concern for his sister snapped Kynyr from his paroxysms of grief. "You've never had a baby before. Gram says the first one is the hardest." Kynyr dragged her arm across his neck and slipped his other around her waist. "Come on, I'll help you. You can lie down in the infirmary."

Kynyr helped his sister into the room. The first bed they passed, which had been Finn's until Sheradyn sent him on to the manor, contained Trevor. Mary sat beside the bed, holding her husband's hand and weeping. Kynyr's stomach clenched briefly.

"Please, Trevor. Please," Mary sobbed.

Kynyr felt Kathleen falter and steadied her. "Help us. She's in labor."

Kady popped around the extended screen that now blocked off half the room. "I'll take her." She shifted Kathleen's weight to her own shoulders and walked her down to the other end, calling back over her shoulder, "Kynyr, get a pot of tea started in the kitchen."

Kynyr rushed out, grateful for something that he knew how to do.

\* \* \* \*

Iollen drove the wagon into the yard of the old house with his child bride beside him. He stared up at the house as he reined the horses in and set the break. The size of it left him feeling small and humble. None of the homes in Wolffgard could rival it. Old Elton McCain had lived there alone for decades with two servants, Henry Butterum the caretaker and Fychan Helmsley the stablemon. McCain's young wife had perished in a boating accident near Chandler's Rock thirty years ago. He had built this house for her as a wedding gift, and then let it fall into disrepair following her death.

Iollen gazed at the columned veranda. It needed a coat of paint and a few boards replaced, but it remained magnificent to look upon.

Aghavie's eyes widened. "We're going to be living here?"

"In the servants section. I can't offer you wonderful things, Aghavie, but I'll take good care of you."

Fychan came out and helped Aghavie down.

"I see you brought the new missus home. She's a pretty little thing."

Aghavie's cheeks brightened.

Iollen reached for one of Aghavie's bags and Fychan shook his head at him. "You get the little missus upstairs and I'll bring the baggage."

Fychan unloaded the wagon while Iollen led Aghavie to their rooms.

"It's not much..." Iollen faltered as he opened the door to their suite of rooms. Kady had paid Odhran to cut a intervening door between two of the servant's rooms the previous day. The wood of the door frame had not yet been painted, but the work had been neatly finished.

A worn sofa sat along one wall, framed by two chests of drawers. Two chairs faced the sofa across a low table. A square table with two chairs occupied the corner to the left of the sofa.

"It's fine," Aghavie reassured him. "I like it."

Iollen found a bottle of wine, two glasses, and a note from Kady sitting on the square table.

*Iollen,*

*If you've come home with a bride, toast your marriage. If you've come home without Aghavie, drown your sorrows.*

*Kady*

"It's late." Iollen got a blanket from the closet and spread it over the sofa. "Why don't you get on to bed?"

"Aren't you coming?"

"I'll sleep out here."

She walked over and looked at him. "Aren't you going to poke me?"

Iollen put his hand on her belly. "I think you've been poked enough."

Aghavie went to the table and turned the note around. "What does it say?"

"Can you read?"

"No." Aghavie poured wine for each of them and handed a glass to Iollen. "Ma says you have to poke me or the marriage can be set aside."

"Can your mother read?"

"No." She cocked her head to a quizzical angle, considering him with serious eyes.

"Then she doesn't know what we signed."

"What was it?" Aghavie lowered her eyes to the wine glass in her hand, her shoulders tensing.

"I acknowledged myself the father of your child. Therefore, consummation is not necessary."

"But it isn't yours."

"Most likely, it's Donald's." Iollen took a long drink from his glass, a troubled look creeping into his eyes and around his mouth. "But it doesn't matter who fathered it. It's your child, Aghavie and I will love it ... and be a good father to it."

"You lied." She spoke in a matter-of-fact voice, sipping her wine without looking at him.

Iollen's head came up. "About what?"

"About you being the only one alive. Preece was there the first time. It might be his."

"How far along are you?"

"Five months. It happened the first time. I missed my menses a week later."

Iollen dropped onto the sofa, his mind whirling as he tried to remember who had been there the first time. "Who was there?"

"Cormic Parry. Keith and Donald Greenlea. Shalto Beggins. Preece Malloy. They all..." Her mouth tightened and she hunched her shoulders. "You know ... they..." She made a palm up sexual gesture with her middle finger.

"You must never mention Preece."

"I know it." Aghavie sat down and leaned against Iollen. "Da's afraid of him."

"With good reason."

"Are you afraid of him?" She sipped her wine, watching him close, her head tilted to a quizzical angle.

"Yes."

Aghavie frowned in disappointment.

Iollen hugged her. "That doesn't mean I won't try to stop him if he comes near you. Courage isn't so much having no fear, as it is acting in spite of it."

She leaned in and kissed him. "Then you're a brave mon."

\* \* \* \*

Pandeena returned to Longbranch, having made five trips to evacuate the non-combatants, including the littlest cubs. Now she had come to fight. She drew her sword and looked out into the darkening fields.

The farm was eerily silent in the twilight. For a moment, Pandeena thought she had returned too late, but then her eyes grew accustomed to the dark and she made out the shapes of close to forty lycans in hybrid form, crouching along the hedgerows.

The sound of horses and the jingle of harnesses drew her attention to the road. The enemy had arrived. She reached out to their horses, filling the beasts' nostrils with the scent of lions. The horses bucked and reared in terror. A bell began to peel from the tower in the rear of the house. Arrows fired by cubs on the roof descended with deadly accuracy among the Waejontori, felling myn and horses alike.

Their attackers thrown into confusion, the farmers rushed out and the killing began.

She spotted their leader and charged him.

Yulus yanked two arrows out of his chest, threw them on the ground, and faced her with a sneer. "Come to die, bitch?"

Pandeena circled him warily. "Steeped-in-Death are you?"

"Of course." Yulus lunged low, his thrust aimed for her belly.

She blocked his blade with a 'hanging guard' maneuver, and forced it aside.

Yulus disengaged and came back at her with a slice from above.

Dropping into a crouch, Pandeena let his strike whiz past her and erupted in front of him, driving her sword into his belly.

Yulus stiffened for an instant, staggered backwards, and laughed at her, before attacking with a furious series of blows.

Pandeena frowned and retreated. This one was more steeped-in-death than any she had fought since the Lycan Rebellion—more undead than alive, because of the number of souls he must have eaten in the rites of Mortgiefan. She spread her arms, leaving herself open for an instant as she slipped into the position of a battlemage, summoning power into her left hand as her sword returned to guard.

The sa'necari commander hesitated, thrown off by the change in Pandeena. There had only ever been, to the best of his knowledge, a single lycan battlemage in all of their history: the one called ... "Moonbow."

"Damn straight." Pandeena threw a blast of golden energy at him and followed up with her sword.

Yulus raised his shields in time to block her power, but her sword sliced through as if his energy field had been made of paper.

Her sword struck him in the neck. Bone cracked. Yulus collapsed onto his back, staring at her with glazing eyes. She shifted her hold on her sword and beheaded him.

Pandeena turned in search of another foe.

The only sounds were those of the wounded and dying.

The only movement was that of lycan farmers taking the heads of their downed enemies.

The skirmish had been brief and efficient.

She interrupted one farmer in the act of dispatching a wounded Waejontori. "Where's Wallace?"

"Over there."

Wallace Callaghan sat on the ground at the base of the hedgerow, clutching a wound in his side. Pandeena squatted on her haunches, took his wrist, and Read him. "It's not as bad as it looks." She glanced up at the farmers gathering around her and Wallace. "Bring all the wounded here. I'll Jump them to the infirmary in Wolffgard."

\* \* \* \*

Kady wiped sweat from her face with her sleeve just before opening the door to the kitchen. The long day was catching up to her, and delivering three babies in succession had nearly finished her off. Stepping inside, she stopped in her tracks, finding the kitchen awash in a dozen cubs all under the age of five. A strange bitch stood at the stove, cooking eggs and ham. She turned and Kady caught her breath sharply at the bitch's aristocratic beauty that must run in the Maguire family. "You're Kynyr's sister?"

"Mallory. And you must be Kady." She winked. "My brother's been saying nice things about you."

Kynyr sat at the table. He looked over the head of the cub sitting in his lap, and flushed. "Hi, Kady. These are my nieces and nephews. The littlest ones."

"So I see." Kady backed out the door and leaned her shoulders to the wall, closing her tired eyes, and feeling overwhelmed.

"You're magnificent, Kady."

She opened one eye and stared at Kynyr. "Is all your family beautiful?"

"I guess so." Kynyr leaned close, his lips brushed hers, and, when Kady made no effort to push him away, he kissed her deeply.

She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him.

His finger teased her nipple. She arched her back, inviting him to fondle her breasts and he did so.

Kady moaned beneath his caresses. "Wild cousins, Kynyr?"

"Call Courtship, Kady."

"I have to tell you something..." Kady kissed him.

"What?"

"Wounded coming in!" Gillivray stuck his head out the infirmary door. "Kady, I need you."

She pushed away from Kynyr with a sigh. "Later ... No, wait. Kynyr ... I Call Courtship. But please, don't expect me to change tonight."

The look he gave her made Kady's heart sing. "I love you, Kady."

"I love you too, Kynyr."

Kady found the infirmary awash in wounded lycans. She closed her eyes to muster the last bits of her

strength, opened them, and counted the wounded.

"Seven," she muttered under her breath. "That's hardly awash."

Then she noticed a sheet shrouded body lying against the wall on the floor. Her heart sank. She knelt and flicked the sheet from the lycan's face. He was barely more than a cub. Kady made the sign of the bear and said a quick prayer for the dead.

"Kady!" Gillivray shouted. "Cots and pallets. Whatever you can find. We have twice as many wounded as we have beds left."

"Right. Cots. They're in the north storeroom." She rushed out again.

Kynyr fell into step beside her.

Kady glanced at him. "How's your leg?"

"I can manage."

"Well enough to help me get some cots from the storeroom?"

"Yes. Did you see my new brother? Ma is going to call him Bran ... for Dad..." Kynyr's voice choked up. "Dad ... he would have been so happy."

"Don't lose it now, Kynyr. There'll be time for grieving later. We've got wounded."

Kynyr mastered himself with only a brief grimace to show for it. "I know."

They moved four cots into the infirmary and Kady dropped into a chair, exhausted. She scanned the room.

Trevor had regained consciousness and had his good arm around his wife as he kissed her tears away. Their love was so strong and clear that Kady felt touched by the warmth of it.

Kynyr noticed the sheet wrapped body, flicked it back as Kady had. When he saw the dead youth's face, he unleashed a keening cry blended of rage and sorrow. "Duggan!"

Wallace Callaghan clutched his wounded side as he lurched across the room and started stroking Kynyr's head and murmuring words of comfort. "He fought well, Kynyr."

"He was barely fourteen."

"He fought like a man and he died like one."

"Wallace..."

"Say the prayers with me, Kynyr."

Wallace began the prayers for the dead and Kynyr joined in, finding solace in the words.

Pandeena, helping with the wounded, glanced at Kady. "Go to bed. Everything's under control."

"Thank the gods for that." Kady tottered out of the infirmary, reached her room, and threw herself down fully clothed. Sleep came the moment her head hit the pillow.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### A QUESTION OF GUILT

Caimbeul stood in front of Baroucha's shop and shook his head. He turned to the crowd that had formed behind him. "Did anyone see this happen?"

No one answered him. A few shook their heads in denial.

He stepped through the broken door and stared at the damage. The words on the walls made it clear that cubs had done it. Someone had seen it; probably a whole lot of someones; and no one would tell him anything. He had gathered that no one liked Baroucha, but protecting a bunch of cubs who would do something like this seemed a bit of a stretch.

The lawgiver walked into the backroom and his eyes fell upon Baroucha's mutilated body. "Shit."

He knelt down and read the note: *collaborator*.

Caimbeul touched her neck and extended his senses through the corpse. Baroucha had been dead at least eight hours. The letter opener had been driven into her after death.

Looking at the note again, Caimbeul could gather two things about the murderer: he was literate, had excellent penmanship, and had something against Baroucha. "Kynyr or Todd."

Caimbeul stuffed the note in his pocket and walked out into the street. "Baroucha Seaver's been murdered. If any of you saw what happened here and don't tell me about it and I find out, I'll haul you in as an accessory to murder."

Still no one answered him.

He scanned the crowd and spotted Erskine Faraday standing with three of Claw's guardsmyn. "Hey, Faraday! Secure the shop and don't let anyone inside. Send word to Claw about it."

Erskine gave a slow nod, and gestured to his companions, sending one running for the manor. Then they started dispersing the gawkers.

Caimbeul stalked off, heading for Cahira's shop. When he got there, the coffin-maker's wagon was out front, unloading two pine boxes. He saw the severed head dangling from the sign. The carrion birds had already been at it. The eyes were missing, but the lawgiver had a gut feeling that those eyes would have been sa'necari blood-violet.

Caimbeul stopped the coffinmaker. "Who died?"

"I don't know. Kady Sinclair came down and said that Cahira needed two."

Caimbeul followed them into the store. The coffinmaker and his helpers carried the coffins through the shop and headed for the stairs. Cahira sat at the rear table, staring into a glass of whiskey. Kady, who sat beside her, rose to her feet, but Caimbeul gestured her to silence. "Cahira? Kind of early for you to be drinking?"

Cahira raised her head, and Caimbeul saw her reddened eyes, her cheeks streaked with tears. He came around, slipped into a chair beside her, and covered her hands with his. "Who died?"

"My son, Branduff ... and my grandson."

"Kynyr?"

She shook her head. "Queran's son, Duggan."

"Where did it happen?"

"Longbranch, Trevor Jumped Bran and himself here after the attack."

Caimbeul listened to their account of what had occurred the previous day. "Where was Kynyr between say ... six candlemarks and midnight?"

"He was here, helping me." Kady put her hands on her hips and stepped between Caimbeul and Cahira.

"The entire time, Kady?"

"Yes, just ask Gillivray."

"I'll do that." Caimbeul's eyes narrowed. "What about Todd? Was he here then?"

Cahira frowned. "Why do you want to know, Padruig?"

"Someone murdered Baroucha Seaver last night and left this tacked to her chest." Caimbeul took the note from his pouch and shoved it across the table. "You recognize the writing?"

Cahira glanced at the note. "No."

"Is Kynyr and Todd here? I'd like to talk to them."

"The parlor."

Caimbeul went up to the parlor, passing the coffinmaker and his helpers who were leaving. There were four lycans in the room: Kynyr, Todd, and two that Caimbeul had never met before, although the Sinclair blood was stamped on their faces, from their size to their strong features and bright red-hair.

Todd bent over one of the coffins, adjusting the clothing on the body within it. He kissed the corpse.

"Todd, I'd like to talk to you. Someone murdered Baroucha Seaver last night."

"She needed killing."

"I won't dispute that." Caimbeul approached the coffins and studied the face of a young wolf. "Doesn't change the fact that it was murder."

"My grandson ... Duggan Sinclair." Todd's voice sounded hollow, his gaze distant. "He turned fourteen three days ago ... and now he's dead. Sa'necari bastard put a sword through him."

The older of the two lycans that Caimbeul did not know put his arm around Todd's shoulders and hugged him. "He fought well, Dad. All of my sons did."

Todd gave a small nod. "I'm sure he did." Todd walked around to the other coffin.

Caimbeul followed him and gestured at the body. "That's Branduff Maguire?"

"Yes." Todd shook himself free of his thoughts, although the haunted look remained in his eyes.

"Caimbeul, this is my middle son, Queran and his oldest Randal. Queran's Duggan's father."

"I'm sorry for your losses. But we still need to talk. Cahira told me what happened. I want you to tell me why you think it happened."

"The enemy knows about Tarrant."

"Baroucha knew about Tarrant. Is that why you killed her?"

Todd went to the small table near the back of the room, sat down, and poured a glass of whiskey. "Help yourself and tell me how she was killed."

Caimbeul joined Todd in a glass of whiskey, settling into the chair opposite from him. "Stab wounds ... too many to count. The murderer made a mess of her."

"There's your answer. I make clean kills."

Caimbeul pulled the note from his pouch and showed it to Todd. "Do you recognize the writing?"

"No." Todd pushed the note back to Caimbeul.

"It's too much coincidence, Todd. The sa'necari find out about that secret you've been trying so hard to hide. Baroucha knew and she had a grudge against the Maguires and the Sinclairs. Your family is attacked and a few hours later someone murders Baroucha."

"Padruig, there was too much going on last night for any of us to have gone after Baroucha. The infirmary is filled with wounded. All of them either Sinclairs or MacIvers."

"Finn MacIver's family?"

"Ayup."

"I'll want to talk to Kynyr privately."

Todd shrugged. "No one is using the salle right now."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul surveyed the salle and sauntered over to the table. He stared down at the empty wooden surface and scowled. "Where's the whiskey? I thought Todd always kept a bottle laying around."

Kynyr frowned and headed for a cabinet. "He does. Kady keeps putting it away when she cleans up."

"Maybe she doesn't want you dogs drinking so much?" Caimbeul grinned as Kynyr retrieved the bottle of Dragonsbreath and two glasses.

Kynyr poured for both of them and sat down across from Caimbeul. "Have you come to threaten me again, Caimbeul? Are you going to prosecute my grandfather if I refuse to answer?"

"I never intended to arrest Todd." Caimbeul scratched at the stubble on his chin, looked aside with a trace of gruff cognizance that he might have pushed Kynyr too far with that threat last time.

"You were bluffing?"

"Yah. But don't make more of it than it is. You'll never know when I am and when I'm not. So don't push your luck when I want answers."

"I won't."

"Did you kill Baroucha?"

"Not killing her years ago was Todd's only mistake."

"He's made others. But that doesn't answer the question. Did you kill Baroucha?"

Kynyr swallowed the contents of his glass at one go and refilled it. "No."

"How about I arrest Rory Scott for vandalism? That's twenty lashes, you know." Caimbeul scratched behind his ear and then took a swallow of his whiskey. "Twenty lashes to a cub his age ... kill or cripple would be my guess."

"You got witnesses?"

"None's come forward ... yet. But give it time. And by the way, Donald Greenlea's dead."

"Dead?"

"Yeah. I decided to administer the rest of his sentence in private. He dropped dead of heart failure in the middle of it."

"He and Iollen raped Kady." The steel in Kynyr's voice had Caimbeul remembering what Todd was like at that age.

"So I've been told. Iollen won't be raping any more bitches."

"Did you cripple him deliberately?" Kynyr tossed the question at Caimbeul, locked eyes with him, and clenched his jaw.

"What do you think?"

"You're a hard mon, Padruig Caimbeul."

Caimbeul shrugged, finished his whiskey, and refilled his glass. "I mete out justice. Sometimes justice is cruel. But it's what I do."

"I was here all night. I never left. Two of my sisters and my mother gave birth last night in the middle of the fighting. I couldn't leave."

"There's just one more thing I want you to do."

"What?"

"Fetch a pen and paper."

Kynyr went to a cabinet and returned with a pen, paper, and a bottle of ink. "Now what?"

"Write 'collaborator' on that paper."

Kynyr did so and Caimbeul put the paper in his pouch as soon as the ink dried.

"You'll be hearing from me, Kynyr." He stalked to the door.

"And if Truth Dies/ Then all that is left of life/ Is Darkness and lies."

Caimbeul's steps faltered and he spun around with a growl.

Kynyr gave him a guileless smile. "I read your book."

END

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