

BLOOD HARVEST



DARK BROTHERS OF THE LIGHT: BOOK VII

JANRAE FRANK

Renaissance E Books

www.renebooks.com

Copyright ©

NOTICE: This eBook is licensed to the original purchaser only. Duplication or distribution to any person via email, floppy disk, network, print out, or any other means is a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines and/or imprisonment. This notice overrides the Adobe Reader permissions which are erroneous. This eBook cannot be legally lent or given to others.

This eBook is displayed using 100% recycled electrons.



Distributed by Fictionwise.com

Blood Harvest [Dark Brothers of the Light Book VII]
by Janrae Frank

DARK BROTHERS OF THE LIGHT

BOOK VII

BLOOD HARVEST

By

JANRAE FRANK

ISBN 1-58873-955-4

All rights reserved

Copyright © 2006 Janrae Frank

This book may not be reproduced in whole or in part without
written permission.

For information contact:

PageTurnerEditions.com

PageTurner Editions/Futures-Past Fantasy

A Renaissance E Books publication

DEDICATION

To the Folks at the Corner

Daniel Arenson, the Summoner of Peers

Debbie Moorhouse, the Evil Sqrl

Jack Kincaid, the Jazmangler King

Joel Wideman, the MUD Master

Kaolin Imago Fire, the {meta,} Mancer

Karen E. Taylor, The Candlelight Queen.

Lena Sawyer, Sims Queen

Mark Prins, Niwi the Dungeon Master

Morgan Sylvia, Wraith of Clubs

Sue Miller, the Numen

CHAPTER ONE

FRIENDSHIPS

The icy wind howled like a horde of banshees as it ripped the leaves from the oaks and birches, shredded the trembling mid-autumn glory of the aspen stands, and hammered the encampment of the Army of the Renunciate, which ranged across the road and through the trees to either side. A sleeting rain added to the misery caused by the savage weather.

The lycans remained in hybrid form as they went about their duties, their fur offering an extra layer of warmth beneath their wool clothing and cloaks. Only the vampires, fifteen Ymraudes and five venomous Lemyari, took the weather in stride.

Lord Isranon Dawnreturning and his General Nans Gryphonheart had begun to weld their army into a whole, uniting all the desperate types who had signed on with them. Vampires, lycans, humans, freerangers, and kandoyarin mercenaries, it was an army unlike any that had marched forth before; not only in its diversity, but in light of all the myn in its ranks that had sworn fealty and allegiance to Lord Dawnreturning. He was a Lord only by the declaration of others and not by birth, a man without lands or holdings, a former slave, and was now the first mage-paladin to Kalirion the Sun God in five hundred years.

The Command Tent was the warmest in the camp, due to a sheltering spell cast by the liege-lord of the army. Within its enchanted shelter, Lord Isranon Dawnreturning sat at the head of a trestle table with his officers and advisors gathered for the briefing.

He had received the scouting reports shortly before he called his officers together. Isranon had long ago decided that he would not lead from the rear, asking his myn to take risks that he would not. Especially now that the game of war had become so dangerous with the rise of the hellgod, Gylorean Galee, on the east bank of the Hillora River.

Isranon scanned the table. His gaze touched on every face, and finally settled on the grim-visaged chieftain of a lycan battle clan, Nevin Scarface sitting to his left. Nevin had once been his mentor and helped raise him, taking him and his now dead sister in after the rest of the Dark Brothers were massacred. The relationship had changed and they were now spirit-brothers.

"What have your scouts reported so far?"

Nevin's tongue touched the split in his scarred upper lip. "We found another deserted village a day's journey north."

"You will take me there as soon as the weather clears," Isranon said. "I want to be certain that it was the exodus ordered by the Sacred King and not something else."

Isranon nodded thoughtfully. When they had come south, they had taken the coast road to avoid the Sacred King and encountered none of the villages and towns that had been abandoned as their inhabitants fled north with her to Rowanhart in a god-decreed exodus. This time they had taken

the West Bank Road that ran close to the Hillora River. After consultation with his general Nans Gryphonheart, Isranon had decided that the forest would help to conceal the movement of their army from any of the sa'nekaryiane's forces that might be watching for them.

This village just ahead of them was the third one they had found abandoned within two weeks. It troubled Isranon in ways that he found difficult to express, because it was little more than a gut instinct that something was wrong.

"We've seen no signs of violence, Isranon." Nevin leaned farther across the table. "No bones, no bodies, nothing except empty houses, abandoned barns. Many of the goods are still in the shops."

"I intend to see it," Isranon persisted. "I will go in ahead of the army, with a small unit."

Nan exchanged glances with Freyrick, her aide-de-camp. She had picked him up in Ocealay partly to act as a go-between herself and the other kandoyarin groups as well as to give her suggestions on how all the new myn could be expected act in given situations and how best to deploy them.

"You shouldn't risk yourself, Isranon." Nans' sapphire eyes hardened, and she fingered her long braid of cinnamon hair. "That's not a good idea,"

Travis rubbed under his nose uncomfortably and scanned the faces. He raised his hands in a fending off gesture as if expecting criticism. "Don't get me wrong, but I think you're reading too much into this, Isranon."

Isranon nailed Travis into his chair with a glance. "Am I? Granted these people could have accepted their priests

warnings and fled north with the Sacred King. I'm told that the vanguard was like a city on the move. However, it isn't easy to give up one's home of generations. Look what happened to the east bank city-states."

"The people of the city-states had more reason to stay." Freyrick glanced at Nans to be certain that he was not speaking out of turn, and at her nod, continued. "For centuries, they were safe behind their walls. How could they have known that something had finally risen that they could not fight? We certainly didn't."

Isranon lowered his head a moment, staring at his hands. "I will have Anksha with me."

Anksha bared her fangs in a broad grin. "Might find demons for baby." She rubbed her belly where Isranon's magical child was growing. "He's hungry."

Isranon glanced sidewise at her, a small smile touching his lips as he reached under the table and pressed his hand to his wife's stomach. He was no longer her blood-slave, and she was no longer his master; yet no one had expected him to bind himself to her in marriage after years of reaching for his freedom. "If we find a demon, by all means eat it."

Anksha simpered prettily, and a chuckle ran around the table.

Isranon rapped the pommel of his belt knife on the table to retrieve his officers' attention. "I've been reading Josiah's journals. There are things that can consume a town or village and leave no remains to be found."

Around the table settled a silence, one finally broken by Amiri, the Ymraude bio-magicalist and bio-alchemist. "Like

what?" Amiri wove her fingers through the beaded cornrows of her nappy hair.

"Like the brymaparusha, which eats even the bones of its victims, or the lamiae." Isranon ran his gaze across all of their faces, meeting every set of eyes, and holding each just long enough to communicate his absolute self-assurance and determination. "I'm doing this because I'm the only mage we have. When we reach Ildyrsetts, I intend to recruit mages. Then this duty will be shared. But until then, I need to do it."

With reluctance, murmurs of acceptance came around the table.

"From now on when an abandoned or nearly abandoned town or village is discovered the scouts will not go beyond the outer perimeter without me."

As the meeting broke up, Isranon gestured for Amiri to remain. "Have Randilyn bring me a couple of nibari."

Amiri frowned deeply, studying him with her head slightly tilted. "Isranon, you just fed hours ago."

Isranon rubbed his neck, bowing his head at the faint disapprobation in her tone. Not too many months ago that he would have agreed to whatever suggestions and orders she gave him in her role as one of his mentors. Much had changed since he stepped more fully into his role as leader of his disparate peoples, but in some areas, she could still make him question his actions. "I can't help it. I'm famished."

"Perhaps you should have some lunch."

"I—I want blood."

Amiri tugged at her hair. "Are you hurting again? You spent a good deal of power shielding the children's tents."

"A little." Isranon's eyes went distant. A year and a half ago, he had received copious wounds from the four blades wrought by the Master of Blood with Mondarius' divinator runes. While his attackers cut and stabbed him, they stole his ability to heal with normal blood. The injuries never healed right, and the embedded spells left in his body by the blades frequently caused the wounds to recreate themselves to varying degrees whenever he used his magic, and sometimes even when he did not. "I appreciate your concern."

* * * *

Randilyn arrived, bringing Eevy and one of the new nibari, Farris with her. Isranon lifted his head from his folded arms and regarded them as his fangs descended from their sheaths.

"Is there anything more?" Randilyn asked.

Isranon shook his head, and flicked his hand at the tent flap, his eyes riveted on Farris.

He pushed back his chair. Immediately Farris went to him, kneeling in first position, arms behind her back, wrists crossed, and her head tilted to expose her neck. "You're very pretty," Isranon said, brushing her dark hair from her neck and shoulders.

"Thank you, lord." Farris glanced at him with sudden devotion. "And thank you for sparing me."

Isranon's brows knit, and he cocked his head quizzically at her, wondering where those words had come from. "What? No lives will be taken out of appetite or for pleasure among my people."

Farris arched her long neck enticing him. "I was to have died three weeks ago. Liuthan had promised me to Stygean for the young master's first rite on his thirteenth birthday. I have small children ... I—I had made the arrangements for another to take them. But now—"

"You'll raise your children, Farris." A shadow of grief passed over Isranon's face, for the sun god had prophesied that he would not live to see his children grown.

"Please have me, Lord."

Isranon opened her blouse, and caressed her breasts, playing with the nipples. "Are you trained in all twenty-six positions?"

"Yes, lord," Farris answered shivering.

"Your breeding?"

"Three Diamonds."

Isranon licked his fangs. "Not fang-shy?"

"Not in the least."

"Good." Isranon pierced her neck skillfully, swept her away to pleasant visions with his power, and sucked.

Farris moaned deep in her throat, the sound arousing him. He sensed her weakening and pulled out of her, licking the wound closed. "Lie down on my bed. Rest until I finish."

Farris obeyed, and Eevy took her place. Isranon's appetite had grown dangerously intense over the past month. It worried him. At one time, he could go days before the craving for blood became sharp, but now he wanted large quantities of it several times a day.

When Isranon had sated himself on Eevy, he sent her to the bed to join Farris. He went to them to satisfy another

appetite. Anksha would be busy with her sa'necari blood-slaves for a long time that evening, sipping from many veins to reduce the Presence Pain in them, which resulted from the Dominance-Link she had set into every fiber of their being, body, mind, and soul, with her first bite.

Farris opened her garments, and drew her heels up to her buttocks in position three. Eevy, not to be outdone, assumed position four on her hands and knees. They were very well-trained, and already aroused to the heights of need by his feeding on them. Isranon dropped his clothing. He began with Farris—since this was his first time with her, while Eevy had sheathed his cock many times in the past. Isranon thrust into the palace of pleasure, moving with an intense hungry rhythm. Eevy, seeing that he had chosen to mount Farris, moved around and began to rub and lick his back.

"Isranon, I was just wondering if you could—oh shit." Travis stood staring in the entrance.

"Be quiet! Either step out or join us here."

Travis swallowed audibly. "Daree wouldn't like that." He ducked outside.

Isranon spilled his seed inside Farris, and grabbed his clothing, wrapping his robe around him. "Off with you both. You'll have yours another time, Eevy."

Taking Warrior in hand, he used the staff to get to his feet, and walked to the table, where he settled in a chair. Eevy and Farris ran out the door after dressing hastily.

"Come in, Travis."

Travis entered, still blushing brightly. He sat down across from Isranon. "Should you be doing that?"

"Doing what?" Isranon smiled with a touch of mischief.

Travis grew a bit more flustered. "Should you be playing Jack in the Orchard when you're married now? What's Anksha going to say?"

"You don't begin to understand our culture," Isranon poured himself a glass of wine and handed the bottle to Travis. "Nibari don't count as..." Isranon searched for the word. He spoke three languages fluently; unfortunately common was not one of them, although his fluency was increasing. He had spent most of his life in his homeland of Waejontor. When he found the word, Isranon started the sentence over. "It is not regarded as adultery among my people. A free woman, sylvan, human, or whatever. That would be different. Now, what brought you?"

"Daree. She went back for another look and says she smelled something nasty there. You were right, Isranon. Something strange is there. Something Daree's never smelled before."

"Find Nevin and tell him I said the scouts were to be kept at camp until I can ride with them."

After Travis had left, Isranon sat for a long time thinking. Farris' words about Stygean Loosestrife came back to him. He had not known that the boy had had a birthday that recently. Stygean was currently one of twenty-eight child slaves of sa'necari origin. The children ranged from six to thirteen years in age. When Isranon defeated Liuthan Loosestrife's coup in Ocealay, the rulers of that city-state had butchered every sa'necari they could lay hands on, adults and children

alike. Out of several hundred households and estates, Isranon had only been able to rescue these twenty-eight children.

Anksha had collared the children and declared them to be slaves, but she had not ordered them branded. Isranon planned to free each child that could be turned to the light and away from the sa'necari rites of rape and death, but he had not told them that and did not intend to. Their parents were among Anksha's blood-slaves, and only death freed a blood-slave from Anksha.

The oldest two, Stygean Loosestrife and Jingen Scathwick, were his greatest concern: especially Stygean. Where Jingen was being eagerly cooperative, Stygean was openly defiant and hostile. They already had their fangs and sa'necari learned to kill at a very young age. He had to find a way to reach them. A belated birthday party might make a very good overture of friendship to Stygean. Isranon decided to hold one, and to also have Randilyn and Nainee collect all the children's birthdays into a list so that they could all have parties.

* * * *

The children slept in a little cluster of tents, sheltered and warmed by Isranon's magic, segregated by age and nature. The tents of the sa'necari children were black oiled canvas; those of the nibari children were green. Predator and prey were not yet trusted to dwell together while the camp slept, and a guard prowled the darkness in the wretched weather to make certain that the sa'necari children did not leave their tent before an adult was available to oversee their actions.

Jingen Scathwick and Stygean Loosestrife shared a tent alone, because they were the only two who had matured into their fangs. Like the rest of the children, they had been born sa'necari. In ages past when the sa'necari were merely a cult of death and necromancy, the sa'necari were created through their rites of rape and death known as mortgiefan. However, over the generations, the rites had altered their genes and they had begun to be born sa'necari, with all the appetites and powers of the undead coming upon them at puberty. That made all of the children potentially very dangerous, especially Jingen and Stygean who had already passed into the first phases of sa'necari pubescence.

Stygean threw himself down on his bedroll with an angry flounce, his arms folded tight across his slender chest, and his dark gray eyes blazing. His long black curls flew around his face and then settled. "They wouldn't let me see my father."

Jingen rolled his eyes at Stygean. He lay on his back, pretending he was sticking a knife into someone with sharp gestures of his hands. "You really want to get out in this weather?"

"I. Want. To. See. My. Father." Stygean turned onto his side.

"I wouldn't want to see him," Jingen said in a disparaging tone. "He looks ghastly."

Stygean winced at Jingen's words, put two fingers to his eyes, and dabbed at the moisture gathering there. "He's withering."

"Huh! That's an understatement. The renunciate's bitch is sucking all the life out of him. All the magic and bio-alchemy.

The way she keeps her fangs in him, I bet his mage net and shaukras are crisped."

Stygean swallowed and fought to keep his voice from cracking. "Shut up, Jingen."

"Why? It's a fact. He's dying faster than the others. That's what my mother says."

The black metal links of the slave collar chafed Stygean's neck, and he ran his fingers beneath it, letting the chill air cool his skin. Stygean refused to look at Jingen, refused to let Jingen see just how much his words hurt. Overnight Stygean's fortunes had plummeted from the heights of a veritable mountaintop to the depths of the darkest abyss he could imagine. His father, Liuthan had been one of the most powerful of the Five Captains of the Coast, who ruled Ocealay, and now he was a blood-slave of the Beast. Stygean shivered, remembering the fateful day that it all went wrong. He had watched his father and mother ride off to a dinner party and then fallen asleep reading, while he tried to wait up for them. Going to his parents' suite, Stygean was ambushed by a lycan who was going through their things, beaten, and tossed into the dungeons. Tears welled up worse with the images running through his mind. For reasons that Stygean could not understand, the other boy's mother was not withering, while his own father was wasting away even though they had both been taken on the same day.

"Jingen..." Stygean began and hesitated.

Jingen made another idle stabbing motion and rolled onto his side to regard Stygean. "What?"

Stygean ran his tongue over his lips. "Your mother ... is she withering?"

"No."

"Yet, my father..." Stygean could not say the word. His chest tightened and his throat felt as if a large hand was squeezing it shut.

Jingen snorted. "The Beast can make it happen faster if she wishes. No doubt, the renunciate encouraged her to do it. He might even had ordered her to." Jingen made a slurping noise. "Bio-alchemy all gone, wither away, wither away."

"Shut up!" Stygean shrieked and covered his ears, curling into a ball. "Don't talk like that."

Jingen chuckled a moment, and then sobered. "Like what? I'm not sticking the blade in. I'm just being honest."

"I don't like the way you..."

"I know you don't. But I don't want you wussing out on me. We made a pact, Stygean. You and I. We're going to kill the renunciate and avenge our families."

"I'm not going to wuss out on you."

"Good. Because, when the opportunity comes for us to stick blades into him, I want you doing your share."

Stygean sucked in an unsteady breath. "I can do it."

* * * *

Anksha trotted through the camp wearing a heavy cloak with a wool lining pulled close about her, the hood partially obscuring her face. No one would be deceived by the hood, nor was she trying to deceive. She was just trying to keep the

rain off. Anksha, one of the most powerful beings in the camp, stood only four feet ten inches tall.

The wind had abated, but the rain still came down, and the camp would not move on until the weather had cleared completely because the wagons would keep getting bogged down in the muddy road.

She held her cloak closed with one hand and patted her stomach idly with the other. It seemed to be taking forever for the slightest bit of swelling to appear. Anksha longed for the day when her belly would be huge and protruding with Isranon's child. With a touch of envy, she remembered how incredibly enormous Haig's nibari, Nainee, had been just before giving birth. Anksha wanted everyone in the camp to see her waddling around with a huge belly sticking out.

Being the last of her kind, she had never believed she would have a child, and that had left her with an underlying sorrow. But then her husband, Isranon, had crossed the gulf between their species with his rogue magic, and now his child nestled in her womb.

"How long does it take?" she muttered, impatiently patting her stomach again.

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

Taking a short cut, she ducked through the narrow gaps between the tents in the lycan battle-clan's section. Those scouts had a black banner with a silver wolf's head flying above their tents. The weather did not bother them as much as the humans and there were several of them about in their transitional form. It tickled Anksha's sense of whimsy seeing them snouted and furry in their efforts to deal with the unpleasant weather, and she giggled softly.

"And just what are you laughing at, pet?" Nevin asked as she nearly bumped into him.

Anksha peeped from beneath her hood, grinning toothily. "You're furrier than I am."

Nevin grasped her arm, pushed her sleeve up, and compared his own arm to hers. Anksha was covered in soft pale fur to her wrists, up to the lower edge of her collarbone and down to her ankles. Nevin chuckled, looking at his coarse gray hair. "I think you're right, pet." He turned to his cousin who walked beside him. "What do you think, Olin?"

Olin smiled broadly, showing all the teeth in his half-snouted mouth. "We've got more hair than she does, except on our heads."

Anksha's stomach grumbled and she lifted her eyebrows at it.

"Sounds like you best get along, Anksha. You're eating for two." Nevin grinned and pointed at the pathway.

"Umm hmmm." She trotted off.

The next section of the camp belonged to the Ymraudes. The all-female vampires of Ishla the Tinkerer had a green banner with a bold black squiggle that was the rune of their

god. The five Lemyari camped beside them with no banner of their own.

An enclosed wagon like a house on wheels and painted green with the distinctive squiggly rune of Dynanna on the side drew Anksha's attention. Beside it, spread a large tent dyed the same colors and marked in the same way as the wagon. The weather prevented the bio-chemist from cooking potions, so the usual sight of boiling cauldrons was absent. However, there were other things that could be done, and Anksha saw her blood-slave, Disharyl Scathwick, standing in the doorway of the tent. Anksha allowed only a few of her blood-slaves to move freely to any degree, and Disharyl was one of them because she had been Liuthan Loosestrife's principal bio-chemist and Amiri used her skills a lot.

Disharyl smiled at Anksha, and opened the neck of her simple black robe to stroke her neck in invitation. Blinking, Anksha shook her head. Disharyl always pretended that she enjoyed Anksha's fangs in her neck; even though Anksha knew very well through the Dominance-Link that Disharyl hated it.

Anksha spied Amiri at the same time that Amiri noticed her.

The Ymraude wore a lightweight cloak just to keep her clothing dry. Weather rarely bothered the undead. The beads on Amiri's dozens of long braids clacked as she walked. She held up her hand to stay Anksha. "I need to talk to you."

Anksha halted. "Is it important? I'm hungry."

"I think it is," Amiri said in a serious tone with an edge of insistence. "I want to Read your pregnancy. I need to do frequent checks on you."

"I'm healthy."

"That's not the point. This pregnancy is highly unusual. I need to monitor it and keep records."

"After breakfast. I'll come back. I promise." Anksha ducked her head. Amiri, being a bio-magicalist and bio-alchemist, was always poking and prodding, trying to study Anksha, and sometimes Anksha got tired of it. "Isranon is not happy with you," she blurted out.

Amiri sighed. "I know. But I don't know what more I can tell him."

"You let him think he was a demon-eater and be mean to me," Anksha accused. But her words came out flat and soft. Since becoming pregnant, Anksha had mellowed toward Amiri and Isranon as her memories of what happened had blurred in an instinctual maternal spiral characteristic of her kind.

"Are you still angry with me?"

Anksha frowned, thinking furiously, but unable to hold onto any reason to be angry with Amiri. "No."

"Then you tell Isranon to stop it for me."

Anksha smiled. "I will."

Once more Anksha resumed her journey to the tents that contained her warm-blooded breakfast. All that remained to do was pass the nibari herd and the big scarlet tent. She saw Travis and Daree walking arm in arm.

"Hi, Travis! Daree!" Anksha headed for them.

Daree smiled, but Travis ducked his head and looked uncomfortable.

Anksha felt a catch in her throat, her nostrils flared to grasp their scents.

Daree dragged Travis over and he shuffled his feet as they stopped beside Anksha. "Still having morning sickness?" Daree asked.

Anksha nodded. She could smell the candy in Travis' pockets. He used to give her candy at every opportunity, but it swiftly became clear that the candy would not be forthcoming this time.

Travis stuck his hand in his pocket, and for an instant, Anksha hoped that the candy might appear yet. But he refused to look at her. "Morning, Anksha," he said in a clipped manner. He turned his head to the side and lifted it without meeting Anksha's eyes. "Come on, Daree. We got things to do."

Daree frowned as he drew her away. "Travissss," she hissed, drawing out his name out in exasperation.

Travis pulled Daree between two tents and out the other side just to get away from Anksha as swiftly as possible.

Anksha watched them go, feeling a sob rise in her throat. "You don't like me anymore."

The bounce left her step as she went on.

The nibari herd's quarters were marked off by green tents and a blank green banner. A single scarlet tent stood at the edge of the nibari section. The tent had an entrance on both the non-humans' side where Anksha stood at that moment

and another entrance on the far side that opened on the humans tents beyond it.

Anksha forced herself to walk faster, and swept past the scarlet tent, her sharp ears picking up the noises inside: moaning, panting, and other sounds of sex. The majority of the nibari in their herd were female, while most of the humans in their company were male. In order to avoid dissention in the ranks arising over the non-humans' access to women and the humans lack of it, Isranon had established a brothel for the troops by rotating a portion of his nibari slaves to serve in the scarlet tent.

Captain Luck Settlesby emerged from the scarlet tent, finger-combing his hair, a pleasant flush to his cheeks, and a satisfied smile on his lips. He raised the hood on his cloak and fell into step beside Anksha. "Where are you going?"

"I'm hungry."

"Can I walk you to the blood-slaves tents?"

Anksha grinned large, displaying her impressive fangs.
"Yes."

"So how's little mama lion today?"

"Just fine." She sighed suddenly. "Timadi is growing soooo slow. Can you see I'm pregnant yet?"

Luck chuckled, grasped Anksha by the shoulders to halt her, and ran his eyes up and down her. "Hmmm. Actually, I can. You look nicely pregnant to me."

Anksha beamed and then snorted abruptly as she started walking again. "Travis says I'm flat as a flap jack."

Luck rolled his eyes. Travis had about as much tact as a half-blind badger and the wits of a speckled pup at times. He

and Travis had served with Nans' search and rescue freerangers, Gryphonheart's Rowdies, for more than ten years. When Nans became a general, she wanted myn from her original Rowdies in charge of the new myn recruited in Ocealay. So she had made both Luck and Travis captains. Travis knew plenty about both fighting and rescue work, but not much else it seemed. At least that was Luck's take on the matters. "Anksha, don't listen to Travis. He don't know what he's talking about."

"Travis doesn't like me any more. He never gives me candy."

Luck caught the hurt look in her eyes. "He's an idiot. You can't help being what you are."

"He wouldn't let Daree talk to me."

"Aww, shit. Anksha, you listen me." He halted and grasped her by the shoulders, and then he curled a finger under her chin. Luck lifted her head up until their eyes met. "I won't say it didn't come as a shock to a lot of us when we learned you weren't Isranon's familiar. That he was your blood-slave. You made a mistake, and then you fixed it. That's all that matters. Don't let Travis make you feel bad about yourself. He can only do that if you let him."

"It hurts."

"I know it. There's a lot of people that love you, Anksha. We understand you. I do. Nans does. Amiri and Zulaika and Randilyn. A whole lot of us. Promise me you won't let Travis get to you. You need to be happy. That baby feels what you feel. Just ask Amiri and she'll tell you."

"I'll try."

"Good girl."

The black tents containing the blood-slaves came into view. Luck walked Anksha to the edge of it and halted. "Enjoy your meal."

Anksha watched Luck leave. Travis had been Anksha's favorite among the Rowdies, until the day that she revealed her true nature as a demon-eater. More and more, Luck had moved into the position of friend that Travis had vacated. Anksha liked Luck.

The four guards nodded to her as she strolled among the tents deciding where to begin her breakfast. There were four times as many males as females among her blood-slaves. When Anksha rampaged through Ocealay, the night after Isranon had been taken captive by Captain Tamric, she had acquired fifty sa'necari blood-slaves as she uncovered Liuthan's planned coup against the city-state. Two had died before they left Ocealay, one of them Stygean's mother Chinisi, and three more had perished in the first weeks of their march. Chinisi had been too weakened by the ferocity of Anksha's attack to survive the march and so the demon-eater had gently put her down like an injured horse.

It all contributed to Anksha's current quandary over how to stretch her supply of blood-slaves. For the baby to be healthy, she needed a generous supply of richly mage-based bio-alchemical blood. Being around Isranon had caused Anksha to spend more time operating on reflection and less on instinct, which was not an easy thing for her to do, being essentially a creature of primal instinct, a consummate predator. Three factors stood out in Anksha's mind as she

examined matters since the die-out of her blood-slaves had first begun. The younger ones tended to die first, so did the weaker ones in magic, -those less steeped-in-death—and finally her feeding patterns. If she fed too seldom on an individual, then the Presence Pain damaged them, and if she fed too frequently that also harmed them. On the other hand, if she wished to she could bring on the Withering with her first taste of their blood, as she had done with Liuthan.

Anksha sighed and continued her stroll with her stomach beginning to growl. She had to make her pick soon. With so many blood-slaves, it was difficult to keep track of the whichs and whens. Perhaps she should have Amiri make her some tally sheets or a checklist, set up rotations. She could have all the ones in one tent one day, and all of another the next, and so on. That might work.

Her stomach gave a particularly loud growl, and Anksha sighed. Enough thinking; she had to eat now. She ducked into a tent and found herself looking at four young sa'necari in their early twenties. Kaligulus, Hertsanin, Cautilya, and Tamyrlaenus glared at her. She could smell the lust and hate rising from them in conflicting waves. Kaligulus and Tamyrlaenus were steeped in death despite their relative youth. Both of their families had maintained a legacy that passed from parent to child through the rites of mortgiefan perpetrated upon the parent by the child for generations. Hertsanin and Cautilya had simply been hungry and eager for the rites, taking lives at every opportunity. They were all strong and healthy.

They wore the traditional blood-slaves garments, a knee-length robe with a sash that made it easy to open, and drawstring pants. Both garments were simple black wool. Slave collars circled their necks with their names etched into the metal along with the statement "property of Anksha." Her brand had been burned into their shoulders.

"On your knees," she ordered. "First position. All of you."

They hesitated, resistance and rebellion showing in every angle of their bodies.

Anksha snarled and hit them hard through the Dominance-Link.

Hertsanin and Cautilya screamed, falling to their knees and clutching their heads as she roared through their brains like a fire in dry timber. Kaligulus stood with his head thrown back and the cords in his neck standing out, straining against the pain of her intrusion in his psyche. Tamyrlaenus swayed, holding his head, but not yet off his feet.

Anksha hit them again. Tamyrlaenus collapsed, curling into a fetal ball, sobbing. Kaligulus still stood, but lines of suffering marked his face, which had gone pale and sweating. Anksha smiled venomously at Kaligulus, sauntering up to him. Her nostrils flared and she inhaled his anguish. Her gaze descended to his crotch and she could see his erection tenting his pants. Most of her command of them was related to the overpowering discharge of her pheromones. Anksha decided to play with Kaligulus rather than break him, and wafted her Circean fragrance across him. "You love me?"

Kaligulus' knees gave, his eyes went wide, and he fell before her as if mesmerized, offering his neck with a low moan. "I love you, Anksha."

"Shall I drain you to death this time, Kaligulus? Shall I kindle the Withering and watch you die in agony?"

"Please, Anksha. Do whatever you want."

"Then I will. First position."

Kaligulus linked his hands behind his back, tilted his head to the side, and arched his neck. Anksha yanked the sash and Kaligulus' robe fell open. She pushed it back over his shoulders. Without warning, she plunged her fangs into his neck and hauled his blood out savagely while burning through his psyche. He screamed, collapsing under her, and she followed him to the ground without releasing her hold on his throat. Anksha continued to suck and tear as Kaligulus convulsed, his heels digging at the ground, chest heaving, and fingers twitching. Dimly, Anksha heard Cautilya sobbing in terror.

When she had finished sating herself on the four of them and left them half-conscious and suffering in their bedrolls, Anksha headed for the childrens' tents to distribute a bag of candies.

CHAPTER TWO

VICTIMS

The lycan chieftain Claw Redhand opened his eyes and saw his wife Aisha sitting on the chair beside the bed, knitting. His right arm felt impossibly heavy as he reached for her. Claw was one hundred and twenty three years old, and yet he had never felt so weak before in his life. Claw seemed to remember something happening to him, a terrible pain and pressure in his chest, and then nothing.

Aisha dropped her knitting, grabbed his hand, and held his fingers against her face.

"Aiii ... ssssha." He breathed her name out in a hoarse whisper. "What ... happened? I feel so ... weak."

Aisha kissed his fingers and the back of his hand, crying softly. "I'd begun to think you'd never wake up."

"Why?" He closed his eyes again, unable to keep them open.

"You had a heart attack."

Claw lay still, searching for words, feeling suddenly vulnerable. Usually the members of his family were hale and hearty all the way to the end with never a sick day. Why should he be different? He wondered what could possibly be different in his case. "How bad?"

He heard Aisha swallow several times, followed by a small snuffle. That did not sound good. Claw tensed as he waited for the bad news.

"Sheradyn says there will be no more working in the fields for you."

Claw forced his lids open, and saw that Aisha's eyes had moistened. Neither one of them had been ready to get old, and the suddenness with which it had descended upon him gave Claw a hollow feeling. It seemed just yesterday that he had been young and chasing his beloved Aisha through the forests in the moonlight. He tried to think of words to comfort her with, to reassure her so that she would not worry about him. Claw did not like to see her distressed. "We get old, Aisha, but I'm too tough to die on you yet."

Aisha managed a trembling smile and hugged him again. "I've been so worried ... you haven't been more than semi-conscious in several days."

"Aisha, Aisha, Aisha, you precious old bitch. Will you still love me now that I'm an old dog?"

"How could I do otherwise?" She bent and kissed him. "We were so worried."

"Hush. Enough of that. I'll be careful and we'll have years yet. I want to see my grandchildren grow up." Claw managed to get his arms around her and held her pressed to his chest.

"Darmyk's been desperate to see you, but Sheradyn says that a child would be too exhausting for you."

Claw snorted. "I'll not have them keeping the cub away. He's a good cub."

Concern deepened in Aisha's voice. "He's lonely. Kenly is missing."

"Missing?" Claw tensed up again and it made his chest tighten. He released Aisha and tilted her careworn face so that he could see her expression.

"The cat went missing the night you had your heart attack."

"Tell Belgair I said to have some myn look for him."

"I will. He kept telling me I was being a foolish old woman. That the cat would come back when he was ready to."

"Tell him I said it was an order." Claw bristled. "I'll have a word with him if I have to." No dog wolf should be so uncaring about the heartfelt needs of bitches and cubs. Claw did not remember Belgair being so insensitive before. Something had changed about the mon, and Claw could not quite put his finger on it. Belgair had always been an exemplary Captain of the Guard, but if he had started ignoring the bitches and the cubs...

* * * *

Merissa Redhand Estrobian sat brushing her heavy ginger hair. She wanted to be as presentable as possible when she went to see her father now that he was awake at last. A few things could be done about her face and her hair so that she would not look like she had spent nearly a week crying. Merissa had been desperately worried about Claw.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror, laid the brush aside, and laced her fingers across her swollen belly. Her abdomen was expanding faster with this pregnancy than with Darmyk, her first-born, but Sheradyn, her physician, said that was because she carried twins this time.

Darmyk came in and wrapped his small arms around her. "Kenly's still missing."

Merissa ruffled his dark curls. Her son would be three in two more months, but his lycan blood had given Darmyk the maturity of a seven-year-old human. "We'll look for him. I promise."

"When?"

"Soon." Kenly had been Darmyk's close companion and guardian since birth, a maned hunting cat that had come to her cub because he had been born wilderkin, one of those rare gifts that allowed him to speak to the animals. Merissa wondered why Kenly had chosen to vanish the same night that her father had his heart attack. She pushed the event aside as coincidence. Kenly was old enough to be attracted by the scent of a she-cat in heat, and that probably accounted for his absence.

"Can I visit Grandpa?"

Merissa hugged Darmyk. "No, sweetheart. He's not well enough yet."

"I'd be good," he promised, sounding more and more forlorn.

Merissa kissed his forehead. "I know."

Darmyk looked so much like his father, Isranon, that it caused a catch in Merissa's throat. If only Isranon had known Darmyk, seen him, then maybe Isranon would never have written that terrible letter repudiating his child.

"Are you bothering your mother?" Malthus entered the room, pulling at his long, thin mustaches and his oak leaf beard.

Darmyk glared at his stepfather. "I'm not bothering anyone."

"Go play," Malthus ordered him.

"I hate you," Darmyk snarled, backing away from his mother. Abruptly he spun and ran out.

"I ought to turn him over my knee for that."

Merissa caught Malthus' arm. "Please, he's young. Give him time."

"Your father spoiled him." Malthus' expression softened and he kissed her deeply, his tongue twining with hers. They parted and he said to her, "I love making babies with you. We'll have a large family."

Merissa caught his hand as he caressed her belly. "Yes, Malthus." Her tone was submissive. She would have liked to space her pregnancies out, but from the way that he talked, Merissa knew that Malthus would never allow that. Merissa should have considered the fact that Malthus was human, and in Waejontor—at least—the males liked to keep their wives full in the belly at all times. Furthermore, Merissa knew her duty as a wife, and she would fulfill it.

Isranon's face flashed through her mind and her throat tightened again. She would never have minded the situation as much if it had been Isranon in her bed. During their courtship, Malthus had taken her mind off Isranon, and helped her forget the letters—one from Isranon and one from Nevin, both saying that Isranon wanted no part of Darmyk. Merissa had believed that she was in love with Malthus, but more and more she realized that she was still in love with Isranon.

"Come, darling, let's go see your father."

* * * *

While the household slept, Malthus crept down to the great hall. He had not appreciated seeing the improvement in Claw's health, the way the color had returned to the old bastard's face. The only one standing between himself and control of Red Wolf Valley was Claw. The chieftain's two sons had been captured and executed by the sa'necari following a lycan rebellion eighty years ago that had been efficiently crushed.

Malthus went to Claw's huge, comfortable chair and sat down in it, enjoying the soft goose-down stuffing. Life in the manor as Merissa's husband was much more pleasant than living among the peasants, as he had when he first arrived and claimed refuge for himself and his two nieces at the Sanctuary: they stuffed everything with straw. He leaned back, feeling himself already de facto ruler of the Red Wolf Clan. He relished the feeling of power sitting in Claw's chair gave him. Malthus reached for the first pipe on the stand between Claw's chair and the one he normally occupied across from it, and then pulled his hand back, thinking. It would not be wise to do anything that might give his true nature away.

Sheradyn, the physician currently living in the manor to see Merissa through her pregnancy, had remarked about the strange coincidences of the old priest, Tempest Anstey, and the mother of the slain lawgiver Nikko Softpaws, having both died of heart failure close together, and now Claw was having

heart problems. It was common knowledge that sa'necari could kill by stopping the heart of their victims with a touch. Claw would have to be the last one he killed that way. By engendering Claw's heart condition in a slow and methodical fashion, Malthus hoped that people would not make a stronger connection to the deaths of Tempest and Granta Softpaws, whose deaths had been swift and sudden.

Malthus did not want them looking in his direction as a way of explaining those deaths he had caused. He stroked the unadorned golden band on his right hand, which he never took it off, not even to bathe. Even 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. Even if they spellcorded him, it would not affect the ring because the ring 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.

Malthus 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. Instead, Malthus relaxed more deeply into Claw's chair, savoring the feel of it. His victory would come.

Only a male lycan could rule the Red Wolf Clan, Merissa, her mother, and her aunts were effectively removed from inheriting Claw's position. 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 knew he had Belgair in his pocket, and figured that he had all the angles worked out. The only thing that remained to be done was to kill Claw in a way that could not be traced back to him.

Malthus had already finished with the pipes in Claw's study, now he would do these. The old wolf would be sending for his pipes soon, and Aisha would only be able to put him off for so long before giving in. Malthus' eyes handled the darkness without difficulty. He did not need to light a candle or a lamp that would have given his presence away to anyone who might be unexpectedly awake at that hour. Taking the first pipe into his hands, Malthus sketched the spell on the bowl and another on the stem. Once the spell had settled into the pipe, insidious and imperceptible, Malthus picked up another, and then another. He finished in less than an hour. This set of spells were twice as strong as the previous ones, as strong as those on the wine bottles that had finally shoved Claw over the edge into his first heart attack. There would be other heart attacks soon—they would arrive in a quickening succession until one finally took the aging chieftain's life.

Each time Claw smoked, it would draw another spell of death into his body, which would settle around his heart. Malthus had been disappointed when Claw survived his heart attack. Perhaps the next one would kill him.

He had been promised lands, great wealth, and a title of nobility by the Waejontori Queen, Tomyrilen, through her agent and advisor, Lord Daemon 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 him and were currently raiding the northern and eastern hamlets and villages. What he wanted was rule over this valley and whatever lycans survived when he finished. With Claw dead, the rest would be easy.

Returning to his suite, Malthus climbed into bed and woke Merissa for sex, having been aroused by the magics on the pipes. Death and sex were firmly linked in his sa'necari mind.

"I'm tired," Merissa mumbled as he opened her legs.

"Then be still." Malthus thrust into her, imagining that his cock in her flesh was a blade in her father's heart.

* * * *

Caimbeul the lawgiver 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, Padruig. 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. What he was doing was dangerous. If that juvenile gang, the Lycamornots, or their various friends connected him to the lawgiver, much less suspected that Padruig and Caimbeul were the same person, it would place his life in jeopardy. 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.

Caimbeul reached the camp as the moon hit its zenith. He saw shapes moving stealthily through the camp, most of them ignoring each other in the usual game of let's pretend to secrecy. 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.

His ex-wife, the Talian priest Pandeena had brought him here to investigate the possibility that the most hated sa'necari his people had ever known of was here: the Butchering Serpent, who was responsible for hundreds of terrible deaths in his arcane laboratories in the north. But no one had ever seen the mon's face and lived to speak of it.

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 Kandaishee 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.

"I see you've come back for more."

Caimbeul started from his thoughts and turned to look at Shalto. He smiled slowly with a shrug. "I like greasing my stick. Especially when it's free."

"Perhaps we ought to start charging." Shalto scratched at the tan sideburns he had recently grown that contrasted with his black hair. Caimbeul had never seen Shalto in his wolf

form, but suspected from the sideburns that Shalto would be a black-masked brown.

Caimbeul laughed softly. "Perhaps you should at that. This place of yours is certainly popular enough."

"It's that. I hear you've chosen favorites. You've jacked Clodagh and Kandaishie every night this week."

Caimbeul heard the irritation in Shalto's voice. "You have no say in that."

Shalto snarled. "I do. There's others want some time with them. You'll slack off with them."

Caimbeul shifted his weight and rested his fists on his hips above his blades. "Are you telling me what to do?"

"I am."

Caimbeul's hand shot out and grabbed Shalto by the throat. He shoved him up against a tree and held him there easily while he squirmed and struggled, dragging impotently at Caimbeul's hand. "I don't like people telling me what to do. Especially wet-tailed cubs that think they're fighting dogs. You're not in charge here, Shalto. The others might think you are, but I can see what's really going on. You've got, what, seven in your little gang? Well, I've counted over twenty-five dogs using the bitches here. This operation is entirely too big for a little dog like yourself."

Shalto stopped struggling, his eyes wide. "What do you want?"

"I want to meet the mon in charge. I want a piece of it. I can show him how to get better value from it. There are ways around Clan laws that forbid brothels."

"I'll talk to him. But that doesn't mean that you'll get to. It's up to him."

Caimbeul released Shalto with a final shake. "See that you do. In the meantime, make certain the others know not to cross me, because I'll take it out on you."

Shalto gave a quick nod and fled. Caimbeul watched him go. *So there is indeed someone else running things. Is it the Serpent? Or someone acting on his behalf? Is it Malthus? Certainly, he had the opportunity to set this up while he lived here. But who put those death commands in all the bitches' heads? Malthus is human. Or is he?*

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 Kandaishree's neutral nets.

Then he did something he had not done before: 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."

"No, Shalto will be angry with me for not sharing your loins."

"Shalto ... yes."

They walked to the bedroom, and as she prepared herself to have sex with him, 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.

He made love to Clodagh, cherishing her body, giving her as much pleasure as he gained from the act; and using it to

conceal his psychic explorations of her, of which she was unaware. By the time he covered her with his body and entered her, Clodagh was moaning and writhing. Caimbeul wrapped her in his fireborn aura to block her contacts with the Serpent and loosen her tongue. As he pumped and thrust, his awareness slid through her mind and slithered around sniffing for areas of damage.

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.

He swept through her with a wave of warmth and comfort as he came inside her and rolled off to the side. "When is the cub due?"

Despite his efforts to shield her, Clodagh tensed. "How did you know?"

Her hands fluttered to her belly.

"I smelled it. Is it *his*?"

"You must stop coming around. He'll kill you."

* * * *

Once Caimbeul had left, Clodagh curled up and wept, remembering the day that Malthus had raped her body and bound her mind. She and four others among the women in the camp carried his children and they were all products of the first rape they each endured.

She stroked her belly. "I wish it were yours, Padruig."

* * * *

Pandeena stood in a morning shadow cast from the west side of the building that housed the shrine to Willodarus and Tala in their joint roles as protectors of the wolves and lycans, the small school room for the camp's children on the west end and her apartments as priest on the east side. Sanctuary's animals would require better shelter for the winter and the young lycan males who worked here were busy splitting logs with hammers and wedges to improve the barns.

Shalto saw her and frowned. Pandeena winked at him and enjoyed the way he flinched. At just turned sixteen, 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."

CHAPTER THREE

THE CRIES OF VENGEANCE

Prince Clovis of Angrim, the middle son of Kyser Gerhardt, sat on a bench in the back of a modified war-wagon, with his hands bound behind him and his ankles tied to a rod running beneath the bench. His broad chest had been shaved of its blond hair, and his bonds forced his chest up and forward at an uncomfortable angle. He shared the wagon with five other nobly born captives, all of them tied in the same manner, and nude from the waist up. A target shaped brand had been burned into the right side of each of their chests as a reminder of their intended fate: they had all been selected to become the living hosts for the demon Maruska's eggs in the spring.

The wagon was her larder. A spell kept the wagon pleasantly warm despite the sharp autumn temperatures outside it.

Clovis had frequent nightmares that woke him screaming. During the day, he was able to retain a tight hold on his thoughts and emotions, but night was always something else. He could not repress the sight of his fifteen-year-old brother, Tibalt, dying as Maruska's larva tore out of the youth's chest. And of Lord Reynhard Dreslin, whom Clovis had always regarded as a hero, dying moments later in the same fashion.

The small door at the front of the wagon opened, and the Skerpyon demon Maruska came in. She was voluptuous, and

had she been human she might have been considered beautiful, with her ample breasts, wasp-waist, and flaring shapely hips. Her demonic attributes ruined it: black horns sweeping back from her forehead amid a heavy spill of ebony hair, her burnt orange skin that shimmered in the daylight, and worse of all her vicious tail that whipped back and forth in rhythm to her moods, with eight blade sharp ridges at the end that could rip a mon's heart out, and the stinger that glinted wetly with a drop of venom on the barbed tip.

She went from mon to mon, running her hands over each of their chests as she always did. Everyone in the wagon froze. If any of them displeased Maruska, she would stab the barb in and dribble a few drops of venom into their bodies. Not enough to kill them, which would have defeated her purposes in holding them as hosts for her eggs, but enough to cause severe pain.

Clovis knew what that felt like better than all the others combined, because he was forever angering her with his defiance. But then, he was also the only one who had witnessed the emergence of her young, which she had made him watch as a punishment. He hated her.

Normally she went to Clovis first. This time she arrived with her hands on his chest last. Clovis tensed, suspecting that something was up.

Maruska smiled venomously, displaying her long fangs. "Dreslin has fallen. The Duke is writhing on a pole shoved up his ass. Where would Berran flee? Where's Reynhard's son?"

Clovis' eyes traveled over her face, wondering if a trap lay in her questions somewhere, but he had not learned to read her expressions well. "How should I know?"

"These should help you, my love," General Ynkendio Kreuz's voice sounded at the back door to the wagon. A huge male version of Maruska, Ynkendio stepped inside with an arrogant turn.

Six myn were shoved into the wagon, stripped to the waist, their hands bound behind them, the death's head of the depnane; branded into the foreheads, and the target symbol burned into the right side of their chests. They were all brawny and broad-chested. One was an especially nice specimen, ruggedly handsome and blond, attractive despite his bruises and a bandaged shoulder.

"That one is Konrad Dreslin," Ynkendio said with a satisfied smirk. "Reynhard's brother. We had to use a net on him. Wanted to fight to the death."

Maruska's eyes gleamed. "How bad is he hurt?"

"It's minor. He'll be well healed by the time we arrive at our winter quarters."

Konrad glared. "Foul, unholy bitch."

Clovis' stomach clenched up. From what little he had witnessed at Stolzingen before being thrown into the larder, the Minnorians were exterminating the Angrim nobility, and possibly the populace as well. *Genocide*. Konrad was almost as worthy a tactician as his murdered brother had been. If Konrad had not been able to halt them, or even slow them down, then how could the Minnorians be stopped?

"Tie them to the bench," Maruska ordered.

Soon the six newcomers had their ankles tied to the rod beneath the bench. A rope ran behind the bench, which was bolted to the wagon, and tightened to the bindings on their wrists, forcing their chests up at a taut and uncomfortable angle, bowing their backs.

Maruska demanded, "Where is Berran? Where is Reynhard's son?"

Konrad spat on her. "I don't know."

Maruska grabbed his head and pulled it forward, shoving his chin to his chest while she waved her stinger threateningly in front of him. "Where is he?"

"I wouldn't tell you if I knew."

"Then think about this!" Maruska plunged her stinger into Konrad's chest. She held the stinger there for several minutes, and Clovis shuddered at the idea of how much venom Maruska had to be pumping into Konrad. The demon must have been basing her assumptions of Konrad's strength and stubbornness upon her experiences with his brother Reynhard.

Konrad screamed, jerking in his bonds as his face twisted into a hideous grimace; yet still the stinger lingered in his flesh, pulsing along the tip.

Clovis' stomach soured and bile rose into his throat with an acidic burning.

Then Konrad sagged, his muscles twitching as his body kept trying to writhe in pain, its efforts frustrated by the unyielding ropes.

Clovis swallowed, his lips framing the name without speaking it, "Konrad."

The other five Dreslin nobles, their eyes wide with horror, flinched as Maruska approached them. None of them had the correct answers for her questions. Clovis saw each of them spasm as Maruska's barb pierced them, and they cried out as their bodies cramped up in reaction to the searing venom. One by one, they collapsed against the side of the wagon, groaning.

By the time she finished, Maruska was feeling wroth and vindictive, so she returned to Konrad and stung him systematically in his arms and legs. Konrad shrieked himself hoarse, his body contorting again and again in agony, until he finally slumped unconscious with his head thrown back against the wall of the wagon, his lips parted, and his eyes closed.

Clovis turned his face away, refusing to watch. The prince had been able to shut out the sight, but not sounds and it ate at his gut. These were myn he had known all his life. Clovis had grown up around them, gamed with them, wenched with them, jousted with them, danced at their weddings and drank toasts to the birth of their children—children that were now dead, horribly murdered. He forced his mind away, certain that if he allowed himself to keep thinking about it, he would go mad.

"You'll break," Maruska vowed. "You'll all break."

Maruska stepped outside and Ynkendio followed her. Clovis heard Maruska say to her mate, "Find me a Lemyari with enough skill to break a strong mind. We don't have time to waste on torture. I want Berran Dreslin."

Ynkendio laughed. "Once the Dreslin family is extinguished, my honor will be avenged."

Clovis shut his eyes with a prayer on his lips. "God lend wings to your feet. Run fast, run far, Berran. God keep you safe."

* * * *

Talons walked through the empty streets of what had once been one of the largest of Angrim's walled cities, Stolzingen. It smelled of death, but it was old death—several weeks old. Flocks of crows circled above her head, searching through the streets and buildings for another morsel of rotting flesh. So far, she had found only the dead. The absence of human voices had been replaced by the whisperings of troubled ghosts. The city had passed beyond silence into a spectral mourning for what had once been.

The vacant, staring eyes of the houses were no longer windows, but the darkened orbs of their spirits. Talons could sense the weeping of the earth for the joy that had once been here, for all that had been here. Having passed the portals of death and returned through the gifts of woodland gods and the touch of Dawnreturning, Talons had grown sensitive to the other world.

Normally she would never have entered an Angrim city, except in disguise. Now she walked openly through their tragedy, and felt their solemn cry for vengeance shiver through her.

She knew the story of the founding of Angrim and Beltria well; it had been one of the first she learned as a child and

the main reason she had never entered one before dressed in her leathers and runes. The Angrimers were rabid monotheists worshipping a god who dwelled on a foreign world. A group of their knights from a place called Yurmyni had been pursuing a small band of Willodarus' chosen with the intention of burning them alive as heretics and witches, when the woodland god opened a Gate Arcane to allow his people to flee to Daverana. However, before Willodarus could close the gate, the Yurmyns had ridden through also. They founded Angrim. Not long after that another monotheistic group from a place called Poulundi came through and established Beltria. Neither realm was much more than six hundred years old, and both were heartily disliked by the pagan lands surrounding them. They executed all practitioners of magic and believers in foreign gods that they discovered on their lands. Only the most skilled of Guildsmyn worked in Angrim.

So it had seemed rather odd to Talons, that after she inquired of the Grand Master of Creeya as to where she could find Dawnreturning, his response had sent her to Angrim. The note had read:

Go to Angrim, and when the proper time comes, there you will find Dawnreturning. So says the word of Hadjys the Dark Judge according to our High Patriarch Mikkal.

Ceejorn Osterbridge

Grand Master of Creeya

Talons found herself unable to argue with that. Her red gryphon, Little Bit, stalked along behind her wearing his

saddle and carrying their supplies lashed to his back. He kept ruffling his feathers at her, making unhappy squawks.

"I don't like this place either."

She had stopped counting the dead when it passed two hundred. Some had been hung upside down with their heads tied back so that their blood could be drained. She had walked past the common, where the skeletons of little children lay with poles through their middles in front of a long scaffold filled with remains of adults mounted on poles that ran up between their legs and out their shoulders. These had been terrible, slow deaths. They must have died screaming their lungs out.

Talons was an assassin, one of the holy avengers of the Dark Judge, and killing came as naturally to her as breathing. She had made her first kill at eleven, a pedophile who had murdered over twenty young girls. Talons considered herself, and so did most others, a cold-blooded killer, and yet, seeing the terrible remains of all these innocents shocked and troubled her. Their spirits seemed to cry out to her on the twilight breeze for vengeance, and vengeance was what she had been trained for all her life, vengeance for the innocents.

She shivered, drawing her cloak of shadows around herself. "I was not sent to bring you vengeance ... And, yet ... by my god, you deserve it."

Little Bit nudged her, and she swung up into the saddle.

"Let's get out of here. But let's see if we can find what did this."

Little Bit gave a distressed squawk.

"We won't get too close. I just want to know."

Maybe my liege-god sent me here, not simply to wait for Dawnreturning, but to find a path to bring vengeance for the innocent.

* * * *

One dark-haired boy practiced at arms in a sea of blondes on the training grounds of the ducal palace at Varsyava. Sweat drenched his copper skin, which was so dark in comparison to his fair-skinned companions. Worse to Lukasz's eyes was his smaller stature, almost fragile when contrasted with the other boys his age, many of whom were more than a head taller than he was.

For as long as Lukasz could remember everyone kept throwing women at his Uncle Stefan, hoping that the Duke of Beltria would finally take a wife and get the Duchy a proper heir. He had overheard the bitter talk about his fitness to become Duke start again the moment his uncle went south with two-thirds of the standing army and half of the levies to aid Kyser Gerhardt of Angrim in throwing back the Minnorian invaders. All of the boys in this group had relatives, fathers, brothers, uncles, who had ridden off to war. Emotions rode high.

Lukasz had been shocked to learn that Lord General Reynhard Dreslin and Prince Tibalt had been taken by the demons and possibly eaten. The boy could not conceive of something of this magnitude happening in Angrim, where he had often visited with his uncle.

Because he was thinking so furiously, Lukasz missed a parry and his sparring companion hit him in the chest with a

practice blade so hard it knocked him backwards into the dirt. Gunther Chudzik, Lord Hagen's youngest son, liked having "accidents" with Lukasz. They were second cousins, since Lord Hagen's father—a minor baron—had married Lukasz's great aunt Sylwia. Gunther smirked at Lukasz with an angry gleam in his eyes. Lukasz knew that Gunther, like several of the other boys, was angry over all of the adult males in their family being sent south to fight, but Lukasz resented Gunther taking it out on him.

Lukasz sprang to his feet snarling, grabbed the larger boy around the waist, and took him down. He hit so fast and from so many directions that Gunther could not successfully fend him off.

A large hand seized Lukasz by the collar and jerked him off Gunther, who favored him with another quick smirk before wiping the look off his face.

"That's enough," Brainerd the armsmaster growled. "Hold your temper for an enemy."

Lukasz almost spat back that Gunther was his enemy and thought better of it. It would only get him lectured on proper behavior by Brainerd. "He didn't have to hit me that hard," Lukasz snarled and immediately regretted it.

"Learn to take it boy, or you'll never be a man." Brainerd unfastened Lukasz's leather padding and examined his chest. "You're getting a nice bruise. Go have Gunda put a poultice on it."

Brainerd picked up Lukasz's practice sword and turned away with it in dismissal. Lukasz stalked off the yard, feeling humiliated. He entered the palace from a side door through

the servants section and headed up the stairs. Lukasz did not intend to go to Gunda the housekeeper, deciding that a little suffering was good for his soul and at least he himself would know that he was as tough as the others no matter what some of them said.

A willowy blonde that Lukasz recognized as Iwona descended the narrow stairs toward him with a bundle of laundry. When she got within a few steps of him, the bundle slipped from her hands, struck the steps and spilled. Iwona cried out in frustration, squatted and started picking them up again. Lukasz bent over her and handed her things that were out of her reach so that she would not have to stretch for them. As he raised his eyes while handing her a dirty shirt, Lukasz's gaze slid down the front of her low cut blouse and he found himself staring at her large breasts, dark brown nipples contrasting sharply against her white skin. His penis jumped to attention, embarrassing him.

"You like them, don't you?" Iwona asked with a conspiratorial wink.

Lukasz gave a vigorous nod, his cheeks burning, and fled.

Sixteen-year-old Iwona had only worked in the palace for a year. For the past two months, she had begun to tease and flirt with him whenever he was running around the servants section of the palace, which he did a lot. The servants were all nicer to him than the members of his own social class were. He speculated briefly on what Iwona would do if he decided to call her bluff and shove his hand down her blouse the next time she did that to him. Lukasz knew he would probably never have the courage to do so, and Iwona would

probably scream if he did. He felt a humiliating dampness in his pants: Iwona had done it to him again.

He shoved Iwona out of his mind with a sigh and went looking for Hartmut the Steward. At four weeks shy of fourteen, Lukasz was still a month away from being legally an adult, so Hartmut was in charge until his uncle returned. Uncle Stefan had always taken Lukasz along when he had to travel. However, war was a serious business, and so for the first time he had been left behind. Lukasz had started worrying about Uncle Stefan from the day his uncle donned his armor and set out. People got killed in wars, and from what the boy had heard this was shaping up to be an extremely ugly one with demons and monsters out there—although Brainerd and Hartmut did not entirely credit those reports, Lukasz did. Demons and monsters had been filling his dreams for months. He had never told anyone about the dreams because he did not want to sound like a baby. Little boys shivered in their beds over nightmares, not thirteen-year-olds.

He felt the servants' eyes watching him as he walked the elegant halls of the palace in his dirty leathers. Lukasz went up to the second floor and found Hartmut at his desk going over some paperwork.

"Hartmut, I want to talk to you."

"About what?" Hartmut looked up from his papers with an impatient expression, tapping his fingers on the desk.

Lukasz dragged a chair up close and settled into it. "About my uncle and this war."

"I wouldn't worry about it. They're linking up with the Kyser at Saynkyorbirg. Thirty thousand myn is more than enough to throw back whatever the Minnorians have brought here."

Lukasz sighed heavily. "But I am worried."

"There's nothing to worry about. Go take a walk in the gardens, read a book, find someone to play a game with you."

"Hartmut..."

"Off with you."

Lukasz's mouth pursed up in distress as he obeyed. He went to his rooms, washed himself off a bit, and changed clothes. Lukasz adjusted his sleeveless green tunic and pulled at the full sleeves of his black shirt. Knotting his long black hair at his neck when he finished brushing it, Lukasz stared into the mirror resenting the fact that he was not tall, blond, and fair-skinned. Furthermore, if not kept trimmed, Lukasz's hair grew longer than most women's, all the way to his knees. It was no wonder the other boys looked at him as if he were some kind of freak. But once he was duke—well then that would be different and maybe he would let his hair grow all the way out and wear it in a braid to spite them all.

His Uncle Stefan had never told him who his mother was, or where she had come from. However, Lukasz knew that she had not come from either Angrim or Beltria, for where else could he have gotten his dark hair and skin? He was the only one in all the ruling families of both Angrim and Beltria that had hair and skin like his. There were a few dark-haired people in the kingdoms, but they were all foreigners or

descended of foreigners. Blond, red, and light browns dominated the hair colors of Angrimers and Beltrians.

He also wondered about his father who had died young in the Great War before his birth. All he knew for certain about his parents was that his mother had given him to Stefan shortly after his birth and returned to her own people. Uncle Stefan was the only father the boy had known. From time to time, a woman attempting to catch his uncle's eye as a bride had briefly mothered Lukasz, only to drop him hard once it became clear that Stefan had no interest in her as a wife.

Lukasz heaved a heavy sigh, feeling totally alone and totally lost without his uncle. He had wanted to be hugged and reassured when he went to Hartmut. Now that it was clear that those hopes were false, he could at least take Hartmut's advice and try to occupy himself.

He took the servants stairs down, which led through the kitchens, and as he reached the bottom, the smell of baking tarts assailed his nose. Ermengard the cook looked up and smiled at him.

"I've some raspberry tarts cooling. Bring a smile to your face," the large woman said.

Lukasz nodded, forcing a smile to satisfy her. Despite the fact that Hartmut kept lecturing him about fraternizing with the servants, Lukasz often spent hours sitting at the table with her chatting. "Yes, thank you."

She wrapped two tarts up in a cloth napkin and gave them to him. "Be sure to bring the napkin back. I don't want Hartmut complaining about vanishing napkins."

"I will."

Lukasz proceeded out to the garden with his prizes. The first section was mostly roses. It seemed like everyone liked roses. They were in all the gardens that he had seen. And then there were the white gardenias. It made everything smell wonderful, although it was all starting to wilt a bit with the bite of autumn in the air. Only the snow jasmine would last until full winter: it was a stubborn bloom, which was why Lukasz liked snow jasmine best.

A curve of carefully manicured hedgerows circled about him with a single path into the next section of the gardens where all the bowers and alcoves were with their pleasant hiding places amongst the junipers, oaks, maples, and willows. He liked the willows best, the way they seemed to weep across the small stream that passed through the palace grounds. Lukasz liked to hide among the willows when he wanted to be completely alone. Not even Gunther had found all of his hiding places.

He walked all the way to the far reaches of the gardens, where the plants and trees grew thick and wild. It had been allowed to grow that way because many ladies of the court found the undisciplined vegetation romantic. Only when it threatened to overwhelm the pathways did the gardeners cut it back.

Lukasz pressed himself between the thickest portion of willows, a place so narrow that Gunther and his friends could not get through, and settled himself on the ground there.

"You must come back, Uncle Stefan. You must come back," he muttered over and over again, fighting an urge to cry. "I'm all alone without you."

Lukasz soon grew restless with worry and started walking again. He decided to try reading a book, maybe he could lose himself in reading that special, favorite book his uncle had given him for his birthday as an incentive to learn Engla, which was called the common tongue or trade tongue in the outlands.

* * * *

As soon as Lukasz had gone out of earshot, Brainerd turned to Gunther with an approving nod. "You did well. Remind the mongrel bastard that he'll never be a real man." Brainerd turned and surveyed the assembled boys. "The purpose of all these years of training that you have endured under me is not simply to defend yourselves and acquit yourselves with honor on the field of battle. It is to be able to kill your enemies. The true and only rite of passage into manhood is when your enemy dies on your blades."

Gunther carried two blades at his hips, a large plain knife on his right and an elegant dagger that had been in his family for generations on his left. The heirloom dagger was of the highest quality steel with golden dragon quillons, a golden hilt molded like intertwined dragons, and a silver pommel. His grandfather had given it to him and he was proud of it. The dagger had dispatched many hell-kissers—pagans—since its forging.

At the first disparaging remark concerning Lukasz, Jedrik and Dobrogost, the two guardsmyn who worked as Brainerd's assistants, moved close to watch for anyone who might come near enough to over hear them. When Brainerd gave one of

his special lectures, their job was to make certain that they were not over heard by anyone who would carry it back to Hartmut. They helped with Brainerd's indoctrinations, teaching the boys to hate pagans and the lesser races who would destroy the purity of Angrim and Beltria if given an opportunity.

The boys gathered and listened attentively to Brainerd's special lecture, which he never gave in the presence of either Lukasz or Stefan. It drew them tighter into one of the many close-knit groups such as Brainerd had been molding throughout his years as armsmaster. All of them had seen the changes in their older brothers as they were initiated into the mysteries of knowledge that Brainerd taught them in secret.

Gunther watched Brainerd closely, wondering what these mysteries might be. His brother had told him that it always happened when the boys were close to turning fourteen. He was only a week away from the crucial day. His friends were all within weeks of it as well, except for Adolf and Gerik who were already fifteen and had been training with the older boys who were all sent to Angrim to fight. Adolf and Gerik had been left behind because they were youngest sons, otherwise they would have been taken with the rest. Only Zygmunt and Jarogniew had little brothers.

Adolf and Gerik already knew the mysteries, but they consistently refused to divulge them, which made Gunther all the more desperate to learn them.

With a start, Gunther went back to listening to Brainerd, realizing that he had missed some of the lecture by getting distracted with his thoughts.

"Soon I will begin your initiation into manhood on all levels. You will step beyond killing the beasts of the forest and the fields and learn to kill like real men."

"I look forward to it," Gunther said, trying to cover up for his momentary absence of attention.

Gerik snickered and elbowed him. "I'm certain you do."

"None of that," Brainerd said. "We are comrades here. You will behave that way."

The boys quieted again.

"So far you've hunted deer, birds, and boar. You've hunted nothing of true danger. I intend to remedy that. Manticore spoor has been discovered half a day's ride from the city."

Gunther gasped, gaped, and got another nudge from Gerik.

Whispers of excitement fluttered through the assemblage. "Manticore," was on all their lips. Even highly skilled and experienced myn died trying to take one of those down. They were lions the size of horses with a scorpion's stinger for a tail and a deadly venom.

"You will need to fight it as a unit, eight boys fighting as one, or else you'll die. As animals go, it is the ultimate challenge. You'll fight it without help from me and my myn, although we will be there with you. Only man is a greater kill."

"When will you have us hunting men?" Gunther asked, before he thought.

Brainerd chuckled. "Eager to rid the realm of undesirables and villains, are you?"

Gunther swallowed as he realized that all the other boys were staring at him. "Well, of course, I am."

"This is neither the time nor the place to discuss such matters. But it will come. True knights of God do not hesitate to rid the realm of the pagan scourge with the point of a blade."

Gunther started to ask another question, but Brainerd waved him off.

"Soon, you will join the ranks of the fighters against the pagan enemy and schvartzer races who are the originators of our present shame and suffering. You must be brutal, domineering, fearless, and cruel. You must bear pain. You must have nothing weak and gentle about you. The spirit of a free, splendid beast of prey must flash from your eyes if we are to salvage the realm."

"I am eager," said Gunther. The other murmured agreement.

"As you should all be. Dismissed."

* * * *

The ugly vampire had returned. Clovis shivered looking at him, unable to repress his memories of the day that Sergei bit him and laid the coercions in his mind.

The Lemyari messenger was a short, ill-favored looking mon with four rows of heavy frown lines etched into his forehead. His brow ridge jutted over his small, deep-set eyes, and a thick nose, humped and hooked above his thin sneering lips.

"Which ones this time, Lady Maruska?" Sergei asked, stroking his chin.

"The six Dresliners." She pointed them out. "That one first." Maruska indicated Konrad.

"Same as before?"

"No, I need information also. One I sought escaped. Berran Dreslin. These meat-pies are refusing to tell me where he fled to and how long ago he left."

"That will cost you six girls."

Maruska's temper flared. "That's expensive."

"Can you pay it?"

"Yes, of course, I can."

Sergei shuffled over to Konrad. "Start your question once I'm inside him."

"Unholy biiitch," Konrad groaned as Sergei twisted his head to the side without preamble.

Maruska folded her arms and rocked back on her heels with a smug smile.

Konrad blanched as Sergei's fangs entered his neck forcefully, and then he screamed.

"Where has Berran gone?"

Konrad writhed, jerking in his bonds. His face went whiter still and his screams became a shriek of anguish. Sergei continued to suck him with loud slurping sounds.

"Where has Berran gone?"

"Oh, gaaaawwds! Beltriiiiiaaaahhhhh."

Everyone in the tent stared at Konrad; their own faces gone as pale as bleached sheets.

Konrad started to sag. Sergei withdrew from Konrad, closed the wound, and faced Maruska. "He's a strong mon. If I keep this up, I run the risk of killing him."

"Finish. His life is not as important to me as catching the other is."

"Very well." Sergei plunged his fangs in just behind Konrad's ear on the opposite side.

Konrad shrieked and wept as the torture began again. Because the others could only imagine what Sergei was doing to Konrad beyond the obvious, it frightened them all.

"What part of Beltria?" Maruska asked.

"Vaaarssyaaavaaaa." Konrad slipped unconscious.

Maruska looked disgusted. "Try another one."

They got what they wanted from the next mon: Berran had a week's head start on them.

"Inform Zyne," Maruska ordered her captain Godofredo. "I want the swiftest riding strike forces we have sent after him. And I want Berran alive. For my larder."

Clovis shut his eyes and repeated his small prayer under his breath, which had by then become a daily ritual with him. "God lend wings to your feet. Run fast, run far, Berran. God keep you safe."

* * * *

It was a sizeable riding, but by no means an army. Campfires burned in the center to keep the autumn chill away, and dissuade dark things from coming too close. Sentries had been set and two myn stood by the fire on guard. Within his tent, sixteen-year-old Lord Berran Dreslin

lay on his side in his blankets, his bad leg aching as he fought for sleep against the nightmare images haunting him. The Lady in White, whom he had taken as his liege-god, had given him a vision of how his father, Reynhard, died.

Once more, Berran saw the twenty-four myn in the converted war-wagon, riding nude with their hands bound behind them. Six guards sat watching them alertly, three at either end. One of them was his childhood friend, Prince Tibalt. Riding next to the guards at the rear, sat Prince Clovis, Tibalt's brother; a bull's eye had been branded on his chest and he was bound hand and foot. Then Berran's gaze went reluctantly to his father, Reynhard, sitting across from Tibalt. He could tell from the lines in his father's face what terrible pain the man was in.

From the corner of his eye, Berran could see several of the myn covering themselves in bloody vomit.

"It's nearly over, isn't it?" Tibalt asked. "That's why they don't take our ropes off?"

Reynhard shook his head, and spoke softly. "I fear so."

"Last night ... last night I hurt so badly I thought it was coming out of me then."

"As did I."

"I've lost track of the days ... of time. I—" Tibalt broke off with a shrill cry, and stiffened, his eyes going wide. He fell backwards in the wagon onto his bound hand, his chest arched. "Oooooohh Gaaawd! The paaaaaaain." He sobbed, sliding off the bench onto the floor. "The paaaaaaain."

"Tibalt!" Clovis cried out in grief and dread.

Reynhard lurched toward his young prince. A large jagged tear opened in Tibalt's chest and the larva emerged, chewing hungrily on Tibalt's flesh. The creature had a vaguely human face on a maggot's body that was orange and brown in color, roughly a foot long and four inches high. Tibalt's eyes had glazed in death, his face locked into a rictus of anguish.

Bile rose from Berran's stomach to his throat as he heard the other myn screaming and saw them dying.

Reynhard shouted a curse and then followed that with an oddly tranquil, "Praise be..."

He sank to his knees, writhing with his back against the bench. Blood fountained from Reynhard's chest as he slipped to the floor—and died.

Berran swallowed back a scream, reached for his father, and found his fingers passing through the ephemeral flesh.

He started awake in his blankets, wondering at what point he had fallen asleep.

"Father ... you should never have died that way."

His body tensed up with grief, and grief burned away into anger, and the intensity of his emotions set off a spasm in his bad leg. Berran hit his leg with his fist, and then held it down until the spasm quieted.

He grabbed his cane and pushed himself to his feet with his good leg. He cursed at his clumsiness as he staggered for a second. His fair skin flushed to crimson, resenting his lameness with another rush of anger. Sometimes it felt like his life had ended when the horse had fallen with him, and his right leg had been broken in three places. The surgeons had set it to the best of their abilities, but it was clear that

the leg would never be right again. To be crippled at sixteen enraged Berran. The only time he was completely mobile was on horseback.

He pulled his cloak around his shoulders, and limped outside, punctuating each step with a furious thrust of the cane against the ground. Two guards stood sentry at the fire. Others were posted around the perimeters. Berran had forty soldiers with him; his mother Magnilda, and two of her maids; four young pages, one each from the four noble families of Dreslin Duchy; and his personal squire, Warenhari. He and Warenhari, who was his Uncle Konrad's oldest son, were the same age and had been inseparable since they learned to walk. It had been difficult to choose who would live and who would die, for there had been no question in either Berran's or his grandfather the Duke's mind, that those left behind in Dreslin were doomed.

"More bad dreams?" Warenhari emerged from his tent and joined Berran at the fire.

Berran gave a sharp nod and ran his fingers through his heavy blond mane. "They'll never stop."

"One day."

"Never." A bitter edge lashed from his voice. He straightened and prowled the edge of the fire, stabbing at the earth with his cane. "How much longer before we reach Lord Lukasz?"

"We'll cross the Beltrian border in a week. Then another week to reach Varsyava." Warenhari glanced at the banner flying over the small camp. Lady Magnilda had made it herself as soon as she learned that Berran planned to flee. It was like

nothing that had ever flown before over an Angrim force of arms: white with a unicorn worked in gold at the center, the banner of the Lady of Walled Cities, the god Aroana. They had forsaken their old religion, embraced the holy visions sent by the Lady with their promise of safety and victory.

A man screamed at the edge of camp and suddenly seven riders in crimson and black raced into the middle. One of them spied Berran and shouted, "There he is! Maruska wants him alive."

"Minnorians!" Berran drew his sword, and stood to meet them, but as he stepped forward his bad leg gave and he fell.

The lead rider jumped from his mount, straddled Berran, and pinned his sword arm with his knee. "Maruska's got an egg for you."

The image of his father dying, the larva crawling out of his chest roared through Berran's mind as he tried to throw his attacker off. However, the mon was inhumanly strong and Berran could not dislodge him. The Minnorian flexed his fingers, and brought forth his secondary nails. He shoved one into Berran's arm. Berran screamed as the burning venom seared through him, his body spasming in reaction to it. They were going to take him captive and put an egg into his chest like they had his father.

Myn were fighting all around him. He saw Warenhari fall beneath a blade as his cousin tried to reach him. Berran's heart broke. He tried to move beneath his captor's grip, but his strength failed him. The Lemyari's finger twitched, pressing his nail in deeper to discharge every bit of venom in

the single sac into Berran's arm, completing the Angrimer's disabling.

"Lady, you promised ... we were faithful," Berran sobbed, certain that he and his myn would soon be dead or worse.

He saw his mother emerge from her tent, and a Minnorian grabbed her.

Suddenly a gigantic shadow passed over the camp, blotting out the moon. A red gryphon landed with a rider and began tearing into their attackers. A pounding of hooves came from all sides, and at first Berran thought that it was more Minnorians, but glittering light rushed into the camp.

Unicorns, dozens of them, engaged the Minnorians, some with manes of dancing flames. They fought with horns and hooves and teeth. Their attackers tried to flee, but the unicorns harried them from every side.

The gryphon rider dismounted, stalking toward Berran.

The young lord's vampire assailant lifted him as if he weighed nothing, threw him across his shoulder, and headed for his horse. The gryphon rider barred his way with a sword in one hand and a dagger in the other. The mon was tall and lean with broad shoulders. He eyed the vampire with cool detachment.

"Drop him," the mon said, in a quiet tenor.

The Lemyari snarled. "Fool. You know what I am."

The mon did not reply. He held his stance and waited. The vampire shifted Berran, using his body as a shield and the gryphon rider moved swifter than a striking snake, going low and to the side. His sword sliced into the vampire's calf and down like a knife through soft butter. Berran had never seen

a blade so sharp. The Minnorian dropped Berran, and reached for his sword, but for all his inhuman speed, the gryphon-rider was faster. His sword ran through the heart of the Lemyari, gave a precise twist, and ripped the organ to shreds.

As his rescuer knelt over him, Berran realized, with a shock, that the mon was a woman who looked no older than himself. "Who are you?" He struggled with the words. His body hurt and his limbs would not answer.

"Talons," she said. Her eyes were cold as stone, and her voice as chill as death.

"Strange name ... for a ... woman..." Berran found his vision shrinking until all he could see was her face, although his hearing remained sharp.

"Where are you hurt?"

"My arm ... stuck me."

Her eyes narrowed and she tore his sleeve open. The flesh had turned black around a tiny puncture. "I'm not a Reader. Are any of your people?"

"No ... it was ... forbidden here."

She shook her head. "I'll do what I can for your wounded."

Talons Trollbane went to the gryphon and hauled her saddlebags and packs off. She dropped them beside Berran and went through one until she found a bottle. She poured a measure into a slender glass and lifted him up. "This is the antidote."

Berran drank it. "Why are you ... helping us?"

Talons shrugged. "I recognized your banner."

"You brought the unicorns?"

"No." She brought out a golden liquid and poured him a measure of that. "This will ease the pain."

Berran drank that also. "Then where..."

"They belong to the White Lady," Talons said. "My god is allied with her."

Talons frowned at how little Berran seemed to know for one who marched beneath Aroana's banner.

"Rest and I'll see to the others."

* * * *

Lukasz spent an hour looking for the book before it became plain that it was not in his rooms. The longer he searched, the more convinced Lukasz became that the book would help him stop feeling lonely and worried, which in turn lent a growing desperation to his quest. He had to find the book, nothing else would do. Anything else would just carry the same sense of frustration and emptiness that his visit to the willow trees had.

Then he remembered that he had had it with him when he was talking to Stefan just before his uncle rode off to fight in the south. Lukasz headed down the hallway to his uncle's suite and slipped inside. Lukasz felt a bit awkward being here without permission. But with Stefan gone, there was no one to give him permission, he reminded himself. This realm was his to hold in trust—with Hartmut's guidance—until his uncle returned.

Walking into the first room of the suite, Lukasz glanced around at the table and chairs, the sofas, and nowhere was the book to be seen. He desperately wanted to finish the

book, for it was something new to Beltria, imported from Gormond's Reach, a bit of heretical naughtiness that would get him punished by the Crisoran priests if they knew about it. Uncle Stefan had given it to him for his last birthday and his Engla had finally become good enough for him to fully enjoy it. Tales of heroes and foreign gods filled the pages along with fabulous illustrations, and it had been printed on one of those new machines they had in distant lands called a printing press.

Lukasz searched high and low through the sitting room. He felt reasonably certain that he had not gone into his Uncle's bedroom with it, and yet he began to doubt himself the longer he searched. Could he have gone into the bedroom and not remembered it? So he went into the bedroom. His gaze fell upon the book immediately, but its placement was very strange indeed. Just the top of it stuck out above a drawer in the nightstand, as if it had been deliberately set there and then the drawer closed to hold it up.

He frowned and pulled the book out. As Lukasz did so, the pages opened and a piece of paper fluttered to the floor. His first thought was that somehow the book had lost a page, perhaps torn out by clumsy handling and his stomach tightened in distress at having a beloved book damaged, which in turn made him think of his uncle who had given it to him. His distress plunged into anxiety and his stomach soured. What if his uncle got hurt? What if Stefan did not come back? What would he do?

Lukasz dropped to his knees and picked the paper up, relieved to discover that it wasn't a page at all. No, it was a

piece of paper with his Uncle's distinctive handwriting on it and the words were strange and incomprehensible.

Anchez Knobis

Innobis keisis

onezetozes treezistenses gresis blackizes, toosibakse

Onsutz darkest, upsiz downsiz

Clickety click

Lukasz laughed delightedly. There was a story in the book about a treasure hidden behind a clue made up of scrambled words. Uncle Stefan must have left him a present and to keep him from worrying too much, made a game by hiding it. All he had to do was solve the riddle and find his present. And odds were that the words were in Engla, not Beltrian. Lukasz suddenly looked forward to his uncle's return so he could tell him how he solved the riddle and found his present. Fascination banished his worries for the moment.

* * * *

Gunther lay on his back staring at a patch of endless blue sky through a break in the heavy cluster of evergreens walled around by a high build up of rose briars. Everyone had a favorite section in the thickets, hideaways where they liked to pretend that no one could ever find them. This was Gunther's. Now and again, his hand would caress the pommel of his golden dagger as if it were a beloved good luck charm. His cronies squatted, sat, or sprawled around him in whatever positions they found most comfortable. Adolf had managed to procure several large skins of wine and they had been passing

them around for an hour. The boys had begun to feel pleasantly buzzed.

"How long do you think it will be before the hunt?" asked Emil, roving the tiny glade restlessly. He was one of those boys who had to be constantly in motion, and fidgeted when told to stay in one place. It sometimes annoyed Gunther, but right then Gunther was feeling too distanced and introspective to care.

"If he waits too long," said Jarogniew, "the creature will move on."

Adolf chuckled darkly. "Brainerd is probably leaving goats staked out for the manticore to keep it nearby."

"I would assume so," agreed Gunther. He wiggled his toes inside his boots and considered pulling them off to air his sweating feet out.

"He should invite Lukasz this time," said Gerik. "Then we could have a fine little accident."

Gunther rolled onto his side and regarded Gerik. "Brainerd never invites Lukasz on our hunts."

Gerik smirked at Gunther in an irritating fashion. "Have you ever wondered why not? After all, Lukasz is the heir."

Gunther licked his lips and grabbed the wineskin from Flawiusz. He had never wondered about it, just made what he thought were obvious assumptions, but now that Gerik pointed it out, Gunther did wonder. "Because he's a mongrel dog?"

The older boy grinned. "Heir or not, Lukasz has bad blood in his veins. His mother was a pagan whore and a schvartzer. He has no place among pure bloods like ourselves. There's a

lot that you don't notice, Gunther. Things you'll be taught when you're initiated into the mysteries."

That perked Gunther's interest. "Like what?"

Everyone was now staring at Gerik. "For one thing, Lukasz doesn't get the private tutoring sessions the rest of us do."

"Why?"

Gerik drew his finger across his throat with an ominous sound. "So the schvartzer will be easier to kill when the time comes. You don't teach schvartzers and pagans how to fight well. If Brainerd had refused to teach the mongrel, then Stefan would have replaced him. So instead he teaches Lukasz poorly."

Adolf moved close to Gerik. "It isn't your place to be telling them these things. It's Brainerd's."

"Oh, come now, Adolf, don't be a prick." Gerik snorted. "There's always a hunt like this one just before initiations begin. Furthermore, I'm not betraying any secrets. And I'm not going to."

Gunther looked from Gerik to Adolf and back again. "So you've both been initiated into the mysteries?"

Adolf sniggered. "Yes. And Gerik is going to get a fat lip if he doesn't shut up."

Gerik shrugged. "You can try and make me."

"Shut up!" Gunther frowned. Because of his connection to the ruling family, Gunther outranked Adolf and Gerik; and rank counted far more than age among the Beltrian nobility. At least when the age difference was as slight as theirs.

Adolf and Gerik fell silent and faced Gunther expectantly.

"Now what is the point of all of this?" Gunther asked.

"The point," Gerik said, "is that Brainerd clearly intends to initiate you into the rites of manhood. You'll have to put all of your little boy nonsense behind you."

"And just what does that mean?"

Adolf shook his head. "You'll know when the time comes."

"Like I was saying, it would be a shame if Brainerd took Lukasz along on this manticore hunt and the beast just happened to get him. Everyone knows how dangerous they are. No one could fault us." Gerik kept a diffident air to his voice. "In fact, I'd be happy to shove the little half-breed in front of the creature."

Everyone went still, staring at the audacity of Gerik's coldly phrased statement.

"Would you really?" Gunther asked.

"Wouldn't you? That would make you heir, you know. Wouldn't you like to be the duke? You deserve it more than Lukasz does."

Gunther's thoughts swirled and he took another long pull from the wineskin. "Yes. Yes, I would."

Gerik grinned broadly, stuck his thumbs in his belt, and declared, "Then I'll suggest to Brainerd that we bring Lukasz along. One dead schvartzer coming up."

* * * *

The myn in the camp regarded Talons with a mixture of wary gratitude and curiosity, uncertain of what to make of her. She moved among them with the cool grace of a stalking leopard and the emotionless eyes of a stone-cold killer, dressed all in black wool and leather, pants, tunic and jerkin

with an odd cloak that spoke of shadows. Bandoleers of blades crossed her body, two huge knives rode at her hips, and a longsword at her shoulder.

"You have six dead and four wounded besides Berran," said Talons. "You'll need to cut the hearts out of your dead; otherwise any necromancers that may be trailing you will raise them to find out where you've gone from here."

Magnilda shivered when Talons came close to her. "Can't we burn them instead?"

"And tell the rest of them where you are? Don't be suicidal." Talons ducked into Berran's tent and knelt beside him. She pressed her hand to his forehead.

He opened his eyes at her touch, and Talons could see the glaze of fever in their depths.

"Will he live?" Magnilda asked anxiously, pulling at her cornsilk braid. "He's all I have."

"He should. I gave him the same antidote that saved my ba'halaef." Talons saw that she did not understand the Sharani word. "My husband. Besides, I got the impression they wanted him alive."

"Why do you say that?"

Talons pulled a glass vial from her pocket and held it up to the light streaming through the flap. She had milked the fingers of each of the dead Lemyari into separate vials, labeled them, and tucked all but this one away into her packs. "That vamp couldn't have been more than a week or two old. Venom's still more gold than green."

Magnilda frowned. "You know a lot about them."

The assassin shrugged. "My husband and I have been fighting them a long time."

"Water," Berran asked, his lips struggling to shape the word.

Berran's mother grabbed a waterskin and started to lift him up. Talons stopped her. "Just a little. Too much and he'll heave it back up."

Magnilda nodded and obeyed her, with a look of desperation in her eyes.

"Warenhari?" Berran asked, after the water had loosened his throat.

"He lives," Magnilda told him. "The wound was shallow."

"Thank the Lady for that." Berran closed his eyes and slipped away from them again.

Talons looked from one to the other. "Who's in charge of this company?"

"My son."

"Huh! He's in no shape for it."

"Then—then I guess it's me. I didn't introduce myself. I—I'm Lady Magnilda Dreslin." She extended her shaking hand to Talons, who gripped it firmly while being careful not to squeeze.

The evident fragility of Lady Dreslin troubled Talons. Someone like her did not belong riding the wilderness roads of Angrim in war time, even with an armed guard. Suddenly Magnilda gave way to tears and sobbing. Talons cringed away from the sound. She had never been good at dealing with tears, her own or anyone else's. The assassin gathered

Magnilda awkwardly into her arms and patted the mon's back, unable to think of what else to do.

"Would you like me to see you safely to your destination?"

Magnilda sucked in a deep breath to control her weeping.

"Please. Please, help us. Help my son."

"I will. But you'll have to promise to do as I say. None of you here have any experience dealing with these monsters. I was raised to fight them."

"By the banner of the Lady, I swear to place my trust in you. We would all have died last night, if you hadn't come. Surely the Lady sent you to us."

Talons decided not to disabuse her of that notion. She would have to put aside her quest to find Dawnreturning for a bit; but Talons felt certain that her god, Hadjys the Dark Judge, would understand. "Perhaps." Talons lowered her head, trying to find the right words and failing. "Lady Magnilda, Dreslin has fallen."

Magnilda's face crumpled up and she fell against Talons, who found herself once again holding her while she sobbed. "Oh god, then the rest of my family..."

Talons heaved a sigh. "If they did to Dreslin, what they did to Stolzingen, I would assume they are all dead."

Two men had to be stretchered between horses. Two others, including Warenhari, rode. Talons created a different solution for Berran, because he needed medicine throughout the day. She side-slung Berran on the horse that his mother rode so that Magnilda could tend to him. Talons selected a horse from among the remounts and rode at the forefront of

the company, while Little Bit soared off ahead of them to scout.

One mon nudged his horse up the line until he rode beside her.

Talons noted him from the corners of her eyes. "Captain Vernados, I believe?"

"Just Vernados will do, Lady Talons."

"And just Talons will do."

Talons could see the predator behind his tranquil gaze. She judged his age at mid-thirties. Lines had already become etched into his skin at the corners of his eyes and mouth.

"I'm warning you..." Vernados said.

Talons had wondered when this was coming and which one would say it. So she waited for several heartbeats for him to finish.

"If you hurt them, I'll kill you."

She met his eyes with the tiniest, almost imperceptible warmth in their dark depths. "Why?"

Vernados blinked in surprise both at the nature of the question and faint thawing in the icy woman. "Because I love them. My family has served theirs with love, loyalty, and respect for generations in full honor."

"What does your family do?"

"We're the Duke's executioners."

"I thought you were a soldier."

"I am. I fought at the Battle of Islyn Hollow."

"There's a tale here."

"A long one."

"Tell it and we'll pass the time better," said Talons.

So he told the tale and Talons listened.

Vernados' father had served as the chief executioner at Dreslin Castle, and Vernados had assisted his father in his duties, as well as those who committed torture in the name of gaining desperately needed information from their enemies. Yet when given the opportunity to become a soldier instead, Vernados had chosen that path. The thirty-four year old Vernados had always been fiercely loyal to Berran's father, Reynhard. He fought at the Battle of Islyn Hollow, taking a serious wound defending Reynhard when the older Dreslin had been briefly surrounded by his enemies after losing his horse.

The Battle of Islyn Hollow had gone down in countless books of strategy and tactics; and it had made the reputation of Angrim's young General Reynhard Dreslin as a master tactician when he defeated the far older and more experienced Minnorian General Ynkendio Kreuz.

"Ynkendio is leading them this time also," Talons said when Vernados finished his story.

"He is?"

"He's not human any longer."

"Vampire?"

"Demon. His mate killed Reynhard at his urging."

"Son of a gutterwhoring goat-cockling bastard..." Vernados continued to curse until he ran out of breath and invention.

* * * *

Brainerd opened the door to his room and found Adolf and Gerik standing there. The armsmaster's shirt was off. Old

scars interrupted the heavy golden thatching covering his broad chest. "It's late. What do you want?"

Gerik inclined his head with a little smile. "It's about Lukas. Can we come inside?"

Brainerd stepped back, and gestured for them to come in. He closed the door behind them and dropped the bar. "It best be more than a trivial complaint."

The bed was rumpled, yet Brainerd was still half-clothed. Considering that servants made all the beds each morning, Gerik felt certain that Brainerd had recently played Jack in the Orchard with one of the serving women. Every year a couple of them were turned out of service for having their bellies swollen on the wrong side of the blankets. If anyone looked closely enough, and Gerik had, most of those women could be connected to Brainerd in some way.

"It is." Gerik sauntered past Brainerd and took a seat at the small table to the far side of Brainerd's bed. "We want to have Lukas along on the hunt."

Brainerd's expression clouded over. "You want that tainted mongrel hunting with pure borns like yourselves?"

Adolf held back as he seated himself with Gerik between him and the armsmaster.

"Manticore is dangerous game," said Gerik smoothly. "It would be such a shame if the beast killed the little schvartzer."

The shadows passed from Brainerd's face and he sat down with the boys, leaning on his elbows to search Gerik's eyes. "Yes, it would be."

"We all know how I am at times ... I could accidentally stumble into the poor little mongrel heir and knock him under its claws."

"A hunting accident..." Brainerd considered, then fetched some bottles of beer he had cooling on the small balcony of his room. He passed them around. "When Stefan returns—if he returns—he'll need a new heir."

"Very convenient," Adolf said.

"You're certain that you can do this?" Brainerd focused on Gerik.

"I've had all the special training sessions. Of course I can." Gerik stood up and made a shoving motion with both hands. "Dead mongrel."

"Good. Then there'll be no tainted blood on the throne. If Beltria is to be safe from the scourge that is ravaging Angrim, we must eliminate all the tainted blood in Beltria. Not just Lukasz. We must be brutal with those who would spread weakness and corruption throughout the realm. We must dominate them. It's the destiny of our race."

"And we will, Brainerd. Adolf and I stand with you in this."

* * * *

Lukasz studied the riddle long into the night, finally shoving it under his pillow just before falling asleep. *The strange words permeated his dreams; strange people spoke them to him. A demon with a tail like a scorpion chased him through the halls of his castle, screaming "Anchez knobis, innobis keisis! Damn you, damn you!"*

The image faded and was replaced by a bloody woman banging on a chest of drawers and she too screamed at him, "Anchez knobis, innobis keisis."

Lukasz fled from her, running out into the garden and there stood a woman in tattered green and brown robes, her black hair wild and disheveled. He started to flee again, but she spoke in a calm tone, "One is two. Three is ten."

She turned and walked away from him. Lukasz ran after her, but lost her in the hedgerows and came face to face with a bronze skinned man with a youthful face and dark, haunted eyes. He carried an incredible staff topped with the upper body of a pegasus done in a metal that had a blue-violet cast to it. "Wisdom is often hidden behind deception. The lines of a spellbook are coded to shelter their truths from the uninitiated. One man's freedom is sometimes another man's persecution. Grey is black, two steps back."

Then the man vanished.

Lukasz spun around looking for how the man had disappeared and heard snarling to his right. He spun again and saw to his horror, a lycan in hybrid form approaching him. The boy had never seen one before, except in the pictures in his book. The lycan had a longsword at his shoulder, and wore finger bones braided into his long black hair. But the worst of it was the scars on his face. Lukasz had thought that lycans could not be scarred, but this one was. The boy swallowed back a scream.

"One is darkest, up is down is."

The lycan turned into a wolf and ran off, leaving Lukasz frightened and alone.

"What now?" Lukasz muttered, walking back toward the keep.

His answer came in the form of a boy his own age. The stranger sat upon a garden bench, with his legs crossed beneath him. He had curly black hair, fair skin, and a smile on his face.

"Who are you?" Lukasz demanded, unable to see something to fear in a mere boy.

"I am named for the river of death. Death is an illusion. Much in life is illusion. Sometimes you have to find it with your heart and not your head. Sometimes you must use your fingers and not your eyes. Clickety click. Clickety click."

Lukasz woke shivering, his body coated in sweat. He sprang from his bed and lit a candle on his writing desk. Then he pulled out paper and a pen. He dipped the quill into the ink well and started writing.

On chest knob is.

In knob key is

One is two. Three is ten

Grey is black, two steps back

One is darkest, up is down is."

Clickety click. Clickety-click

Lukasz wrapped a robe around himself against the chill clinging to his body and stuffed the paper into his pocket. He belted on his knife. Then he walked through the silent hall of the sleeping palace to his uncle's chambers. He let himself in and lit every candle he could find.

He could feel his pulse racing and throbbing in his temples as fright melted into desperation. Lukasz could feel in his gut

that this was not a game of find the present, but of something far more urgent. He wondered what his uncle could be hiding that was meant for his eyes alone. He scanned the room, trying to decide whether to start on one of the two dressers or the chest of drawers. Lukasz chose a dresser. One by one, the boy started working the knobs off with his knife. As soon as one piece of furniture proved unfruitful, Lukasz moved onto the next. He destroyed the knobs in the sitting room and moved on to his uncle's bedroom. The boy was almost in despair when he reached his uncle's favorite dresser. It had huge knobs. Knobs big enough to hold a small key. Lukasz felt conscience stricken over all the destruction he had left in his wake. His uncle always told him he needed to use more common sense. If he had stayed calm and considered everything, Lukasz would have known to look here first. One drawer had two knobs and they were the biggest knobs of all.

"One is two."

With far more care than before, Lukasz pried the first knob off. His finger slid over the edge and he realized with a leap of hope that it was hollow. It rattled when he shook it. Turning it up, Lukasz saw, glinting in the candlelight, a key. He dumped the key into his hand, then put it in his pocket.

"How can three be ten?" Lukasz scanned the room. "Find something that has three and on the three is ten."

His heart nearly jumped out of his throat. On one wall hung three battle standards.

"Three!"

Lukasz pulled the standards down and tossed them on his uncle's bed, which revealed all of the gray stone behind it. There was a pattern of ten cut stones at the top and ten at the bottom, with half stones along some of the edges on the section of wall where the standards had been hanging.

"Gray," he gasped, his heart hammering so hard that he felt like there was a blacksmith in his chest using his ribs as an anvil.

The boy went to the wall, aligned himself as perfectly in the middle as he could, and put his nose against the cold stone, then he took two steps back. Being this close made the stones look blurry and for a moment, Lukasz could not figure out what to do next.

"One at the top and one at the bottom are darkest."

Lukasz blinked and then rubbed his eyes, trying to clear them. The stones appeared to be all the exact same shade of gray. He looked again, studying them closer and noticed a thin pattern of black in a single stone at the top and ... Yes! Directly at the bottom beneath it was a matching stone.

But there was no key hole. Lukasz' eyes roved up and down that line of stone.

"Much in life is illusion. Sometimes you have to find it with your heart and not your head. Sometimes you must use your fingers and not your eyes. Clickety click. Clickety click."

"My fingers."

Lukasz stood on tiptoe to reach as high as he could. Painstakingly, he searched each stone in that line. His hands came lower and lower, and Lukasz began to worry that he had gotten it wrong, looked at the stones wrong. Just as tears

of frustration began in the corners of his eyes, his fingers found a keyhole shaped indentation. The boy peered around his fingers, trying to see it, but it was as if nothing was there. Holding one finger over the keyhole, he brought out the key and carefully slipped it into the invisible hole. Lukasz turned it and heard clickety-click, clickety-click, followed by a grinding of stone.

The mantel of the hearth had slid back. Lukasz gasped sharply, released the key, and went to examine the hearth. The movement of the mantel had revealed an opening on the left side. It must have been a tight squeeze for a grown man, but Lukasz was small for his age and slender by Beltrian standards. He slipped through with ease and then a sudden worry seized him. Before looking around, he ran back out to the outer door to his uncle's suite and dropped the bar across the door. It was best that no one surprise him while the secret room was open.

He returned to the secret room to look around, wondering why Uncle Stefan had never told him about it. A desk sat to one side, and a chifferobe to the other. He went to the desk first, sat down in the little chair in front of it, and opened the middle drawer. Lukasz licked his lips nervously, worrying about someone finding him here, and yet intensely curious. A journal lay in the drawer with the year written across the cover: 1068

"That's this year," Lukasz gasped. "God, I shouldn't. But he gave me the clue. He must have known I would."

Although that thought salved his conscience a bit, he wavered until his curiosity overcame him and he flipped through to the last entry in the book.

Lukasz,

Your greatest fault is frequently your greatest virtue.

Lukasz nearly jumped out of his chair when he saw that the entry was headed up like a letter to him. Then he thumbed back and found that they were all that way. He took that as permission to read and returned to the last entry.

I left the clues, counting on your curiosity. I know that I ride to my death, for I sent to the Oracle of Badonth and was told that when I rode to the aid of Angrim I would die. Before you condemn me for a heretic, read on.

Lukasz gasped and began to sob. The Oracle of Badonth was legendary for its accuracy concerning wars. Uncle Stefan was not coming back. He was going to die and then Lukasz would have no one to love him. Lukasz knew he would never be happy again, but he vowed to be a man about it. He would have his cry now, then he would never, ever cry again. Lukasz forced himself to keep reading.

The oracle was not destroyed, I merely hid it. I could not risk the Kyser discovering that I still harbored it. Not even a Duke of so large a realm as Beltria would be safe were he known to worship the native gods of this world. However, there will come a time when only those gods can save you.

You will not find your mother's name in my journals, only her initials. You must go to the Hermit of Jasmine Falls to learn her name. I believe that in your time of direst need,

your mother's people will come to your aid, for she was great among them.

Lukasz closed the journal, tucked it under his arm, and after retrieving the key and closing the secret room, he returned to his suite where he curled up on his bed and read until he fell asleep.

CHAPTER FOUR

BIRTHDAY PARTY

"Are you out of your mind?" Nevin snarled, leaning across the table in Isranon's face, scattering the maps. "The boy's looking for a chance to stick a knife in your back ... and you're going to give him a birthday party?"

Isranon regarded Nevin calmly. Their relationship had changed drastically over the past four years, and Isranon recognized that fact as they faced each other. Nevin had been his boyhood mentor; but after Isranon had killed the sa'necari named Troyes to rescue Merissa, Nevin had become his spirit-brother, as had Nevin's cousin Olin. Gone were the days when Nevin's outbursts could intimidate him.

"Yes." Isranon finally broke his silence, his gaze steady. "I can't continue to punish him for the things he does wrong, unless I also reward him for the things he does right."

"And just what has Stygean done right?"

Isranon knew that Nevin had him there, so he groped for a moment. "Well, he hasn't bitten anyone without permission."

"That's simple obedience."

"Even obedience should be rewarded."

"You're never going to get through to him, Isranon. You're never going to reach him. If I had my way, I'd cut his black heart out and eat it."

Isranon swallowed and moistened his lips with his tongue, remembering how Claw had eaten Troyes' heart after finding

the sa'necari dead on his own altar. "I never wanted to be a leader of myn. First Prince Timon forced it on me and then Kalirion."

Timon, what were you thinking of when you forced this role upon me? I was too badly wounded and ill to handle it. All I wanted was to find healing, but I'm trapped by duty instead. Now we're an army going north to do battle with an ancient evil at the behest of my liege-god, Kalirion Sun-Lord. Sometimes I don't know if I can do it or not.

Nevin's gaze softened as if he could read where Isranon's thoughts had gone. "Do you regret it?"

"Sometimes. My brother, I must lead on my own terms, by the tenets of the path I have chosen. The Middle Path. That means I have to judge Stygean by his actions, not his words and not the fact that he was born sa'necari. Think of all the people who wanted to kill me because I was sa'necari. Think of all the sa'necari who wanted to kill me because I was a heretic, a Dark Brother of the Light."

"Stygean isn't you."

"Until he breaks a law severe enough to merit giving him to Anksha, I will treat him as if he were any other boy."

"That's your decision?"

"Yes."

"I think you're making a grave mistake."

"Noted."

Isranon's thoughts drifted to Darmyk. He wondered how his small son was doing, how Merissa was faring having to raise the boy without him. Anksha had promised, back in the days that he had still been her blood-slave, that she would

take him to Red Wolff Valley in Waejontor and allow him to raise his son there. He had not had more word from Claw in months and he worried, wondering about the silence. He wanted so desperately to finally meet his child. He trusted Claw, Aisha, and Merissa to raise his child right, but he still wanted to be there.

* * * *

The rain had stopped, and the sun emerged in bright warmth, taking some of the autumn chill from the air. In another day or two the ground would be dry enough for the horses to pull the wagons without the wheels getting mired down in the muck of the roads. The older children, twelve of them nibari and the two thirteen-year-old sa'necari had been taken into the forest close to the camp to gather firewood. Two Lemyari, Corbienne and Haig, stood watchful guard over them.

Because Jingen and Stygean were not trusted to keep their fangs in their mouths, the only ones who took the children out of camp were Lemyari, Ymraudes, and lycans, all capable of handling the boys' dark talents if they got out of line. That fact was not lost on Stygean who did not wish to get clouted again by the likes of Nevin or Anksha. Jingen, however, always seemed to think he could find a way around the rules to an extent that made Stygean nervous.

Stygean tried to ignore Jingen, not wanting to catch the blame for his friend's exploits, but found it impossible to do so. He could tell from Jingen's body language, the small steps and frequent flicking glances, that Jingen had gone into sneak

mode. Stygean picked up another stick and tucked it under his arm with the rest of his bundle, then allowed himself to pause to see what Jingen's goal was. He wanted to kick himself for not having guessed it immediately.

Jingen was working his way toward Nolly, which would take him straight across Stygean's path.

Nolly, a Three Diamonds filly, had such a long biteable neck that both boys drooled every time they found themselves near her. As Nolly bent to pick up a piece of wood, her long blonde hair slipped around her face and she tossed it back, revealing how ruddy her fair complexion had become, and her narrow finely defined features were puffy.

Jingen knelt to pick up a stick beside Stygean and bumped his elbow. "Look at Nolly. I think she's starting to bloat."

Stygean glanced discreetly. "You're right. Jun needs to blood her."

"Don't be foolish. He may own her, but he doesn't know how to treat her."

"And you do?" Stygean felt edgy as Jingen resumed working his way toward her, gathering sticks with each step he took until he bumped her.

Nolly's bundle fell to the ground. Jingen smiled, showing his fangs. "Let me help you."

Nolly backed away from Jingen, her lips trembling.

Jingen had been stalking her for weeks. "My fangs. Your neck. My sword in your sheath," he whispered low.

"Let her be," Stygean said, coming up to Jingen. He disliked seeing Nolly so frightened. He wondered if Farris would have been that frightened, or more so, when he

mounted her and stuck the bane-blade into her. Then he remembered Imra dying beneath his father, screaming as if she had lost her mind. It had excited Stygean, filled his necromantic senses with pleasure, and yet, Nolly—Stygean felt a shred of discomfort and doubt.

Jingen glared at him. "Wuss."

Nolly chose that instant to flee, leaving her sticks behind.

"What's going on here?" Corbienne walked up to them, frowning heavily at Stygean. "Keep your fangs in your mouths and your bones in your pants." She seized Stygean's shoulder, barring her fangs which were much larger than his own.

Haig grabbed Nolly as she ran past him, lifted her to his shoulder, and patted her. "Now, now. You're safe, little winepress. No one's going to suck your grapes except Jun."

* * * *

Corbienne brushed her long black hair and tied it. She shoved the brush into the small copper-hinged chest that was the tent's only furnishings besides her bedroll. In a little while, she intended to leave her tent and seek out a ripe nibari to feed on. The nibari herd was ninety percent females and nine percent mules, with only three adult studs in the herd. It worked out all right for Corbienne, since as the only female among the Lemyari that meant she had a choice of the males for her feeding.

Iuf came into her tent with a pleading light in his eyes as he ran a hand through his scruffy brown hair that was liberally sprinkled with white and gray.

She knew what he was going to ask for. "You're going to get us into trouble."

He rubbed his leathery face, burnt by too much sun and wind over the years, the lines and crow's feet etched like valleys into his skin. "It's the only real pleasure I get."

Corbienne lowered her eyes, refusing to look at him. They were lovers, but since the march began she had been refusing to feed off him. Iuf felt his age keenly, being in his late middle years, and when her fangs were in his neck, Corbienne gave him visions of his youth back. It did not require the use of fascination to draw him. Their love was genuine. But both General Gryphonheart and Lord Dawnreturning disapproved so stringently of her feeding on him, that they had both been chastised and threatened over it: Iuf because Nans believed, with reason that it reduced his awareness and ability to fulfill his duties for many hours afterward; and herself because Isranon feared that she might inadvertently kill Iuf or decide to turn him without permission.

"I can't, Iuf. You can enjoy my body, but not my fangs."

"Please, just once, just a little."

"No. I won't disobey orders. And you shouldn't."

"We could leave."

Corbienne looked horrified. "The two of us alone in the wilderness with no other food source for me but you? How long would you last once the madness of thirst came upon me? You know what happened to my family."

Her father had given her to a vampire in payment for the erasure of his gambling debts. The vampire had given her a glass of blood-laced wine—which Iuf had recently learned was

a common trick—and then killed her in front of her father, knowing she would rise, but not informing her father of this before leaving with her body. She rose in a strange place among people she did not know. Corbienne fled them and made her way back home, only to fall prey to the obsession of the newborn, which drew her into killing her family, one by one, in the Passion-Dance. Grief stricken, Corbienne had fled into the wilderness and wandered aimlessly until Timon found her and taught her a better way, bringing her into his society of the Borealysyn, those who did not kill from appetite or pleasure, those who knew the difference between love and bloodlust.

"You could get Isranon to sell you some nibari."

She shook her head. "I asked. He refused. He's keeping me here, dependant on his bounty, because he's afraid of what I might do to you."

Iuf grabbed Corbienne in desperation, trying to force her head to his neck. She knocked him down and retreated to the tent flap. "Don't."

"Corbienne..."

She fled.

* * * *

It seemed to Isranon that there was only a single person in the entire camp besides himself that believed it might be possible to reach the two young sa'necari, and that was Amiri's nibari, Randilyn. He knew that Randilyn, being an incorrigible optimist, was not taken seriously by most, and yet he felt that they overlooked the core of wisdom in her. After

all, Amiri would never have taken Randilyn as her nibari if she had not possessed the capacity for true wisdom. Ymraude nibari were not bred, they were made from humans, sylvans and others through a secret process that Isranon had become privy to. Randilyn was not simply Amiri's nibari, but her apprentice in bio-magicalism, and should Amiri die, then Randilyn would be instantly transformed into an Ymraude and replace her. All of which made her the perfect choice to enlist in Isranon's efforts to turn the two boys to the side of light and away from the darkness they had been raised to.

As Isranon waited for Randilyn to arrive, he considered all of that and reaffirmed his decision. He sat at his table, sipping from his pocket flask of Sanguine Rose, a powerful troll's blood cocktail laced with strong drugs and herbs that was the only thing keeping him alive and healthy. It had its dangers if he took too much of it in a quest to ease his suffering and Isranon was no stranger to them: it led to nightmares, flashbacks, and hallucinatory visions.

Randilyn poked her head through the tent flap and glanced about. She was an appetizing nibari like an image of butter cream frosting, pale skinned with nearly white blonde hair. Only the off-kilter broadness of her shoulders suggested the fact to Isranon that she had been male before being transformed into an Ymraude nibari.

"You wanted to talk?" Randilyn asked.

"The weather is going to keep us pinned down here for a few days, and I recently learned that Stygean had a birthday shortly before we left."

"You want to give him a belated birthday party?" Randilyn beamed. "I love birthday parties. That ought to bring a smile to him. I know Stygean spends a lot of time worrying about his father."

The mention of Liuthan Loosestrife sent a shadow across Isranon's face. "I'm doing all that I can to slow the Withering in him down, but Anksha was so enraged when she took him that she crisped his shaukras and mage-net. There isn't a lot I can do for Liuthan."

Randilyn nodded. "For a sa'necari, Stygean was raised with an unusual amount of love in his life. He cherished his parents. When he learned his mother was dead, it broke his heart. The others may not have noticed it, but I did. It's why I think he can be reached. He needs another source of love, especially with his father rapidly dying before his eyes. He's going to feel very alone, Isranon."

"I can only hope he will allow us to fill that void, Randilyn. You and I. The other children are warming toward Anksha, but Jingen and Stygean see her as a murderer."

Shaking herself loose from the dark thoughts, Randilyn grinned. "So what about this party?"

"Just a small party. Just the older children like Stygean, Jingen, and Nolly. You pick the rest out. I want you to take charge of it. There's a stack of carrying globes in that chest." Isranon indicated one of the gold and green ones that had been a gift from the god Mariko, Queen of Imralon, after he raised her son Dynarien's wife from the dead. He remembered how happy Dynarien and Talons Trollbane had looked together the last time that he had seen them. "Go

through several of them and set aside whatever you think might make an appropriate gift. We can discuss it when you've made your picks."

* * * *

Jingen Scathwick slipped inside the large tent that his mother shared with five others. Woolen curtains partitioned the tent into rooms to give each of the five women and one male some privacy from each other. He knew all of them, because they had once served in Liuthan's household as had Jingen's parents, Jurgin and Disharyl Scathwick.

"So you're back again, are you?"

Jingen stopped short and stared up at Brenoc's powerful form. The mon's robe hung open, revealing a fresh set of fang marks on his neck and claw wounds on his broad chest. Jingen's gaze flashed over all of Brenoc's exposed skin, looking for signs of the Withering, and found none. "I've come to see my mother."

"I know what you've come for. So go on."

Jingen nodded and darted into the section that his mother slept in. She lay resting on her bedding with her eyes closed.

"Are you awake?"

Disharyl smiled and opened her eyes. "I am now."

Jingen flung himself into her arms as she sat up. "Are you well, mother?"

"As can be."

His eyes searched her face. "Are you Withering?"

She pressed his face into the curve of her neck, and heaved a sigh. "I found my first signs this morning. A small

patch under my right breast. Actually, the Beast found it. She likes biting me on the nipple."

"Bitch."

Disharyl laughed softly and hugged him. "She fed on everyone in this tent today, starting with me and ending with Brenoc. Her appetites are growing."

"She's going to kill someone." Jingen shivered.

"Pregnancy makes her hungry." She ran her fingers through Jingen's hair and kissed his forehead. "Are you getting enough blood?"

"Plenty. The nibari never refuse and never tell on me."

"I told you they wouldn't. Foolish creatures."

"I'd like to kill the Renunciate and punish the Beast for what she did to father and is doing to you."

"I love you for that."

"Could you make a poison for me?"

Disharyl shook her head. "They guard the herbs too well when I'm there. Randilyn and Amiri never turn their backs on me."

"Just a few pinches here and there?"

"I can try. What about Stygean?"

"He'll help me stick the heretic. But if I can't get my hands on a baneblade to do it with, then I'll have to poison whatever blades we can steal."

Disharyl opened her robe, lifted her breast out, pushed Jingen's face down until his lips rushed her nipple. "I can spare a little for you ... like I used to do."

Jingen's mouth covered his mother's nipple and he sucked her to tightness, then his fangs came down and pierced her.

Disharyl laid back, moaning with her son moving atop her while he sucked.

* * * *

The Sanguine Rose sent Isranon into dark dreams again that night as he slept in Anksha's arms, her soft furry body warm in the curve of his own. The blankets had gone askew and he shivered in the chill, yet he did not wake.

Isranon lay on a wooden surface shaped like a D laid on its side, his ankles were bound to the bottom and his neck had a strap around it holding his head tightly against the other side. Another strap crossed beneath his armpits and his arms were stretched out straight and taut in a line above his head, shackled in place. He was nude like an offering on a strange altar. He reached for his power to free himself and that was when he became aware of the spellcord on his wrists. Isranon jerked desperately at his arms.

"What in Hell's unholy name?" He pulled with all his muscular strength and could not get free. Fear curdled in his stomach, and sent sour bile rising to his throat. With no memory of how he had gotten here, Isranon felt the backwash of nightmares past when he had been bound and nearly killed in the rites. He considered himself indurate, numbed to the past and the possibilities of the future alike; and yet laying there bound, Isranon found that to be a lie. He struggled again. This position they had bound him in, and this peculiar table, did not match with any rites he had witnessed while he lived among the sa'necari.

He heard footstep and realized that he was not alone. The band around his throat would not let him turn his head, and when Isranon finally saw them, it was from the corners of his eyes.

Two creatures looked down upon him. The sight of them chilled him: they were the first demons he had ever seen except in the pictures drawn and painted in some of Josiah Abelard's books. Their bright orange skin reminded him of the color of flames, their black horns swept back from their temples, and their long whip like tails had eight bony ridges along the end and a barbed tip that oozed fluid which he suspected was venom. A closer look and he recognized that one was a male and the other female.

The female ran her hands searchingly over his chest. He felt a Reader's power wash through him. "There's a divinator's spells embedded in him. Mondarius must have had him already."

The male crossed him arms and regarded her. "You wanted Dawnreturning. Now you have him. Will he do?"

The female smiled at her mate. "His chest is broad and deep. There is plenty of room in it."

Plenty of room? What are they going to do to me?

"What about the spells?"

The female considered for a moment. "I doubt it will affect my young. Yessss, he'll do."

Isranon shivered, his fear growing, and he reached for his gods, Kalirion and Dynanna for the strength to accept his fate, whatever that might be.

Her tail whipped around, and the barb penetrated his chest. Isranon screamed in anguish, felt the barb open up inside him, and something settle against his lungs.

"When my larva hatches, Dawnreturning, it will eat its way out of you."

"Nooooo!" Isranon screamed.

Then a terrible pain erupted in his chest and a gigantic maggot with a human face emerged from his flesh.

Isranon was still screaming when he woke and bolted into a sitting position.

Anksha snapped awake, glancing around with her claws out. "What is it?"

Her nostrils flared as she sniffed the air, and then blinked. The moist air would sharpen the odors, yet she found not.

Isranon swallowed. "Another nightmare, Anksha."

Her brow furrowed. "Of me?"

"Ahhh. No." He kissed her forehead. Anksha had never shown any sign that she knew about his nightmares concerning the day that she had taken him as her blood-slave, broken his will, and shattered his sense of self, leaving him to painfully pull himself back together again. Nor had he ever told her. "I love you, Anksha."

* * * *

Isranon spent the next day, while Randilyn was decorating the area beside the command tent beneath a large awning for the party, pouring through the books and journals of the late mage-master, Josiah Abelard. The ghost of his friend had bequeathed him all his journals and books just before Kalirion

released his soul to the wheel of life after Isranon expiated Josiah's sins by taking on his mentor's unfinished service to the Sun-Lord.

The distinctive clacking of the wooden and ceramic beads in Amiri's long braids alerted Isranon to her entrance. He raised his eyes and regarded the Ymraude shaman as the vampire settled across from him at the table where he had the books spread out.

"Randi is enjoying putting the party together," said Amiri.

Isranon smiled and then sobered. "Yes, she is."

Amiri leaned across the table and touched Isranon's hand as she studied his face. Isranon tensed at the contact and she drew back. Too many unresolved issues remained between them, yawning like a chasm that had suddenly opened like a rip in the grounding of their friendship. "Is something bothering you?"

"A dream. A vision. I don't know what it was."

"Describe it to me."

When Isranon had finished, Amiri nodded. "Skerpyons. A very dangerous type of demon. I thought they were extinct, but if you've had a vision of them..."

"A lot of things that we thought were gone forever after the godwar aren't." Isranon turned more pages of Josiah's monster book, searching the illustrations for anything that resembled them.

"The females implant their eggs in the bodies of intelligent species. The stronger the host body, the stronger the larva emerges and in the case of mages, they frequently absorb the mage's powers."

Amiri extended her hands to Isranon for the book and went swiftly through the pages. "Josiah was given the gift of knowledge by Kalirion." Her hand paused on a page and she turned the book around for Isranon to see the picture. "Is this it?"

Isranon felt chilled by the image. "Yes."

Beside the picture of the male and female Skerpyons was a diagram of how their tails worked, both of the male and the female with a side cut. The caption, written in Josiah's elegant script read:

The venom is comparable to that of the Lemyari, only stronger. On a scale of one to ten, I would place theirs at seven, the Lemyari at level six, and the legendary nekaryiane and sa'nekaryiane at nine.

"I felt the stinger enter my chest and the egg slide in." Isranon shivered, his eyes haunted, one hand curling into a fist. "Then the larva hatched and emerged from my flesh."

Amiri eyed him closely. "Let's pray that wasn't a vision of the future."

Isranon's voice thickened and he lowered his eyes, reaching for the still place within himself that he called his castle. But the doors refused to open and he remained visibly troubled. "Yes, let's. And ... if they do get me ... promise you'll kill me before that thing can hatch."

She gripped his arm as a sign of her word. "I swear it."

Looking up with the tiniest sigh of relief, Isranon felt the first easing of the tension that had lain between them for over a month. "I knew you'd understand. I knew I could count on you for this."

"You can count on me for many things. I made a mistake with you and Anksha. I regret it. I let the scientist in me get the better of my compassion. Randi tried to intervene and I punished her. I keep telling you how sorry I am."

"We all make mistakes, Amiri. This isn't going to be an easy war, or a short one. Stand by us. And ... and I forgive you." There, he had said it. It was what Anksha had been pressing him to say for days. But it was forgiveness of the mind and not yet of the heart. That would come with time.

* * * *

Stygean's small party mixed both the sa'necari and the nibari children so that it would be a large one and hopefully produce some good will on both sides. The nibari children's transitioning had not yet made them completely docile with the sa'necari children, as it would once puberty set in, and they were a bit rowdy. And the two sa'necari boys' status as slaves enhanced the nibari perceptions of them as equals, rather than superiors; which was something the adults would never have done.

A few presents were produced, but only a few, since most of the people did not like Stygean. He seemed first hurt and then defiant when he saw how little there was. Had he been in his old home with his parents, it would have been a grand birthday, for he had been blooded. Perhaps they would even have provided him with a nibari to rite in mortgiefan, to feel her death slide down his throat while he rode her and shattered her soul. It burned in his stomach that he had been given so little.

They will pay for giving me such a shoddy birthday,
Stygean thought angrily.

When all was done, Anksha allowed him to see his father. Stygean immediately pressed himself into Liuthan's arms and wept. "They gave me a belated birthday party."

Liuthan kissed Stygean's forehead. "Happy birthday, my son. I wish I had something to give you."

"I wish we were home. I wish Mother were alive. I hate these people."

"I wish I had never gone up against Lord Dawnreturning," Liuthan said softly. "Then you would still have those things and this would have been a splendid birthday."

"It was a terrible birthday. I got six presents. Three books of stories—and they weren't sa'necari stories either. The heroes were humans who fought our kind. And then there was a vambrace, a silver necklace, and a belt that will hold a sword if they ever allow me one. I hate them. I hate them. I hate them."

Liuthan sucked in a fortifying breath and held Stygean tighter. "I am sorry."

"And they don't like me. None of them. The children are rude and the adults are always treating me like I am the worst person that ever existed."

"If you want them to like you, then first you must like them. If you want them to trust you, then first you must prove yourself worthy. That is the way their world works."

"I am sa'necari."

"Stygean, if you follow their rules, sooner or later, you will get what you wish."

Stygean ran his hand under the slave collar on his neck. "I wish to be rid of this."

"Then you must cooperate and give them a reason to remove—" Liuthan's eyes went wide and he clutched at his chest. "I can't breathe—can't breathe. Fetch the healer." He fell back on his cot.

Stygean ran outside, shouting. "Help me! Please help me. It's my father."

The guards ignored him. Stygean clutched at one of them and she shrugged him off. "Please, please help me." Stygean's voice caught in his throat, half-sobbing.

Randilyn, who was walking past after returning Disharyl to her quarters, grabbed the guard who had refused to help Stygean. "You heard him, run for Amiri and Dawnreturning."

The guard obeyed her. Ymraude nibari spoke with the voice of their masters. Then she followed Stygean into the tent. Randilyn knelt beside the cot, brushing her cool hands over Liuthan's face. "Help is coming."

Liuthan's lips mouthed, "Thank you," but he had no breath to give it sound. Then his eyes closed and his breathing worsened.

"What's happening to him?" Stygean's voice came soft and frightened.

"It's the Withering. It always happens. For some reason it has come on more swiftly in your father than in the others."

Stygean began to cry. Randilyn took him in her arms and drew him onto her lap. She sat rocking him while they waited for Amiri and Isranon. All the pride and defiance of earlier

went out of Stygean. "Have faith. They'll help him," Randilyn murmured soothingly.

He nestled against her, comforted by Randilyn's calm presence, her arms and body reminding him poignantly of his dead mother.

When Amiri and Isranon arrived, Randilyn moved away with Stygean and watched from a corner. Amiri started setting out bottles from her satchel, poured several lines of a purple powder, gathered it into a tube, and blew it into Liuthan's nostrils. Then she rubbed more of it into the mucus membranes in his mouth. Isranon took Liuthan's wrist and began to pour cool, healing waves of power through him.

Liuthan's breathing eased. His eyes remained closed.

"Someone needs to stay with him for the night," Amiri said.

"Can it be me?" Stygean asked.

Isranon regarded him for a long moment in silence before nodding. "So long as you swear not to leave this tent. If something goes wrong in the night, come to the door and call. Someone will be listening. I promise you."

"Thank you," Stygean said, rubbing his hands over his eyes.

CHAPTER FIVE

STALKERS

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 Uncle Malthus had taken them in. Standing within the dark interior of the huge linen closet, they watched the adults go by in the corridor of the manor through a crack in the door. The chieftain's manor, where they had lived since their uncle's marriage to Merissa, was a warren of child-sized hiding places, and the girls spent hours every day exploring them.

Ros held the door barely open, using just her fingertips on the inner edge of the door so no one would notice them there. Her eyes narrowed like a predator's as she focused her attention on three-year-old Darmyk standing ignored at the door into his grandfather's suite.

The adults kept brushing past the little prince, coming and going from the chieftain's chambers. Darmyk saw his chance and peered around the edge, trying for a glimpse of his beloved grandfather.

"Worthless little lycan cub," muttered Ros, her voice oozing with contempt and crusted with hate. She kept her weight on her good leg, with the damaged one twisted slightly to the side so that none of her weight rested on it. A month ago, a powerful Lemyari had raped her and left her for dead after

sticking a single venomous nail into her thigh close to her groin. If Uncle Malthus had not fed her his blood and nursed her, she would have been paralyzed. As she shifted her feet, pain shot up the damaged leg. Ros thought of that vampire, and she hated him with a cold, hard hate, just like she hated Darmyk. When she grew into her adult powers, Ros intended to destroy every Lemyari she could get her hands on. They would all pay.

Lyrri squatted against her sister's legs, leaning to peek between her calves. "Are you going to suck him?"

Ros glanced down at Lyrri. A strand of long black hair fell across her face, and she flicked it away. "Yeah, I'm going to suck him. Right down to nothing."

Lyrri gave Ros a look of wishful envy. "I wish I had fangs. Then I could suck him too."

"You'll get yours eventually. It's not my fault I was born with them." Ros was a prodigy, as their Uncle Malthus explained it. Normally sa'necari got their fangs at puberty. Lyrri would not get her fangs until she got her menses. Ros had her fangs, her powers, and the intellectual maturity of an older human child. She also knew to conceal it, for if the lycans knew she had all that, they would spellcord her and cut her off from her powers as they had done with the five sa'necari women at Sanctuary. Back when they had been living at the Sanctuary, seeing the cords on those sa'necari wrists had always angered Ros.

"Do you hate him, Ros?"

"His daddy killed our daddy."

Lyrri's eyes widened and she snarled softly. "Truth?"

"Yesssss," Ros hissed, wondering why Lyrri even had to ask. "And his grandpa ate our daddy's heart. All the lycans here ate a piece of him."

Lyrri went silent for several heartbeats, her expression considering. A shadow of horror passed across her face, followed by fury that settled into resolution. She knuckled her teeth, and spoke softly around her fingers. "I want to suck him, Ros."

Ros let her fangs descend and her tongue darted across them. *Sharani killed our mama, but lycans killed our daddy. I want to eat them all.* Resentment flared, shading her hatred like a tombstone above a grave. "It's not fair that he should have a mama, when we have neither."

Darmyk leaned his head farther around the door, only to be shoved back by an adult.

"You can't come in, Darmyk," said Belgair. "He doesn't need you tiring him out."

Darmyk drifted away, scuffling his shoes, his eyes fastened on the floor. Ros waited until Darmyk reached the stairs and then slid out of the closet with a gesture for Lyrri to follow her.

"We going to suck him now?" Lyrri whispered.

Ros put her arm around Lyrri's shoulder as they walked. "He's going to the tree house. We'll suck him there. I'll open him up and give you a taste."

Fianait, Claw's younger sister, an ugly old crone of a bitch walked toward them, her thin white hair caught at the back of her head in an impeccable bun. Ros feigned a delighted laugh and rocked Lyrri, her face lit with girlish innocence. Fianait

smiled at them in passing and continued on. Ros heard her murmur, "Such good little girls." That set off a peal of laughter from Ros.

* * * *

Darmyk sat on the lower ledge of his two-story tree house, swinging his legs, and singing sadly to himself. The big square of the lower level had a wide porch like ledge running around the outside. Inside there was a bed with several old quilts thrown over it in one corner and a table with chairs standing diagonally across from it. One of the two big windows faced his bedroom window in the manor with a branch of the huge chestnut tree stretching beneath the door. A small back door led to the ladder to the second floor of his tree house where there was a second bed and a toy box.

His maned hunting cat, Kenly, had been missing for a week. The adults kept brushing him off when he expressed his concern about Kenly. No one seemed to have any time for him now that his grandfather, Claw, had been sick. His mother had not had any time for him since marrying his stepfather, Malthus. Darmyk resented Malthus. The mon felt like an intruder in his life.

The boy found himself fantasizing more and more about his father, who he had never met. He knew his father's name, although he had been forbidden to speak it. Isranon. Darmyk wondered what his father was like. His mother and his grandparents used to tell him that Isranon was a good mon, but recently they had begun to say that Isranon was a bad mon. The boy could not understand how that could change so

quickly. However, he had decided that his father must be a good man and had begun to create his own private stories about him in which his father was a courageous swordsman, fighting bravely against the darkness.

Being of lycan and sa'necari parentage, Darmyk was as mature as a child of seven, although he was still two months shy of three years old. He did not have the lycan gift of shape-shifting; for Darmyk had been born sa'necari and one day he would have fangs and a taste for blood. He would much rather have been able to shape-change, for the entire idea of sticking his teeth into someone's flesh made his stomach heave. However, he had one odd talent that gave him much pleasure: Darmyk was a wilderkin predator. He could speak to the animals and they could speak back to him.

Sitting there, lonely, and feeling sorry for himself, Darmyk extended his wilderkin awareness into the outlying forest, searching for Kenly. He stretched his immature powers as far as he could and found no sign of either Kenly or any other large predator that he could summon. Both things troubled him. Normally Darmyk could sense bears, hunting cats, true wolves, and foxes. But he found nothing. What had happened to all of them?

"Kenly," he said as a sob broke from his throat.

A soft chuckle made Darmyk look down at the rope ladder to his tree house. His insides went cold with fear. Ros stood in the middle of the ladder with Lyrri a few rungs beneath her. Taking a step with her good leg and swinging her bad one up from the hip to meet it, Ros climbed toward him. Lyrri let Ros

get two rungs ahead and then followed, handling the rope ladder easily.

Darmyk retreated inside, but he could already feel the prickle of Ros' power in his mind. Ros and Lyrri had knocked him down one day, pinned him to his bed in the tree house, and Ros had bitten him. Since then some part of her had stayed lodged in his head with the power to compel his obedience. Afterward Ros had sealed his lips so that he could not betray her.

The little prince cringed, backing up, trying to reach the window that would take him to the tree branch that ran to his bedroom window in the manor. Needles of anguish exploded in his head, staggering him.

"Lie down," Ros hissed.

Darmyk froze and then his body began to move of its own accord, leaving him a prisoner within his own flesh. He walked to the bed and laid down, opening his robe. A chill autumn breeze flowed through the windows, breathing across his narrow chest like a kiss from the grave. He shivered, goose pimples breaking out over his tender, exposed skin. Tears streamed over his face as he anticipated the pain Ros was bringing him.

The cub thought of all the times that people had pointed out to him that he was sa'necari born, just like Ros. And, yet, every time she fed from his veins, every time her fangs entered his soft flesh, Darmyk's heart cried out that they could not be the same, that they would never be the same, that even if he did grow fangs one day, he would never hurt anyone with them.

Ros reached the ledge and entered. She stalked toward Darmyk with her fangs down and grinning. "Call all you want. Kenly will never answer. He's dead. Uncle Malthus poisoned him."

Darmyk began to sob loudly, but could not move or call for help. His heart broke. He had dreaded that possibility, but to have it confirmed was terrible.

Lyrri joined them, laughing at him. Ros lifted his wrist to her lips and bit into it. She tore him open enough for the blood to flow well, and extended his wrist to Lyrri. "There, have your first taste of blood. You'll like it."

Darmyk whimpered as Lyrri covered the bleeding wound with her mouth. She shoved her tongue into the wound and wiggled it around inside as she sucked. Darmyk's stomach heaved, but nothing came up.

Ros straddled him on the bed, tangled her fingers in his hair to force his head to the angle she wished it at, and sank her fangs into his neck. Darmyk made a low animal noise of anguish in the back of his throat as she hurt him.

Her presence swirled through his mind and her voice spoke in his head.—*I'm going to kill you this time. Uncle Malthus won't mind at all. He's killing your grandpa.*—

"No, please," Darmyk moaned. He felt his life vanishing down their throats as he weakened, his heartbeat fluttering.

He sensed her amusement at his plea. Ros sucked harder, savagely. Darmyk's vision grayed. Fear gripped him. He convulsed and went still.

Lyrri lifted her bloody face from Darmyk's wrist, licking around her lips. "Is he dead?" she asked with detached curiosity.

Ros swiped the neck wound with her tongue to close it and regarded her sister. "Not yet. Shall we finish him?"

"I'd like that."

"Then let's do." Ros bent her head to Darmyk's throat and renewed her feeding.

* * * *

The guard annex connected to the west wing of the manor, part of the newest addition to the place. Off duty guards lounged at the various tables, eating and drinking, and playing games to pass away the extra time. Malthus sat at a table in their common room playing cards with Belgair.

"Claw's heart attack has me worried," Malthus said. "We need to be certain that there are plenty of people watching him to see that he doesn't overdo or tax himself."

Belgair regarded his cards, pulled at his nose, and then nodded. "Old Claw's stubborn that way. Sheradyn and Aisha will have their hands full keeping him out of the fields."

"Just so," Malthus said, punctuating his words with an appropriate sigh. "The clan needs Claw. He's a canny leader."

Malthus tossed some cards down. "Dealer takes three."

"I've got an ugly hand. Give me four." Belgair held onto a single card. "You're right. If he's not going to take care of himself, then we should try to take care of him. Take the work out of his hands if necessary. There's nothing he can do with the herds that can't be done by a younger mon."

Malthus dealt to them both. "Exactly. I worry what it would do to Merissa if something happened to her father. She loves him."

"Yah. They've always been close."

"Malthus! Belgair!" Merissa rushed in, worry written large on her face. "I can't find Darmyk. I've looked everywhere."

Malthus rose from his chair. "Have you checked the tree house?"

Merissa's eyes dropped and she pressed her hands to her swollen belly. "I can't climb the ladder."

"Have you called out to him?" Belgair asked, folding his cards, and coming to his feet.

"If he's up there, he doesn't answer me," Merissa said.

"I'll check the tree house," Malthus said. "Belgair, could you gather some myn and search the grounds?" Malthus made a point of not framing his words in such a way that Belgair would think he had usurped his authority.

"Aye."

Malthus left through the guards' door into the yard and went to the tree house. He gripped the rope ladder, gazed up at the tree house, and called Darmyk's name. When he received no answer, Malthus discreetly extended his necromantic awareness in a low-level scan. Someone was there. Malthus climbed the rope ladder and perched on the edge, then he got his feet under him and went inside. Darmyk lay upon the bed, his face pale and pasty with a bluish tinge to his lips. His head dangled limply off the edge revealing a long smear of dried blood on his neck.

Malthus threw another scan through the tree house, reaching into the upper story, and found a strong residue that tasted like Ros and Lyrri. They were not up there now, but they were only minutes gone. Malthus guessed they must have fled along some of the huge branches that pressed against the windows and gone into the manor. Only the fear of getting caught and Read could have forced Ros to take that route with her damaged leg and risk falling. The girls must have heard Merissa calling for Darmyk.

"Damn it, Ros," Malthus muttered, remembering how she had told him that Darmyk would not last and he had forbidden her to bite him. Everything had to be done in the right order. First Claw would die and then Darmyk. Not the other way around. Malthus grasped Darmyk's wrist and Read him. The boy was barely alive. Then he saw the oozing tear in the child's other wrist. "What the hell were you doing? Feeding Lyrri too?"

Malthus settled Darmyk against his shoulder and headed down the ladder. He heard several voices, glanced, and saw that people had gathered. Merissa, her aunts, Fianait and Searlait, and Lawgiver Caimbeul—where the hell had he come from—as well as several of the nibari. Merissa had her knuckles in her mouth, trying not to scream at the way that Darmyk rested limp against Malthus' shoulder, his arms dangling.

Once down, Malthus shifted the boy in his arms and cradled him.

Fianait's brows knit. "What's wrong with the poor little cub?"

Caimbeul stepped forward scowling, flipped Darmyk's wrist to expose the wound, and turned the cub's head so that the smear of blood showed. "What happened?"

"There were bats on him. I drove them out." *That lawgiver is far too nosy. He'll have to die like the last one.*

Caimbeul's eyes narrowed and he regarded Malthus suspiciously. "Give him to me," Caimbeul said in a voice that brooked no argument. The 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.

Malthus scanned the faces, wanting to refuse, and knowing that the lycans might easily take it wrong. He could not risk the gains he had made so far. However, when no one was looking, he would punish Ros. Malthus understood that Ros had been obsessing on Darmyk for months and her prematurely adolescent appetites were hard to control; however, if she kept this up someone would discover that she already had her fangs. Malthus yielded Darmyk to Caimbeul.

"Where's his bedroom?" the lawgiver asked.

"I'll show you," Fianait said, and she led him into the manor with the others following.

Searlait, Claw's youngest sister, put her arm around Merissa's shoulders. They both had the distinctive chestnut hair that had first attracted Malthus to Merissa, although Searlait's had begun to fade with age and had white sprinkled through it, including a heavy strand at her temple. "Sheradyn will help him. Don't you worry, child."

Aisha was standing in the foyer when they entered; her hand flew to her mouth as a strangling sound emerged.

"Darmyk."

"Which way?" Caimbeul asked, overpowering any hesitancy wrought of worry in the bitches surrounding him.

Aisha gave a quick nod and headed for the stairs. "This way."

Caimbeul followed Aisha to Darmyk's room, placed the cub in his bed, and covered him. He Read the cub and then shook his head. "Fetch the healer. He's dangerously ill and weak. Whatever fed on him took him to the edge."

Malthus licked his lips, wondering at Caimbeul's use of the sa'necari term: to be "taken to the edge" meant that after a few sips more the victim's heart would fail.

Caimbeul continued to examine the wounds. "Too small for any sa'necari I've ever seen. But I'm not seeing the distinctive scrape marks left by most vampires." He lifted his gaze and pinned Malthus. "You say you saw bats?"

Malthus nodded. His memory traced the details of the bat form Sergei had used to feed upon Ros the first time Malthus caught them together. Set the lycans to watching for Sergei and maybe one of them would kill the goatfucker. "Yes. Black with a brown patterning on their bellies. Over sized ears."

The crowd watching from the door into Darmyk's bedroom moved aside as Sheradyn arrived, carrying his satchel of medicinals on his shoulder. His assistant and lover, Gillivray, came along behind him. They were a mismatched pair in every way except ability. The aristocratic Sheradyn, educated in Creeya's finest medical school, dressed like a human in

close-fitting buttoned pants and shirt, his long white hair, with only a single strand of his original russet color, hung well brushed and tied at his neck with a bit of black ribbon. Gillivray, eighty years his junior, slouched comfortably in his traditional lycan sashed robe and drawstring pants that would easily accommodate shape-shifting, and watched Sheradyn with a glance so fond it frequently embarrassed those around them. Sheradyn motioned Caimbeul away from Darmyk, pulled up a chair, and sat down by the bed. Taking Darmyk's small wrist in hand, Sheradyn Read the cub with an expression that grew steadily more serious. Finally, he shook his head. "He's extremely weak. The blood loss is severe. But, I'll do what I can. Gillivray and I will take turns sitting with him tonight."

"Send for the priest," Caimbeul said.

Merissa gasped. "My baby."

Searlait held Merissa tighter. "Courage."

Caimbeul took Merissa's hand, his dark eyes kind. "I didn't mean to imply he needed the prayers for the dying, Merissa. I want her to ward his window so that the bats or vampires or whatever they were, cannot get him again."

Merissa favored Caimbeul with a trembling smile. "Thank you."

"The cub is sa'necari, I've never treated one of those," Sheradyn said.

Caimbeul pulled at his stubbled chin. "He's a bit young, but you should try to get him to drink some blood. It might help. Bleed one of your nibari enough to fill a glass and mix it with

fruit juice. Get that down him as often as he's willing to take it."

Sheradyn lifted an eyebrow at Caimbeul.

The lawgiver shrugged. "I'm old, and I've been around."

* * * *

Claw tipped himself forward in bed and grabbed his robe. A wave of dizziness hit him, and he sat still for a few breaths, letting it pass. The old wolf pulled the robe around him and sashed it closed, then he swung his legs off the edge and stood up, using the furniture to keep his balance, walking from one piece to the other until he reached the door.

"Claw!" Aisha exclaimed, coming in through the outer door to their suite. "You should not be up."

He grumbled under his breath, tottered to the sofa, and sat down, feeling momentarily defeated by exhaustion. "I want to see my grandcub."

Aisha shook her head at him, her white streaked gray hair hanging about her shoulders. "When you're better."

"Now. I'm going now—even if I have to crawl." Claw's mouth settled into an obstinate line that Aisha knew all too well. Knowing the way people had been refusing to let Darmyk visit him, and added a twinge of guilt to his mood. Claw believed that Darmyk would have been with him, instead of in the tree house alone, if all the pushy people had not been keeping the cub away.

"Then let me get someone to help you, old dog."

Claw glared. Aisha put her hands on her hips and glared back. He surrendered with a sigh. "Go on, old bitch, and get me some help."

Aisha returned with Malthus. Claw wondered why it had to be his wretched son-in-law, when he would far rather it had been Belgair. Malthus did try to get along with him, but too often, they disagreed, and Claw disliked him on a gut level.

Malthus helped Claw down the hall to Darmyk's room. When the chieftain saw how pale and still his grandcub was, his chest tightened uncomfortably, and his left arm began to ache in that now familiar pattern that he knew reflected how damaged his heart had become. He knew he should mention it to Sheradyn, but Claw hated being coddled and restricted. No one was going to make an invalid of him if he could help it.

Gillivray sat in a chair on the far side of the bed, so Malthus fetched a second chair for Claw and got the chieftain settled into it. The old wolf held one of Darmyk's little hands, rubbing his thumb over it, thinking how much he loved the cub and how desperately he wanted him safe. When Merissa first informed him of her pregnancy, Claw had been outraged to discover she had been sleeping with a sa'necari—even one so well regarded as Isranon had been in those days. Fifty years ago, Merissa would have been stoned to death, chieftain's daughter or not, for sleeping with a sa'necari, much less for having become pregnant by one.

Claw had tried to force her to abort Darmyk, but now he was grateful that he had allowed Nevin to talk him out of it. The innocent love and affection that the cub showed him

blessed Claw's old age with an indescribable joy that filled his heart to overflowing every time Darmyk climbed on his lap. He remembered building the tree house, and the way that Darmyk had stood watching them, laughing and clapping his small hands with delight.

Darmyk's blanket had slid down, and his robe had opened enough for Claw to see the bear-shaped birthmark on the cub's slender chest. "I love you, Little Bear."

The cub's eyes fluttered open. "Grandpa?"

Hope surged within Claw. "Yes, Little Bear. No one's going to be pushing you away from my door again." He shot Gillivray an irritated look. "I'll always have time and energy for you."

* * * *

Malthus walked Claw back and the chieftain halted him at the main upstairs drawing room, the Blue Room. He could taste the aura of suffering surrounding Claw and he knew that the chieftain had begun to have chest pains again. "What is it?"

"I don't want to go to bed. Grab a bottle of wine, some glasses, and a deck of cards," Claw ordered.

A broad smile spread across Malthus' face. "That Faewinian wine?"

"Yeah, that one." Pleasure shone in Claw's face.

Malthus did as he was ordered, taking time to refresh the spell on the bottle, and brought it to Claw.

The old wolf poured for both of them. They sat and drank and played for two hours. Malthus smiled, joked, and

deliberately lost to Claw most of the time. It kept the old wolf happy and drinking his death. With luck, the next heart attack would come sooner than Malthus had first anticipated. The fragrance of Claw's discomfort, which was slowly turning into outright pain, pleased Malthus' necromantic senses. He could almost make a meal off the taste and smell of Claw's suffering it was so heady and strong.

Claw tensed, rubbing his chest, lines deepening in his face. He grimaced and laid his cards down.

"What's wrong?" Malthus asked, his tone urgent. "Are you all right?"

Claw blinked and then grimaced again, the lines deepening in his face. "I think I need to go back to bed."

"I think so too. Maybe you've done too much, too soon."

"Help me get back. I need to lie down."

Lie down and die, old wolf. That's the best thing you can do.

* * * *

Caimbeul changed to Padruig and went to the Difficult Horse to watch for Shalto and Oswyl to turn up as they usually did. The Difficult Horse, called that because of its sign that featured a horse sitting on its rump while a mon tugged the reins before it, stood on Main Street across from the village common. The interior was dark and pleasant. 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.

He chose his usual table and put his back to the wall where he could scan the room without fear of getting a blade in his back. Gwythyr, the son that Pandeena had borne him, had died with a blade in his back. Caimbeul still blamed himself for it, although in all of his arguments over their son's death he had never admitted it to Pandeena. Perhaps the time was drawing near when he would have to tell her the full story and acknowledge his part in it.

Old Hereward the tavern master had begun to regard him as a regular and automatically sent a nibari to his table with a tankard of mead without being asked. He paid for his drink and dropped a few coppers down the front of her blouse. Even slaves deserved a few extras.

She giggled and he wondered what she would buy with it. Probably ribbons for her hair. Nibari were silly creatures. What they never tried to buy was their freedom. Certain genetic problems ensured that they did not survive well on their own and rarely lived more than a couple of years without a master to see to their special needs. The sa'necari and the vampires had made a mess of their genes, Caimbeul thought with a trace of bitterness, and it was exactly what they wanted to do with his own people. It had been one of the dependencies the Butchering Serpent had been trying to create in lycans with his experiments.

Shalto and Oswyl came swaggering in with Preece. Of all the Lycamornots, Caimbeul disliked Preece the most. Preece had a cold, quiet presence as if he were measuring people for a kill. It reminded Caimbeul of the ones who had murdered his son Gwythyr.

The trio spotted Caimbeul and joined him at his table.

"So I see you're still here," Shalto said, as if it had been he who had won their last cock-wagging match instead of Caimbeul. The old wolf let it slide.

"And so are you." Caimbeul took another swallow of mead. He noted that they were wearing pairs of long blades at their sides instead of the usual multi-purpose knife commonly carried by his people. "So do I get to meet him?"

"He doesn't want to see you."

"I don't believe you've spoken to him yet."

Preece half turned in his chair, leaving one arm on the table, checking the room before he spoke. "Don't mess with us."

"I think it would be a good idea if you stopped visiting our bitches," said Shalto.

"I'll stop when I'm ready." Caimbeul drank down the last of his mead and left.

CHAPTER SIX

SAYNKYORBIRG

Being in a hurry to get to lunch, Lukasz simply pulled his tabard on over his leathers instead of changing clothes completely and hoped that Hartmut would not notice. The Steward liked it best when Lukasz went to his meals as clean as possible, all nice and proper. He would be going on a manticore hunt tomorrow. Brainerd had never included him before and Lukasz believed that he must have finally won the armsmaster over with his efforts on the training grounds and in the salle.

Manticore was dangerous game, but Brainerd and several guardsmyn would be along to see that nothing went wrong. Hartmut had argued against his going at first, but Brainerd had reassured the steward that he would protect Lukasz. Added to Lukasz's pleadings, Hartmut had reluctantly given his consent.

The huge formal table had been set and all the members of the nobility who dwelled currently in the manor were seated in their assigned places along it. The majority of them were women and girls whose husbands, fathers, and brothers had ridden off to fight in the south with Stefan. Gunther sat three seats down from Lukasz on the opposite side of the table. Adolf and Gerik sat beside him.

Lukasz squirmed in his seat as the three boys kept casting sly glances at him and laughing. He had a feeling that

something was up, like the time they had put the bucket of mop water on top of the outer door to his suite and then called him out to talk. They had been reprimanded, but nothing more.

"You be very careful tomorrow, Master Lukasz." Maurychi stopped beside the boy with a huge platter on his arm.

Like all the servants, Maurychi treated Lukasz as a pet with an intense fondness in every word.

Lukasz beamed at the servant. The devotion of the servants frequently made up for the coldness that his own class showed him. "Thank you. I will."

Maurychi stumbled against Lukasz just as he was stretching to lift a huge gravy boat from the platter and the entire platter and boat plunged over Lukasz's tabard.

The boy jumped in his chair and sprang back, overturning it. "My tabard! I have to wear my colors tomorrow or Brainerd won't take me."

Gunther and his cronies burst into loud laughter, which was cut short by a word from Hartmut.

"I'm so sorry," Maurychi apologized, wiping at Lukasz with a napkin. "Run upstairs and change before it dries. I'll take it all to Gunda. We'll have it clean in time."

Hartmut nodded. "Do what he says."

Lukasz plodded off to his room with Gunther's laughter echoing in his memory.

Maurychi trailed after him. "I'm very sorry, Master Lukasz. I didn't do it on purpose."

Lukasz sucked in the side of his cheek, nodded, and kept walking. "I know. And I'm not angry at you."

Maurychi looked profoundly unhappy with himself. "If it had happened with one of the other boys, they would have had me beaten for it."

That got Lukasz's attention. "I would have stopped them."

"If you'd known about it."

"Has it happened before?"

Maurychi nodded. "I've been lucky. Usually it's a beating and a dismissal. I've been lucky. In thirty years service, I've only been beaten perhaps a dozen times."

"I'd run away."

"Where would I go? No one trusts a servant that has fled his master's house."

"I'm sorry. I'll tell Hartmut I don't ever want you beaten."

Once they reached Lukasz's rooms, Maurychi took the soiled clothing and departed, leaving Lukasz to think about Maurychi's situation. He changed clothes and headed off to find Hartmut to keep his promise to Maurychi.

From habit, he went to the servants section to use their stairs out of sight of the rest of the nobility and upper classes that frequented the palace. As he started up the stairs, Iwona started down from the top. When she got close, Iwona bent over as if she had dropped something. Lukasz could not see what she had dropped, so it must have been small. He hesitated, glancing at the ground first, and then at her conspicuous cleavage, which he could not resist staring at despite his desire to do otherwise. Lukasz edged to the side of her, his gaze flicking from steps to tits, back and forth again.

Iwona did something with her shoulder, Lukasz was not certain what, and one of her breasts popped right out of her blouse. She giggled, but made no move to cover it up.

Lukasz sucked in a breath, his eyes circling the dark areola and the nipple in the center. "Iwona..."

"You can touch it, if you want." Her voice lowered in her throat, becoming deep and sensual, almost a purr. "I won't tell."

Lukasz's hand went out and closed gently on her nipple. He squeezed it tentatively.

"We could do *it*. Right here. Right now."

"Iwona..." He withdrew his hand. "I promised Maurychi..."

"A quickie, Master Lukasz. Poke me. It won't take long."

Lukasz's heart raced at being pressured for sex by Iwona. He did not know what to make of it. Half of him wanted to say "yes" and the other half wanted to run away as fast as he could.

She massaged his erection through his pants, and he abruptly came all over himself. Iwona made a moue. "That would have been nicer for both of us, if you had done that inside me."

Lukasz swallowed and backed away from her. "Now I have to change my clothes again. I hope you find what you were looking for."

"I did."

Lukasz fled.

* * * *

Maurychi took the tabard and the bundled clothes to the housekeeper. He found Gunda talking to Ermengard the cook in the kitchen with Zyta the head laundress. The three were sitting at a table and chatting while the cook filled pastries with fruit, nuts, and honey, then folded them carefully and pressed the edges together.

Gunda frowned at Maurychi. "What have you got there?"

"Master Lukasz's tabard and leathers. I spilled a platter on him."

"That's not like you to be clumsy," she said sharply. "He needs them for tomorrow. The little chick is very excited about it all."

Maurychi's expression darkened as if a storm were gathering behind his eyes. "You mustn't let him have them back."

Cook paused with the spoon in the filling. "Brainerd won't let him go if we do that."

"I know. I know." Maurychi's head lowered as he placed the clothing in Gunda's hands, and he sucked in a long breath, held it, and expelled it in a rush. "That's why I did it."

"Maurychi!" Gunda snapped. She ran the household as if she were a general, answering only to Hartmut.

He searched a long time for words and then simply blurted it out softly, "They're going to kill him. I overheard Gerik and Brainerd planning it. They're going to throw him to the manticore."

Gunda stared at him in shock. A servant's words were rarely heeded over that of someone with the kind of standing that Brainerd had and it would recoil on all of them if they

spoke out. Their only hope lay in handling this themselves. "I'll take care of it. You did well. I'll get the clothes washed, but he won't have them in time to go on the hunt."

A look of relief spread over Maurychi's face. "Thank you, Gunda. I knew you'd help."

"Pssh, how could I not? He's such a dear little thing."

"If they all treated us like Lukasz, they'd get more loyalty," Ermengard growled, patting the edges of one pastry too hard and causing the filling to squirt out. She flushed, grabbed a cloth, and started wiping up with an embarrassed expression.

"We need to keep an eye on the Sweetling and the gutter hearts as well," said Gunda firmly. "I'll put the word out."

* * * *

Lukasz woke, expecting to find his tabard and leathers laid out for him in the antechamber of his suite. He looked around and discovered they were not there. After a futile search, he ran off in search of Gunda and found her giving orders to some of her "girls" in her office.

"Gunda, I can't find my tabard and my leathers," Lukasz gasped out breathlessly. "Where are they? Brainerd says if I'm not prompt he'll leave me behind."

Gunda ruffled Lukasz's hair affectionately. "I gave them to Elsbeth because she's so good at getting stains out."

"Elsbeth?"

"Try the laundry room."

Lukasz gave a quick nod and ran out, his shirt bottom flapping around his hips. He raced around people narrowly avoiding several collisions with elegantly clad noblewomen,

reached the servants stairs and went down them taking the steps two at a time. He staggered when he reached the floor and set off running again. Lukasz was now in a section of the manor that most of the nobility never ventured, yet he knew it all like the back of his hand because he had turned to associating with the servants when he could find no acceptance among the nobility.

He found Elsbeth, a young woman whose hands were already reddened and careworn from years as a laundress, working with several others with a washboard among the soapy water of the tubs.

"Elsbeth! Elsbeth, where's my tabard and leathers?"

She draped the shirt she was working on over the washboard and straightened, drying her roughened hands on her apron. "I gave it to Zyta to hang up to dry yesterday. She should have brought it in and put it in your room."

"Where's Zyta?"

Elsbeth shook her head at him as if he had asked an obvious question. "Out in the yard, hanging up more, where else?"

Lukasz heaved a sigh and set off running again. He reached the side yard where the servants hung out long lines of laundry and spotted several pairs of legs behind a wall of linens. "Zyta, where's my tabard and leathers?"

Zyta poked her head around some fresh washed linens and looked at him. "Well, I gave everything to Maurychi to take back up to your rooms."

By then Lukasz had started to panic. Maurychi could be any place. After a frantic search, Lukasz found him sitting at a table in the kitchen polishing silver and looking out a window.

Lukasz followed Maurychi's gaze before speaking and saw the gate closing behind Brainerd's guardsmyn who were riding out with Gunther and his friends. They had left him. "It's too late." Lukasz's voice cracked.

"I'm afraid so," Maurychi said. "Was there something you wanted?"

"My tabard and my leathers, but I guess I don't need them now. Where are they?"

"Why up in your room of course where I put them yesterday."

Lukasz dragged himself up to his room and found his clothes laid out on the sofa. He could have sworn they had not been there before. His lower lip slid out beneath his upper in a peeved expression. Brainerd would never offer to include him again. Somehow, he had overlooked his clothes and gone off on a fool's quest that had made him late.

The other boys were probably laughing at him. When he was duke, he would show them all. When he was duke ... abruptly, he remembered his uncle's journals. Uncle Stefan was not coming back. That was what the oracle had said. His stomach clenched and his chest tightened. He fought back the tears that came whenever he let himself think about it.

Lukasz wished he could tell someone about the journals, Hartmut, Gunda, Maurychi, someone, anyone. But he knew he could not, not until the time was right. Until word came

from Sankyorbirg, Lukasz had to keep his mouth shut. All his childish peeve melted away before the profundity of his grief.

An intense feeling of restlessness came over him as he strove with his emotions, and Lukasz left his suite. He headed back to the servants' stairs out of habit, and unexpectedly, Lukasz's thoughts turned to Iwona.

He knew now that she would not complain if he shoved his hand down her blouse. Her soft breast had felt very nice to his hands, and maybe next time he would spend more time playing with them. However, Lukasz felt far less confident and far more unready about the poking.

Turning off at the third floor, Lukasz spotted Iwona walking alone with a basket of fresh linens. "Iwona!"

She paused, turned about to look at him and leaned her shoulders against the wall so that her breasts were thrust up and out. "Master Lukasz. Did you *want* me?"

"I wanted to talk to you." Lukasz sucked in a breath and marshaled his courage. He stopped in front of her, reached out, and squeezed her breast. After months of her teasing him, Lukasz had finally initiated the contact. His own audacity made him dizzy and Iwona's appreciative moan nearly set him off him off in his pants again.

"Come with me," Iwona whispered in his ear, brushing her breasts against his chest.

Three doors down, she slipped into a room and closed the door behind them. Iwona sat the basket on the floor and dropped the bar across the door. The room had a narrow bed with a patched quilt thrown over the top, a battered sofa, a small table in one corner and two dinged chairs.

Lukasz felt abruptly uneasy. He had never been alone in a room with her before where no one could accidentally walk in on them. Lukasz experienced a fluttering in his stomach as if he had swallowed all the butterflies in a spring garden and they were now asking him to let them out again.

She turned, caught the look in his eyes. "So we won't be interrupted."

"Is this your room?"

"Yes."

Lukasz seated himself on the sofa, wondering how the servants managed when they had so little. Before he could take that thought any farther, Iwona had sat down beside him and slipped out of her blouse. He put his hands on her breasts, squeezing and exploring.

Iwona leaned into him. "I love you, Lukasz."

He lifted his gaze from her breasts to her face and saw the way her eyes shone with adoration and warmth. It stirred deep longings inside Lukasz and he responded without thinking. "I love you too, Iwona."

She bent her head and kissed him, parting their lips so that her tongue could slide into his mouth. Lukasz twined his tongue around hers and pushed it into her mouth. His cock hardened.

Lukasz pulled away from her lips, heart thudding, pulse racing like a warhorse at a joust.

"Touch me. Touch me," Iwona moaned. "I know I'm unworthy, but touch me."

Lukasz blinked, and nuzzled her breasts. "You're worthy, Iwona."

"Suck my nipples."

Mouthing one nipple, Lukasz sucked it. He felt her long, slender fingers creep past his waistband and into his small clothes. She rubbed his cock and Lukasz erupted in her hand. He flushed. "I—I can't seem to..."

Iwona kissed his lips again. "In time. Be patient. I love you."

"I love you too, Iwona." The words felt so perfect that Lukasz wanted to repeat them over and over again.

Iwona drew her blouse on. "I have beds to make up before Gunda starts complaining. We'll have another time."

"Yes, we will."

* * * *

Once they were clear of the city and descending the wide swath of open green that lay between Varsyava and the heavy canopy of trees in their autumn colors, they began to sing.

Let not the fear of pagan swords
And treacheries of schvartzter lords
Hold you from your own true destiny
To rule these lands 'gainst their perfidity
Smite them down without a thought
Our promised rights are dearly bought
Spare no schvartzter nor hell-kisser spawn
Cherish the brutality of your swords once drawn.
Gerik moved his horse up in the column to ride beside Brainerd.

"You're out of position," Brainerd growled.

"I have a question."

"It best be a good one."

"I only wish to learn from you. Why else ask questions?"

Brainerd grunted. "Say it."

"Why didn't we wait for Lukasz?" Gerik asked. "I thought we were finally going to be rid of the schvartzer."

"If we had kept waiting after I ordered him to be prompt, it would have become suspicious," replied Brainerd. "When I spoke to Hartmut, I made it very plain that our chance of getting the creature depended on leaving before the morning grew late."

Gunther, riding just behind Brainerd, nodded, listening to his mentor more closely than the others. "Discretion, Gerik. If we had waited too long and then brought him back dead ... Hartmut may be old, but he isn't stupid."

"Exactly, Gunther. You've learned well and will make a good leader when I finish with your training," said Brainerd.

"The schvartzer is weak and effeminate. He probably wouldn't know what to do with a woman if she came crawling into his bed," Adolf said.

All of the younger boys giggled except Gunther who looked introspective. "There's rumors that the mongrel has been taking it up the ass from Stefan for years."

Brainerd glanced over his shoulder. "Where did you hear that?"

Gunther shrugged. "Here and there."

"I always wondered about Stefan. I've long suspected he was a pedou."

A poisonous smile emerged on Gunther's face. "He made the mongrel his heir because Lukasz was such a good buttboy."

"Pedous, schvartzers, and hell-kissers, they all need to be run through with a blade," said Jedrik. "They're poisoning the realm."

A chorus of "Kill them all" ran through the riders and they picked up another chant.

The forest closed around them. In the early afternoon, they reached a place where the vegetation had been crushed, including small trees. A half-eaten carcass of a goat lay in the sunlight at the edge of a clearing with the rope that had held it still dangling from its neck along with the tall stake that the rope had been tied to.

Brainerd grinned. "It's probably sleeping off its lunch."

He dismounted and told off two myn to stay with the horses. Brainerd faced the boys, motioning for them to gather around. They stood at attention in a semi-circle, waiting for him to speak.

"A manticore, as I've said, is dangerous game. It isn't something a lone mon can take on. Too big, too heavily armed, teeth, claws, and stinger. Especially beware the stinger. Use your shields to defend against the stinger."

"Yessir, Master Brainerd," the boys chorused.

"I'm assigning you to groups. This isn't just a test of your courage and your ability to kill. This is about your commitment to each other, your devotion to your comrades in arms. Love your comrades more than your life, your women when you have them, and your fortunes. Because when push

comes to shove, it's your comrades who hold your life in their hands. Schvartzers, hell-kissers, and pedous don't understand loyalty like we do. The lot of them are betrayers and corrupters who would shake our loyalty to our comrades and our devotion to our homeland. We must always stand strong, acting without hesitation to destroy the scourges of our homeland, acting together as we do today against a monster that raids the countryside. Today, you become heroes."

Gerik nudged Adolf as he scanned the eager faces of the younger boys. "Too bad the mongrel chickened out. I would have liked to have heard him scream."

Adolf's hand dropped to his dagger hilt, rubbing his thumb round and round over it. "Brainerd should just let us stick him and be done with it."

"You always did like sticking a mon."

"Pay attention!" Brainerd growled.

"Yessir, Master Brainerd," Adolf and Gerik said together.

"Now," continued Brainerd. "Your groups. Adolf, Flawiusz, Mikolai to take the left flank. Gerik, Emil, and Jarogniew to the right flank. Gunther and Zygmunt a frontal attack. Shields ready."

The boys settled their shields on their arms.

"Spears."

The boys hefted their sturdy thrusting-spears that had large, broad-leaf heads, and a crosspiece to prevent the wounded animal from running up the shaft like an enraged boar would.

"If you lose your spear, draw your sword, and do not retreat unless ordered. Jedrik will command the left flank,

Dobrogost the front, and I will take the right. If one of your comrades should fall, close ranks and defend him until he can be safely rescued from the field by your commanders. Am I understood?"

"Yessir, Master Brainerd," responded the boys in unison.

Brainerd noticed that Emil was stirring restlessly from foot to foot. Emil always seemed to have too much energy, too quick to strike. "Emil, you will follow orders and not allow yourself to get carried away. You will stay in line with your comrades. Understood?"

"Yes, Master Brainerd."

"Good. Now let's go."

Brainerd located the spoor of the manticore easily. The paw prints were huge, like a lion's only twice as large. His sixteen guardsmyn spread out behind the assigned commanders and the boys as they entered a large meadow and found the beast sunning itself.

Gerik heard the younger boys gasp when they saw the size of it. The manticore was as large as a warhorse with the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion.

"We're going to fight that?" Jarogniew breathed the words.

"Shut up. I've done it before," said Gerik. "It's not hard so long as you hold your positions."

"YAWW!" Brainerd shouted to get its attention.

The manticore reacted by getting to its feet with a growl and shaking itself. It brandished its stinger, waving it dangerously from side to side. Its huge eyes gleamed with malice and it stalked to meet them as they advanced on it.

"Shields up," shouted Brainerd. "Ware the stinger."

The manticore charged Adolf's group and Jedrik ordered them back just as Dobrogost and Brainerd ordered theirs in. The boys thrust their spears and soon the creature's body ran red. Whichever way it charged, the boys retreated while the other two groups rushed in to strike.

At first, it went well and the beast soon began to tire as it bled from a multitude of wounds. Then Emil, always restless, saw what he thought was an opening with the creature and charged in before the order was given.

The manticore's tail snapped at him.

Emil got his shield up, but his footing was wrong, and the impact of the stinger on his shield knocked him off balance. He staggered, slipped, and fell on his side. Instantly Emil abandoned his spear and threw his shield away to scramble to safety. That left Gerik unexpectedly open on his right as Emil's desertion startled him and caused him to hesitate. His recovery came too slow. He brought his shield up, but the manticore was too close by then. Its tail snapped out and the stinger plunged so deeply into Gerik's chest, that his body became lodged upon it. The manticore lashed its tail back and forth, furiously trying to shake the boy's body loose.

Gerik screamed in anguish as he was flung about like a rag doll. The more the manticore tried to get the boy loose, the deeper the stinger tore through Gerik's lungs. Gerik's eyes bulged and blood geysered from his lips.

For an instant, the rest of the boys hesitated in horror, and then Brainerd strode into the fray cursing. "Attack it all together before it kills another of you! Damn you! Cowards! Attack!"

The powerfully built armsmaster hefted his spear and threw it as if it were a mere javelin, piercing the manticore's side. It whipped about on him, striking at him with its tail. Brainerd sidestepped, drew his sword, and sliced the tail in half. Gerik fell to earth. The boys rallied around their commanders, fighting as a team. Whenever the creature charged one side, the other attacked making it turn again and again. They exhausted it, wounded it, slowly reduced it to a bloody ruin.

The armsmaster left them to it, kneeling beside Gerik. He freed the stinger from the boy's body and cradled him, wounded side down to prevent the blood from rapidly filling both lungs. Blood ran freely from Gerik's mouth amid pinkish froth, and spread rapidly over his tabard. Brainerd tore Gerik's clothing open. The wound was too large and hopeless.

"I'm so ... cold." Gerik coughed up more bloody froth, his voice rasping with his efforts to breathe. "Cold."

Tears gathered in Brainerd's eyes. In nearly thirty years as an armsmaster, including ten years doing the special training, Brainerd had only had two boys killed in the course of it. As harsh and brutal as he had to be to train them right, he loved his boys. They were his pride and joy, as he watched them become strong, hardened men that nothing could stop, flawless predators of the highest order.

"You were a good boy. Always. It was supposed to be that mongrel, not you."

"Kill him ... for me?"

"Yes."

"My mother ... tell her ... I was brave." Gerik gave another shuddering cough and his eyes went sightless.

Brainerd clutched Gerik's body to his chest, pressing the boy's dead face into his shoulder.

The boys gathered around him in a silent circle, staring at Gerik's body.

"We killed it," Gunther said. "Gerik?"

"He's dead." Brainerd lifted his head and spotted Emil. "It's your fault that Gerik is dead, Emil. You're a bloody, fucking coward."

Emil went pale. "I'm sorry."

"If you had done what I said Gerik would be alive. How many Goddamn times do I have to tell you either you fight as a team, or you die one by one? That is how war works. You think of your comrades first. Always first. Yourself second. Always. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

"Yes, Master Brainerd." Emil hung his head down, his face a study in misery.

All the boys and most of the guardsmyn looked downcast.

"Since you need a refresher course in teamwork, your friends are going to help you. Tomorrow, you will all do pole strikes until your arms fall off."

Gunther and the others glared at Emil who seemed to shrink even further into himself.

* * * *

Lukasz stood on the walls encircling the palace. He had watched all day for the return of the hunters, wanting to see the manticore carcass close up as soon as it was in. As

afternoon deepened toward evening, he spotted them wending their way through the city streets toward that palace. A cart followed the horses with the manticore in the back. Lukasz gasped at the size of it. As they came closer, Lukasz noticed that Jedrik rode beside Brainerd with a spear in his lance cup that had a black pennon attached to it. Someone had died.

He ran down the steps from the catwalk and into the middle of the courtyard as Brainerd, his myn, and the boys began dismounting. Lukasz scanned all the strained faces, trying to see which one was missing. A blanket-wrapped body draped a saddle.

Lukasz spotted Gunther and ran up to his cousin. "Who died?"

"Gerik," Gunther snarled. "And it's your fault."

"My—my fault?"

"Yes, yours. If you hadn't chickened out, we would have had more students and Gerik wouldn't have died."

Lukasz flinched and then flushed. "I didn't chicken out."

"You're a dirty, rotten coward. Schvartzer bastard. You might as well have killed Gerik with your own hands."

Emotion kaleidoscoped through Lukasz in a crazed pattern, grief, shame, indignation, anger, all warring for dominance. Anger won out. Lukasz body-slammed Gunther, driving his shoulder into the larger boy's chest. They went down in a flailing heap.

Almost as soon as they struck the ground, Brainerd had Lukasz jerked up and dangling from his hand by the collar.

"Vicious, no good pup," Brainerd growled. "Isn't it enough that we're grieving?"

Lukasz's cheeks burned as Brainerd released him, and he fled past Gerik's mother, Lady Genowefa who was weeping loudly as she emerged from the palace. He sped through the corridors and up the stairs, not stopping until he had reached his rooms. Once there he threw himself on his bed and wept brokenly, Gunther's accusations burning in his mind.

Dinner that night was a subdued affair, what with arrangements being made for Gerik's funeral. Afterwards, Lukasz again retreated to his rooms and did not emerge until the next morning. He spent most of that time wishing that Iwona would come and comfort him, but she did not appear.

* * * *

Brainerd summoned Gunther to his room the night that they returned with Gerik's body. Gunther glanced uneasily about the modest apartment, from the half-empty bookcase to the weapons on the wall to the rumpled bed and the small table.

"Sit," ordered Brainerd, pouring wine into two glasses.

Gunther settled opposite Brainerd. "What do you wish of me? I did all right, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did. Go on, have a drink. You'll need it."

"Why?"

"Because I need you to take Gerik's place as a leader in the training. He was your comrade. You wouldn't want him to have died in vain?"

Gunther sipped his wine, staring into the blood-red contents between drinks. "No, sir. I'll do whatever you need of me."

"You performed very well against the manticore, a brutal display of courage, and an honor to your comrades in arms. Are you ready to be initiated into the final rites of manhood? To become a real man capable of smiting the scourges of the realm and your god remorselessly? We cannot afford to be gentle and weak. We must be strong and brutal, cruel and domineering if we are to win out against those who would corrupt our hearts and souls so that we would fall victim to their wiles. Are you ready to kill for your god and realm?"

Gunther drank down the last of his wine before answering. "I am."

"Then come with me and your initiations into the mysteries of manhood will begin this night. Adolf is waiting for us."

Gunther rose from his chair as Brainerd did and followed him from the room.

Brainerd had been giving his secret lessons for the past ten years, ever since Duke Stefan's Edict of Tolerance had allowed the filthy pagans to practice their religions in Beltria. Sooner or later, power would have to be taken from the Bradwins and given to myn who practiced the old ways, the true faith in the one true god, serving him ruthlessly and without qualm, unafraid of practicing brutality and cruelty in their god's name. Brainerd believed that Angrim was losing the war because of their rulers' sins.

He had trained the older brothers of Gunther and his friends: Gerik, Adolf, Flawiusz, Jarogniew, Emil, Mikolai, and

Zygmunt. Their fathers had known about the training; in fact, Lord Hagen had suggested it to Brainerd less than a day after the Edict went out. What they had not told him, was how to go about achieving it. So his techniques were his own.

Which was why he had Adolf waiting for them. Gunther would be crossing the threshold into manhood tonight, and Adolf had already made it across. Adolf, like most of the men in his family, lived for the kill. If Gunther passed, then he would find his reward waiting in his bed tonight to complete his instructions in manhood. Brainerd had arranged it as he always did.

He led Gunther through the armory. The first large chamber was filled with spears stacked against the wall, boxes of arrows and bows, casks of oil, grindstone wheels, and swords of many types. The next chamber held armor. Brainerd took him through a small door at the back, which opened on a dusty stairway. The light of the candle flickered madly along the walls and over the narrow steps.

The room at the bottom was as large as the salle, but lacking in mirrors and windows. Low benches lined two walls. Four guardsmyn sat on the benches and two stood near the door. Jedrik, Dobrogost, and Adolf sat together at one end of the second bench. In the middle of the room, two scruffy street boys lay bound and gagged. Brainerd smiled when he saw Gunther's eyes widen.

"Move one to the side," ordered Brainerd.

The two standing guards grabbed a boy foot and hand and removed him to the side.

"What lesson is this," asked Gunther.

"Tonight, if you do not fail me, you will be a man, Gunther," said Brainerd.

He picked up a sword and a long stick that leaned against the far side of the room. Walking back, he put the sword in Gunther's hands. Then he knelt and cut the street boy free and gave him the stick.

Gunther examined his weapon. "This has an edge."

"This is a real fight, Gunther. Not the pretend ones on the training grounds. I'll set the boy free if he wins. If you win? Well, you'll find something nice in your bed."

"And if I lose?"

"You don't want me to think that you're less than a man? In three days time, you'll be of age, but that won't make you a man."

Gunther squirmed as Brainerd withdrew to the benches.

Before Gunther could assume a fighting stance, the street boy attacked with the fury of desperation, getting in two blows to Gunther's ribs and a third that clipped his ear. Gunther retreated, found his balance, and brought his sword up to counter. Anger flooded his veins with the juice of rage and his training kicked in on an instinctual level. When the stick came at him again, Gunther blocked it, knocked the stick aside, and thrust. His blade plunged deep into his opponent's body.

The street boy gave a gasping scream and collapsed, nearly tearing the sword from Gunther's hands. Gunther stared in shock as the street boy began coughing up blood, groaning, and clutching his chest.

"I—I killed him."

Brainerd gestured for his guards to move the dying boy to the side, so that the training session could continue. He hugged Gunther in approval. "Yes, you did. I'm very proud of you. Gerik would be proud of you."

"Thank you, Brainerd." Gunther walked stiff-legged to the benches and sat down as the sword passed to Adolf, and the stick to the next boy.

Adolf got through without being hit once. His first strike caught the street boy in the thigh, which forced him to his knees. Gunther wondered why Brainerd did not end the match at first blood. Then Adolf's sword slammed through his opponent's chest, mortally wounding him. Brainerd and the guards applauded Adolf who joined them on the benches afterward.

Gunther understood then. The special training was not about fighting: it was about killing.

The sounds of the dying boys, as they lay on the far side of the room, made it difficult for Gunther to listen to Brainerd's lecture.

"When you face an enemy, Gunther, don't expect them to fight fair. Lukasz doesn't. Schvartzers never fight fair. They're a dishonorable lot. Their blood is tainted."

"Is Lukasz my enemy?" The question was rhetorical, arising from a confusion of spirit that Gunther felt at having killed his first mon.

"Does a pedou's schvartzer buttboy belong on the throne instead of you? He's a half-breed who doesn't deserve to rule. If Stefan hadn't kept refusing to wed—well, at least he could have named one of your brothers as his heir instead of

Lukasz. Who knows what foreign whore Colin got the mongrel bastard on?"

Brainerd's strong invective slowly stirred Gunther from his lethargy. "The schvartzer is an abomination. He doesn't deserve to live."

"Where is the boy who spoke of throwing the bastard to the manticore? The one who asked eagerly when it would come time to kill men? Show me some spirit."

Gunther looked Brainerd in the eyes, forcing his nerve to steady. "I will be brutal and cruel to the scourges of the realm and my god. I will not hesitate to put the schvartzers, the hell-kissers, and the pedous to the blade. I will rejoice in their blood as it flows from their wounds. I will not hesitate in my duty."

He sucked in a deep breath, his eyes drifting again to the boy he had killed. The boy had stopped moving and no longer moaned. Gunther guessed that he must have finally died. "Can I give the other boy the coup?"

"No," said Brainerd in a severe tone. "Get used to the sounds of death, Gunther. Be a man about it."

Adolf snickered. "He's my boy. Not yours. I don't mind the sounds."

Gunther frowned deeply, his hands clasp and unclasp. "This isn't your first kill, is it?"

"I've lost count. I've been doing it for a year." Adolf turned to Brainerd. "I'm getting good at it."

"Yes, you are, Adolf. You're one of my best students. Okay, off to your beds, boys. And enjoy your rewards."

Gunther walked to his room in a daze, his mind replaying the moment that his sword entered the boy's chest, the way he had crumpled to the ground, the sounds the boy had made as he died. He felt disturbed as he entered his suite and lit a candle. Dropping his clothing in the middle of the floor, he continued on to his bedroom. Gunther lit several candles on his desk before turning to the bed. He felt as if his heart had leaped into his throat and was choking him. Someone was in his bed.

The willowy blonde turned over, pushed the covers down, and revealed her nakedness. "Hello, Gunther."

"Iwona," Gunther gasped, recognizing the sixteen-year-old serving girl that he had long fantasized about. His cock went erect so fast, it felt like his member was trying to leap off his body. Eagerness and desire banished all thoughts of his first killing.

Iwona opened her legs and played with her clit invitingly. "Two things make a man a man: killing his enemies and fucking his women."

Gunther jumped onto the bed and threw himself on top of her. His hands explored her body in a mad rush, then he shoved inside her and put an end to his virginity.

* * * *

Eight boys lined up in front of tall poles on the northeast side of the training grounds with the heaviest one-handed practice swords available in their hands. Jedrik stood at one end and another guardsman at the other while Dobrogost walked the line eyeing the boys. Lukasz grumbled under his

breath at being included in the punishment. Brainerd had informed him that it was because he had "chickened out" on the hunt.

He could feel the other boys' eyes on him, sneaking glances and throwing glares.

"It's your fault," Gunther snarled.

Lukasz flinched. "It isn't." His remark was a bit louder than Gunther's.

Jedrik heard Lukasz, walked down the line, and smacked him on the back with a stick. "Silence!"

Dobrogost began to call the cadences and the boys struck the posts in rhythm.

"Gerik's dead because of you," said Mikolai.

Adolf spat on Lukasz. "You're a murderer, schvartzer."

Lukasz bit his lip as he continued to swing his blade. If he said anything back, Jedrik would switch him again. He wondered why they always caught him, but never the others. Maybe it was because they were singling him out for it. The one time that Lukasz had mentioned it to Hartmut, Brainerd had then called him a liar, and Lukasz had been made to apologize to Brainerd, Jedrik, and Dobrogost for his accusations of favoritism.

Between the drill and the accusations coming from the other boys, the day soon became a misery. Lukasz wanted to scream at them that it had not been his fault that Gerik died. Yet a small voice in the back of Lukasz's conscience would not stop saying "maybe" and that troubled him.

By the time the drill ended, Lukasz's sword arm was trembling with exhaustion and he hurt from wrist to shoulder.

The boys clustered around him, hurling insults. Lukasz broke into a run, and sprinted strongly toward the door into the kitchens with the boys in pursuit. Because he was slender and light and fleet of foot, Lukasz managed to disappear inside before they could catch him. He took the stairs two at a time, turned left and vanished deeper into the servants section where they would never find him.

Seeing the door to Gunda's office, Lukasz darted inside. Gunda was sitting behind her desk and rose when she saw him. "What's wrong, poppet?"

She wore a black crepe band on her right arm as a sign of mourning for Gerik. All the servants were wearing them, although Lukasz knew full well that none of them had liked the boy.

Lukasz let Gunda guide him to the couch and hold him in her arms. "They're saying I murdered Gerik."

"Aww, poppet. You didn't murder anyone. Ignore them, Lukasz. They're just spiteful and looking for a target."

"I keep thinking..."

"Don't." She noticed the way he held his arm. "Is it hurting?"

"Yes," Lukasz said in a small voice.

"You go up to your room and I'll bring a poultice up for it. I'll have dinner sent up to your room."

Lukasz pulled away from her. "Gunda, they'll think I'm hiding."

She gave him a sly wink. "I'll tell Hartmut that you're grieving for Gerik."

"You wouldn't ... I didn't like him. Oh, you would." Lukasz felt momentarily flustered and then he chuckled softly.

"Wouldn't you like a nice quiet evening?"

"Yes." Lukasz almost asked her to have Iwona bring him his dinner, and then held back because he felt shy, not knowing how Gunda would react if she suspected what was going on between himself and Iwona.

"Then leave it to old Gunda and I'll make everything right."

* * * *

On the third morning after the attack, Berran lay tucked into his blankets in his tent, staring upward at the canvas. Movement had come back to his body, and only the wounded arm remained unresponsive. Talons had told him that would return last.

She had won over his mother the first night, and Vernados the next day. His cousin Warenhari was already falling under her sway and the swiftness of it all seemed totally inexplicable to Berran.

"You're married?" Berran asked in a rhetorical tone. He knew the answer already, but could not think of another way to bring up the subject.

Talons debrided more of his flesh around the puncture, working with a tiny blade on a long handle. "Yes. I can't stitch it until I'm certain all the infection is gone."

"Does he know you're here?"

"Yes."

Berran regarded the icy woman, wondering who could possibly have wanted to marry someone like her. Yet her

hands on his arm, as she handled his wound, were as gentle as any that had ever touched him. "Did he let you come?"

Talons finished cleansing and bandaging the wound, gave him a chill stare, and said, "Yes. I can't stop your questions, but you'll find I'm not much for answers."

"I noticed that." Berran went silent, watching Talons put her things away. She intrigued him, filling his mind with questions, setting his curiosity burning like a torch. It struck him then that Talons had the same coloring as his friend Lukasz, which unexpectedly led him to thoughts of Shaurone where the women formed the warrior class. It had long been speculated that Lukasz's mother might have been Sharani, one of the hereditary enemies of the Beltrians. The Sharani were the people of the White Lady, Aroana, who had extended her protection to Berran's family.

As Talons rose to leave the tent, Berran's reasoning led to the obvious question. "Are you Sharani?"

Talons coughed up a dry chuckle. "Would that make me your enemy?"

Berran shook his head, finding himself in a tough spot. "If you are, then we follow the same god."

"We don't follow the same god."

"But you are Sharani."

"My grandmother was."

"But..."

"Enough questions. We need to pack up and get out of here. We're still being hunted."

Berran settled back into his blankets to wait for the myn who would be moving him to the stretcher again. The woman was a riddle with too few clues.

* * * *

Clovis and his nine companions sat in the wagon with their arms bound behind them and their ankles tied to the pole running the length of the bench they sat on. All day they had been hearing the distant sounds of battle, desperate horn calls, and the roar of fighting. They knew that they sat near to the plain around Castle Saynkyorbirg, the capital of Angrim. Maruska had delighted in telling him that his father had gathered a tremendous army and that Duke Stefan of Beltria had brought another army to aid Angrim.

He tried to keep faith that his father would prevail, but he had seen what the forces of the Minnorian Empire could field and was not sanguine about the matter. Despite the defiance that he continued to show Maruska, he felt in his heart that his people were doomed.

As twilight arrived, a cheering rose in the camp, breaking like a tremendous wave across everything. Ten myn looked at each other, and as one, they lowered their heads in despair.

Clovis, still sick from the last time that Maruska had stung him in a fit of pique, vomited onto the floor, his face pasty white. He sagged in his bonds, feeling wretched at the knowledge that the culling of those captured in the fighting would begin with the dawn, certain that his father and three surviving brothers had been among those marching in the now defeated army.

He glanced at the eleventh mon, Konrad Dreslin who looked worse off than he did, staring vacant-eyed at nothing, his lips parted and drool trickling from a corner of his mouth. Konrad had not spoken a word since the day Sergei tortured his mind while sucking him to the edge, and the once stalwart mon could now barely feed himself. Maruska kept singling them both out for punishment. Clovis could not get Konrad's screams out of his mind, the way the mon had writhed and shrieked information with Sergei's fangs in his neck.

The prince slept fitfully and was awakened by the sound of the Minnorian General speaking to his unit of soldiers that guarded the larder.

"Move them into the tent," General Ynkendio Kreuz ordered. "The next batch of noble meat-pies is coming."

Clovis found himself praying that his brothers and father had gained a clean death on the battlefield, and would not find their way into the larder. He had long since given up trying to resist the vampiric coercions that had been placed in his brain by the Lemyari messenger Sergei. So when the two soldiers, Wakeem and Rafael, began unfastening him and the others from the bench, Clovis obediently went outside and waited for his next orders.

He could defy the demon Maruska with his mind and words, but not with his body.

Ynkendio stood smirking at Clovis. Once Ynkendio had been a man like other men, but his mate Maruska had changed him. His burnished skin shone a shade of burnt orange, heavy black hair hung past his shoulders, black horns swept back from his forehead, and a long tail moved

restlessly back and forth from just above his buttocks. The tail had eight ridges as sharp as steel near the barbed tip. Clovis had seen Ynkendio kill with his tail for the pleasure of it, not bothering with the venom, but simply shoving the eight inches of ridges into the victim's chest and then ripping a hole in him large enough for a man to put his fist through.

The General indicated the tent beside the wagon and the condemned filed into it. They settled on the ground, which had been covered in hay, sitting separately, no one looking at the other. Clovis wondered despondently who would be added to their numbers this day, more men intended to become hosts for Maruska's eggs.

He could not stop remembering the death of his youngest brother, Tibalt, and how the demon-spawn had torn its way out of Tibalt's chest. Clovis shuddered and prayed.

"Keep an eye on them," Ynkendio said just outside the tent. "Maruska and I need to make our first picks."

After an hour that seemed like forever, Ynkendio and Maruska returned.

Ynkendio smirked at Clovis. "Your father and Duke Stefan are among those captured." He burst into a fit of laughter. "But they're not good enough for the eggs. So Zyne had the scaffolds raised close enough for the city to watch their impalements. We'll take the city tomorrow after we ram the poles up their noble asses. What do you think of that?"

Clovis glared and said nothing, fighting the last bit of illness from the last time that one of them had stung him.

"Aren't you going to ask about your brothers?" Maruska simpered.

Clovis refused to be baited, trying to act as strong as Lord General Reynhard Dreslin had before his death. Reynhard had defied them to the end, even as the unholy larva was eating its way through his body.

"Well, you don't have to wonder any longer," said Maruska. She opened the tent flap and Clovis' three brothers were thrust inside, along with seven other members of the nobility that had been chosen for her larder.

They stumbled across the tent as soldiers shoved them along. All of the new additions were bare to the waist. The death's head brand glared from their foreheads, and the bull's eye had been burned into their chests on the right side to mark the place that Maruska intended to inject her eggs.

Clovis could see the uncertainty and confusion in his brothers' eyes. They were probably wondering why they were here and not dying on the scaffolds with their father and the duke.

The soldiers forced each of the newcomers to their knees and bound them ankle and wrist to poles. Clovis supposed that they would remain tied until a vampire of the requisite ability could be brought in to set the compulsions and coercions in each of their brains, as Sergei had done to Clovis and his companions. Clovis still had nightmares of Sergei's fangs in his neck and the needles of power in his brain.

Maruska came in once the soldiers had bound them all. She ran her hands over their chests, chortling. "Nice juicy nobles and four fine princes. My babies will be so happy when they arrive next spring."

"Bitch," Clovis muttered under his breath.

She heard him and whirled to face him. "The eggs go in like this."

Her tail whipped around, and the barb penetrated his chest. She dribbled in enough of her venom to hurt him and make him sick for a time, but not enough to permanently injure him. Clovis screamed, and sagged in his bonds.

The others cowered, and a few screamed with Clovis.

Maruska paused in front of Konrad Dreslin. "You're going to die like your brother did."

Then she left them.

Alajos turned to the newcomers. "That's how Reynhard and Prince Tibalt died ... with one of those things crawling around inside them until it finally ate its way out. They suffered terribly, vomiting and coughing up bloody phlegm, writhing on the ground."

"Did she just put an egg in Clovis," asked his eldest brother, Willard, frowning worriedly.

"I doubt it," answered Alajos, listening to Clovis' moaning. "Else, she'd have done the rest of us. I think she just envenomed him a bit to make an example of him."

"I won't eat," said Sewell, the second born prince. "I'll find a way to die before she can shove an egg in my chest."

"It won't work," said Alajos wearily. "She'll send in a vampire to take control of your mind at the first sign of trouble. It's been tried. Don't you think we tried everything while we were watching your brother and Reynhard die?"

"There must be a way..."

"We have until spring," said Alajos. "And then we die."

"The brands?" asked Tancred, the youngest prince now that his brother Tibalt was dead.

"You mean the ones on our chests?" Alajos asked. At Tancred's nod, he added, "That's to mark the place where the eggs will be injected into our bodies."

Two days later the city of Saynkyorbirg fell, but Maruska found none of the captives taken there suitable to her needs. Instead, the nobles and their families were all executed from the oldest gaffer to the smallest babes. The city was culled swiftly and not a single citizen was spared. All of the adult males were either killed outright and drained for the preserving bottles or shackled into groups within the various larders to be eaten later or rited. Most women of childbearing age were sent south as slaves, a few were kept as slaves and to satisfy the carnal lusts of the soldiers. Women that could no longer bear children were killed, as were the children under the age of seven. Boys between the ages of eight and twelve were impressed into the Minnorian Army.

* * * *

Lukasz sweated under the autumn sun in his padded leathers. Brainerd had, predictably, put him to sparring with Gunther again. It did not matter how hard Lukasz worked or how well he performed, it seemed like Brainerd always found something to criticize about him.

Gunther and Zygmunt turned fourteen a day apart and in honor of it, a large party was held in the palace. Hartmut had insisted that Lukasz give them both presents and he had. When the party ended, all of the boys except Lukasz had

gone with Brainerd to the Golden Lantern, a high-class brothel, for a final rite of manhood.

Lukasz had not seen Iwona in several days and had begun to fret that she did not really love him or that she was too disappointed in him for not being able to hold an erection long enough to get his cock out of his pants, much less get it inside her. He wondered what kind of man he was going to make when he finally came of age, and all of it added to his misery.

As the days dragged on with no word from Saynkyorbirg, the two dozen boys who were training with Brainerd grew irritable and more accidents happened as they took out their worries on each other. For some of them concern became anger. For others, anger at being left behind and not taken to fight with their kinsmyn, became rage. For Gunther it had become rage and, increasingly, Lukasz became his target.

That morning, Gunther beat down on Lukasz with his heavy practice sword until the smaller boy was driven to his knees in his weakening attempts to hold him off. Lukasz became afraid that the next blow would connect and break one of his bones. So rather than wait for it in the normal fashion of their training, Lukasz threw himself to the side, rolled to his knees and smacked Gunther behind the legs hard enough to bring him to his knees. Lukasz finished Gunther off by swinging the sword against Gunther's back with a resounding whack.

Gunther landed on his face and rolled onto his side screaming curses. "Coward's move, you whoreson bastard. You let Gerik die."

"I didn't." Lukasz knew he was going to get it, even before Brainerd's hand closed on his collar, jerking him to his feet.

"Learn to fight like a man," Brainerd snarled.

Lukasz swallowed, found his courage, and looked Brainerd in the eye as the armsmaster released him. "Had it been real, which of us would have lived?"

Startled, Brainerd needed a moment to frame his response. "That's not the point. You're dismissed for the day. Don't think I won't bring this up with your uncle when he returns."

Lukasz left the field.

* * * *

A mon approached the gates of the capital of Beltria on a staggering horse. His scarlet and russet livery torn and blood spattered, the messenger rode as if he could scarcely keep his seat. The guards at the gate ran forward and one of them caught the messenger as he started to fall.

"Veykko," the guard said, recognizing the messenger. "What happened?"

"Must see ... Lukasz ... must tell his Grace..." Veykko moaned.

The guards shared a glance at the title the messenger had just given Lukasz.

Eskild pushed his finger between the tear in Veykko's tunic and then the rip in his thigh. Both had wadded cloth shoved into them, now dried and stiff with blood. "He's wounded."

Without being asked, one of the guards had gotten a fresh horse. The guard named Eskild, mounted and took Veykko up

before him on the saddle. They rode through the streets heading for the keep with two more guards running before them and clearing the crowds so that they would not be hindered.

As Lukasz left the training grounds, feeling miffed and a tad sullen over Brainerd's reaction to his victory, the boy saw the messenger brought in. His heart leaped into his throat as he ran for the courtyard. "What is it?"

Veykko stumbled as he left the saddle, and fell.

Lukasz shoved through the myn gathering around him. "Speak, mon!" Lukasz demanded.

Veykko's eyes focused on Lukasz with a desperate intensity. "My liege, Kyser Gerhardt and your uncle are dead. Their armies were crushed at Saynkyorbirg, and the city was overrun."

His message delivered, Veykko's eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped backwards over Eskild's arm.

"Is he dead?" Lukasz asked.

Eskild put his fingers to Veykko's neck. "He lives ... barely."

Lukasz drew himself up, every inch the young duke. "Take him to my physician. Get him every care. I need more information from him, and I'm not going to get it if he dies."

CHAPTER SEVEN

UNDER SEIGE

Isranon could not shake the feeling that something lingered in the abandoned town that he had forbidden his scouts to investigate further without him. So once the roads had dried enough that the wagons could move on, the Army of the Renunciate marched to within sight of the town and made camp. He and Nans had allowed further scouting only around the edges of the town, and although the lycans were now reporting that they had caught whiffs of strange, unfamiliar scents, no other spoor or evidence of inhabitants had been discovered. Isranon decided to do a necromantic scan for life forms before allowing anyone to enter.

That morning Isranon stood at the edge of the camp, studying the town. He had brought only Nevin with him so that he would have fewer warm bodies to disrupt or distract his necromantic awareness. A dusty, battered sign hung high between two posts with "Welcome to Chyniolus" barely readable on it because of the chipped and faded paint. All the windows had been shattered. Broken shutters creaked forlornly in the morning breeze. Torn, faded curtains waved in the windows like tattered ghosts. If he judged by his eyes, Isranon would have believed that nothing lived there. Yet he felt his necromantic senses tingling.

He extended his awareness in a low-level scan for living and undead. At first, he picked up nothing, and then he

extended his scan, broadening it into a powerful sweep. He picked up dozens of presences that he could not identify, although he could taste their rage and hunger.

Hunger.

It provoked his own hunger for blood, distracting him for an instant, reminding him of just how out of control his own appetite had grown over the past six weeks. His fangs descended from their sheaths and pricked his lip. He could hear the beating of Nevin's heart as the lycan stood beside him, smell the blood in his veins. An urge to pull Nevin down and suck him to the edge and beyond came over Isranon. The young sa'necari fought it, his face going pale. Shaken, Isranon nearly lost his focus.

Forcing himself to close Nevin's presence out, Isranon once more extended his scan. He tasted terror, pain, and then a death. A small cluster of humans were somewhere in that town with those hungry others.

Someone staggered from a building, got to the edge of the road where the town ended and collapsed beneath the signposts. He struggled to his hands and knees, crawling toward them.

"Help me."

Isranon recognized the mon's uniform and cursed. "It's one of ours. I told them to stay out."

Nevin changed into hybrid form and loped off to help the injured mon. Isranon ran behind him.

The lycan reached the fallen soldier first. As he started to kneel, Nevin heard a rustling and a flurry of darts struck his arms. He half-turned and two penetrated his cheek. Nevin

started to shrug it off, and then he felt the betraying burn in his bloodstream. More hit him. Nevin jerked and stiffened, falling to his knees. Confusion and disorientation made him blink. He shook his head trying to clear it. Another volley of the deadly darts pierced his skin. Nevin's body twitched and cramped. His breathing turned choppy and struggling.

Isranon could tell that Nevin was hurt, but not by what. As soon as he came within range, Isranon threw a golden shield around them.

"Nevin!"

When Isranon saw tiny darts scattered along his spirit-brother's arms and two lodged in his face.

Nevin blinked at Isranon, his face tightening into a grimace as he mastered his body and turned the mon over. There were tiny darts all over him also. "Devil's Silver."

Nevin crumpled.

Isranon's blood ran cold as ice, knowing what Devil's Silver could do to a lycan.

The soldier moaned. "My friend. They ate him alive. He was screaming ... screaming ... and they were eating him."

Isranon glanced from Nevin to the moaning soldier and back again. A cold sweat had broken out on Nevin's face and his body was shaken by rippling convulsions. Isranon could not heal them and maintain the shields. If he let the shields down, whatever had struck at them would strike at him. Nor could he move both of them alone. He gazed at the camp. The sentries were out of sight on the far end of their walk. Isranon saw people moving beyond the tents, but although he waved his staff, none of them noticed him.

In desperation, he reached out to his wife through the psychic link that bound them forever.—*Anksha help me. Nevin's wounded.*—

He sensed her turn toward him, felt her race unerringly through the camp, gathering people. Each passing moment dragged at him. Then he saw her.

Anksha stood at the edge of the camp with four vampires: Haig, Zulaika, Corbienne, and Jun. She had chosen her companions wisely.

"We've got to get them back to camp," said Isranon. "I can't hold the shields and heal them at the same time."

Haig and Jun lifted the two unconscious myn and carried them to the safety of their encampment. As they reached the first two rows of tents, Haig turned to Isranon. "This one's dead."

Isranon felt stricken. He had not even known the mon's name. Reaching for Nevin in Jun's arms, Isranon grasped the lycan's wrist and Read him. He immediately cast Shared Life, moving part of his blood and life force into his spirit-brother. The transfusion of sa'necari blood added a missing resistance factor to combat the Devil's Silver while his life force strengthened Nevin's. Isranon's brow furrowed with worry because he knew it would not hold long. "Get him to my wagon where I can work on him."

People stopped to watch them pass, muttering loudly. Olin pushed his way through the gathering crowds and fell into step beside them when he saw them. Concern filled his dark eyes and etched lines into his forehead. "Nevin?"

Isranon kept walking. "Devil's Silver."

"Gods, no."

"I've only dealt with poison once. And that was with a circle of divines helping me. I'm not sure I can save him."

Olin patted Isranon on the back. "You'll do your best. That's all Nevin would expect."

Haig laid the body of the kandoyarin soldier beside the wagon, climbed inside and returned with a blanket to cover the mon's dead face and body.

"What happened?" asked Luck, walking up with Travis and Daree.

"We don't know yet. Nevin's in a bad way." Haig flicked back the blanket and they all stared at the dead mon. "Devil's silver."

Travis knelt and carefully pulled a dart free. "Imps. I never heard of them using Devil's Silver before. That's a Waejontori poison."

Despite Travis' innumerable flaws when it came to interrelationships, he knew his business, and a ripple of concern and speculation ran through the ranks surrounding them.

Jun climbed into the back of the wagon with Nevin in his arms and settled him onto the larger bed to the right. Amiri entered after Isranon. She quickly plucked all of the darts from Nevin's body, dropped them into a jar, and got him undressed.

Unfolding a campstool, Isranon sat down beside the bed. He placed his staff across Nevin's stomach and his other hand on his spirit-brother's chest. "This isn't going to be easy."

Isranon extended his awareness into Nevin's body. The poisons felt like a fire in Nevin's veins to Isranon, burning the arteries, searing the muscle tissues. His spirit-brother convulsed under his fingers. "Help me, Amiri. I don't know what to do."

She knelt beside him. "I can try guiding you. But I can't circle with you. The undead can't heal."

"I need more mages."

"Menders. You could circle with Menders for something like this."

Nevin's heart fluttered and steadied, fluttered again and stopped.

"Noooooooooo!" Isranon screamed and poured power into Nevin's heart, re-starting it. His power sang through the wagon, enveloped it.

"Link his heart and breathing to yours. Visualize a golden cord between your heart and his, your lungs and his."

Isranon forced himself to center and calm, established the links. Nevin quieted, his convulsions ended.

"Ignore the damage it's causing. Focus only on burning the poisons and venoms out of his body." Amiri's quiet, clinical tone and manner kept Isranon steadied as she instructed him.

Isranon sucked in a deep breath, gave a nod, and focused. Amiri Read Nevin as Isranon went, following through the lycan's body.

"Push it, Isranon. Don't let it leak back into his chest and heart. Yes, that's it."

Isranon perceived the Devil's Silver as a corrosive inky blackness eating its way through his blood stream. The vessels ruptured and it spread into his muscles. Isranon had to stop himself from trying to grab at the muscles with his healing energies. Instead, he burned and purified the veins, pulling the healing energy along behind the cleansing fires. The veins closed as he worked. He cleaned out the arteries and veins and the smallest blood vessels.

The spells embedded in Isranon's body reared up and struck at him as he used his powers. Wounds recreated themselves across his stomach and chest. Blood soaked his garments, and he grew dizzy and exhausted.

"Amiri ... I can't hold ... on ... much longer."

"You've done it. I can handle it from here."

Isranon managed a small smile, and blacked out, falling across Nevin's unconscious body.

* * * *

"There's been trouble." Dahnig, a kandoyarin serving as a soldier in the Army of Renunciate, muttered as he pulled at his first growth of golden stubble on his chin.

The lycan standing beside him in hybrid form lifted his head and listened to howls echoing through the camp as the others of his kind passed their information to all the ears that could understand their noises. His stance and shoulder tensed and his expression tightened. "Two fools went into the town without permission. They're dead. Nevin tried to help and he's wounded."

Stygean paused in his stacking of firewood and listened, hoping in a flash of bitterness that Nevin was dying.

"How bad, Gordain?"

"Devil's Silver. We've got imp problems, Dahnig."

"That doesn't sound good. What is it?"

Stygean felt a flare of victory. He knew all about Devil's Silver. It meant the bastard had to be dying. Lycans always died when you got Devil's Silver into their veins. The heretic would soon be mourning the loss of his thrice-cursed spirit-brother. It served them both right.

Straightening, Stygean ran his fingers beneath his slave collar to let some air breath across his sweating neck. "I was promised some free time when I finished."

Gordain turned to him. "I hear that you've sunk your fangs into someone—I'll dig them out of your mouth with a knife."

Stygean winced and repressed an urge to spit in his face. Ever since he had gotten his fangs, the lycans placed in charge of overseeing him and Jingen had been threatening him. "I won't."

"Then go on. But be back in your tent by nightfall for bed checks."

He headed north for the center of the camp where the command tent was located, wanting to be among the crowd he was certain had gathered so that he could hear the announcement of Nevin's death.

As he left the kandoyarin section of the camp, Stygean passed the Scarlet Tent and saw the nibari emerging. His mouth screwed up at the idea that Isranon had the nibari herd whoring to humans and others in the company. Most of

them had been owned by his father and were some of the finest bloodlines ever bred in the south. Many of them were pedigreed Three Diamonds and Black Cliff stock, bred for sensitivity and complete docility, with a sweet, crisp taste to their blood.

His heart skipped a beat when he saw Farris come out of the tent to stand with the others. She held a loose robe closed around her nudity with one hand. Resentment and a fresh rush of bitterness twisted Stygean's insides. Farris was doing time in the company brothel. Farris! His stomach churned.

Liuthan had promised Farris to Stygean for his first rite. He had fantasized for months about feeling her die beneath him with his cock in her flesh hole, erupting into her at the moment of her death, feeling her soul shatter and sucking up pieces of it to make himself fully sa'necari. Farris' body was to have been the altar that gave him his birthright of power.

"Filthy heretic," Stygean muttered. "Ruining good cattle."

A sound broke across the camp as Stygean reached the tents of the lycans. The sound shivered in the air like a wordless chorus of angelic voices. Stygean's head came up and he felt a thrill run through him at the sheer beauty of it. It rose in a crescendo of power and majesty that aroused his spirit and filled him with a need to discover where it originated.

Suddenly, Stygean found himself running toward it, toward the central tents. He had to find the singers, if singers they were. He could not imagine any instrument or any voice that could produce something so awe inspiring, so uplifting.

Crowds of onlookers blocked his way and Stygean squirmed between people who gave him disapproving glances, but he ignored it and burst into an open space surrounding the command tent and Dawnreturning's wagon that was parked beside it.

He pulled up short so fast that he nearly stumbled and fell. Randilyn's hand descended on his shoulder in time to steady him.

The music was coming from Dawnreturning's wagon.

Stygean stared at the aura wrapped around the wagon in all the shades of the rainbow, purest white, pale golden darkening to true gold, pink turning to rose, to crimson to burning orange, to gold, to pale yellow to every shade of green, blue through violet and then white again.

Stygean glanced at Randilyn, who still had her hand on his shoulder. She was one of the few in the camp who readily spoke to him. "What's going on?"

"Dawnreturning is healing Nevin. The music and the aura are manifestations of his power."

Stygean swallowed back his first response, which was to hope that Nevin died, for the lycan had been the one who captured him at his father's mansion in Ocealay. However, he had no wish to offend Randilyn, who had become one of the few he honestly considered a friend among his enemies. Then the sights and sounds slid through his defenses and Stygean found himself caught up in and trapped by wonder.

Tightening his gaze and narrowing his eyes, Stygean searched the aura for the innate necromantic black of the

sa'necari and failed to find the merest thread of it in the rainbow. "Impossible! He's sa'necari."

Randilyn squeezed Stygean's shoulder. "He's the return of Dawnhand. He's a pan-elementalist."

Stygean backed away. "Can't be. Can't be. Can't be." His words became a troubled chant. "If he's so powerful, why doesn't he heal my father?"

Pity entered Randilyn's kind eyes. "There's no cure for the Withering. Not even a lifemage can cure it."

"As if one would touch my father!" Stygean snarled before he thought and saw the hurt look on Randilyn's face as she released his shoulder. "I—I'm sorry, Randi. I didn't mean it to come out like that."

He turned and fled back the way he had come, plunging between the tents of the lycans. Stygean ran past the Scarlet Tent and saw a kandoyarin press himself against Farris. The mon slipped his hand inside her robe to squeeze her breast and then they went inside.

"I hate you." Stygean's voice cracked. "I hate you all."

His heart hammered as he ran head long, remembering his father's words, "We should never have challenged Dawnreturning. We called our fates upon ourselves."

"No, we didn't," he addressed the memory in a strangled sub-vocalization. "Sa'necari were born to rule."

Dawnreturning. The Renunciate was twisted beyond belief. How could any sa'necari have gained such power?

Denial chased Stygean's thoughts as he searched for the lie. Yet he had felt the heretic's impossible power himself

when Isranon crushed his shields like brittle ice to peer beneath them and see if Stygean was clean or tainted.

He had always been told that the heretical Dark Brothers of the Light were weak because only the rites make sa'necari strong. Yet here was Dawnreturning destroying all of the tenets of Stygean's beliefs, all the things he had been taught growing up, melting knowledge like mist just by existing.

The boy reached his tent, rushed inside and threw himself down on his bed, rolling up in his blankets. Tears of rage ran down his cheeks as Stygean recited to himself:

Sa'necari, born to rule
With other races shall we due
Our natures we'll concea
Until it's time to revea
Sa'necari hide their powers
Until the world we know is ours.
Sa'necari, strong and brave,
Other races shall enslave

By eating flesh, blood, and lives, other races will enslave
by eating flesh, blood and lives sa'necari shall arise by eating
flesh, blood and souls sa'necari magic grows through eating
flesh, blood and souls sa'necari magic grows

Rise to conquer lesser races.
cattle shall they be
As of old in Haradante.

* * * *

General Nans Gryphonheart called her officers and advisors together in the command tent in the late afternoon.

The bed that Isranon and Anksha normally used at night lay empty. Amiri had settled Isranon into the smaller bed in the wagon. Freyrick, Nans' kandoyarin aide-de-camp, sat with his pen, inkbottle, and paper ready to take notes if need be.

Scanning the faces at the table, Nans noted those who were present and thought about those who were missing. She turned to Amiri sitting to her left beside Zulaika, and nodded at the two Ymraudes.

"How are Isranon and Nevin holding up?"

Amiri leaned forward, resting on her forearms. "I managed to get some Sanguine Rose into Isranon, but he's still very weak. He taxed his powers to the limit getting the Devil's Silver out of Nevin, which allowed the embedded spells to hit him harder than usual. I wish we had found a way to free him of them before heading north."

"So do I. I've never heard of imps using Devil's Silver before. I'll go into that in a moment. What about Nevin?"

Amiri's beads clacked in her hair as she shook her head. "Not good. His body is badly damaged. There's a chance we may lose him. I didn't tell Isranon that because I feared he might trade his life for Nevin's."

Silence settled around the table.

"Nevin's too stubborn to die," said his cousin Olin.

"I should have been there." Travis looked deeply troubled, his eyes on his hands. "I should have been with them. I let them talk me out of it."

"You'd be dead," said Amiri. "The toxins on the darts are far more virulent and sophisticated than anything I've ever seen imps use. I don't see how imps could have gotten their

hands on a supply like that. A Romilay or a Tyrins had to have produced it. It's a very expensive product."

Nans' gaze went around the table again, touching on every face. "Then we can't send in humans or lycans. Chain mail won't keep out their darts. It slips in between the links."

"We can't stay out either. Isranon told me that there are humans trapped in there. Several pockets of them." Amiri pulled at her beaded braids.

"Hah!" Haig snorted. "Jun and Corbienne have already gone imp hunting. I couldn't hold them back. They're feasting on imp blood while we sit here talking."

"It's not a solution, Haig." Luck pointed out from where he sat beside Travis. "We have only fifteen vampires—until we rendezvous with Zulaika's sisters at Merkreth's Crossing—imps hunt in tribes. There's probably several dozen of them in the town. We'd never rescue the humans in time."

Nans waited until she saw that no more comments were forthcoming. "We can't do this without Isranon. You need to try and get him on his feet, Amiri."

"I'll try."

"Good. I argued with him before we left Ocealay. I didn't want to turn aside and head for Ildyrsetts because it meant wintering there when there's people in danger in Angrim and Beltria. However, I see his point now. We need more mages and that's the only place we can get them with Charas destroyed and Rowanhart barred to us. For now, Haig, Zulaika, send in your units and hunt. It will improve the odds when we do strike in force. Dismissed."

* * * *

Liuthan rolled off his cot and sank to his knees when Anksha entered. He no longer tried to even passively resist or defy her. His life had gone from a feast to scraps of rancid meat. He pulled the sash on his robe and shrugged out of it, assuming first position like a nibari.

"Your son is making trouble." Anksha's normal patois was completely missing as she stalked toward him on the balls of her feet: Liuthan shuddered, because he had learned to recognize that as a sign of anger in her.

"He's young. He'll learn."

"I'll eat him if he doesn't."

Liuthan's stomach clenched up as he remembered his wife, Chinisi, writhing and dying beneath Anksha in Ocealay. Suddenly, in his mind's eye, the image transformed into Stygean and it became his son struggling under Anksha's fangs and claws. "Please don't kill my son. Please, Anksha. He's just a boy."

She growled low, the sound rising up from her diaphragm. "I hate begging."

Liuthan closed his eyes, sucked in a breath to fortify himself, and tried to relax. "I know."

He could feel her presence every time she walked through the blood-slaves' tents, it roared through his awareness like flames in a dry forest, making his nerve-endings burn and sending pain shooting through his body.

She stood close enough to him that he could smell her feline musk. "If he's good, I'll leave him alone, but if he's bad—" Anksha's chuckle made the hairs on Liuthan's arms

rise and the muscles crawl beneath his skin. "If he's bad, I'll take him and quicken the Withering so fast ... by the end of the day he'll be more withered than you are now, dead within three, and I'll make you watch it happen."

Anksha kicked Liuthan onto his back, straddled him, and sank her fangs into his neck. She savaged him through the Dominance-Link and Liuthan convulsed beneath her screaming himself hoarse.

* * * *

Four tents down, Jingen lifted his blood-rimmed mouth from his mother's breast and sat up. "Do they always sound like that?"

Disharyl straightened and ran her fingers through her hair, wiping Jingen's ejaculate from her loins with a corner of her bedding. "Only when she punishes us."

"Can you tell who's screaming?"

"Liuthan."

Jingen went silent for a time. "Does she ever do that to you?"

"Make me scream? Frequently. It feels like your body is on fire and your nerve endings are sizzling."

"I hate her."

"The heretic speaks to Liuthan frequently. Sooner or later, we'll meet and I'll see how well my wiles work on the heretic."

CHAPTER EIGHT

MISDIRECTION

The lycan priest, Pandeena Moonbow, had just finished assembling the lesson for the children of the refugee camp, which was also called the Sanctuary, and closed her books, when a soft, yet urgent knock came at her door. The moon had reached its zenith, and she could see its sliver glowing through her window. Pandeena did not need to see the moon to feel its phases and movements keenly. As the granddaughter of the moon god, Tala, Mistress of Wolves, she experienced the moon and its patterns more intensely than the rest of the lycans.

Dark of the moon in three days. If something is going to go wrong, it's almost always dark of the moon. Dark things happen in the dark of the moon.

Pandeena opened her door to find Caimbeul there. The lawgiver was her ex-husband, although no one knew it in Red Wolff Valley, since she did not want anyone questioning the obvious differences in their ages.

"Let me in quick," he said, glancing around.

She stepped aside and allowed him to enter, closing the door quickly. "What is it? If you've come to break your promise..."

"Hush. Listen..." Caimbeul went quiet, abruptly swallowing back his words. He had come to inform her that lycan males came and went from the camp all night long, that it had been

turned into a brothel. But then he remembered Pandeena's temper, which he could not always mitigate or influence, and decided not to gamble on persuading her not to act once she had the information. He knew that the Serpent had placed death spells in all of the women, not just Clodagh, to be triggered if they were discovered. Caimbeul would not risk the women's lives, if he could avoid it.

"You've discovered something, haven't you?" she asked suspiciously when he went quiet.

"I can't tell you. I can't risk you doing something before I'm ready."

"Then why bother to come? I clearly heard alarm in your voice."

Caimbeul settled his big frame into the largest chair near the window. "I think I may have been pushing too hard and too fast. My life could be in danger."

"From who?" Pandeena sat down on the sofa in the corner closest to him.

Caimbeul smiled thinly, reading a slender acquiescence in her move to the furniture. "Again, I can't tell you."

"You are operating too much on your own," Pandeena snarled. "The Butchering Serpent is the deadliest sa'necari in existence."

Caimbeul sighed heavily. "I know that. But I need to play it close to my chest until I have something more concrete. If something should happen to me, it's all down in my journals."

Pandeena lowered her head, and tangled her fingers in her hair. "Be careful, old lecher. I don't want to lose you."

Caimbeul perked up. "Aha! You do still care."

"Not that way," Pandeena snapped. "We're friends."

Caimbeul wiggled his eyebrows at her and put his hands in his lap. He sobered. "There's a gang of juvenile dogs that appear to be running with the Serpent or one of his agents."

"Moonlight pure." Pandeena gasped. "This is a tangled web. Are we to be betrayed by our own kind?" She licked her lips, fighting for calm. "You think it's Malthus?"

"He's human and he used to live here at the camp, all of which gave him opportunity to become acquainted with them. However, we both know ... or ought to—" Caimbeul paused to frown deeply at Pandeena, "-that ... he's not the Serpent. The Serpent is sa'necari."

"Don't remind me. Do you think the Serpent attacked the little prince?"

Caimbeul shook his head and moved to the sofa beside Pandeena.

"Oh, no, you don't, you old lecher!" Pandeena jumped up and took over his vacated chair. "Stay where you are, and just answer my questions."

"No, I don't believe the Serpent attacked the prince. Vampire more likely, but if so it was either in bat form or one of the smallest vampires I've run into." Caimbeul showed the width of the bite between his thumb and forefinger.

"That is small." Pandeena sounded thoughtful. "I warded both the windows of his room, and all of the entrances to his play house."

"Thank you, Pandeena." Caimbeul reached inside his robe and rubbed the godmark that Pandeena had burned into his shoulder as a link between them. "See if you can find out

what happened to his cat. Kenly has been missing for a week. Ask the animals."

"I'll do that."

* * * *

Claw sat in the main upstairs drawing room, the Blue Room, feeling frustrated. Aisha refused to allow him in the Great Hall because she did not trust him on the stairs yet. They were making an invalid of him and he resented it. Aisha, Merissa, his sisters also. Even Belgair and Malthus. That was the reason he had decided not to tell them that every single day he had more twinges of chest pain, more feelings of pressure as if someone were piling stones around his heart. It worried Claw, but the price of confession would be that they would gang up and put him back to bed again.

At least sitting in the drawing room meant that people came by to visit with him and he did not feel as isolated.

Claw stared down at his lunch: slices of lamb cooked with some of Aisha's pickled plums, a chunk of his favorite sharp cheese, and the half a bottle of that red wine he had shared with Malthus the other night. Claw worked the cork out and filled his glass. He still had two unopened bottles left of that Faewinian wine that Malthus had brought back from Hell's Widow for him. Malthus could be very thoughtful at times, but Claw could not get past all of his misgivings about the mon.

"Are you eating?" Fianait stood in the doorway.

"Yes."

"I'm going to look at your plate before it goes back to the kitchen, you know."

"Don't be such a pushy bitch!"

"Well I am." Fianait turned and walked off.

Claw grumbled for a few minutes about all the pushy bitches in his life, and then took a few bites of the lamb. Nothing tasted right, except for the wine. There was a vacancy in his life brought about by having no work to do. It made him itchy. Claw decided that he would insist that they find him something that he could do sitting here in his chair. Sheradyn had promised that if he continued to improve, Claw would eventually be allowed to take short walks in the garden. All the more reason to lie to the healer about the twinges. Shape changing and sex had been forbidden also. Claw felt as if he were suffocating beneath all the restrictions. The old doctor had tried to take away his tobacco, and his wine and spirits; however, at that point, Claw had rebelled.

The old wolf took a long swallow of wine and then another. He forced himself to chew up a few more bites of lamb and swallow it.

"Appetite's gone to hell," Claw muttered. He finished off the glass of wine and poured a second one. Drinking that glass faster than the first, he rang the bell for a servant.

Kissie came in, wiping her hands on her apron. "What would you, master?"

"I want the other bottle of red wine, like this one." Claw handed her the empty bottle. "And a corkscrew."

Kissie took the empty with her when she left.

Claw dug his fingers into his chest. Sharp pains were jabbing through him, far more than the usual twinges. He felt cold and clammy. Claw shivered. His awareness grew fuzzy

around the edges, and it seemed for a moment as if he were going to put his face down in his plate.

"Are you all right?" Malthus walked over and sat down at the table across from Claw. "You should eat more of that. Aisha and Merissa are going to worry if you don't start eating more."

Claw glared at Malthus. "I'm fine. I'm just not hungry," Claw growled. "Fianait and Searlait have already been in to lecture me. I'd eat more if they'd let me do more."

Malthus nodded thoughtfully, glanced down and to the side with a small smile. "But it will be difficult to convince them."

Kissie appeared with the bottle of wine, and set it on the table. Seeing Malthus, she asked him, "Will you be having some?"

"Yes, I would like that."

Claw started on his third glass of wine while Malthus harassed him into eating half of the lamb. Once Kissie returned with a glass for Malthus, they both sat drinking.

"No more than two glasses," Malthus said, covering his glass as Claw tried to refill it again. "I'm driving into Hell's Widow to pick up a few things. Merissa and your sisters made a list for me. Clodagh wants a few things for the camp."

"You come and go more than anyone else," Claw observed.

"That's because I'm coming and going for other people."

Claw's eyes narrowed. "And you've never run into any trouble."

Malthus pulled at the long, drooping ends of his mustache and his beard before answering, considering his reply. He could taste Claw's pain. Seeing the old bastard drinking the

cursed wine had been a pleasant surprise. "I wouldn't say that. I've had to hide from the Queen a few times, and the Sharani have stopped me more than once. The Sharani always demand a toll."

"Two weeks ago, a young wolf was killed not far from the bridge. Arrows poisoned with Devil's Silver and other arcane shit. Yet, you come through unscathed, time and again."

"Remember I was a scout and forager for a kandoyarin company. I'm trained to handle situations like this one." Malthus downed his glass and stood to leave. "I must be on my way. I want to get there before dark."

Claw rang for the servants to help him back to bed for a nap.

* * * *

The town of Hell's Widow had prospered under the rule of the Sharani occupiers. Without the constant drain on their resources by their former masters who had ruled through blood, terror, and cannibalism, the town had expanded to twice its borders in twenty years. Malthus drove the wagon into Hell's Widow, and through the town, noting the presence of the Sharani women walking tall and proud down the streets. Waejontori peasant women wore shapeless black dresses and head scarves. The only sa'necaris dwelling in Hell's Widow lived in the shadows, hidden from the conquerors. They maintained the secret way stations.

He turned into the yard of an inn called the *Devil's Dance*, which was a way station to those who knew what to look for. Their rooms on the third floor catered to obscene appetites

concealed from the Sharani. Malthus intended to spend the night here while he concluded his business, and start home to Wolffgard Village tomorrow.

He tied off the reins, set the break, and climbed down from the wagon. An ostler came out.

Malthus tossed the ostler a handful of coppers. "I'll be staying the night."

Inside the inn, Malthus found the common room filled to capacity with locals and he spied Heironim sitting in the far right corner dicing. He strode up to the table and gazed at Heironim. "You have some goods for me."

"Yes, I have." Heironim picked up his winnings. "You'll excuse me, but I have business to take care of."

His companions grumbled, but Heironim shrugged them off.

Malthus started toward the door to the back without waiting for him, and Heironim fell into step beside him.

They reached the third floor where Heironim had his rooms and walked down the hallway. A nibari emerged from a room and greeted them. Her face had the kind of flush that came from being sucked after having gone too long without fangs in her flesh.

Malthus raised his hand to halt her. "Do you have more that are over ripe?"

She curtsied. "Yes, master. Two that are getting the blood-bloat bad. We haven't had many masters come through recently."

"Light meat or dark?"

"Both light meat, sir."

Malthus extended his fangs and tongued them with a smile. "I'll take your best room, and both nibari." He reached in his pouch and produced two silver coins, which he placed in her hands. "Have them wait for me in my room. Send up a nice dinner also." He turned to Heironim. "Now let's have a look at my supplies."

Heironim's suite had a modest sitting room with four chairs around a square table, a divan, and two chests of drawers. A door to the right opened on a bedroom. The only guests who lodged on this floor were those who could not bear close scrutiny. Heironim seated himself at the small table and lifted a chest from the floor onto it. He shoved the chest into the middle, and Malthus pulled it the rest of the way across. "Here's what your mother sent."

Malthus opened the chest and smiled. Six bottles of exotic wines to tempt Claw's palette once the curses were laid upon them. Tucked into the other side of the chest were jars of powers and bottles of liquids in strange colors. His mother, Sidera Tyrins, had sent him a fresh supply of the various toxins Malthus enjoyed working with and three of her newest creations. Sidera currently served as Lord Daemon's toxicologist and bio-chemist, creating deadly surprises for his enemies. Poisons and venoms, both arcane and natural, had been the family business for generations. Malthus had informed everyone in Red Wolff Valley, especially the people of Wolffgard Village, that he was the illegitimate son of the late Lord Estrobian, when actually he was the son of Sidera Tyrins and Lord Feodras who had gone missing after the

destruction of the late King Baaltrystan's mountain stronghold.

A large number of sa'necari nobles had gone missing after the palace collapsed, and only Malthus and his mother knew what happened to them. Sidera had betrayed them into his hands as they fled and he had rited them all, including his father. Each of his victims had carried mortgiefan legacies, increasingly powerful collections of soul fragments and stolen magic, that passed from parent to child when the child rited an aged or dying parent. As a result, his powers now rivaled that of the late Prince Mephistis, the most powerful sa'necari of all time, who had been slain by the Sacred King of Rowanhart.

Malthus took a bottle of wine from the chest, sketched the spell onto the green glass side, and then added two more runes to triple the strength of the curse.

"That's an interesting spell," Heironim said, watching Malthus finish with the first three bottles. "It's a bit too subtle for my taste, but still interesting. Who's the wine for?"

"My father-in-law."

"Ahhh, the chieftain. I can see why you'd want to be subtle."

"I'm going to the heart of the matter." Malthus paused to chuckle at his joke. "His heart."

A knock came at the door as Malthus finished with the final bottle. He closed the lid and looked up as Heironim answered.

"Tell the other master that his rooms are ready and his meals are waiting," said the nibari on the other side of the door.

Heironim nodded, closed the door, and returned to Malthus, looking at the number hanging from the room key. "Best room in the house. How do you rate that?"

Malthus shrugged with a tiny smile that spoke of secrets. "I've known the innkeeper for twenty years. He was having a bit of trouble when I first met him. So I went out and rited his trouble."

Heironim laughed.

Malthus pulled three small sheets of paper from his pocket and passed it across the table to Heironim. "Have your people purchase all these things for me. My cover is that I'm running errands."

"I'll do that."

"For now, come to my rooms and have dinner with me."

"You sure?"

"Of course, why else would I order two blood-bloaters?"

Malthus' rooms were plush, from the carpets to the heavy drapes, from the overstuffed chairs and sofas to the claw-footed, elegantly carved tables.

The two nibari, both female, waited on opposite sofas as Malthus and Heironim walked in. The nibari were in the late and most dangerous stages of blood-bloat, something that could kill them if the pressure and other symptoms were not relieved by being bled. The innkeeper, Dymier, could have bled them using leeches or have sliced their wrists and drained a bit off into bottles, but he generally let at least two or three of them go almost to the point of death because some sa'necari and vampires would pay high prices to drink

from a bloater. The bloaters always released a pleasant rush of tasty endorphins when a master's fangs entered them.

Malthus picked one and sat down beside her, savoring the symptoms of the bloat. Their normally light-skinned faces were ruddy, their bodies bloated, and their skin clammy with sweat. She shivered as Malthus opened her bodice and pushed it back over her shoulders.

"I'm Lona, what position do you wish, master?"

Malthus played with her breasts. A long moan caused him to glance from the corner of his eyes, and he saw that Heironim already had his nibari on the floor in third position. "Position six."

Lona laid down on the sofa, draping one leg over the back, and placing her other foot firmly on the floor. She pulled her skirts up, exposing her slit.

"Very good, Lona. Very good." Malthus opened his pants and mounted her.

She turned her head to the side, offering the best angle for entering her long neck.

Malthus nuzzled her neck and then slid his fangs into her as he began to thrust.

* * * *

Darmyk lay in his bed, staring out the window. He wanted to go back to his tree house, but his mother would not allow it yet. Everyone seemed worried that the vampire would get him again. He always cried when they said it was a vampire that attacked him, because he wanted so desperately to tell

them that it had been Ros. He had a hard time sleeping because he imagined that she would drain him in the night.

He had nightmares that caused him to wet his bed some nights, so his mother now had the servants putting pads beneath his sheets. That humiliated Darmyk and made everything worse. Six times a day they brought him a glass of blood and juice.

Claw's visits became the highlight of every day for him. A troll hunt had been suggested and some of the guards were riding out each day to ask the farmers if any had been sighted. Troll blood and flesh had been suggested as medicine for Darmyk if he did not improve faster. The idea of eating a troll did not appeal to Darmyk at all.

His eyes filled up with tears. "Kenly's dead. Grandpa's dying. I hate them."

"Darmyk, don't say those things." Merissa's dress swished as she entered the room and sat down on the edge of the bed. "We don't know that Kenly's dead and your grandpa isn't dying. He's getting better. Just like you are."

The boy swallowed and said nothing.

"You must stop blaming everything on Malthus. He's a good mon and he cares about you."

Darmyk turned his face away. "He hits me."

"Only because he wants you to be a good cub."

"I am a good cub. Grandpa says so."

"Sweetheart, you're making it very hard on me when you keep telling people that you hate Malthus."

"He's not my father."

"Darmyk, your father doesn't want you!" Merissa spoke before she could stop herself.

The boy burst into tears. Merissa gathered him into her arms and held him while they both wept.

* * * *

Malthus had known Heironim since they were both unblooded boys hungry for their first rites. Like himself, Heironim was a bastard; but unlike himself, 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 Txanton, 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.

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 Txanton, and shot him so full of poisoned arrows that his body bristled like a porcupine. As Lord Txanton lay dying, Malthus had instructed Heironim in one of 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.

Malthus woke Heironim early.

"Is everything taken care of?" Malthus asked him.

Heironim yawned and ran his fingers through his black hair. "It should be."

"I'll take stock when we get to my wagon. Meanwhile get dressed. You're riding with me."

"I am?" Heironim looked startled. "Why?"

"Don't ask questions. Bring your weapons, especially your bow, and meet me in the stables."

Malthus went back to his rooms, retrieved the chest with his mother's gifts, and carried it down to his wagon. The rest of the supplies he had ordered had already been delivered and were waiting for him in the back. He shifted the drugs, powders, and poisons to the wagon seat, took a necklace of small colored globes from a pouch at his waist, and spoke the command that sent those supplies into a green globe. Then he climbed over the seat and returned to the packages in the rear. Malthus added nine more bottles of liquor into the chest, spelling them as he worked.

Heironim appeared, yawning as he headed for his horse, which Malthus had ordered saddled. His bow case rode at his hip. "It's a long bow, Malthus. I can't comfortably use it from horseback."

"You're not going to be shooting from horseback."

"So I am going to be shooting?"

"Shut up."

They journeyed until noon, which placed them at the last bend in the road before reaching the bridge over the Eirlys River onto Clan Red Wolf lands. Malthus reined in, tied his team, and set the break.

Heironim looked about. "I don't see anyone to shoot. Am I going to ambush someone?"

"Yes," Malthus snapped at him. "Me."

"I'm what—"

"More than one person has remarked that I appear to be the only one coming and going safely," Malthus told his companion. "I don't want them becoming suspicious of me."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Simple. You're going to shoot me."

"Malthus..."

"You do have a few that aren't poisoned?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Good. Get them out."

Heironim frowned and took several arrows from his quiver. He pushed the tips into the soil in a line so that they could be drawn fast in succession.

"Read me while you shove it in. I want it left side of my chest, right up against the shoulder blade. I don't want them to wonder why I can heal a lung wound, so don't hit anything important."

Malthus gritted his teeth. Heironim gripped Malthus shoulder to steady him. Malthus groaned and air whooshed around his teeth as the swallowtail arrow went deep into his flesh.

"Are you all right?"

Malthus nodded, sagging against the wagon seat. "Back off and..." Malthus swallowed. "Shoot me in my left leg ... and arm. Put a few into ... the side of the wagon."

* * * *

The wagon creaked over the bridge into Red Wolff lands in the late afternoon. Using the ring, Malthus had reduced his enhanced healing ability to the level of a normal human. Which meant that the pain and weakness from blood loss was the worst he had ever experienced. He drove slumped forward over his hand that clutched the knotted reins against his mid-section, fighting the dizziness that threatened to drag him down into darkness. His ragged breathing emerged in struggling intermittent gasps. The wagon slowed to a halt as it reached the middle. Malthus felt himself starting to black out.

The guardian wolves charged the bridge, led by Odhran who had duty that day.

They smelled blood, saw the way Malthus sat, and ran forward.

Odhran's eyes went to the shafts. "He's been shot."

Malthus heard Odhran's voice close by and rallied. He managed to lift his head a bit, groaned, and clutched his chest. "Help me..."

Odhran climbed onto the wagon, took the reins from Malthus, and released the brake. He whipped up the horses and drove them across the bridge into the yard of the manor. Malthus sagged against Odhran, slipping into a semi-conscious state, barely aware of his surroundings. Odhran broke the shafts off in the middle to make it easier to handle him, and handed Malthus down to two of his companions. Odhran changed into his hybrid form, lifted Malthus into his

arms, and cradled him to his chest. Two ran ahead of him to get the manor door opened. Odhran carried him inside.

Isbeth and Kissie appeared, followed by their mistress. Aisha's hand went to her mouth. She recovered in a flash, and started giving orders, sending a nibari to fetch Sheradyn and another after Merissa.

Odhran and his companions bore Malthus to his bed and laid him atop it after Aisha threw back the covers.

Sheradyn arrived and Read Malthus. "Swallowtails. Hard to get out and ugly. Is there something he can bite on?"

Odhran pulled a leather glove from his belt and handed it to Sheradyn, who rolled it up and put it between Malthus' teeth. The healer opened the wound in his chest a little wider with a tiny blade on a long handle, stuck his fingers in carefully, and worked the barb out.

Gillivray extended a tray and Sheradyn dropped the arrow on it. Finally, the healer poured whiskey on the wound and stitched it closed.

Merissa rushed in. "Malthus!" She swept to his side.

At the sound of her voice, Malthus swallowed, and opened his eyes. He extended his hand to her and she clutched it. A suffering groan escaped him as Sheradyn began digging out the arrow in his thigh.

Once finished, Sheradyn gave him poppy milk to ease his pain. "Let him rest, questions are for later."

* * * *

Pandeena and Caimbeul sat on the sofa together in her apartment. The lawgiver had procured one of the arrows that

had been drawn out of Malthus' body and Pandeena sat turning it over and over in her hands.

"Swallowtail. This is the type of arrow that was pulled from Nikko's body."

The previous lawgiver, a young dog wolf named Nikko Softpaws, had been shot six times by the Butchering Serpent. The arrows had been poisoned with Devil's Silver and other toxins in a unique blend that only the Serpent used. Nikko survived, hidden away in the home of Pandeena's mother, Navaryn. The people of Wolffgard Village believed that Nikko was dead, which was how Pandeena intended to leave it, since she did not want the Serpent coming to finish the kill.

"I wish he remembered what the Serpent looked like," grumbled Caimbeul.

"So do I. But he hasn't remembered anything besides the dog's name, not even his own."

"Moss."

"Yes. He remembered Moss. I think it's because the dog comforts him and isn't a threatening memory."

Caimbeul stroked his rough chin and pulled at it as he thought. "So what do you make of all this, and can you get me a beer?"

Pandeena rolled her eyes at him, rose, and refilled his glass. "I think it's an attempt at misdirecting our suspicions from Malthus. After all, none of the wounds were dangerous. It happened close enough to the bridge for him to get help easily. And..." She gave him the glass. "Most damning of all to my mind, is that the arrows weren't poisoned."

Caimbeul took a long swallow before nodding. "All of the others who have been shot coming and going ... the arrows were poisoned. But everyone in the village seems to be treating Malthus as if he were a hero."

"Which makes it all the worse for our cause. I'm afraid that only the most damning of evidence is going to convince anyone that Malthus is linked to the Butchering Serpent. Have you discovered anything more since we last spoke, you seemed close to something."

Caimbeul drained half his glass. "No. I've been promised a meeting with the person behind this gang I discovered, but so far it hasn't been forthcoming."

"And just who are the members of this gang?"

"I can't tell you that yet, Pandeena. If something should happen to me, it's all in my journals."

"You keep saying that. What if they should simply kill you and take the journals?"

"They'll never find them, but you can. I drew your mark on them in my own blood to key it."

CHAPTER NINE

THE DUKE

Gunda sat at her dresser, brushing her thick yellow hair out, preparing to weave it into a night braid so that it would not get badly tangled sleeping on it. She wore a simple nightgown, modestly buttoned. Unlike most of the servants, Gunda had a suite of two rooms, which she had done over in bright yellows when she became housekeeper ten years ago. Her husband had been the Captain of the City Guard at Varsyava and much liked by everyone, so when he died, rather than see his widow left unprovided for, Hartmut had hired and placed her in charge of the palace servants. She had loyally seen to it that Hartmut and Stefan had never regretted their kindness.

A knock at the outer door, made her lower her brush to the dresser and snatch up her robe to cover her gown. Gunda tied it closed and answered her door. Maurychi, the butler who oversaw the meals and helped to serve at the table, slipped inside.

"I was preparing for bed," Gunda informed him.

"It's about those girls..."

"The latest batch that Brainerd's foisted off on us?" She did not bother to school the annoyance out of her voice.

"The same. I think Iwona's the worst of all. If Lady Adelajda had not provided her with letters of introduction, she would never have been hired."

Gunda made a disparaging noise. "Do you know how I spot Brainerd's doxies?"

Maurychi sat down at Gunda's table as she hung a small kettle of water up on the bar crossing above the flames in her hearth. "Going to finally tell me the secret, Gunda? Women's intuition or something."

"They always land in his bed first. How do you do it?"

"I or someone I know usually recognizes them from a brothel."

"All whores then." Gunda sounded satisfied as if Maurychi had confirmed her own suspicions. "So, is it Iwona you've come to discuss?"

"She's sleeping with Gunther. Iwona is dangerous when it comes to young men."

"Whatever do you mean? I'll grant you, she's prettier than most of Brainerd's gutterscrews, but looks aren't everything. As for Gunther. Pffff! If a gutter heart wants to screw a gutterscrew, it's no skin off my nose."

"Let me tell you about Iwona. Then we'll see if you still feel that way."

Gunda gestured for him to wait a few minutes while she fetched her kettle and made them both cups of tea. Once that was done, Gunda settled in looking ready to argue her case.

"Iwona was sold to the Golden Lantern when she was seven."

"High class brothel," said Gunda, eliciting a lifted eyebrow from Maurychi. She gave a flustered wave of her hands. "My husband wasn't a saint. God bless him. And he liked to tell me about his adventures. Sometimes I wished he wouldn't,

but that's neither here nor there. Oh, get on with it, Maurychi."

"They trained her intensively and at ten they sold her virginity at auction."

Gunda started tapping her lips with her forefinger. "Hmmmnnn. I think I recall my husband saying something about that. But I don't think the girl's name was Iwona. How can you be sure?"

"It's her. Trust me, Gunda. Iwona is Ilsa. She was purchased from the Golden Lantern by Lady Adelajda two years ago, vanished, and now she's here."

"So, we've got a plot of some kind. They buy the girls, train them just enough to pass for servants, and bring them here. Frankly, Maurychi, I don't see the gain here. My girls and I routinely isolate them."

"So do my fellows."

Gunda sipped her tea and thought for a while in silence. "Keep an eye on her, Maurychi. We will too. She's been flirting with the poppet and it worries me."

Maurychi heaved an uncharacteristic sigh. "Lukasz will be of legal age in less than three weeks. He's not a little boy any longer. If he decides to bed her—well, Hartmut and Berran might fault his taste, but I doubt they can persuade him not to."

"We can't let her get her claws into him. I won't have her debauching the poppet, even if I have to toss a bucket of lye in her face!" Gunda's cheeks flushed and she squirmed in her chair for an instant before recovering her composure. "Accidentally, of course."

Maurychi grinned at Gunda's vehemence, knowing how protective she was of Lukasz. "Of course."

Gunda sobered. "With Stefan gone, we must do everything we can to protect him, Maurychi. We can't let them kill him."

* * * *

Maruska walked into the briefing with Zyne. The others had already arrived, including Mondarius and Maruska's husband Ynkendio.

"It's confirmed, Lady Zyne," Ynkendio said, rising to greet her. "Dawnreturning marches north to fight us with a paltry force of five hundred soldiers, and as many camp followers and non-combatant auxiliaries."

Zyne laughed. "Then we'll take him easily."

"If we take him alive, I want him for my larder," said Maruska, brandishing her tail. "I want to hear him scream when my egg goes in and when my larva climbs out."

Zyne's eyes glimmered. "He and I have history. I'll enjoy watching you plant that egg."

Maruska brought out the roll of paper she carried and laid it out on the table with bottles and candles to hold it flat. "The next set of eggs should go in easier than the others." She chuckled. "Easier for me that is."

She pointed at the diagram on the paper and Zyne came over to look at it over Maruska's shoulder. "See, it curves. The hosts will be placed on their backs and lashed tight. Ankles chained at the base of the curved piece, a strap across their waists, another under their armpits and a third around their necks. Arms will be stretched and chained tight above

their heads. This will tighten their chests properly, and hold them immobile so they will not be able to flinch away. My eggs will slide into them easier, with less chance of being damaged. What do you think?"

Zyne examined the diagram thoughtfully. "It looks good. What say we make this next batch a public demonstration? And then allow a handful of survivors to escape with the news of what we have done to their princes? Let the rest of Angrim know the fate of their royal family."

Ynkendio lashed his tail, frowning. "There's still two members of the royal family left."

Zyne straightened and stared at him. "Who?"

"Lukasz Bradwin and Gunther Chudzik. Their great-grandmother was the sister to a Kyser."

"Then should we complete the conquest of Angrim or go after them?"

"Send assassins, Lady Zyne," said Ynkendio. "Otherwise we might get flanked if Angrim manages to pull the remnants of its armies together."

Zyne turned to Mondarius. "What do you think? Have you been able to get a clear divination?"

Mondarius flinched, his hand going of its own accord to the feeding scars on his neck. He heard Zyne chuckle and stiffened.

"Eager for lunch, Mondarius? I am." Zyne licked her fangs at him.

Mondarius shuddered. "I—I haven't been able to get a clear reading. Perhaps a major rite? Or we could move to a more favorable location?"

"Which do you want?"

Mondarius' had been nervous for weeks, ever since the god Kalirion himself had intervened to destroy one of his divinations concerning Dawnreturning. Suddenly, the divinator wanted to get as far as he could from the place where Kalirion had attacked and nearly destroyed him.

"Another location."

"So be it." Zyne turned to Ynkendio. "I'll send out the assassins. Which city falls next?"

Ynkendio rolled up his wife's diagram and scanned the map beneath it. "We go east. We have four, maybe five weeks before winter sets in. I want to winter at Badekrynock."

"Make it so." Zyne flicked a finger at Mondarius. "It's lunch time."

* * * *

Gunther sat on a narrow chair in the armsmaster's quarters, which sat atop the barracks for the palace guard connected to the palace by a high, enclosed span above the southwest gardens. The door had been closed and secured behind him. He had come alone in response to a note from Brainerd that had reached him soon after it became known that Duke Stefan was dead.

The palace and the city had become drenched in depression and mourning muted only by the hollowness of shock. Only Veykko had survived to bring them news. The rest of the glorious army of Beltria had been wiped out to the last man along with that of the Kyser. The Minnorians seemed unstoppable.

Although the defeat overshadowed everything, life went on. Bakers baked, laundresses washed, soldiers practiced; and the boys' lessons continued.

Gunther did not mourn for his father and three brothers, and spent as little time as possible around his mother rather than cope with her alternating bouts of keening and raging. Oddly, the loss of Gerik seemed more real to him and he folded his emotions into a lock box in his core that he shrouded with a stonewall of anger.

Brainerd sat cleaning his blades, running an oiled cloth up and down them. "So the pedou duke perished with a pole up his noble ass. How appropriate."

His broadsword lay on one end, with two long daggers and a pair of stilettos. A small pot of something and a brush sat next to the oil and cloth. He had a dark look on his face as he worked and had let silence fall between them for several minutes.

"With Stefan dead, the little schvartzer buttboy inherits," Gunther grumbled, bringing the subject up again. "Sixteen days to his investiture. His uncle's taint caused the deaths of my father and brothers."

"We must assume that you and Lukasz are all that's left of the Duke's family." Brainerd set the dagger aside that he had been oiling, and picked up another. "Technically, you're Lord Gunther now. Hartmut can't hold off investing you with your father's lands much longer."

"As the schvartzer's guardian, he has too much control."

"He'll be guardian of nothing once his ward is dead and a real man sits the throne."

"A half-breed should not be duke." A bitter edge crept into Gunther's voice.

"I've been saying that to you all along, Gunther. However, far more is at stake here than Beltria."

Gunther lifted an eyebrow at Brainerd. "What do you mean?"

"According to reports, the entire royal family has been extinguished."

"But that means..."

"That you or the buttboy will be king."

A gleam shone in Gunther's eyes as he became dizzy with the possibilities. "King Gunther, savior of the realm. I shall have to cleanse it of the schvartzers, the hell-kissers, and pedous if I want to reclaim Angrim from the Minnorian invaders."

"Precisely. They must all die."

"But what do we do about the mongrel who murdered Gerik?"

Brainerd set his oilcloth down and rubbed his upper lip. "Well, Stefan didn't leave us much to work with. He took all the nobles I had counted on with him."

Gunther looked unhappy and shifted in his chair. "There must be someone."

"There are a few. We can start by trying to gather support from what's left, but it's mostly women and children. We can't afford to see Lukasz crowned. A lot of folks will follow the crown regardless of who wears it."

"But what if that doesn't work?"

"There's always a blade in the back ... or an accident. If the mongrel had not pulled his little stunt you might have broken his neck that day and fixed all of our problems."

Gunther bit his lip and nodded. "That was what I was trying to do."

Brainerd put the dagger aside and opened the pot. He took a stiletto in hand and dipped the brush into the whitish fluid. "Next time do a better job of it."

"What's that?"

Brainerd did not answer immediately, concentrating on painting the substance along the stiletto. "It's from Waejontor. Something special."

Gunther blinked. "But that's the death realm."

A dark chuckle from Brainerd punctuated his reply. "I have connections with certain traders. It's manufactured by Sidera Tyrins and her people."

Gunther felt his sphincters tighten. Even in Beltria rumors of the Tyrins family had filtered down, they were a matriarchal branch of the Romilay clan that had developed Devil's Silver for killing lycans. "It's poison. That's a coward's work."

"I'm only poisoning the stilettos. That schvartzer is unworthy of an honorable death. You must handle the enemies of god and the realm with brutality and cruelty. You cannot be weak. You must be strong. Or they will destroy you." Brainerd slipped the stilettos into his forearm sheathes, placed the daggers at his sides, and settled the sword at his back. "Come, it's time for another special session."

They headed for the armory.

"How strong is that poison?"

Brainerd chuckled. "Curious at last?"

"Yes."

They took the rear stairs and passed the outer hallway that led between the salle and the armory. No candles were lit, but Brainerd carried a lantern. "It's a special blend. Hit an artery and within moments they can't speak above a whisper, can barely find the strength to move. They're dead in twenty minutes to half an hour."

Gunther now had five kills to his credit and with each one it became easier. Each session, Brainerd added another of Gunther's companions, always making the new boy go the first round and make the first kill of the night. By initiating them into the mysteries of the kill one at a time, Brainerd made it an intimate transition into manhood while the others eagerly awaited their turns to join the ranks.

Gunther had begun to seriously contemplate what it would feel like to kill Lukasz. All of his opponents had been black-haired with foreign blood, boys that looked a great deal like Lukasz.

Brainerd paused before opening the door to the secret room and confirmed Gunther's suspicions. "I want you to pretend your opponent is Lukasz."

Gunther nodded an absent agreement.

Brainerd seized his arm to get his full attention. "I'm preparing you to save the realm. You must kill Lukasz. If he lives, then he will not only be duke, he will be king."

Gunther met Brainerd's eyes and parroted the cant he had been fed all of his life. "If a hell-kisser should sit the throne, Beltria is doomed. I will rejoice at his blood on my blades."

"Exactly. You're learning."

By Brainerd's lights, Lukasz was not only Gunther's rival, he was his enemy and the enemy of their realm. Furthermore, Gunther had begun to envisage himself as king. Tonight it would be Zygmunt who blooded his sword for the first time and received his reward. Gunther had found himself competing with Adolf to make the best kill each time and this night it would be his. An unexpected eagerness came on him. A kill meant finding Iwona in his bed.

Then they went inside.

* * * *

Iwona lay naked in Gunther's bed, watching him prepare for another round with her. His stamina was amazing for a youth his age. This would be their third go before she had to flee at dawn.

"I'll have you every single night once I'm duke, Iwona," said Gunther. "And more often than that when I'm king."

"You'll toss me aside for prettier women."

"Once I stick the mongrel it will all be mine. I'll give you lots of pretty things."

Iwona pulled her heels up to her butt so that he had to look at her flesh hole. "Will the schvartzer duke's eyes bulge when you stick him?"

"Their eyes always look big as a toad's when the blade goes in." Gunther climbed on top of her, his cock bobbing against her hole.

"I'd like to be there when you put it into Lukasz."

"It's up to Brainerd." Grunting, he shoved inside her and began thrusting.

"Everything is up to Brainerd." Iwona gave a long sigh before wrapping her legs around Gunther. "If you kill as well as you fuck, he'll be dead fast."

* * * *

Lukasz's people depended upon him being strong and a leader, despite his youth. So he dared not show how deeply he grieved where anyone could see it. He had been trying to prepare himself to deal with his uncle's death since he read about the omens in his uncle's journal, but now that the news had finally reached him and it all became real, his heart had broken. So long as Hartmut had kept his mind and hands busy following the messenger's arrival, Lukasz had been able to hold it in and maintain a stoic façade, but once he was alone in his bed, it all came apart in the silence.

No one would have faulted him for his tears: he had seen all of the servants crying, including Maurychi. Yet, Lukasz found it impossible to release his hold upon himself where anyone could see it. But in the stillness and the dark, he let the tears slide silently and invisibly down his cheeks as he fell asleep.

He dreamed that he walked the paths of the farthest portion of the gardens, heading for his favorite hiding place

among the willows. Inexplicably in the dream, Uncle Stefan was still alive and he just had to find him. When Lukasz reached the two that grew close upon the waters, overhanging the bank and practically leaning against each other, he squeezed through to sit and wait for Stefan, certain that his uncle was coming there, although his uncle had never known about this hiding place.

His feet came to rest on a grassy expanse more green than anything Lukasz had ever seen before. Instead of the stream banks and trees, a broad meadow spread out around him. Lukasz walked along it, gazing in amazement.

The sounds of many hooves turned his head to the right and he saw a herd of unicorns enter, led by a white one that bore a rider and a golden one that ran beside her. The rider drew up a few yards from Lukasz and dismounted.

She was dark-haired and fair skinned, and absolutely the most beautiful woman Lukasz had ever seen. A longsword rode at her shoulder and a double-bladed axe hung from her belt. She was clad all in the purest white.

"Lukasz Bradwin, duke of Beltria and soon to be king of Angrim," she addressed him.

He approached her, wondering how she knew all this. When he got close he felt the aura of holiness surrounding her, and he dropped to one knee. "My lady, who are you?"

"I am Aroana, Lady of Walled Cities, Defender of the Weak, God of Justice and Defensive Warfare."

Lukasz felt as if he were in one of the stories in his favorite book. "Holy One, what can I do for you?"

"Accept me as your liege-god and I will send you help to save your people."

His heart filling with hope where before he had only sorrow, Lukasz said, "I accept you."

"Give me your hand."

Lukasz extended his hand and she clasped it. His palm burned, but he knew from his book that was what would happen. When she released him, he saw the rune burned into his palm. "Hence forth, you are my liege-god and I shall be forever faithful."

"Then by this sign will you conquer."

Out of nowhere, a banner appeared and settled over his arm.

"Thank you."

"There is more, my paladin from Dreslin comes to you. Take him as your general and you will save your people. I will send you aid in many guises. Have faith and be strong."

As swiftly as the dream had come upon him, it vanished, and Lukasz awoke on his knees in the parlor of his suite with a cloth draping his arm. He placed it on the table and hurriedly lit a candle. Then he looked at the banner. It was the golden unicorn on a white field of Aroana. He opened his palm and the Aroanan rune was burned into his flesh.

"It was not a dream," Lukasz murmured in awe. "It was a holy vision. Praise be to Aroana."

* * * *

A company of horsemyn rode into the courtyard with a youth leading and a black-clad woman riding astride next to

him. The banner of Aroana snapped smartly above them and, lower on the same staff, the white horse of Dreslin.

Lukasz, having been notified of their approach by a runner from the gate guards, emerged. He instantly recognized Berran, although he had not seen the youth in over a year, because he looked so much like his father, Reynhard, a sturdy blond with a proud, but not arrogant, manner. Lukasz's uncle had always liked Reynhard, and although Berran was nearly three years older than Lukasz, the two boys got along well together.

As the youth started to dismount, Vernados went to his side and helped him. Berran used his hand to get his leg over which had braces strapped to the calf. Warenhari handed him a cane, and he was finally able to walk towards the door of the palace.

The woman in black walked close beside Berran, her stride long and gliding like a cat's. She was like no one Lukasz had ever seen and had he met her alone he would have run away. The woman looked like someone from one of the pictures in his book. When all was settled, Lukasz promised to run upstairs and thumb through the illustrations.

Lady Magnilda came next, and Lukasz wondered what Berran could have been thinking of to bring so many women with him.

Berran stretched his arms out and Lukasz hugged him.

"Who's this?" Lukasz whispered at Berran while glancing at Talons.

The people in the courtyard stared as much at Talons as they did at the odd banner.

Berran raised his voice as loudly as he could, wanting his statement to carry. "This is Talons Trollbane, my general."

"A general?" Lukasz took in the strange woman. There certainly seemed an air about her that could lend itself to the title. "Where's your army, then?"

"This is all that remains of Dreslin," answered Berran. "The rest is dust, fallen to the enemy. As we would be had Talons not come to our aid."

Talons gave no sign of having been startled by his unexpected declaration, but slapped dust from her leathers in an offhand manner.

Berran turned to her. "I would like you to meet Lukasz, Duke of Beltria."

"You know about my uncle, then."

Berran's shoulders sagged briefly. "Yes. The tale needs to be told in private, Lukasz, and I need to prop my leg up."

Lukasz led them inside and sent a servant running for Hartmut.

Berran Dreslin looked all about as they entered the palace. There were pairs of guards in Beltria's colors making their usual rounds, male servants, and many women and children passing. It took him a minute to put his fingers upon what was missing: except for the guards and the servants, there were no other adult men. He started to remark upon this when a tall blond boy approached with six companions and greeted him with an outstretched hand.

"Hello, Berran. It's good to see you." Gunther Chudzik shook Berran's hand. "We heard about what happened to Dreslin. It's good to see that you made it out okay."

"Well, you have Lady Talons to thank for that." Berran indicated her with a sweep of his hand. "I owe her my life."

Gunther glanced at Talons with an appraising look, then ignored her.

Talons hooked her thumbs into her belt and returned the look with such a dry expression that Adolf snickered.

"We should all go upstairs to the east gallery and discuss it," continued Gunther. "Beltria needs all the news of the war and the outside world that she can get."

"A private conversation with the duke would be best," Talons said, her face unreadable.

Gunther's eyes slewed over and took her in, then continued as if he had not heard her. "We can have a servant bring wine and you can share your tales."

Talons shifted to an arrogant angling of her body, her eyes like ice and her voice chill and to the point. "Your myn are tired, Berran. The ladies are exhausted, and the children collapsing on their feet."

"Then perhaps you should rest," Gunther snapped. "As I was saying—"

Lukasz sucked in a breath and cut his cousin off. "Berran's myn are tired. The ladies must be exhausted."

Gesturing at a passing servant, Lukasz added, "Take the ladies somewhere to rest and freshen up, and show Lord Berran's myn to the barracks common room. Hartmut will be along presently."

"Don't count me among the ladies," Talons said.

Lukasz ran his eyes over her again, taking in her weapons and masculine attire. "I guess I won't."

The young duke headed for his chambers with Berran, Warenhari, Vernados, and Talons in tow. Gunther and his cronies fell into step behind them. Lukasz paused, turned sharply on his heel, and said to Gunther, "Not you."

Gunther responded with a thin smile and a tiny bow. "As you wish, cousin."

Lukasz did not resume walking until he was certain that they were gone. Then he took Berran and his companions to the suite that had been his uncle's. Lukasz had moved into it two days after getting word of Stefan's death. It was the largest suite in palace.

Some of the knobs were still missing from the dressers and bureaus and Lukasz had taken to opening them by inserting his finger into the holes.

When the door closed, Vernados seized Lukasz under the arms, lifted and swung him around. "Duke or not, you're still our little otter."

The grim mood lightened like the sun breaking from behind clouds on an overcast day as Lukasz remembered the delightful summer that Vernados taught him to swim.

"Always, Vernados."

Vernados plunked Lukasz into the chair at the head of the table.

Lukasz noticed the way that Warenhari favored his left side as he reached for a chair. "You're wounded?"

"Healing ... thanks to Talons."

Lukasz glanced at Talons again, his curiosity growing sharper.

Hartmut arrived as their guests were settling into chairs around the low table. He gave Talons the same doubtful glance that everyone else had and then sat down. Talons let it pass since she was accustomed to being an oddity in the outlands.

A servant followed him and placed both wine and whiskey on the table with an assortment of glasses. The mon started to open the wine and pour, but Hartmut waved him out.

"What will everyone have?" Hartmut asked, opening the wine. "I know Lukasz will have wine."

Talons picked up the bottle of whiskey and poured her own.

Hartmut lifted an eyebrow at that before pouring wine for the rest.

"Shouldn't we have Brainerd here also? And Captain Yevhen?" asked Lukasz.

Hartmut regarded Lukasz with gentle concern, as if measuring the boy. "I don't know how you feel about Brainerd, Lukasz, but I have never trusted the man. As for Captain Yevhen, he's an unknown quantity to me. With your uncle dead, we must proceed cautiously."

"But Brainerd..."

"No, you listen to me. Until I have heard what our guests have to say, Brainerd and Yevhen are to be told nothing. Lukasz," Hartmut reached over and gave the boy's arm a reassuring squeeze, "circumstances have changed. You may not only soon to be invested as duke of Beltria, but crowned King of Angrim. That carries not only responsibilities, but dangers."

"Yes, Hartmut."

Silence settled in and stayed until after the first glasses had been emptied and replenished.

"Tell me about it," Lukasz said.

Berran stared into his glass of wine. "Everyone's terrified." He paused, running his finger distractedly over the cut glass pattern on his goblet as if struggling for words to say. "My father's dead. So are all of our friends. Tibalt, Dearg, all of them. If I hadn't broken my leg, I would have been with them."

Lukasz felt stunned; his head light with the impact and his stomach heavy as if everything had been knocked from his head into the pit of his being. "Did you come just to tell me this?" Lukasz's voice had a cracked edge amidst a velvet softness of distress that would not let him raise it above a hushed tone.

"Partly. Just as Hartmut pointed out, Lukasz, you and your cousin are the last surviving princes of the royal house of Angrim, as well as heirs to this duchy."

Hartmut straightened in his seat and his eyes narrowed to a penetrating stare. "You're certain they're all dead?"

Berran still refused to meet his eyes. "The Minnorians execute all of the nobility, down to the tiniest babes. Then they cull the populace and put most of them to death."

Talons leaned forward. "I've seen the cities. They house only the dead."

"They'll come here when they finish with the rest of Angrim," said Hartmut.

"I would assume so," said Talons.

"I've come here to beg for a place at your court," said Berran. "My myn and I will fight at your side."

"I will have you, Berran. We're friends." The earnestness in Lukasz's voice reached out to Berran.

Hartmut sat tapping on his glass as he listened to them. "We have less than a third of our army left. The rest went with Stefan. You're going to need a good general, Lukasz. I think our myn would be cheered to have a Dreslin in command. Everyone here still speaks highly of your father, Berran."

As if Lukasz had touched him, or perhaps the wine, Berran found the strength to continue. "There's more to it than that. I know how my father died. I saw it in a dream and woke screaming in my bed. A demon planted an egg in his chest. It hatched and chewed its way out of him. Merciful gods." A sob escaped from Berran as he broke down for the first time in weeks, as if finally being safe had released his grief and fear to expression. "The forces of hell are arrayed against us."

Vernados caught Talons' eyes with a look of pained understanding, for Berran had not confided the details of his nightmares before to him; and he knew the details of Reynhard Dreslin's death only from what Talons had told him. "Reynhard should not have died that way. Gods damn Ynkendio."

The image made Lukasz nauseous. "I'll do everything I can."

"You may call this blasphemous, but my grandfather says that our god has abandoned us, or perhaps he's dead."

Lukasz shivered, remembering what he had read in his uncle's diaries about the Nine Elder Gods who ruled in the lands beyond Angrim and Beltria. "I'm not certain what to think."

"When Stefan issued the Edict of Tolerance," Hartmut interjected, "I questioned the wisdom of it. But this isn't the world of our ancestors. We're intruders here. Perhaps Angrim and Beltria went awry when we attempted to force the faith of our ancestors on this new world. We have made enemies where we could have made allies."

Berran gave Hartmut a grateful look, took another drink from his glass, and reached for the bottle. Once he had poured himself another glass to steady his nerves, he began to talk again. "We've been having dreams, my grandfather and I. The same dreams again and again, of a lady in white. She carries an axe in her belt and a sword at her shoulder. There's a golden unicorn beside her. The beast rears and she points at him, saying 'by this sign shall Lukasz conquer.' We must have had it a dozen times each."

Lukasz's shivering became violent trembling. "Aroana. One of the Nine who protects Shaurone from the forces of hell. I've dreamed of her also. My mother is Sharani."

"Is? I thought your mother was dead."

"She lives, but the only way to find her is to go to the Hermit of Jasmine Falls."

"The holy madwoman?"

Hartmut turned to Lukasz. "Where did you learn this?"

Lukasz felt as if he was blurting out secrets, but he had opened the door to it with his words and found his own

courage again. "My uncle's journals. He gave them to me before he left and told me to go to the hermit. That Beltria can only be saved by speaking to her ... Oh, and the Oracle of Badonth survives. She has it."

"The oracle!" Hartmut gasped. "Of course, we must go. But first, you must be invested. I refuse to let you out of here until then. We must keep you safe."

Lukasz lowered his head as he considered and then raised it again when he felt ready to speak. "Once I'm invested."

"And recognized as Prince of Angrim, so that we may crown you king when you return. We must do matters in the proper order," said Hartmut.

"I want to go with you. You are my prince, Lukasz." Berran eased himself to the floor beside Lukasz, resting on his good knee. He took Lukasz's hand. "You are my liege-lord, of life and limb, and earthly worship. I pledge my life, my sword, my honor, and my fortune to your service."

Lukasz blinked and stared, uncertain of what to do.

"Accept him, Lukasz," urged Hartmut.

Lukasz did not have a sword on him, so he extended his hand to Berran. "Give me your sword."

Berran drew his blade and handed it to Lukasz hilt first.

Lukasz tapped Berran on both shoulders, and then returned the blade. He leaned in and gave Berran the kiss of acceptance on both of his cheeks. "I accept you into my service, Lord Berran, for as long as our lives shall last. And I name you general of my armies." Then Lukasz turned to Hartmut. "You will issue the declaration?"

"First thing tomorrow."

Talons finally shifted in her seat. Lukasz wondered how anyone could be as still as she was. "You'll need a champion and I'm offering my services for the time being."

"But you're a woman..." Lukasz goggled.

"Hah!" Berran grinned broadly as he eased himself back into a chair. "She fights like a hell cat. I doubt even your armsmaster can best her." Then he proceeded to describe how she had saved him from the vampire.

Hartmut and Lukasz both looked astounded.

"I accept you," Lukasz said, and turned to Berran. "How's your leg?"

"It throbs when I'm on a horse too long, but I can handle it."

"Then you're coming with me."

"Berran doesn't go any place without me," Talons said.

Warenhari and Vernados echoed her statement.

* * * *

Gunther lounged in the great hall on a sofa with Adolf, watching the servants passing by. Although Brainerd had not given him permission to launch his own plots, neither had the armsmaster specifically forbidden it. For all that he and Lukasz were only a few weeks apart in age, Gunther knew that his bookish cousin shied away from the talk of girls and the usual male bragging about the proper use of a friendly weapon. However, there had never been any sign that Lukasz was so corrupted by his tainted blood as to prefer to lie with males, and furthermore, Gunther had caught the shy looks that Lukasz sometimes bestowed on Iwona. All his talk about

Lukasz being a pedou had been lies. The wench ignored them. She could do nothing else, since Brainerd held her on a tight leash. Still, gold spoke with a loud voice.

He spotted Iwona, her arms laden with a basket of folded and fresh washed laundry. Her hips swayed seductively as she walked, her body clothed in a white skirt and low cut blouse that revealed her cleavage, a wide black band cinching her waist from hips to just beneath her breasts.

"Iwona!" He rose and cut across her path.

"I'm not supposed to speak with you, Lord Gunther," Iwona murmured low, turning her head to the side in a demure manner as if she had not been naked in his bed several times. "Brainerd..."

"Yes, yes," Gunther said impatiently, taking several gold coins from his pocket. He waved them at her. "I want a small favor. Nothing that will displease Brainerd."

Iwona's eyes lit greedily on the coins. "What is it you want me to do?"

"Flirt with Lukasz."

"How long?"

"Until I tell you to stop, go as far as you can with him. I've more gold for you so long as I'm pleased with your efforts and successes."

Iwona shifted the basket to her hip to conceal her actions, snatched the coins, and dropped them down her bodice. "As you wish, Lord. Shall I bed him?"

"If you can." Gunther stepped aside and motioned for her to proceed.

After Iwona had gone, Adolf jerked Gunther aside. "Why the hell did you do that?"

Gunther smiled. "Because when the time comes, someone needs to lead Lukasz to his death."

Adolf laughed, and then sobered. "Brainerd won't approve."

"Brainerd doesn't need to know. Vengeance for Gerik." Gunther gave his heirloom blade a stroke for luck.

"Vengeance for Gerik."

CHAPTER TEN

QUESTIONS OF FAIRNESS

Morning came and went and tension lay over the camp. Soldiers grumbled about being held back from attacking the town, and their officers kept a tight hold on them to prevent any of them taking matters into their own hands. Nans would not allow an attack that would result in the kind of unacceptable losses posed by imps armed with an unusually deadly toxin.

Stygean had overheard the discussions and complaints among the myn. He knew that the vampires had gone in to hunt, being the only ones who would not be harmed by the poisons.

Even Nainee, whose owner Haig was hunting, seemed stressed and distracted when she gave the children their lessons that day. Stygean watched her hungrily, thinking it would serve Haig right if he could get his fangs into her and drain her dry, make a corpse of the vampire's favor nibari.

The boy had speculated on what it would feel like to drain one completely. Jingen had told him that it was very exciting the way their hearts fluttered and struggled, the way their skin turned clammy as they went into shock from blood loss, the way their eyes looked dying, and the taste of their terror. Jingen stated that the more docile the nibari were, the more fear they experienced whenever it came time to cull the herds.

On the other hand, Stygean's father had always insisted that when you did a major culling, you put most of them down gently with as little pain as possible because it often put the rest of the herd off their feed and too much prolonged stress gave their blood a bad after taste for weeks.

Stygean wandered the camp once Nainee finished with their classes, feeling vaguely dissatisfied with everything. The seven children in his group traveled in the big wagon, by day. Their nanny, in this case Nainee, covered most of their lessons then. It was different when they were camped. He hated it. He hated taking instructions on anything from a mere nibari. Now that he had his fangs, he wanted to sink them into someone. They were limiting his feedings to members of the common herd. Basically, these were captured nibari, some of whom had once belonged to his father. Now they belonged to Isranon by right of conquest, since he was liege-lord to the vampires and other non-humans.

He watched them at the cooking fires. Farris was there, slender, dark haired and pale skinned. Her time in the Scarlet Tent must have ended last night and now she was being given other chores.

Stygean licked his fangs. She not nearly as pretty as Nainee who was a Black Cliff nibari, but attractive nonetheless. Farris deposited a load of firewood beside the fire. Stygean walked over to her. With everyone preoccupied with the situations involving the town and Nevin's injuries, no one was paying much attention to him, and it seemed the most opportune time to try his luck at getting some extra blood and maybe his cock in a flesh hole for the first time.

He bent and hissed in Farris' ear while she was still stooped over, his hands closing on her buttocks briefly. "Come away, I want to speak with you."

Farris trembled, looking up at him like a deer before a predator. Although Stygean was still a boy, he was sa'necari while she was nibari and submission to the masters was bred into her. She had also once belonged to his father, so she knew what he was. His father had bedded her several times. It was even possible that some of her young had belonged to his father; however, since they had not been born sa'necari they did not count. Farris recognized the collar on him, but it did nothing to change her reaction. She was twenty-five to his twelve, but she could not find it in her to fight him. "Yes, Master Stygean."

Stygean led her by a circuitous route into the forest near the campsite, avoiding the sentries. "Sit," he ordered her. They had forbidden him to feed freely. He was supposed to feed in a restrained fashion under supervision. He would not allow them to continue to humiliate him this way. Now that he had his fangs, he would use them as he pleased.

The nibari sat down, spreading her skirts around her.

Stygean settled next to her and started unbuttoning her blouse. She sucked in a frightened breath and let it out slowly as he reached in and began kneading her breast. The fear of the masters was on her, he could smell it and it made him all the hungrier for her. The old sa'necari proverb proved true: "there is always fear before passion." Liuthan had promised him Farris for his first rite of mortgiefan. The rites were forbidden to him by the renunciate Lord Dawnreturning. He

could imagine holding a ritual blade in his hand; imagine shoving it into her yielding flesh as his penis moved in and out of her in rhythm to the beating of her dying heart. Yet, he could not imagine the way it would feel at the moment of her death, to feel her soul shatter, to taste the pieces of her soul as he sucked them into his body, making him stronger and heightening his magic.

At least this would be much more satisfying than playing with himself in the night. "You will tell no one," he ordered her.

"I promise."

He bent his face to suck her nipple and felt himself harden. His fangs came down as he thought about entering her as a man and ending his virginity. If Anksha and the others did not know about it, then they could not take his pride away in this. He lifted her skirt and slid his hand into her small clothes, feeling between her slit. Terror made her wet, as it did with all nibari. Or so his father had once told him. She knew he could choose to kill her if he wished to and she was totally incapable of resisting him. Resistance had been bred out of her kind.

Stygean pulled his boots off and slithered out of his pants. *Enough of this pretense of passion.* He had no reason to satisfy her, only himself. Her body was a sheath for his sword and nothing more. Stygean pushed at her. "Position three."

Farris removed her clothes and complied by lying back on the ground with her legs drawn up and knees spread. Stygean studied her opening and probed the fleshy folds with his fingers. With her wide open like this, her labia looked a bit

like a rosebud and it intrigued him. He had never gotten more than a limited side view while watching his father in the rites. Stygean probed the opening to her vagina with his finger, feeling the wet walls of it: this was going to be much better than handing himself. He imagined a blade in his hands, shoving it into her while he thrust, harmonizing her death to his orgasm. The images made him feel giddy with power and mastery. His member grew harder still, aching with need.

Obedient and well-trained, Farris remained still while he did this. He climbed on top of her, grasped his cock, and shoved it inside. The warm, wet, clutching hole closed around his cock and he gave a low moan of satisfaction. He had never dreamed it could be this good. She wrapped her legs around his buttocks to help him to go deeper, and as he began to thrust her pelvis rose in rhythm to him. The muscles in her vagina contracted like a fist around him. Stygean sighed with pleasure.

A heavy pressure built up in his cock and just behind it and he knew from the times he had masturbated that he was close to spilling his seed into her. Only then did it occur to him that he had not asked where she was in her seasons. Nibari had a ninety-day cycle, unlike human women with their twenty-eight days. He did not want his deeds to become known by the swelling of her stomach, but then he reminded himself of how intermittently fertile his own kind were. His father had taught him well.

And, yet, what would it feel like to get her pregnant? That would make him a stud. A real stud. Especially if he had more than one pregnant at the same time.

Stygean exploded within her in a great fountaining and rolled onto his side. He would find Farris again tomorrow and the next day also. He would keep finding her, until another caught his eye. He had been told that Farris was a screamer; perhaps he needed to get rougher to produce that. But then he did not want her to scream and give him away. He could always put something in her mouth and then make her scream ... yes that would be delicious.

Stygean levered himself up and bit into the nibari's breast for a drink of the wine. As he drank, he thought about his father ... He would have vengeance for what they were doing to his father ... what they had done to his mother. He knew he could not hurt Anksha directly, but he could make her life unpleasant, make all of their lives unpleasant, and perhaps even achieve more than that.

When he finished, Stygean sent her off and lay thinking about it. Then he dressed, stole back to his tent, and found Jingen waiting up for him.

"Did you do it?" Jingen uncurled and sat up in the middle of his bedroll.

"You mean Farris?" Stygean grinned evilly, dropped his hand to his crotch, and made several tiny humping movements. "It was too easy. She opened her legs and veins so eagerly ... you should have seen it."

Jingen slapped him on the shoulder. "Now that you know how easy it is, you'll soon be doing it as often as I do."

"How often is that?"

Jingen's mouth shaped a sly, smug smile. "Every single night."

* * * *

Isranon lay on his bed in the wagon. He held Nans' hand, hesitating as he always did when divine blood was offered to him, feeling deep inside that he was unworthy of it.

"Feed, Isranon, it's freely given," Nans told him. "We need you. The longer we wait the more of those humans are going to die."

He bit the general's wrist and sucked the richness of her divine blood. A sense of well-being filled him, surging through his body in a heady rush.

Amiri had managed to get all of his divinator wounds closed with the Sanguine Rose, but he had still be weakened. Nans kept saying that she intended to add her own blood to the trolls' blood cocktail called Sanguine Rose to increase its strength, but so far had not done so. Amiri was still working on creating a proper blood tap like ones that the sa'necari and vampires with large herds used. They had not needed one until now and Ymraudes did not use them because they never had more than one or two nibari at a time.

Isranon lifted his mouth from Nans' wrist and closed the wound with a flick of his tongue. Between the troll blood and Nans' divine blood, he regained the strength to push himself from the bed. "If one of the vampires can get through to the trapped humans, have them carry word that I'm coming."

He paused as he glanced at Nevin, torn between love for the mon that had helped raise him and the endangered myn. Isranon could sense through his necromantic awareness that

Nevin's life still lay in jeopardy unless he had the strength to finish the healing.

Amiri touched his arm. "People are dying. More lives are at stake than his."

Isranon chose duty over love, and followed them out.

A host of soldiers, nibari and others followed them to the edge of the camp. Nans ordered them back and stood between them like a wall of steel to see that no one else tried to enter the town.

Isranon walked slowly toward the town, leaning a bit on his staff. He extended his necromantic sense, searching for the living and separated the imps from the humans while excluding the vampires. The closest four houses contained imps and he knew that must have been where they fired their darts from when they struck Nevin down as he went to the mon's aid.

To the imps, they were all food—all except the vampires—and poisoned meat did not bother them a bit so whatever they killed with their darts was perfectly edible to them.

Isranon narrowed his focus. He still remained out of the range of their darts. Lifting his staff high, he cried out the words of power as Josiah had taught him and the sunfire answered.

The Sunfire Lances shattered the roofs of the buildings, popping them open like flimsy straw as it plunged through. Burning debris spiraled through the air. The imps screamed and died. As the debris landed on other rooftops, a gesture from Isranon snuffed the flames before it could spread. Other imps, hearing the houses explode and the cries of the dying,

rushed out and charged him with their blowguns to their lips. Isranon calmly threw a wall of golden light up to protect him, enveloped them in flames, and roasted them to cinders in a flash of orange and gold.

He let his necromantic senses guide him and he walked closer, scanning ahead of him. In that wise, Isranon moved deeper into the town with Amiri at his side.

* * * *

Olin sat on a stool beside his unconscious cousin, his brows knit and the corners of his tight mouth turned down. He glanced at the sound of someone climbing through the back of the wagon and saw Travis.

"How's he doing, Olin?" Travis squatted with part of his weight resting on one knee, his arms draped across the other.

"Not well. He hangs by a strand of hair."

"I'm sorry." Travis averted his eyes, hunching slightly.

"For what?" Olin shifted to face Travis.

"Well ... I ... uhh ... I've been kind of avoiding him since you told me he was..." Travis let his words trail off.

"A manlover?"

"Yeah. I'm real sorry about that. I've had it wrong about him ten ways to Jarienday."

"Why bring this up now?" Olin rubbed his face, tiredness settling over him.

Travis blinked. "Well, look at him."

"You paid your debts at Aubrudrin."

Travis looked away again. He had nearly died saving Nevin from a demon called a susrag. "I piled up a whole lot more since then."

Olin heaved a sigh and prepared to listen as Travis appeared to be determined to make a complete confession of his sins. "And?"

"Well, it's like this. I thought he wanted Daree—I thought that was why he kept ragging on me. But then you told me he was a—"

"Right. It isn't you, so stop worrying about it."

Travis threw his hands up in a fending off gesture as if he expected Olin's next words to be an insult or worse. "Does Daree know?"

"She won't tell you. This is none of your business."

"I just want to make things better for him."

Olin grumbled under his breath, then fixed Travis with a sharp look. "You wouldn't know how to make things better if your life depended on it. You're wasting what little time I may have left with him."

"You love him?"

"You humans are always too quick to see sex in everything. We lycans bond in groups, we love our brothers as intensely as we love our mates. When we have a leader as strong and compassionate as Claw Redhand or Nevin, we bond with them and cherish them. We have twenty words for love. You have two, maybe three. So, yes, I love my cousin, but you would never understand the shadings if I tried to explain it."

Travis shrank in on himself. "I'll ask Daree to explain it."

"She can try. I doubt that you'll understand it. You want to know how Nevin got that scar?"

Seeing an out there, Travis nodded.

"Claw periodically sheltered the Dark Brothers of the Light. Isranon's father, Isranon Soulspeaker, was their leader. Nevin was a young lawgiver, just barely the age that Isranon is now. Isranon was nine, a husky boy and faster than he looked. When the sa'necari came snooping about clan lands, someone would be sent to tell the Brothers to flee. Soulspeaker left Isranon behind many times and Claw hid the boy in his home."

Olin paused to smile. "You should have seen Isranon ... the way he was always following old Claw or Nevin about trying to be helpful. What do you know about the Brothers?"

"They were pacifists. They didn't practice the rites."

Nevin groaned. Olin took the cloth from his forehead, rinsed it in a basin of water, and placed it back.

"He's not going to make it ... is he—"

Olin shook his head and sucked in a breath. "I doubt it."

Nevin suddenly convulsed, his heels digging into the bed, chest heaving.

"Travis! Find Randilyn or Nans. Quickly! We're losing him."

Travis leaped out the back of the wagon and ran off.

* * * *

The sounds of the exploding houses carried across the camp. Stygean emerged from his tent and stared at the shafts of light in the distance that struck the earth. He had never seen anything like it. One more piece of strange magic

was added to the wonders he had witnessed. He walked toward the middle of camp and seeing very few people there, he continued on until he saw the crowds ahead of him and squeezed through them. When he reached the front, he found Randilyn standing beside Nans.

Anksha stepped from in front of Nans and barred her fangs at him. "Be good, oh troublesome sa'necari, or else I'll eat you."

Stygean shivered. "What's going on?"

Randilyn moved back and put her arm around his shoulder. "Dawnreturning is fighting alone."

"Alone?" Stygean's first impression was how they could be so stupid as to allow the renunciate to go in alone. His second was to wonder if all that wild magic were also Dawnreturning's. "Is the magic his?"

"Yes," said Randilyn. "All his."

Stygean backed away, turned, and ran. He plunged through human sections of the camp, detoured between the tents of the lycans as a short cut, and headed for his own tent. At the last minute, he diverged again and soon found himself standing at the entrance to the blood-slaves section.

He hated coming here, hated seeing his own people reduced to cattle by the Beast. However, if Stygean wanted to see his father, he had no choice but to come here. One of the guards spotted him and came to the edge of the section.

"What do you want, Stygean?" asked Daree.

"To see my father..." He almost added the word bitch in a disparaging manner, but caught himself. Lycans knew that on the lips of a non-lycan the word was an insult. Daree would

be as quick as the other lycans to give him a clout in the head for getting ugly with her.

"Are your chores and lessons finished?"

"Yes. We've been excused from them because of the battle. Everyone is standing ready."

"I'll check on that."

Stygean swallowed back an imprecation. "I know. Now can I see him?"

"Go ahead."

"Anksha can't be here, can she?" He glanced around, with a spasm of unease in his stomach.

"She finished her dinner half an hour ago and left."

Dinner. That's all we are to Anksha. As he walked toward his father's tent, he passed a pair of lycans taking four of his people to the latrine. The sa'necari had the empty, vacuous expressions of the mind-torn. Stygean shivered. Anksha had gone at his people with such savagery the night Isranon's people attacked his father's compound that she had enslaved fifty of them before dawn and fully a third had been so psychically torn that they could not recall their own names. Anksha had "put down" the worst cases before they marched as if they were ruined horses, among them had been Stygean's mother, Chinisi Loosestrife.

Stygean's hands tightened into fists. *When we get to this war of theirs, I'll runaway and join their enemies. That's what I'll do. Sa'necari were meant to have cattle, not be cattle.*

He found his father's tent and slipped inside. Liuthan lay on a cot, staring at the canvas ceiling. At least they had not made his father share his tent with the others. Stygean

noticed the fresh wound in his father's neck and felt a hot rush of anger. Liuthan had been Anksha's dinner.

His father had lost weight and his black blood-slave robes hung on his once powerful frame. Liuthan's face had become gaunt, with deep lines around his eyes, mouth, and across his forehead. His fair complexion that once contrasted so handsomely against his black hair had turned splotchy.

Stygean swallowed and crossed the tent, dropping to his knees beside his father's cot. He brushed a sweat drenched curl from his father's face, causing the mon to look at him. "She hurt you."

Liuthan grasped his son's hand and drew it down to his chest. "It hurts worse when she doesn't feed often. The Presence Pain..."

"Dawnreturning is a bastard," Stygean muttered.

Liuthan's brow furrowed. "What have you done now?"

"Me?" Stygean felt taken aback by the question. His father had never been as quick to assume matters were his fault before Anksha had taken the mon. Stygean missed the love, warmth, and supportiveness his parents had always shown him growing up. He had always treasured their freely given approval of his efforts in every aspect of his life. It seemed as if from the day that his father became a slave that had begun to change.

"What have you done? He doesn't punish you unless you've done something."

Stygean jerked his hand from his father's grasp and sat back on his heels. "He punishes me when he thinks I've done something. It isn't the same, father."

Liuthan grimaced. "Find Daree. I need my medicine. Then we'll talk."

"I want to talk about the Withering ... and Dawnreturning."

Liuthan held up a hand to stop further discussion. "First find Daree."

Stygean obeyed.

Daree returned with him, took one look at Liuthan, and reached in her belt pouch, bringing forth a tiny glass and a bottle of Pollendine, a pain reliever so potent and addictive that it was only given to the dying. She poured a measure of the violet liquid, raised Liuthan into a sitting position, and helped him to drink. "She took too much; I can see it in your face."

Liuthan nodded weakly as Daree settled him back to the cot. "She was hungry ... she apologized when she finished with me."

"Apologized? She apologized and that's it?" Stygean bristled.

"Stygean, hush! I'm too tired for this. If we're going to talk, we'll do it calmly or not at all."

Stygean subsided with his brow knit and his lips parted in ire.

Daree frowned and excused herself rather than become involved in a matter that she had no right to.

"I hate him."

Liuthan shook his head wearily at his son. "Don't. He's a good mon. Listen to him. I brought this on myself."

"No, you didn't." Stygean's voice began to climb up the scale. "We were meant to have cattle, not be cattle. We're sa'necari."

"There's more than one way to be sa'necari."

"No, there isn't. Don't talk like this."

Liuthan reached for his son, but Stygean flinched away from him. "Stygean..."

"No! If he wanted to heal you, he would. But Dawnreturning wants you to die. He wants me to have no one left to love me."

"There's no cure for the Withering."

"There's no cure for Devil's Silver either, but he cured that bloody lycan. I hate him." The boy fled.

* * * *

Isranon scanned again, sensing imps, a vampire, and several humans in a large house to his right. He drew his shields in tight around himself and plunged through the front door, spinning about. The sound of imps screaming in terror greeted him. He followed their shrieks into the kitchen and found Corbienne had cornered three of them. Half a dozen drained imps lay strewn amidst broken chairs and she had shoved the three survivors into a corner where she had wedged them in place with a table and doors she had torn from their hinges. Corbienne held another imp struggling in her arms, her fangs sunk deep in its throat sucking loudly. The imp stilled and she threw the emptied body aside. Then she lifted the top door just enough to snatch out another and drained that one also.

"Corbienne!"

Her head jerked up at the sound of Isranon's voice and she stared at him wild-eyed with the imp's throat in her mouth.

Amiri went to Corbienne's side and squatted, stroking her and murmuring softly. Gradually the savagery left Corbienne's eyes and she dropped the dead imp from her teeth.

Corbienne straightened and stood trembling violently. "Oh gods. They were eating a man alive when I arrived here."

Isranon closed his eyes. "And what were you doing?"

"Eating them ... alive."

He nodded. "Wipe your face off and sheath your fangs. Get the humans out of here. Take them to camp. Then return."

Corbienne headed for the basement where the humans were hiding in terror.

"She lost it, Isranon. It's going to happen sometimes. It could happen with any of us. Ymraudes always drain any enemy wounded left after a battle."

Isranon crouched beside the table, peering through at the imps. They gibbered at him. He reached into his sa'necari heritage, to the blackest portion of it that he could access, and sent lances of death magic into the chests of the imps, stilling their hearts. "It's still hard for me to deal with. My father ... if his spirit can see me ... he probably condemns me for what I'm doing."

"You're the one the Gods of Light have accepted, Mage-Paladin of Kalirion. Not your father."

Using his staff to straighten up, Isranon walked on.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DEADLY PRESENTS

As soon as Malthus was awake the first day after his wounding, he had had the servants bring up the chest of wine and several other things, bags and sacks, and finally gave them the list of who was to get what from the things that still remained in the wagon. The rest of that day and several days afterward, the hours passed in a fog created in equal measures by pain and the fire poppy that Sheradyn was giving him for it.

That morning, Malthus sat propped up in bed, with pillows to his back, reading an innocuous book. Sheradyn wanted him to stay off his leg for at least another week, and then use the crutch that rested against the nightstand. The door to his bedroom opened and Claw walked in accompanied by a servant carrying a small table and another with the checkers and board.

A nice gesture from the old wolf, but one probably provoked by something Aisha said.

"I brought you some gifts," Malthus said, pointing to the brown chest.

"And got shot for your trouble," Claw grumbled under his breath. "Set up the checkers and I'll have a look."

Malthus got the game pieces arranged on the board while watching for Claw's reaction.

Claw's expression brightened and some of his usual curmudgeonry dissolved into delight as he pulled bottle after bottle out. "Four bottles of Dragonsbreath!" Claw exclaimed excitedly, patting a bottle of the dwarven whiskey more famous for its potency than its taste. "Six more from Faewin! Five bottles of dark rum from Ildyrsetts. How the hell did you manage this miracle?"

Malthus smiled in a self-deprecating manner. "I wrote my mother. She has an estate along the Creeyan border these days. The Creeyans have access to nearly everything. I had to pick it up in Hell's Widow because the Creeyans won't fly into a lycan valley without advance permission from the chieftain, and I wanted to surprise you."

"Oh ho! You've surprised me. However," Claw's voice turned stern, "you will be more careful next time. I don't want to see my daughter a widow." He gestured to the servants. "Bring two glasses. I must have a taste of this."

They sat and played checkers and drank for several hours. Malthus eagerly observed Claw drinking glass after glass of rum, calling his death closer and closer. The chieftain's capacity for alcohol impressed Malthus, and told him that he had chosen the proper vehicle to end Claw's life. Gradually, Claw began to feel the power of Malthus' curses, the lines of his face becoming ragged with pain. Malthus knew then that it would not be weeks, but only a matter of days before Claw had his next heart attack.

Claw sagged back in his chair, breathing heavily. "Ring for the servants. I need to lie down. Have them put my presents

in a cabinet in the Blue Room and see that no one else samples them."

Malthus nodded and reached for the bell on the nightstand. He had known that giving Claw rarities would mean that he would hoard them from the rest of the household.

* * * *

Using his cane, which had replaced the crutch, Malthus made his way through the halls of the manor early that morning. His wounded leg still ached and twinged when he walked too much on it. He wondered how humans dealt with their wounds, or how they ever managed to survive the smallest of them. Had he dared to access his normal healing rate and fed on blood warm from the veins, Malthus would have been fully healed in less than a day. As it was, it was taking weeks. Perhaps he needed to begin testing humans in his laboratories as well as lycans when the time came.

He found Claw in the Blue Room, sitting up alone. The chieftain kept kneading his left arm and digging the heel of his palm into the center of his chest as if he hurt. Malthus could tell that Claw was in bad shape, and guessed that pain was what had awakened the old bastard at such an early hour. It had to be severe to force Claw from a sound sleep. The room smelled of Claw's favorite tobacco, so Malthus knew that more of the spells were lodged in the old wolf's body.

A bottle of the cursed rum sat at Claw's right and a half-filled glass sat in front of him.

"It's a bit early to be drinking. Sun's barely over the horizon."

Claw paused in his rubbing and kneading to glare at Malthus. "I'll drink when I want to."

"If you aren't feeling well, wouldn't that medicine Sheradyn mixed for you be better?" Malthus' voice filled with concern.

"You're sounding as bad as Aisha and Merissa. You didn't let them fuss over *you*. Fetch yourself a glass and have a drink with me."

Malthus pulled at his mustache. "I don't—oh, all right." Malthus took a glass from a cabinet and sat across from Claw, who immediately filled it to the brim with rum.

"They're always getting on me to give something else up." Claw growled loudly.

"Don't wake the household. One of those silly servants will immediately get Aisha up if they think there's anything wrong with you. Then Merissa will arrive and they'll try to put both of us back to bed."

"Too true. Just let the damned bitches sleep," Claw growled, his palm started again on his chest.

Malthus sipped at his glass, staring into the contents, and finding it hard to conceal his pleasure at the taste of death in Claw's aura.

Claw refilled his glass. "They're trying to treat me like an invalid. That gets on my nerves."

"Understandable. In your place, I would resent it too."

Claw drank two glasses in the time it took Malthus to finish one.

Malthus sipped thoughtfully, watching the lines of suffering deepen in Claw's face. The wolf was close to another heart

attack. Malthus' necromantic senses became aware of the increasing agony in Claw's auric field, the way the heart attack neared moment by moment. Anticipation filled Malthus with ecstasy. *Any minute now ... any minute. Yes!*

Claw went pale, sweat broke out on his grizzled face as he bent suddenly across the arm of his chair, his breathing hard. "Gods, it's a bad one."

The chair tipped over and hit the heavy carpets with a dull thud, spilling Claw into a twisted heap where he lay unmoving.

Malthus left his chair too quickly and his injured leg gave, dumping him onto the floor beside Claw. He crawled closer, glanced around to see if anyone had heard them. Malthus turned Claw's face and saw that the chieftain was unconscious. That thrilled Malthus. Killing the old bastard properly would take more time than Malthus could risk, and doing it wrong could leave traces that Readers might question. He bent close and inhaled the fragrance of Claw's agony before slipping his hand inside Claw's robe. His smooth hand slid across Claw's hairy chest and came to rest over the chieftain's heart.

At least, he could hurry the process and with luck Claw would be dead by evening. Malthus sent three precision strikes into Claw's heart, damaging fresh sectors of the heart muscle and constricting the blood flow from his arteries. He wanted to do more, but his sense of caution overrode his desires. He reminded himself that Claw was already dying; it was just a matter of pushing him over the edge; Malthus could afford to be patient.

Malthus used his cane and the edge of the table to get to his feet. *Damnit*. His insides were parched and he was totally unhappy being lame. He still had some bottles of blood in his carrying globes and Malthus intended to heal himself while everyone was too busy worrying about Claw to notice his own improvement.

He limped from the room and up the stairs, turning right along the corridor and pounded on Sheradyn's door. "Claw's having an attack in the Blue Room. Quickly. Come quickly."

Gillivray opened the door, blinking and nodding sleepily. "We're coming."

Sheradyn threw a robe on and grabbed his satchel. When they reached the Blue Room, the healer Read him and immediately administered a bluish powder to Claw's nostrils and gums, rubbing it in.

Malthus roused the servants to carry Claw to his bedroom. By then the entire household was moving. Merissa grabbed at Malthus and he slowed down, wrapping his arms around her. "What happened?" she asked, her eyes wide and wet.

"We were sitting here talking and he collapsed."

When they had gotten Claw to bed and left a servant to sit with him, Sheradyn called Aisha, Merissa, and Malthus into Malthus' study. "Two attacks this close together ... well, my news isn't good. Claw is old. His heart is worn out and it's failing him. There is a strong possibility that the next one will kill him." Sheradyn lowered his head, searching for words. "And I expect that it could come in the next three ... maybe four weeks."

Merissa sobbed against Malthus' shoulder while he held her long after the others had left.

Malthus patted and stroked, making comforting noises, yet all the while feeling exhilarated by the taste of Claw's pain.

* * * *

Claw looked up from the bed table when Pandeena entered. He shoved the sheaves of paper at her. "Make three copies. I want yours, mine, and Caimbeul's signatures on them."

"What is it?" Pandeena moved a chair close to the bed and sat down.

"My last will and testament."

"They told me you were ill, but not what."

"My heart. I've had two heart attacks in less than two months. Sheradyn says the next one will kill me." Claw looked down at his hands, clearly uncomfortable talking about it. "He also doesn't think it's far off."

Pandeena lowered her eyes and then reached out a comforting hand to squeeze Claw's forearm. "I'm sorry. Can I Read you?"

"You won't find anything that Sheradyn hasn't."

"But I would like to anyway."

Claw nodded and extended his wrist.

Pandeena Read Claw. She saw the extensive weakness of his heart, the narrowed arteries, and damage around his lungs also. Yet there was an odd residue of something. She could not quite call it arcane, and yet it was clearly not chemical. "Sheradyn is right. I doubt you'll see Solstice."

"I thought as much." Claw grasped her hand as if he were fighting for words. "I have a brother."

Pandeena's head came up and she regarded Claw in surprise. "This is the first I've heard."

"We don't speak of him much. Brock left under a cloud a century ago. And it wasn't his fault. He's only been back twice. The last time was when Merissa was twelve." Claw paused, thinking. "Odd thing was. He looked young enough to be his own grandson."

"Any long lived in your family?"

"None."

Pandeena pursed her lips and nodded. "Yet you are sure it was Brock?"

"Yes. Now, take care of those papers," Claw told her. "Don't let anyone know you have them."

"I promise."

"I want Brock as regent. He's in Creeya. Go to the Grand Master when I die. Find my brother."

"I'll find him."

When Pandeena left the manor, she carried the papers in her pouch. Walking quickly into a dense stand of trees in the nearby forest, she Jumped from Wolffgard to her mother's home. She found the long living room nearly empty for once. Little Moss ran yapping around her feet and she scooped the dog into her arms, scratching behind his ears.

A cheery fire burned in the hearth, throwing its warmth through the room to chase away the late autumn chill. Her mother, Navaryn, looked up from her conversation with Teakamon.

Navaryn crossed the room and hugged her daughter. "What is it, dear? You look like you have something on your mind."

"I do." She explained about Claw and Brock. "I've never been to Creeya, so I can't get a psychic fix on it to Jump there."

Teakamon flicked back his heavy green hair that hung to his waist. "Dynanna and Dynarien have been there, but they've been elusive lately."

"Dynarien I can understand. He's caught up in this triadic marriage of his to Edouina Hornbow and Talons Trollbane. But Dynanna dragged you all out here to fight the dark ones and protect a child ... a child I might add who is threatened by the Serpent. Then she just disappears to play a lone hand as usual." Pandeena did not attempt to conceal her irritation.

"I could ask my step-mother to help," suggested Teakamon.

Pandeena shook her head at that. "I would never feel comfortable calling upon the Queen of Imralon. Will you ask the others when they show up? It may take time finding Brock and I want to start as soon as possible."

"Certainly, Pandeena," said Teakamon. "They come through all the time."

CHAPTER TWELVE

DEAD HEARTS

"What are we looking for?" Warenhari asked, matching his stride to that of Talons as they crossed the market square.

Colorful awnings flapped in the morning breeze. The chatter of customers mingled with the shouts of sellers calling attention to their goods. At the edges of the square houses perched atop the shops which were built wall to wall with narrow alleys scattered through the lanes.

Talons ran her fingers around her neck and drew forth a silver chain with a squiggly rune, a book, and a blade, all done in silver, dangling from it. She let the chain slither through her fingers, and indicated the blazon on Warenhari's tabard, which had a sable bar sinister across it, a unicorn rampant on a white field upper and lower the legendary badger of Dreslin gold on vert.

"We're looking for pagans."

"You won't find many here. Stefan tried to find them after he declared his Edict of Tolerance allowing them freedom of worship, and none were found."

Talons turned her cold eyes on Warenhari and he suppressed a shiver. He wished he could read her, but the woman was as indecipherable as an abyss at midnight.

"I know they're here."

"You can't know Beltria like I do."

She chuckled dryly and once more Warenhari had to restrain an urge to shiver. He owed her a debt for saving Berran, but she spooked him. "I know its underbelly well."

"You've been here before?"

"Actually, the pagans will find us. I just declared myself and they will come to us."

"That pendant?"

"And the fact that we're attracting every eye in the place. Hmmm. I smell meat pies. Let's grab a bite while we're waiting for them."

They found the stall manned by a stout mon in a stained dress and apron. Behind her stood a small brick oven on a stand and the aroma of baking pies rose from it to delight their noses. The mon lifted an eyebrow at Talons, and whispered in her ear as she placed the pie in Talons' hands.

Warenhari walked away with Talons and took a bite of his pie. "What was that all about?"

"Do you know a tavern called the *Ass in a Bucket*?"

"Yes. It's on Wheelwright Street."

"Take me there. Follow my lead when we get there."

The tavern was dingy and ill lit, full of dark wood and smoke stain. All eyes followed them as they took a table. Talons put her back to the wall.

The tavern master came himself and said, "Come with me, I have a better, private room for drinking."

Talons shrugged at Warenhari's questioning look and followed the tavern master to the back, along a narrow corridor and up a flight of stairs to the second floor. The tavern master ushered them into a large room where they

found themselves confronted by eight armed myn. Alarmed, Warenhari reached for his sword, but Talons touched him lightly and he left it sheathed.

"Are you true?" asked the tavern master.

For answer, Talons set aside her bandoleers, unlaced her jerkin, and unfastened her shirt, revealing her breasts.

Warenhari stared. At first, he had thought she was offering her body to let them escape, but now his eyes fell upon the tendriled rune, the book, and the blade burned over her left breast.

"Touch it and know if I'm true," she said.

The tavern master pressed his trembling fingers to the godmark and sucked in a sharp breath. "Paladin, what is your name?"

"I'm called Talons Trollbane."

Warenhari gaped as the armed myn all went to one knee before her.

The tavern master sounded a trifle flustered as he managed to say, "Princess, you honor us with your presence."

"Princess?" Warenhari turned to Talons looking as if he could have been knocked dead with a daisy.

"Of Creeya."

* * * *

Iwona brought lunch up to Lukasz, who was reading his book again and had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. Ermengard, the cook, refused to allow him to skip meals, even though he was getting more obedience from the staff than before. They were already referring to him as the

duke, even though he would not be formally invested for a just over a week. Totally immersed in his reading, he ignored Iwona as she set out his meal and his drink, moving it all from a large tray onto his table.

Ostensibly, it was a book of tales, but more and more the young duke suspected the book was something far different. He ran his hand over the embossed lettering, its gold leaf silken smooth to his sensitive fingers: *A Book of Tales: Past and Future*.

Lukasz's attention drifted for as Iwona's cologne slithered up his nostrils pleasantly. He watched her from the corner of his eyes, realizing that they were alone together in his rooms for the first time. He hoped that she would show him her tits again.

His pulse sped up and Lukasz tried to force his attention back to his book. He wanted to mess around with her, but feared one another failure with his manhood. Lukasz wished there were someone he dared discuss it with, but until he came of age in ten days, it would endanger Iwona.

He had debated whether to go straight to the stories about Creeya, or those about Shaurone first. Although he had not yet found a way to say this without being rude, Talons intrigued him for another reason. They were both the same skin and hair color. He remembered Berran relating that Talons had told him her grandmother was Sharani and now he wondered if it that meant his own mother was also. He had recently claimed that she was, but it had been an impulsive statement of wish fulfillment.

The Sharani were amazons, ferocious fighters, and they had thrown back every attempted incursion by Angrim and Beltria over the centuries. Their cavalry, both light and heavy, were without peer and their paladins rode upon wondrous steeds faster and stronger than ordinary horses. He opened his hand and stared at the rune burned into his palm, wondering if that meant he would get a wynderjyn or a unicorn like they did. After all, didn't a godmark make him a paladin too?

Iwona's breasts brushed against his shoulder as she put his plate in front of him. "You'll have to move your book," she said.

Lukasz closed his book, and found himself looking down her blouse. He set the book on the far side of the table while not taking his eyes off her breasts.

"Please stop ignoring me." Iwona poured his wine. "Why don't you ever come looking for me anymore?"

"I've knocked on your door, but there's been no answer."

"I sleep heavily when I'm very tired. Perhaps you should leave your door unlocked and I could come to you when no one is looking?"

He swallowed as his cock reacted. There was no place to flee to rather than make a decision. If he refused would she think he was a pedou? Did he want to refuse? What did he want? For several moments, Lukasz could not decide exactly what to do.

Iwona rubbed her hip against his side as she placed a small cutting board, a slicing knife, and a plate with rolls.

"Well, my lord duke, are my breasts no longer worthy of you?"

Unworthy? "I like looking at your breasts. They're pretty."

She pulled her blouse over her head and stood there nude to the waist. "I'm in love with you, Lukasz. That's why I want you to touch me all over."

She always spoke of love when they were together. Lukasz reached out and caressed her breasts, tentative at first and then with more certainty. "I love you, Iwona."

Lukasz trusted the servants in ways that he did not trust the members of his own class, and by extension he trusted Iwona. He reached out and caressed her breasts. The young duke wanted to be loved more than anything and he wanted to be in love with someone.

A warm feeling rose up from the core of him that went beyond the tightening in his loins as he played with her breasts. "You're so soft."

"All of me is soft." Iwona pulled the tie loose from her skirt, pushed it over her hips, and let him see her thatch. "Would you make love to me? Even though I'm not worthy of your love, your true love?"

Lukasz felt as if he had to reassure her that he would not reject her, even as his eyes fastened on her pale-haired loins. "Don't say that you're unworthy. You're beautiful, Iwona."

"Thank you." She lowered her eyes as if she were the most demure of ladies even though she stood there nude before him. "Have you become a man yet, my love?"

"I—I—not like that." His thoughts whirled. Lukasz knew how it was done. He had seen the animals do it, the cats,

dogs, and horses. When his curiosity first became hot, Lukasz had gone to the kennels with his uncle when Stefan's best bitch was being bred to a fine dog.

Iwona smiled sensuously. "Surely, my love, you should be initiated into these earthly rites before you are invested."

Lukasz sucked in deep breath after deep breath. His cock filled with an agony of need, pulling and aching for relief. His eyes ran once more from her breasts to the thick yellow thatch between her legs. He knew then that he was lost: Lukasz wanted Iwona so bad, that he could barely think. He groped for the right words when a simple yes would have done, and ended up repeating Iwona's earlier phrase. "I want to make love to you."

"Do you have a large, soft bed?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps in your big, soft bed you'll finally give me what I've been begging you for all these months."

"Yes." Lukasz allowed Iwona to lead him into his bedchamber.

Iwona undressed him with skilled hands.

Lukasz felt vaguely embarrassed, standing there nude, with his member jutting in front of him. On none of the previous occasions had Iwona managed to completely disrobe him. Iwona caressed him from throat to cock, lingering on his rod, licking it. Lukasz moaned under her touch.

"I've loved you for a long time, Lukasz. You're not like the others. You're kind and gentle." She stretched out on his huge, canopied bed, and gestured for him to press himself

atop her. "Feel how wet I am, how eager. Stick your finger inside me."

Lukasz probed her vagina and it was very wet.

"See," she said. "I'm ready for you. Lukasz, you'll slip inside so fine."

Tired of coaxing, Iwona pulled him down on top of her.

He sucked in a nervous breath as his cock bobbed against her clit. Lukasz wanted it. He wanted it desperately. And yet, he felt afraid.

"Put your fingers inside. I don't have teeth down there."

Lukasz stuck his fingers inside her again, feeling around. Her vagina was warm and wet and called to him. He grasped his cock and got the knob inside. Excitement built into a roaring fire of eagerness.

"All the way, my love. All the way and thrust fiercely."

Breathing hard, Lukasz eased all the way inside her. She tightened her muscles, contracting her vagina around his cock making it suck him, and the intensity of sensation nearly overwhelmed Lukasz. His uncertainty melted away, and he began to thrust rhythmically into Iwona. All thoughts, all doubts, even clarity and intellect, were banished when he erupted inside her.

Long afterward, as they lay together in his bed, Lukasz felt a warm contentment. All seemed finally right with his world. Soon he would be invested as duke, eventually crowned as king, and best of all, he was in love with Iwona.

* * * *

Talons' and Warenhari's errand had stretched into the evening. They returned with a solemn man named Eurus, whose white beard hung to the middle of his chest. He was a Willodarian physician with a strong Reader's gift. Eurus elicited stares from the servants, the guards, and many of the passing nobles. Captain Yevhen started to pass them in the great hall as they were walking to the stairs, did a double take, and fell into step behind them.

"Why did you bring Eurus here?" Yevhen demanded.

Talons glanced from the side of her eyes. "Why shouldn't I?"

"It isn't safe." Yevhen said and quickened his pace to come up beside her. His eyes focused on her runes and widened. "Guildsman."

"I don't see why you're surprised."

Warenhari, who was still sorting everything out that he had learned earlier, glanced at Yevhen. "What's that?"

The captain grabbed Warenhari and pulled him aside to whisper into his ear. "She's an assassin."

"She's a what?"

"Shut up." Yevhen grabbed him again and they trotted to overtake Talons and Eurus. They caught up to them at the stairs. "Where are we going?"

"Berran's chambers," Warenhari replied. "He's usually resting his leg at this time of day."

They knocked on the door to Berran's suite.

"Who is it?"

They could tell from the edge in Berran's voice that he was hurting, which was why they had brought Eurus.

"Warenhari."

"Come in."

They found Berran laying in bed with his bad leg propped. His color looked off, which suggested that he was hurting more than usual. Warenhari suspected that Berran was spending more time on it than was wise since coming to Varsyava.

Vernados sat in a chair near the bed, sharpening his dagger.

Berran raised an eyebrow when he saw all the company that his cousin had brought him, and tried to push himself up in bed. A loud groan escaped him and he fell back onto the bed with a wan smile.

"I think I overdid it."

Warenhari gave him a displeased look. "I think you did too. Sometimes I think I should tie you down."

"You can't do that to a general."

"He can if I help him," interjected Vernados.

Talons chuckled.

Warenhari left the room, dropped the bar into the corridor, and stalked back to the bedroom. "Now, I want to make a few things known before we go any farther. Just what the hell did you mean by telling me that Talons is an assassin, Yevhen?"

Berran tensed. "Were you sent here to kill someone?"

Talons crossed her arms. "I was sent here to help someone."

"Furthermore, she's a princess of Creeya," continued Warenhari.

"Talons Trollbane, of course, of course." Yevhen smacked himself in the forehead. "You're Grand Master Takhalme Gee's granddaughter."

Talons favored Yevhen with a thin smile. "Which god do you serve?"

"I?" Yevhen faltered.

"You know too much for a Crisoran. Speak up." Talons put her hand in front of his face and summoned her silver runed tiger claws. A gasp ran around the chamber.

Yevhen squared his shoulders. "If there was any doubt about your identity, princess, you have banished them now." He reached inside his tunic and brought forth a golden chain from which hung a single sword.

Talons dismissed her claws. "Badonthian."

Yevhen nodded. "I helped Stefan hide the oracle."

"The oracle still exists?" Berran sounded dumbfounded.

Yevhen nodded again. "When it prophesied his death, I helped him choose who to take with him and who to leave behind. We feared that the nobility would turn on Lukasz because of his mixed blood. So we sent all the adult males of the nobility with him, holding back only a handful of youngest sons."

"You've given me so many revelations to consider," said Berran. He turned to Eurus. "Who are you?"

"A healer, my lord. With a few odd talents, previously forbidden by law."

"What kind?"

"I'm a Reader with a very minor gift for Mending. May I examine your leg?"

Hope flashed into Berran's eyes for the first time in months. "Can you help me?"

"I can try. First I need to examine you."

Berran pointed at his bad leg.

Eurus pushed Berran's pants leg up and ran his hand over the calf, then he gripped it firmly and Berran felt a tingle run through his body. The pain disappeared, leaving him dizzy with relief.

Eurus frowned deeply. "I can do some to make it easier for you to walk. But only a lifemage can completely heal it. There aren't any left alive."

"There's six left," Talons corrected Eurus. "Five journeymyn and one master. And two children that are showing signs of the gifts."

"Praise be to the Nine," exclaimed Eurus.

Talons turned to Berran. "When I'm certain it's safe, I'll fetch one. A general should not be crippled at sixteen."

Berran looked at Talons with gratitude in his eyes. "You have made my suffering bearable. Thank you."

* * * *

It started out like any other night, first the meeting in the Kill Room. But there were no victims waiting this time, no enemies of the realm to be slain. Instead, Brainerd led them out by a secret door and to the stables where saddled horses waited. He took Gunther and his friends beyond the walls of Varsyava at midnight to a glade concealed from all eyes. Six of Brainerd's soldiers waited there watching over seven scruffy street boys tied to slender trees.

Gunther's eyes widened. "What is this about?"

His companions whispered amongst themselves uneasily. Only Adolf seemed completely at ease.

"For this to go forward with the mongrel duke, you must not hesitate at the sticking point." Brainerd regarded them with his arms crossed and a commanding look.

"We've all killed several times now, Brainerd," said Gunther.

"The hot blood killings you have done before don't count. It takes strength of character to open your enemy up in cold blood. This is a test of your brutality toward the scourges of the realm. Cruelty in its most exquisite form against those who would corrupt our people and drag us down into the darkness as is happening in Angrim with the Minnorian scourge."

Adolf immediately went up to one of the boys and jerked his stained tunic open, running his eyes eagerly over him while thumbing the hilt of his dagger. "So we're each going to kill one?"

"Tonight is different," Brainerd said. "That's why I brought you out here instead of doing it in the Killing Room."

"Where did they come from?" asked Mikolai.

"They're pagans. Willodarians. My myn and I broke up one of their unholy rites. We killed the rest of them."

Gunther waited to see if Brainerd intended to arm the boys and release them to fight as had been done previously. "How is it different tonight?"

Brainerd chuckled and it sent a shiver up Gunther. "We begin the final stage of your special training. You have been

killing in hot blood. Tonight you will kill in cold blood. This is a supreme test of nerve."

Gunther's stomach tightened. "Why can't someone else kill the schvartzer?"

"Because, with Lukasz dead, no one would dare execute the last of the ruling families. The absence of power in the realm would destabilize it. Also, you wish to appear to our people as their savior from evil influences. You'll all be heroes."

"Can I start?" Adolf asked.

Gunther turned and watched Adolf pricking his victim impatiently. He dared not appear less eager to dispatch their enemies than Adolf. It was important to maintain his position as leader, and if this was what it took, then so be it.

"Yes," said Brainerd. "All of you choose your hell-kissers."

The boys made their choices, tearing their clothing open as Adolf had done.

"Strike now for the glory of your god, and strike later to save the realm from your unholy duke."

A scream rent the night and Gunther saw that Adolf had beat him to the first strike. Angrily, Gunther began to plunge his blade into his victim with insane abandon, continuing even after the boy had sagged in his bonds.

Brainerd caught Gunther's hand. "Very well done, but I fear he's been dead for a while. You killed him three or four strikes ago. Next time, do it without anger. We will keep repeating this exercise until each of you get it right. I want it cold and clean."

* * * *

Lukasz goggled at Talons. "You're a princess?"

She tousled Lukasz's hair. "Don't get any ideas, I'm married."

A genuine smile lit Talons' face, and for the first time Berran could see why someone would have married her. He sat with his bad leg propped, and a tankard of ale in his hands.

"An adventuring princess like in my favorite book," said Lukasz, with a grin, twisting his head to escape her long fingers. His thoughts stole to Iwona, and the fact that he had lost his virginity only a few hours before they returned. The glow and warmth in his being filled him to overflowing. Lukasz wanted desperately to discuss what had happened to him, but he restrained his urges. Iwona had promised to return to his bed later when no one would catch her there. She had insisted that their love had to remain a secret until after he came of age because otherwise Hartmut would send her away and they would never see each other again. So Lukasz had agreed.

"Hardly," Talons said. "My grandfather was the grandmaster of the assassins' guild of Hadjys the Dark Judge."

"So you're an assassin," Berran said, sounding intrigued. "No wonder you were able to rescue me."

"We're not evil," said Talons, reclining in her chair. "The Hadjysheen sect serves justice and vengeance for those who would not otherwise get it."

Berran smiled at her. None of them had ever seen Talons so forthcoming about her history, but they all suspected that she still withheld her secrets. "I begin to realize how little I actually know about the lands beyond our borders."

Talons took another drink from her tankard. "I haven't liked what I have been seeing on your training ground, Lukasz."

"Why not?" The young duke leaned forward on the table.

"Because I think that Brainerd is training you wrong."

"What do you mean?" asked Lukasz.

Now Talons had everyone's attention. Berran shifted in his seat to eye her more closely. "Because he's teaching you one way and the others another. I don't think he wants you able to fully to defend yourself."

"But—but why not?"

"There are many ways to kill, Lukasz. And one of them is to leave the potential victim unprepared. Is there a reason that Brainerd might want you to die?"

Lukasz felt as if his blood had chilled. "Brainerd praises Gunther when he bests me, but he condemns me when I best Gunther."

Talons' expression turned chill. "I think he wants you to die, Lukasz."

"But he's my armsmaster."

"If he was your own mother, it would not mean anything. You need a different instructor."

"But who?"

"Me."

Berran leaned across the table. "But you still haven't completely explained why you're here. I'm beginning to suspect that it wasn't an accident that you stumbled on my company."

"I came because my god sent me here to wait for someone."

"To kill him?"

Talons laughed at him. "No. To help him. Lord Dawnreturning, the greatest mage-paladin of Kalirion ever to exist, is coming to the aid of Beltria. I have a debt to pay. I owe him my life."

"Why would he come here? I mean, Beltria's always been..."

"Hostile to pagans?" Talons reached out, and pulled open Berran and Lukasz's right hands, revealing the Aroanan rune. "I think that's why. Kalirion is a god of prophecy as well as healing and the sun. I think he must have foreseen this."

* * * *

Clovis fought to still his stomach and not spew all over himself as he listened to his brothers' screaming. Sergei had returned from his errands, bringing two of his kind with him so that they could finish setting the compulsions and coercions in the newest meat-pies in Maruska's larder more swiftly. Apparently, there was a second war in progress and Sergei had much less time for Maruska's requirements than before.

He could choose not to look, but he could not close out the slurping noises and his brothers' cries. Once the vampires had

finished with all of them, Clovis and those who had already been in the larder for months were set free again. Clovis crawled across the tent to seventeen-year-old Tancred, his younger brother. He cradled the sobbing, terrified youth in his arms and murmured faint, hopeless words of comfort, knowing that there was really no comfort to offer that would assuage the anguish of the vampiric mind rapes that prevented them from escaping or killing themselves.

Again, Clovis found himself visited by images of his youngest brother, Tibalt, dying.

Tancred raised his face to Clovis. "How long ... the final agony ... how long does it last?"

Clovis wanted to lie to him and tell Tancred that the pain would be brief, but he could not do that. Tancred was clearly trying to become resolved to his fate, and Clovis would honor that with truth. "I wasn't there for the first of it. But I'm told that Dearn lasted only four weeks. Tibalt and Reynhard lasted six weeks."

"Oh, god."

Clovis held his brother until Tancred was finally able to master himself enough to move to his bedroll and fall asleep. He lay down himself, and in his despair murmured into the darkness. "White Lady, I disparaged Reynhard's belief in you. Forgive me. Lend me the strength and courage that you gave to Reynhard. Let me die as well as he did."

He slipped into exhausted slumber and found himself standing on a meadow filled with unicorns and a white clad woman with a longsword at her shoulder and a double-bladed axe hanging from her belt.

"White Lady," he gasped, dropping to one knee before her.

* * * *

Gunther lay among the fallen leaves killed by the early frost of the previous night. He stared up at the blue sky. He wanted to be in Iwona's arms, but she avoided him except for the nights on which he made a fresh kill. On those nights, Iwona would cherish him and praise him. Gunther suspected that Iwona had some kind of pact with Brainerd, as did the young women who served as rewards to his six friends. No one broke a pact with Brainerd and got away with it. The mon knew too much, too many secrets, too many ways to scrape the nerves and sear the soul for anyone to cross him. There was no way to know which of the city and palace guards belonged to Brainerd besides the six who came to the Kill Room. Gunther suspected that it might be a small army.

No one breaks a pact with Brainerd. He's making real men of us. But I never expected it to feel like this. Is being a man so joyless?

Iwona wanted money and gifts for everything she did. Gunther paid her and she slept with Lukasz, but nothing would persuade her to sleep with him unless he made a kill and that had to be the pact she held with Brainerd. Eventually Iwona would lead Lukasz to his death, but that time had not yet come. Despite the fact that it was his gold that kept Iwona in Lukasz's bed, Gunther felt a twinge of jealousy, because no matter how much he offered her to come to his own, she refused.

Gunther studied the patterns of the naked branches against the blue of the sky, the harsh against the fair. That brought his thoughts back to Iwona and how her lips had closed around his cock and sucked him dry on the night of the last cold blood session. She was a skilled teacher in the sexual arts, the arts of dominance, the art of the male to dominate the female with her submission to his every wish between the blankets. Iwona taught him how a man should be lord of a woman.

He heard footsteps, but did not bother to look, because he knew who it would be.

Adolf squatted beside him with the other five youths standing about. "What are you dreaming about?"

"Iwona."

"Ahhh. Good one. Does she suck you?"

Gunther flushed as he turned on his side to look at them all better. "Yes."

"Does she swallow?"

"Of course!" An edge of indignation crept into Gunther's voice and his friends snickered. "Adolf, how long have you been getting these special sessions?"

"A year. Brainerd starts boys when they are a bit shy of fourteen." A sly look came on Adolf's face. "I got my first bastard a few days ago. It's a boy."

The other boys broke out in congratulations, but Gunther remained silent and slightly pensive.

Zygmunt clapped Adolf on the back. "What happens if you swell one?"

Adolf shrugged. "If your mother is willing, the girl goes to your family estate and Brainerd gets you a new girl."

"You're the best of us at cold kill."

"I should be," Adolf chuckled. "All of my kills have been cold from the first. Brainerd says that all the men in my family have ice in their veins."

Gunther shivered. Something inside him was dying with each kill and he was not certain what that was. He felt as if he were hollowing out.

"Shall we harass Lukasz?" Zygmunt suggested. "I saw him heading deeper into the garden. He's alone."

"No. It's best to leave him alone, until we're prepared to kill him." Gunther had lost his desire to bully Lukasz on the training field and in the salle, as well as elsewhere. He had no emotions left toward Lukasz, only a cold certainty that Lukasz required killing when Brainerd said the time was right.

"You're no fun any longer, Gunther," complained Mikolai.

"Grow up, Mikolai. This isn't a game. We're not children any longer. We're men." Gunther did not realize he was mimicking Brainerd's tones and inflections. The others did and they quieted, settling around him.

* * * *

Lukasz rose from his bed and nudged Iwona awake. Oh, how he loved her. She turned on her side and looked up at him, her face glowing with desire. He felt as if he should not, but he spent the next hour sating himself on her. He was duke in fact, if not in law until he turned fourteen in one week.

He felt as if his life were much better than it had ever been. Although Talons had started his lessons, he still studied each morning under Brainerd. But more and more he wanted to be quit of Brainerd.

Drifting down to the formal dining room, Lukasz settled into the head of the table on the dais. Once his Uncle Stefan had sat here with Lukasz at his right hand. Now it was Lukasz with Berran at his right and Hartmut at his left. Gunther had deliberately been assigned a seat further down. Lukasz felt as if his cousin's ire at this were a palpable thing, although he wrote it off to his imagination.

More than anything, Lukasz wanted to make peace with his household, but he suspected that would never happen.

* * * *

Brainerd slipped through the corridors of the east wing, following a midnight assignation with one of the bereaved widows. There were dozens of noble widows since Stefan's ill-fated adventure in Angrim, all of them with money, lands, and titles, and all of them in need of a strong husband such as himself. Once Gunther sat the throne, a profitable marriage could be arranged between Brainerd and whichever one he wanted. Gunther would not dare to refuse him.

Three doors down, a familiar willowy blonde emerged.

What the hell is Iwona doing in this wing at this hour?

Brainerd stretched his legs to catch up to her and, as he passed the door she had come out of, he noted that the room belonged to Lukasz. Ahead of him, Iwona hesitated and glanced back over her shoulder. That was all Brainerd needed

to overtake her. He imprisoned her elbow in a grip like iron. She flinched.

"What the hell are you doing?" Brainerd hissed. "I did not give you permission to open your legs to that mongrel."

Iwona sucked air for an instant. "I was paid well."

"By who?"

Brainerd walked her down the hall to a room he knew was currently unoccupied and thrust her inside. He dropped the bar and turned to confront her.

Iwona trembled before the look of rage on his face. "Gunther."

"Gunther paid you to sleep with that tainted dog?"

The question was clearly rhetorical, yet Iwona answered any way. "Yes. And he paid me well."

Brainerd stared past her thinking. "How long has this been going on?"

"A month."

"And all of it in his bed?"

Brainerd rubbed his chin. Neither he nor Gunther could afford to make any mistakes. He would have to allow this to continue for the moment, but he would have a word with Gunther.

"Yes."

"Is the boy any good?"

Iwona began to relax, and shook her head. "He's awkward and uncertain, but totally caught up in our little ruttings."

Brainerd laughed softly at that. "Then keep fucking him, Iwona. With luck, it will keep his head away from matters that

would not bear his or Hartmut's notice. There is no one so cock-happy as a young boy."

"I'll do that. I'm very good at what I do, Brainerd."

Brainerd laughed again. "That's why I got you hired onto the staff. Just remember to save up for your old age, Iwona. Once your looks are gone, I'll have no use for you."

Sending her on her way, Brainerd proceeded to Gunther's room with the intention of giving him a small scare.

Gunther's suite was still and dark as Brainerd let himself in with a special key that he was not supposed to have. The first light of morning edged the outer room in tiny streams that broadened as he crept into Gunther's bedroom. The bed curtains were tied back, and he could see the outline of the boy curled on his side sound asleep. A poisonous smirk of anticipation curled the corners of Brainerd's lips. He leaned forward, clamped a hand over Gunther's mouth to stifle his scream, and jerked him awake with a dagger beside his neck.

The youth's eyes bulged.

"Remember how easy it is to die, Gunther," Brainerd said and released him with a shove.

"How—how did you get in here?"

"I have my ways." Brainerd sheathed his blade and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I want to know why you're paying Iwona to sleep with the mongrel."

"She told you?"

"I caught her coming out of his room a few minutes ago. So of course, she told me. What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Gunther rubbed his eyes and settled cross-legged in the middle of the bed. "She's the bait for my trap."

"*Your trap.* You are not—I repeat—not to leave me out of your plans. If Lukasz were an experienced mon, he would never fall for this, never allow a woman to lead him somewhere dangerous. Women are notorious for their unfaithfulness and treacheries."

"I understand. It won't happen again. I promise."

"So what were you planning?"

Gunther lowered his eyes, clearly expecting to be told it would not work. "The part of the gardens that are kept wild. The places where some of the nobles like to play their games of hide and go fuck."

"You're going to arrange for Iwona to get him there?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll need to do better at your lessons than you have been. Tonight, come to the Kill Room after dinner."

* * * *

It was one of those nights when Iwona did not come, and Lukasz laid in his bed feeling restless without her. He stared out his window at the full moon, which looked so large and round and near that he could imagine walking through the garden to the far side and finding it sitting amidst the dense thickets. A huge winged shape passed across the moon and Lukasz gasped.

Berran had told him about the gryphon and suddenly Lukasz was certain that was what he was seeing: Talons' trained gryphon. He sprang from his bed and pulled his pants

on over his nightshirt. Lukasz stole through the palace, using the servants' stair that led into the kitchens. He knew all the guard routines and eluded all of them.

The flickering light of oil lamps guided him to the edge of the thickets, but then there were none and he had to stop to let his eyes become accustomed to the dark before he could move on. Lukasz moved deeper and deeper into the wilder portions of the gardens.

He heard a deep-throated crooning, dropped to his hands and knees, and crept closer. Soon Lukasz saw the tremendous gryphon limned in moonlight. Talons stood beside him, stroking and patting him. Enchanted by the sight, Lukasz sat up and the bushes shifted.

"You can come out now, Lukasz," Talons said without looking at him.

Lukasz stood up. "How did you know it was me?"

"Little Bit smelled you."

"But how'd he know it was me?"

Talons laughed. "I gave him one of your dirty shirts to smell."

"Can I touch him?" Lukasz asked, approaching closely.

For answer, Talons grabbed Lukasz around his slender waist and swung him up onto Little Bit's back.

"Will he carry me?"

"What do you think?" Talons fastened the straps around Lukasz and gave Little Bit a firm pat on the flank. "Once around the city."

Lukasz grabbed the saddle and clutched the rim as the gryphon ran three steps and launched skyward. The wind

blew in his face as they flew faster and faster. The houses and walls dwindled into insignificance and all too soon it was over. He was laughing with excitement when Talons helped him down from the saddle. "That was wonderful. Can I ride him again sometime?"

"Yes. There are two ways to call him. One is with the whistle I wear around my neck. The pitch is so high that most humans can't hear it, but he can. Another is that if he's within hearing, he'll answer to this phrase: vengeance and justice send. Now I think it's time you went back to bed like a good little prince."

"I'm not a prince."

Talons' voice turned very serious. "No, you were just a duke, but now you're a prince. One of the last two princes of Angrim."

"The other's Gunther."

"Gods help you, Lukasz. I don't trust him."

"He doesn't like me, but doesn't hate me enough to hurt me."

"You're too trusting." Talons tousled his hair. "It doesn't take hate to kill. Greed and envy do nicely. Promise me that you won't turn your back on Gunther. Don't offer him a target."

Lukasz frowned and hunched his shoulders a bit. "Okay, I promise."

* * * *

"You're the only one giving me problems with this part of the lessons," Brainerd grumbled. "Tonight we'll fix that."

Gunther felt a tremor of apprehension. He did not like it when Brainerd was disappointed in him. The mon knew all of Gunther's soft spots, and how to make him squirm inside his own skin.

"Sometimes I think you're unworthy of the honor being offered to you," Brainerd continued. "Perhaps you're not strong enough to be king. It could be offered to one of the other boys, if no royal blood remained."

Gunther swallowed, and managed a faint nod.

When they reached the Killing Room, and stepped inside, Gunther saw six myn bound hand and foot on the floor and spaced at wide intervals. There were only two guards present. "Where's everyone else?"

"No one else is coming. You're going to practice until you get it right."

Gunther licked his lips, running his eyes over the benches and saw that Brainerd had laid out several pairs of clean clothing, as well as the weapons, basins and pitchers of water, bars of soap. It looked as if Brainerd expected there would be too much blood tonight to walk from the room clean without first washing up. "I'm to slaughter them all, aren't I?"

"Until you get it right."

Gunther squared his shoulders and went to the first youth. Oddly, he felt nothing at all. Where there should have been emotion, reaction, there was a distanced emptiness. These youths were pagans, enemies of the state, little more than animals, and a blight in the eyes of god. "How do you want me to do it?"

Brainerd bent over the youth, ran his gaze along the captive, and pulled at his chin. "Cut his throat."

Gunther straddled the youth, drew his long belt knife, and put it to the captive's throat. The youth squirmed and bucked, trying to get Gunther off him.

"Grab his hair and twist his head to the side so you can get at the artery properly," Brainerd instructed.

Gunther obeyed, but he was close to losing his seat as the youth beneath him kept struggling. Striking the youth in the forehead with the pommel of his knife, Gunther stunned his captive.

"Shove it all the way through and then rip it forward," Brainerd continued to advise. "Yes, I know it's called slitting and cutting, but it isn't. It's tearing. Too many muscles and cords in the neck to simply run a blade across it."

The blade slid into the artery and through the neck muscles with far greater ease than Gunther had expected, but then he kept his knives very sharp. His captive's eyes glazed with terror and pain. Gunther studied his victim's eyes, which reminded him of a deer's, and he ripped the blade forward with a savage twist. Blood spurted in Gunther's eyes as it splattered over him. Beneath Gunther, the youth stilled.

"Is that how you wanted it?" Gunther staggered to his feet, rubbing at his eyes.

Brainerd fetched a wet cloth and wiped Gunther's eyes and face with it. "Yes. The next one is different. We're slaughtering pigs tonight."

The next mon looked to be about forty and heavily built, dark haired and skinned, another victim of Brainerd's quiet

pogrom. Gunther did not have the size and weight to hold him down properly for the strike, so guards pinned the captive's shoulders and legs to the floor while Gunther straddled him. Brainerd tore the pagan's shirt open and pointed to the left breast just off center.

"You'll need to give your blade a good twist or two to stop the heart. I want it done efficiently."

Gunther felt even more empty than before, as if his soul had gone dead. He knew that was the purpose of these final lessons. Now he understood the change that had come over his older brothers during their last years of training with Brainerd.

Cutting the mon's gag away, Brainerd nodded. "Now do him."

The mon screamed and tried to thrash, but the guards held him firm. Gunther thrust his blade in and gave it several twists before dragging it across. The mon stilled. Gunther rose and went to the next one without any direction from Brainerd.

As Gunther gazed down upon this captive, he was startled to discover it was a woman in torn clothing. She looked as if the guards had sported with her before tying her legs. Brainerd pulled the gag from her mouth before Gunther straddled her.

"Oh please, mercy!" she screamed.

Gunther felt a flutter of emotion in his stomach, but this was no time to feel and he squashed it. "How do you want it?"

"Any way you wish. One blow."

"Merrrrrrcccyyyyyyy," she shrieked.

Gunther showed her mercy by putting the blade through her eye, jamming it in until the edge of the handle caught on her eye socket. Her body twitched involuntarily as he wiggled the knife to free it.

The next two went easily, but the last of the six pagans was a small child. Gunther steeled himself as he approached the little boy, not wanting Brainerd to detect the slightest sign of weakness in him.

He shoved his blade up under the back of the boy's skull in an attempt to make it quick but different. The blade caught upon the edge of the lower boney ridge and snapped off as the child screamed in agony. Gunther's stomach clenched.

"He's still alive!" Brainerd shouted. "Finish him with your hands, damn you!"

Gunther wrapped his arm around the boy's head, pressed down on the child's back between his shoulder blades. He gave the boy's head a ripping twist. The bones gave with a loud snap and the child went still.

The lesson ended, Gunther washed and changed clothes. The youth moved as if in a daze, lost in thoughts yet unable to access them, as if nothing moved in his head because he was so deeply submerged beneath the murky depths of death.

"Now you are ready to kill Lukasz and save the realm from his tainted blood."

"Yes, Brainerd, I am."

"Now we must plot and choose our time."

Gunther went from the session to Iwona's arms in his bed, and there he took her without emotion.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

AFTERMATH

Isranon staggered back into camp. Amiri shouldered most of his weight and he managed the rest on his staff. She had wanted to carry him, but Isranon had refused. He had once vowed that so long as he could stand, he would do so. Only Amiri's potions and his determination had kept him on his feet through the battle. The town had been swept clean of imps and the surviving inhabitants had been removed to the camp.

Haig led the rest of the vampires in a long line behind him.

A triumphant shout of welcome went up as they walked.

When they reached Isranon's tent, Randilyn emerged from the wagon with tears in her eyes. A fresh surge of adrenaline hit Isranon's system and he pulled away from Amiri. "Nevin?"

"He keeps going into seizures. Nans and I can't stop them."

Amiri stepped between Isranon and the wagon. "You're too exhausted. It could kill you."

Isranon's eyes turned to chips of steel and his voice went low and hard. "Get out of my way."

Amiri tried to stay in front of him, but Isranon shoved her down and climbed into the wagon.

His necromantic senses could taste the nearness of death as he sat down on the bed and covered Nevin's jerking body with his own. Isranon slipped his arm around his spirit-brother's neck and lifted him up enough to slide Warrior

beneath him. Then he called upon the staff and threw every ounce of strength and energy remaining in his own body as well as the magic of the staff into Nevin.

Reality altered. The wagon seemed to dissolve around him. Isranon no longer heard the voices of those calling out to him in alarm. He heard the howling of lycans as they attempted to add their strength to his. A warm hand settled on his neck, and he sensed Nans pouring her divine forces into him. A soft, narrow hand with claws sheathed, grasped Isranon's arm above the wrist and the link he shared with Anksha flared to life.

The embedded spells erupted across Isranon's body. His arms, legs, stomach, and chest bled. He ignored the pain and walked the astral plane.

"Nevin, don't leave me. Don't leave us. We need you, Nevin. We love you, guurmondru."

He saw Nevin's soul ahead of him, standing with his face in the winds of eternity. The silver cord that held Nevin's soul to his body had frayed to a single thread. Isranon grabbed the cord before it could snap and healed it.

Nevin turned and looked at him with eyes gone distant and unfocused. "Tala! Tala, will you come for me?"

"Don't go, Nevin. Don't go. You promised me you'd never leave so long as I needed you. I need you."

Isranon healed Nevin's heart and lungs, all of his organs, his muscles, and arteries.

Nevin's eyes cleared and he gazed into the depths of Isranon's eyes. "I swore an oath..."

"Yes, you did. I'll never let you out of it either."

Then everything turned suddenly black and Isranon knew nothing more.

Nans grabbed Isranon as he went limp and moved him to the other bed. Amiri freed the staff from beneath Nevin, stood it in a corner, and turned to Nans who was already Reading Isranon. "How is he?"

"Bad."

Amiri winced and to get her mind off that news, she Read Nevin. "He'll live."

* * * *

Only Anksha's unceasing efforts kept Isranon alive. Four days passed during which Isranon woke only when Anksha's link forced him to consciousness long enough to get more Sanguine Rose into him. On the fifth day, Isranon began to have short periods of waking, but he remained weak. His powers were great, but his body was still crippled and ill from the embedded spells.

Nans ordered salvage crews go through the ruined town, purchased the townsmyns' excess goods and a large portion of their surviving herds. The townsmyn and their families would make the journey north with the Army of the Renunciate until a safe place could be found for them. On the third day, she ordered their march continued since they had to make Ildyrsetts before winter made the land impassible.

Nevin was strong enough to be moved to his own tent within the first day. If anyone had still doubted the Rowdies' claim that Isranon was a master lifemage, that doubt was dispelled with the miracle that had saved Nevin.

The genocide of the lifemages by the sa'necari was common knowledge throughout the continent. Only five had survived, led by a young journeyman named Britlyn, and they dwelled on the grounds of the Azure Circle Mage School in Rowanhart. Now, from the unlikeliest of sources—a sa'necari necromancer—a true master of lifemagic had arisen.

* * * *

The winds blew chill from the north that day, sending the leaves of the trees shivering down to the earth. Amiri refused to allow Isranon to use even a small fraction of his magic to warm the wagon, so instead he lay in bed wrapped in multiple robes and a heavy layer of blankets. Propped into a sitting position against by several pillows, he gazed fondly at Anksha, then his lips framed a sudden smile and he patted her stomach.

"You're swelling, Anksha. I can see it."

"I am?" Anksha opened her dress and examined herself. Because of the upheavals of the past weeks, her belly had become puffy below her navel without her noticing. She squealed in delight. "I am! When does Timadi start moving around inside me?"

Amiri had several bottles of herbs and potions, glasses and glass rods for stirring set out. She paused in mixing another potion. "I'm not sure. There's nothing in the surviving records about it. Another month or so I imagine."

Anksha rolled her eyes, closed her dress, and crouched next to Isranon with a handful of candies.

Isranon screwed up his nose when he saw what color the next potion was. Amiri had just dosed him with three different ones and here came the fourth. Every time he swallowed one of the dreadful things, Anksha popped a candy into his mouth to get rid of the taste.

As swiftly as it had come, the look of joy vanished from Isranon's eyes and the haunted light—that had lingered so frequently in their depths since the battle—replaced it. "I killed them all ... even the ones that were fleeing."

Amiri brought the next potion to him. "You can't keep obsessing on it. Those imps had invaded the town and eaten most of the inhabitants.

Isranon rubbed his eyes before drinking the potion. His voice went soft and his attention distant. "It was a massacre. I've never done that before." He paused, his gaze searching the wagon as if for things unseen. "I—I feel as if I've dipped my soul in a cesspool."

Anksha patted his hand. "You're a good mon, my Isranon."

"Am I? I rebuked Corbienne for feeding on them." He paused again, searching for words and the strength to speak them. "I wanted to sink my fangs into their throats also. By the time I was halfway through the town, all I could think about ... what I wondered about ... was the taste of their blood."

Amiri studied Isranon and when he did not begin to speak again, she spoke in a carefully neutral voice. "Did you do it?"

Isranon swallowed, his throat constricting, stomach clenching. Silence yawned like a midnight chasm. Then suddenly he doubled over, clutching his head and screamed.

"Yes I did! I did. Four of them. I kept sucking ... and sucking..." His voice cracked. "And then they ... they didn't move anymore."

He broke down and wept.

Anksha frowned, her lower lip poking out beneath her upper. "I've done that lots of times." Her patois grew more pronounced. "Sa'necari, trolls, imps, demons. Lots of times."

Amiri shook her head at Anksha. "Shush, Anksha." She squeezed Isranon's arm. "You weren't the only one killing them. There was Zulaika, Haig, Jun..." She rattled off the names of every vampire in the Army of the Renunciate. "All of us ate at least one or two of them."

Isranon mastered himself. "Even you?"

"I ate five of them. I went you one better."

"But the Borealysyn—"

"Don't take lives out of appetite or for pleasure. Ymraudes and Borealysyn are pragmatic about some things. Warfare is one of them. I haven't told you this before, because I was not certain how you would take it."

"Tell me?"

Amiri gave him a tiny smile. "I will if you'll be quiet and let me. The day that we invaded Captain Tamric's estate to rescue you, we needed to eliminate the archers on the walls. Otherwise, they would have turned it into a killing field, enfiladed us, and most of your friends would now be dead. So Corbienne and Jun went in ahead of the rest of us. They scaled the wall and ate the archers."

"Gods!"

"When humans go into battle, frequently the bloodiest of battles are characterized by something called 'bloodlust.' The retreating enemy is pursued and mercilessly hacked to pieces as they attempt to flee. In point of fact, the majority of battlefield casualties occur after one side has broken and fled."

"I don't understand..."

Amiri wagged her finger at him. "Let me finish. Hemovores have a different kind of bloodlust that is brought out by battle. I'm not saying that it should be yielded to without resistance. I'm simply saying that it exists. And it is also a matter of degree. The greater the battle, the greater our appetite becomes at the time because we metabolize the blood in our own veins faster."

"What does metabolize mean?"

Amiri stared at Isranon. "You're reading Josiah's journals and you've not come across it yet?"

Isranon shook his head.

"Well, you will. Josiah traded me a pint of his blood and two nights of feasting from his veins for the information that he recorded in his journals concerning vampires. That was just before he went after Lord Hoon the first time."

"He was my teacher."

Amiri breathed out a long sigh. "Would you like to have his blood? I've never opened the bottle. Not in all these centuries. It's as fresh as it came from his body."

"Yes. I would ... like that."

"Then it's yours. I'll send Randilyn over with it when we're done here."

"Thank you."

"My final point is this. Appetite becomes overwhelming when physical stress is overwhelming, combined with smelling the rage surrounding you, the rage rising up within you, and in the case of the imps, their own hunger for blood and flesh creating an echo in your psyche. So you're not a monster, Isranon. And you'll probably do it again the next time you're in a major battle. You must make peace with your nature. That must become part of your Middle Path also."

"Is there a name for what you're describing?"

"Bio-magicalists call it the Sorrows of Monsters and frequently apply it to humans as well as our kind. Now you look exhausted again." She handed him the bottle of Sanguine Rose. "Take a long drink and get some sleep."

In a desire to escape the memories of what he had done in the heat of battle, Isranon drank more of the Sanguine Rose than he normally did and soon he was lost in dreams formed of nightmare-shaded memories of his life.

The creak of his door opening in the night caused Isranon to sit up in bed. Yoleema slipped into his room, smiling strangely with her fangs completely down. He wondered how his sister's fangs could look so large. Then the stupor of sleep that still clung to him faded and he saw that her dress was torn and muddy, her skin blue with death. She extended her arms to him.

"Hello, little brother. Let me hug you."

Isranon's eyes widened and he scrabbled backwards on the bed. "Keep away from me."

"Don't you love me anymore, Issy?"

Isranon flinched from his name on her undead lips. "You know what you are. You know the laws."

"I'm hungry and cold. Make me warm."

"No." He threw himself off the end of the bed and tried to edge around her. "The laws..."

She leaped upon him, sinking her fangs into his neck. Isranon cried out in fear and pain. The greed with which she sucked made him dizzy. "You're killing me."

Yoleema paused in her sucking and licked the wound closed. "You'll rise and we'll be together forever."

"I'll step into the flames. 'Better to step into the flames than to live undead.' I'll do it."

"Don't say that, Issy. Make me warm. I don't want to be alone."

Isranon struggled in her arms. "I don't want to be undead, Yolee. It's wrong."

"It's not so bad ... except I can't get warm," she said mournfully. "I was terrified when he was killing me..."

"Who? Who killed you?"

"I can't say his name. He bound my tongue. Don't fight me, Issy. It won't hurt as much. Then we'll always be together."

She bit him again.

Isranon fought down his panic. "Yolee, I'll step into the flames. I swear it," he said with every bit of determination he could force into his voice. "I will."

Her sucking hurt him, and she showed no signs of slacking.

"Yolee, father will hate you."

She wavered in her sucking.

"Mother's unhappy spirit will never forgive you. They died to keep us alive. Not so that we could become undead."

Yoleema hesitated again, then resumed drinking from his veins.

"I will never forgive you."

Yoleema faltered for the third time.

"I'll hate you forever. You're a monster!"

Yoleema released him and fled. Isranon chased after her, and abruptly he was sitting once more in Lord Hoon's drawing room in Charas.

Anksha rose and walked slowly around the chairs, smiling in a calculating fashion, her hands behind her back like a child planning naughtiness. Isranon felt detached from all the people speaking around him, no longer putting names to voices. Words were empty things. He watched Yoris blubber, trembling uncontrollably as Anksha picked one of the others and pulled him down, dragging him over to that one's feet. The sa'necari were accustomed to having cattle, not being cattle.

She took Yoris and made him her blood-slave. Yoris curled up in a tight, sobbing ball when she finished with him.

Isranon decided it was time to make an end of it with all the courage he could muster, show himself to be a man like his father. He removed his shirt and tunic, kneeling. He drew in a fortifying breath, folding his hands together behind his back.

"Since there is no escaping my fate, Anksha, then let me meet it well, rather than whimpering like the others."

Anksha looked at him curiously, taking in the calm stoicism, the proud tilt to his chin, shoulders and back straight. "You I could like," she said.

"No!" Mephistis shouted. "No, please, Anksha. Not Isranon. He is a good man. He isn't like the rest of us." Mephistis crossed the room, dropping to his knees and pushing between them. "Please. Don't do this! Hoon, please ask her not to do this."

"Move aside," Anksha hissed. "Or I'll not just take him, Mephistis, I'll kill him." She twisted about, tearing her claws deeply across Isranon's chest, gouging him. He bore it well, making not the smallest sound.

Hoon turned his back. "Take him and be done with it, Anksha."

"Do not dishonor me." Isranon kept his voice calm. The Darkness hunts me and the Light does not want me. He centered himself in the teachings, waiting for her with his head tilted now like a nibari's before a hungry master, exposing the favored vein. A stoic stillness framed his utter surrender.

Mephistis withdrew, burying his face in his hands.

Anksha took him more savagely than the others, tearing him further with her claws as well as her fangs. Isranon's sphincters tightened and his body went rigid with the pain. He fought to stifle the groan that felt as if it were climbing up his throat inch by inch until it escaped past his clenched teeth despite his efforts. But he did not scream. All his hopes and dreams died as his blood welled into her mouth and her power swept through him in a roaring presence, claiming all

of him—body and soul. The Dominance-Link sank into him like a thousand, searing barbed-hooks. She jerked him hard through the Dominance-Link, and then slashed him with the blade of her mind, cutting him heart and soul.

The scene changed as Isranon stumbled from the room, his blood oozing from his wounds. He stood once more in the shattered house in Chyniolus and stopped short, seeing four imps biting pieces from a struggling child. Rage roared through him, and with it hunger. He could smell the blood of the imps as they turned on him to defend their dinner. They chattered at him, reaching for their blowguns.

A gesture of his hand threw them across the room into a wall. A second gesture and the blow guns and darted exploded in the imps' hands. Isranon stalked after the imps. They retreated before him. He walked past the human child, who crept toward a door to escape.

Isranon ignored the child, all thoughts of rescue and succor for living beings vanished from his mind, replaced by hunger. His nostril flared and his fangs came down. He could taste their terror through his necromantic senses, and for the first time in his memory it reminded him of savory meat set out on a banquet table. Saliva gathered in his mouth. The pounding rhythm of their hearts filled his body with desire. The back of his throat crawled and itched, craving the sensual flavor of their blood on his palate, sliding down his throat, filling his belly with their delicious essence.

Poking at the imps with Warrior and hemming them in with his shields, Isranon herded the imps into a corner of the room. He opened his shield enough to reach through and grab

one. Isranon crushed the squirming imp to his chest and sank his fangs into its throat. Greed for more came with the first intense taste of the blood. The imp's heart fluttered, faltered, and struggled as it died in his hands, exciting Isranon. He sucked until there was nothing left but a withered husk and the creature had stopped moving. Tossing that one aside, Isranon grinned at the others as he licked away the blood rimming his mouth. He reached and seized a second one, draining that one. Then the third and the fourth. Only when he had drained all of them did her come to his senses, staring in horror at what he had done.

Isranon sat upright in bed, causing Anksha to sit up and regard him with her head titled and her lips pursed in concern. He hurt as he reached again for the bottle of Sanguine Rose. "I'm a monster."

"No, you aren't, my Is ... rah ... non." She drew his name out. "You're a good mon."

* * * *

Corbienne sat on her bedroll in the tent she frequently shared with Iuf. The mon held her tight as she sobbed again of the horror seeing the imps eating still struggling humans, biting pieces out of them; how she had lost it and begun eating the imps at first in growing rage and then in a rage-born hunger—how Isranon had caught her and she had experienced his condemnation.

"Aww, Corbie..." Iuf said. "You can't help it. You're what you are."

"You're the only one who makes me warm. Forgive me..."

"Always." Iuf pressed her face into his neck, arching to bring his carotid artery in line with her fangs.

Corbienne smelled the blood in his veins, listened to the irresistible pounding of his pulse as he anticipated her entrance. Since the battle none of the nibari satisfied her appetites, only Iuf did. His blood was strong liquor and the nibari tasted like thin whey. Corbienne could not get enough of him, even knowing how weak she left him. Where weeks ago she would never have considered taking from his neck, now only his neck appealed to her, the place where the wine came sweetest. The neck, and only the neck, every time she fed it was from his neck.

He jerked when she pierced him and she drew her comfort from his veins. Iuf moaned as she swept through his mind, filling him with illusions, making him feel young again. They knew they should not be doing this: it took Iuf too long to recover and he had sentry duty that night. His consciousness faded from waking dreams into sleep as she sucked him under. No matter how soon she tried to stop early, no matter how much discipline she tried to exercise; each time she fed, Corbienne drank him closer to the edge. Deep inside herself, Corbienne knew that one day Iuf would not wake up again. All the signs were there, when she allowed herself to face them, that her love for Iuf was spiraling into the Passion-Dance.

She closed her fears out, locking them away, refusing to think about them as she licked the wound closed, and tucked Iuf into the bedroll, concealing the distinctive bruise on his neck. It would heal. She was always careful not to scar him.

Corbienne woke Iuf close to midnight, when his turn came to stand watch. He moved sluggishly, and she knew that she had taken more from his veins than she should have.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah."

Iuf found Gordain, a lycan from Imralon that he did not know well yet, and a sixteen-year-old kandoyarin named Dahnig who tended to get paired with Gordain a lot. Nans and her officers believed that the best way to get their units to bond was to pair the same people up time and again. He and Dahnig walked in opposite directions with Gordain ranging free along the length of their watch in wolf form.

Iuf moved in a half-daze with his hood up, his hand sneaking inside his collar to rub the bruise that Corbienne had left on his neck. He knew that he should not have encouraged her to do it, but she had been so upset and it always calmed her. Iuf shook himself as he realized that he was trying to put the blame on Corbienne. He had wanted it as bad as she had. He craved it like a drug addict, the way she made him feel that went beyond sex.

His eyes grew heavy-lidded as he fought to keep alert. He felt more exhausted than usual after opening his veins to his lover. His feet seemed to catch on every root and tangled bit of grass. Iuf got to a point just halfway into his first walk when an urge to sit down overcame him and he settled with his back to a tree, thinking that if he just rested for a moment, he'd be able to continue.

The next thing that Iuf knew, he was being shaken roughly awake.

"What the hell's wrong with you? You just let a hunting cat kill one of the foals." Gordain snarled in his face and smacked him.

Iuf hit Gordain back and came swaying to his feet like a drunk.

Gordain lunged at Iuf and Dahnig's hands closed on the lycan, dragging him back. "Look at him, Gord. Something's not right with him. I'm going to get him to Amiri."

The lycan relaxed in Dahnig's grip with a nod. "I can hold until you get back. Just bring a replacement with you."

Amiri emerged from her wagon at the sound of her voice being called. She and Randilyn slept in the wagon with their supplies and used their tent as an infirmary for minor ills affecting the soldiers. She helped Dahnig get Iuf settled on a cot. "Wake Travis and have him assign someone."

"Thanks." Dahnig left them.

Amiri gripped Iuf's wrist to read him and he shoved her away. "Don't be doing that."

"Then you know what's wrong?"

"I didn't say that." Iuf tried to avoid her eyes.

Amiri, acting on instinct, pulled his head around by the hair and shoved his collar open. "So she's feeding from your neck now."

The disapproval in her voice was heavy enough to make Iuf wince. "It's none of yer business."

She released him with a small shove and shook her braids back. "Everything to do with the Lemyari and Ymraudes here is my business."

Iuf turned away from her.

"Does she ever say something like 'you're the only one who keeps me warm?' Does she?" Amiri prodded.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Does she say it, Iuf? If she does, then it's the Dance and she's going to kill you."

"She hasn't been the same since the imps."

Amiri's hand stole to the pommel of Iuf's sword and sketched a telltale on it. The spell melted into the metal and vanished as if it had never been there. "You realize that she'll be staked the minute enough signs of the Dance appear in you."

Horror shone in Iuf's eyes as he faced Amiri. "It isn't her fault."

"You know absolutely nothing about our kind. Don't be arrogant in your ignorance. I've never intervened in a Dance, because I wanted to study it. I've seen dozens of deaths in it. I've also seen a handful of successful interventions. But only if the vampire involved is willing to seek help."

"We don't need no help. Just leave us be, Amiri."

Amiri ignored his comment, dug in a small chest, and handed him a bottle of ugly yellowish liquid. "It tastes terrible. Take three fingers of it twice a day and you won't die as soon. But you will die, if Corbienne doesn't seek help."

Iuf shoved the bottle into his pocket. "Thanks. I'll talk to her."

* * * *

Nearly two weeks passed before Isranon was well enough to tend Liuthan and reduce the effects of the Withering. Amiri

had been doing all she could for Liuthan in Isranon's absence, but that had mostly been a matter of keeping the mon comfortable and out of pain as much as possible.

Liuthan lay on his cot, waiting patiently. "If I last until the madness comes, help me die. I don't want Stygean seeing me like that."

"I'll take care of it," said Amiri, administering more of her drugs to Liuthan. "I can blend a dose of the Gentle Path that will take you down as easily as a human."

"Thank you." He settled back on his cot, his expression peaceful. Liuthan had never seen a sa'necari in the throes of the Withering Madness, but he had read descriptions of it. Amiri had witnessed several cases of it and had confirmed that what Liuthan had read had been accurate. First, a sa'necari began to drool around the edges of their mouths constantly, then to froth like a rabid dog, and have troubling fits of misdirected rage and loss of comprehension. Finally, they collapsed in a snarling seizure and died.

Amiri grasped his wrist and Read him again. "You have a month to six weeks left, Liuthan, before you enter the final stage."

"I wish Dawnreturning would let me tell Stygean what he's doing."

Amiri's beads clacked as she shook her head. "If word got out that he was mitigating the Withering, all the blood-slaves would want it, and Anksha would be forced to kill several."

"I understand."

Relief brightened Liuthan's gaunt face when he saw Isranon enter the tent.

Isranon opened Liuthan's robes to examine how far the Withering had progressed during the weeks he had been unable to come. Liuthan's flesh hung flaccid on his bones like an old man's. Splotches of scarlet marred his chest, abdomen, and sides, sprinkled through with ugly blisters. Isranon placed his palms on Liuthan's chest and Read him. "I can't repair your mage net or your shaukras."

Liuthan nodded. That was where the Withering began, at the point in which Anksha's feeding upon the arcane bio-alchemy caused their mage nets and shaukras too damaged to replenish the substances in their blood that gave them their magic. When those died, the rest of the body began to die. She did not feed on normal humans because their bodies did not produce the necessary nutrients to keep her healthy, and satisfy her appetites.

Isranon's power spread a soothing warmth through Liuthan, and his pain eased as the blisters, pustules, and open sores that some of them had become vanished, leaving only the splotchiness.

When he finished with Liuthan, Isranon walked wearily back toward his own tent. He sipped from a flask of Sanguine Rose to ease his body, and leaned on Warrior as he moved through the camp. Drawing the Withering from Liuthan would not have normally tired him this much, but he still had a ways to go before he regained the strength he had had before the fighting at Chyniolus. He bitterly resented the embedded spells.

Isranon forced his thoughts from the spells and found himself focusing on another troubling matter instead. "I worry that I'm never going to reach Stygean."

"He's still rejecting your overtures?" Amiri saw him sway and take a misstep that cost him his balance. She reached out to catch him, but he recovered without falling.

"Yes. Anksha has begun licking her fangs every time the subject of Stygean comes up. I hate the idea of giving a boy that young to her, but that may yet be all that I can do."

"You can't save all of them, Isranon."

"I must try." He paused in front of his tent, gestured for Amiri to follow, and went inside where he dropped into a chair at the table as if his legs could no longer support him. "Does what happened with the imps make me a hypocrite for trying?"

"The exigencies of battle, Isranon. Perhaps the reason that your father and the rest of the Dark Brothers were such utter pacifists was that they knew about them."

Isranon's lips parted, but no words came out. He leaned Warrior across his lap and rubbed his face with both hands. "No wonder they let themselves be killed."

Amiri's hand clamped onto his arm. "Don't go down that path. You have only two choices in life. You can lie down and let them kill you, like they did. Or you can fight back and kill them. It takes two sides to make a war, but only one side to make a massacre."

"I know." Isranon's voice grew softer and more troubled. "Stygean—if Anksha sees him as a threat to me ... I'll never be able to hold her back."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

UNWANTED DISCOVERIES

Claw sat alone in the drawing room, playing a hand of solitaire. Merissa had gone to visit her granddam, taking Darmyk, Aisha, and his two sisters with her in their carriage. Normally he would not have felt so alone. After all, he had the servants and the myn-at-arms. They were only going for a day, and would be back by nightfall.

It had been difficult for him to get his bitches back to a normal routine, to persuade them to stop fussing over him. If he was going to die, then he would die whether they were gone or not. Deep down inside, Claw did not want Aisha with him when the end came. The old chieftain wanted to spare her the sight of him slipping away. With luck, when the time finally came, it would be while they were away on one of their regular visits to see Aisha's mother.

He poured another small glass of the rum that Malthus had given him. Claw appreciated the smooth, sweet taste of the amber liquor, the sensual way that it clung like syrup to his palate and throat.

Malthus stopped at the door and looked in at him. "I'm going into the village. Is there anything you wish me to bring back?"

Claw waved him off. "Nothing at all. The liquor was the best present you could have given me."

"I'm glad that you think so. It's a pleasure to watch you enjoy it."

Malthus walked on and Claw was left once more alone.

Belgair came in and sat down at the table beside Claw.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine," Claw lied.

Belgair picked up the bottle of Ildyrsetti rum and examined the label. "That's a legendary year."

Claw nodded. "You want some?"

"I'd like that." Belgair fetched himself a glass and poured a measure from the bottle. He sipped his drink a moment. "I didn't come to make small talk, Claw."

"I didn't think you had."

"I wanted to talk about Merissa."

"No, you didn't," Claw grumbled. "You've come to talk about Sheradyn's saying I'm going to be dead soon."

Belgair knocked down his drink and poured another. "I didn't want to put it that way."

"Don't dance around the issues, Belgair. It irritates me." Claw refilled his own glass.

"The children will need a suitable regent to run the estate for them. Malthus can't serve."

"Thank the gods for that."

"You don't like him."

"I don't."

"Why? He's a good mon, Claw."

"Just because I don't." Hair sprouted along Claw's arms in irritation. "I wanted Merissa to marry her own kind."

Belgair gave a small nod of acquiescence. "I understand. But you'll have to choose a lycan to be regent until the babes that Merissa is carrying come of age."

"I already have."

"Who?" Belgair lifted his eyebrow.

"Brock."

"Pssah! He hasn't been seen in nearly ten years and he went sixty without being seen before that."

"Brock will come."

"I doubt that Fianait could bear to have him here. My father says she threatened to kill herself over it."

"Brock is a good mon."

"Brock cocked-up his own sister. Some say he raped Fianait. You really want someone like that raising your grandcubs?"

Belgair's statement hit Claw hard, and his chest tightened painfully. Fianait had admitted years ago that she had used an arcane aphrodisiac to force her twin Brock into a sexual relationship, but people still blamed his brother for getting her pregnant. A side effect of the potion, which she had gotten from a shrine to Ishla, had nearly killed Brock. As a result, their father had thrown the Ishlanan priests out of the valley and torn the shrine down.

Claw's lips curled back and his eyeteeth looked wolfish. "Are you suggesting yourself?"

"I'm doing most of it already."

"I want my own flesh and blood looking out for my grandcubs."

"Claw, this is a bad decision."

Claw's face flushed and he smashed his fist on the table. "Don't argue with me! My mind is made up. I want Brock." Sharp pains lanced through the chieftain's chest. Claw's face went from bright red to pasty white. "Help me back to bed and fetch Sheradyn."

* * * *

Malthus met the Lycamornots at the old cottage that he and his nieces had once lived in on 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 compound and surrounding lands were run by Clodagh and Pandeena, when it was actually himself. 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.

"This Padruig sounds suspicious, Shalto," Malthus said over a tankard of ale. He had tired of drinking mead all the time just because that was what the young ones liked.

"He's certainly asking an awful lot of questions, just as many as that lawgiver is." Yren wrinkled his nose and red hair sprouted along his arms in reaction to his irritation. "He tried to pin me against a tree for some answers, but I got away from him."

"I don't think it would be wise for me to meet him." Malthus lowered his head, gazing off to the side. "I'm still healing. You'll have to take him yourselves."

"It's good that you're getting better." Shalto refilled his tankard.

"It was a very near thing, Shalto. An inch lower and that bloody barb would have been in my lung."

Shalto's face filled with concern. "You be careful, Malthus. We don't want to lose you. You're our inspiration."

Malthus lowered his head still more as if overcome by the praise, tilting it to the side with a small smile. "Thank you, Shalto."

"We'll take care of this," Torquil said. "Trust us. We'll go at him like wolves on a deer."

"Make sure no one sees you do it."

Preece smiled and ruffled Rheu's hair. "I'm good at ambushes."

Malthus regarded Preece. He was more and more certain that both Preece and Yren had killed myn before and enjoyed it. "The other thing we need to do is to get the pregnant women out before anyone notices them. Kandaishie's getting huge."

Shalto chuckled. "You must have got her up the stick good first try. She was already swelling before the rest of us started taking our rides."

"She's due to deliver me a son long before my wife is."

"So what are we doing with them?"

"Sending them to my mother's estate. I have some friends who will meet us in the forest half a day's ride from here and take them the rest of the way."

"Sounds good to me," Shalto said.

The others murmured an agreement.

* * * *

Malthus rode out of Wolffgard village with a packhorse tied to his mount's saddle. It had been hard convincing Sheradyn that he was well enough to travel. Even old Claw had argued against his going, and normally the bastard did not give a

damn what happened to Malthus. However, he had insisted that he needed to bring back meat for the refugee camp known as the Sanctuary. He rode north alone, heading for the mountains where the caves were that formed the north boundary to Red Wolf lands. He needed to arrange the rendezvous that would take the pregnant women, not to his mother's estate, but to his own at Carrion Crevasse where he was re-establishing his laboratories and preparing to resume his old experiments on lycans and other races once his job in Red Wolff Valley was done.

He stayed deep in the forest, traveling through the shadowed places where he was unlikely to be seen, sheltered from view by the pine forest and diverged late in the day onto the same hunter's trace where he had killed the lawgiver Nikko Softpaws months ago. After riding for two hours, he began watching for flashes of orange moving through the trees above him. By now, he should have seen imps scampering about on every side of him, through the trees on every side of him, through the brush and briars, and up in the trees leaping like wizened orange-skinned monkeys. He had been promised the service of dozens, under the leadership of the imp-warlord Gahni. Malthus and Gahni had worked together many times over the years. Yet it had taken substantial promises of food, gold, and booty to persuade Gahni to bring his people from the West Bank of the Hillora to Waejontor. Malthus had also provided Gahni's queen with a large supply of one of his mother's most potent arrow poisons in return for the queen releasing Gahni and his myn to Malthus' service.

Malthus wondered why they were not around, greeting him and looking for food. Legend had it that imps were genetically altered monkeys, created by a hellgod named Jasmeden during the last godwar.

"Where's Gahni gotten off to?" he muttered.

The trees gave way steadily, thinning into a rocky fell. As Malthus' horse topped the first treeless rise, he saw the northern border of Claw's lands, the Place of Boulders. Huge rocks, which had fallen from the mountains rising above it, broke up the landscape like the remains of a giant's scattered toys. It looked like a good place for an ambush and Malthus rode cautiously through them.

When he reached the far side, he saw a stone bleeding table with a tool table sitting next to it almost beneath the cliff, saw the mossy overhang that concealed his brother's caves, and saw a lycan *body* on the bleeding table on its belly. If it was female, then he would be very irritated with Egidius and Laetus.

He had told them to spare as many of the bitches of childbearing age as possible and send them to his manor in Carrion Crevasse. He knew that none of them would arrive there virgins, but that did not bother him. Any that arrived there pregnant would be a bonus to his plans to create a new race of genetically altered slaves. He would succeed where Waejonan had failed.

He dismounted and tied his horse to a tree near the cave before investigating the body. To his relief, it was a young male perhaps fifteen years old. The runes painted on the nude corpse drew Malthus' eyes. This one had been an

offering for the soul of the dead. He wondered who warranted that attempt to send a soul to Bellocar, their liege-god, instead risking its capture by Hadjys the dark judge.

"Egidius!" He called out, turning around. "Egidius!"

Malthus walked into the cave. There were two interlocked caves, and they were roomy, around the size of a bedchamber. The first one had a cabinet, a table, and two chairs in it. He thought of it as his brother's cave because it was here that he found the first proof that his half-brother Troyes had been killed. He would never forget finding two of Troyes' blades in one of the drawers along with the empty hilt of a third. The blades only shattered when they were used to kill their makers. Beside the blades had lain the crest of their family carved into an ivory round, painted, and attached to a golden chain. They had bottled his brother's blood after killing him on that bleeding table. Malthus had found it, and then he, Egidius, and Laetus had drunk it in remembrance of what a fine sa'necari Troyes had been.

He had still not gotten his full vengeance against Isranon and Claw, but marrying Merissa had given him a start on achieving it. Once Claw and Darmyk were dead, and the valley had fallen to his armies, then his vengeance would be complete and Malthus would reveal himself.

A mon slumped across the table, making small sobbing noises, with his hand on a bottle of blood wine.

"Egidius? What happened?"

Egidius lifted his head and his sa'necari eyes, amaranthine without pupils, iris, or whites, looked at him glistening with tears. Malthus could tell that he was half-drunk.

Malthus gripped Egidius' shoulder and shook him.

"Whatever it is, you can't let it unman you."

Egidius put the bottle to his mouth and drank more, the wine dribbling into his thin beard. "Laetus is dead. I promised my family I'd take care of him, and he's dead."

"How did it happen?" asked Malthus, his voice low and dangerous. He knew that Egidius and his much younger cousin, Laetus, had been very close, but this display of grieving sottery irritated Malthus.

"Three Stones ... near Iudris Meadows..."

"Where you exterminated that battle-clan?" Malthus' head tilted back, rising to an alert angle. He had given permission for Laetus to take a sizeable force against the hamlet, more than enough to have taken on whatever the lycans might have been able to field. There wasn't a surviving battle-clan in the area, just farmers. Around three weeks ago, Lokynen and Phelan had come from Three Stones insisting on a private talk with Claw. *Did they tell him about this? And he said nothing to me? Why hide a victory?*

"Yes. Oh, hell, it seemed so easy. Just a little hamlet. Laetus wanted to lead it himself. To show me what he could do, you know? I let him. Gods of Hell, I should have been with him."

"What happened, damn it. Get to the point! What went wrong?"

"They were wiped out. No one escaped, not even the three brukulacos I sent. Since then, the hamlet raised a fort around their perimeters ... and an ugly abatis that would be hell to get past."

"How do you know he failed to escape?"

A long sob came from Egidius and he took another drag from the bottle. "They piked his head above the gates. I saw it."

"How could this happen?" Malthus searched his memories of Lokynen. That mon had a stench of power about him. Lokynen must have been part of the force that defeated Malthus' units. But what kind of force? He needed more information.

"That's what I keep asking myself."

"They had to have had help of some kind. And it didn't come from a battle-clan. There are none left in the east here." Malthus' thoughts circled around and around.

"Remember those odd prints we found when those Rakshasha scouts were killed? I asked then if you thought it might be yuwenghau and you laughed at me."

"Yuwenghau." The word tasted nasty in his mouth. Lokynen had to be yuwenghau. Malthus connected more pieces together. Lokynen had to be Lokynen Willidar the Battle-Master, a very dangerous yuwenghau, and the odds were that he was not the only one. Lokynen had spent time with both Claw and the priest. Was the priest also yuwenghau? "We need weapons from the godwar. There's a rumor that Lord Daemon found a cache of them. He'll want something in trade, and I have an idea of just what to give him. Call the others."

Malthus held back on informing Egidius that Lord Daemon, principle advisor to Queen Tomyrilen was actually Lord Hoon, possibly the most dangerous vampire in existence. The

golden band on Malthus' hand that concealed his nature had been created by Brandrahoon for his brother, Waejonan the Accursed.

* * * *

Pandeena answered the knock on her door with a knot of irritation in her middle. "If that's you again, Odhran, go away."

"It isn't."

A smile flashed across Pandeena's face at the sweet male tenor that spoke from the other side. She yanked the door open and threw herself onto Hathura.

"If I had known such a greeting awaited me, I would come more often." The Fae kissed her forehead as she ushered him inside. The son of Willodarus God of the Woodlands, Hathura was slender to the point of appearing fragile, yet flaring through the shoulders, translucently pale skinned with white hair and silver eyes. He carried his golden fans tucked into his belt. The points of his ears peeked through his hair, which was held in place by a dark green headband.

"What brings you?" Pandeena fetched a bottle of wine and glasses. She and Hathura had slept together a few times over the centuries, but as with the majority of the minor divines, nothing more than friendship had ever come of it.

Hathura settled onto the sofa and stretched his legs out. "My brother Teakamon said you needed someone who has been to Creeya before."

"I need to talk to the Grandmaster on a matter of some urgency."

The Fae nodded, rolling his wine around on his tongue.
"Nice wine. Are you hunting or enlisting?"

"Neither." Pandeena explained the situation with Brock and Claw.

Hathura listened closely, interrupting from time to time to ask a clarifying question. "It is shame about Claw. He is well regarded among your people. But everyone gets old ... except us."

"Can you take me?"

"Of course." Hathura took another swallow of his wine. "My sister, StealsThunder, is second of thirteen in Lord Channadar's band of chosen. I visit her often at court."

"Can we go now?"

Hathura finished his wine, nodded and rose, reaching for Pandeena. "Give me your hand. Once I have taken you, you should be able to get back there on your own if need be."

Pandeena felt the betraying tingle throughout her body that presaged a Jump and then they vanished from her apartments.

They appeared in the Great Central Hall of the palace of the grandmaster. Pandeena sucked in a sharp breath at the glory of it. The huge chamber was beautiful, with its forest of green-veined marble columns, three-story high groin vaults and ribbed arches that merged one into the other to form curving conchoidal points, and broad skylights in a tremendous central dome. Broad galleries looked down upon the chamber, sweeping along the sides, reached by wide staircases.

Sofas, chairs, and tables formed small alcoves throughout the room. In the middle stood a half rail around a descending stairway that led to a cloverleaf of shops and cafes beneath the chamber. People were spread throughout in small chatting groups.

"All those myn you see moving through the crowds in the black uniform with the golden threads and the book and the blade embroidered..."

"They're Guildsmyn?"

"Yes."

Pandeena turned completely around with her head back to take in the ceiling. "It's beautiful."

Hathura nodded, and then pointed a small band of Fae. "There's my sister."

Pandeena saw the little white-haired Fae in her elegant mauve breeches and tunic wearing a sword at her shoulder and a pair of golden fans in her sash. "She's tiny."

"Don't let her size fool you. She eats vampires for breakfast."

Pandeena laughed.

"No, seriously. She roasts them with garlic and onions and eats them."

"I'm impressed."

Hathura led the way to a sofa where a black-haired Fae with streaks of fiery orange in his hair held court to a rapt audience of both Fae and humans. As he spoke, a Fae with pale yellow hair entertained them with illusions wrought of her pair of flashing fans and dancing steps.

"I've never seen it done that way before. Doesn't the storyteller do his own illusions?"

Hathura nodded at the storyteller. "Look at his arm. That's Lord Channadar. The dancer is his wife, Dragonfly."

Pandeena noticed that one sleeve hung empty. "He's maimed."

"Yes. Dynarien saved his life with the staff of Dawnhand, but the arm refused to heal properly. A month later, the Guild surgeons were forced to remove the arm when infection set in."

Channadar spotted Hathura and smiled at him, an impish turn at the corners of his lips. "Hathura, welcome back."

Hathura crossed the room and joined the rest of the Fae and their audience.

Channadar regarded everyone. "I fear we must continue our story later. We must greet our kinsman."

A dark-haired human with doves resting on her arms, rose suddenly and the birds flew in all directions. She knelt before Pandeena and kissed her hand. "Holy One."

Pandeena licked her lips and wondered how the woman had detected her. "Please stand up."

The woman stood and pushed her sleeve up, revealing the crescent moon and stars. "I'm Chucomei Who Calls the Birds, the Mage of Wings, and I serve your mother."

"A Talian paladin?"

"Yes."

"Tala is my grandmother, not my mother." Pandeena smiled and extended her hand. "I'm Pandeena Moonbow."

"Second Mother of the Lycan." Chucomei's hand went to her mouth.

A tall golden skinned and golden-eyed Fae came to stand beside Chucomei with a smile. "Welcome to Creeya."

His hand rested on one fan as he regarded Pandeena.

She extended her hand to him. "You must be Tiderider, First of Thirteen."

His eyes slewed toward Hathura with a tiny bow. "You've taught her well, kinsman."

StealsThunder took that moment to throw her arms around her brother and he swung her off the ground into a hug that brought a delighted laugh from her.

"What brings us such intriguing company?" Channadar gestured at Pandeena with a closed fan, although the question was directed at Hathura.

"A matter of urgency, Lord Channadar. Pandeena needs to speak with the Grand Master."

Channadar lifted an eyebrow and then gestured with his fan at the white-blond Fae who had been dancing his story for him. "Isn't that Aramyn over there?"

"I'll fetch him." She sped off.

Channadar's lips formed an impish smile. "My Dragonfly. My wife."

Pandeena dipped her shoulders to him politely. "She's beautiful."

"Yes, she is."

Dragonfly returned with an innocuous looking man in a Guild uniform. "This is Aramyn; he should be able to help you."

"What brings you here?" Aramyn was a clean-shaven, dark-haired mon with regular features and nothing to set him apart as anything special except for his chestnut eyes. If it had not been for the uniform, Pandeena would have taken him for a servant—or a farmer.

"I need to speak with the Grand Master. I'm looking for a certain Guildsmon."

"Why?" The cool detachment in his voice belied the seriousness of the simple question.

Pandeena guessed that he was wondering if she had come seeking vengeance against the mon—it was not unheard according to Hathura. "I'm looking Brock Redhand. His brother is dying."

"Tell him all of it," Hathura urged when Aramyn looked uncertain.

"Somewhere private?"

Aramyn nodded and led Pandeena with Hathura in tow down a hallway and off into a side corridor that had dozens of branching rooms.

There they sat while Pandeena poured out the story about Claw and the Serpent.

"I think that Claw is being poisoned somehow, but I've Read him and can find nothing." Pandeena leaned across the table.

"You know that you'll not only be involving Brock, but the Guild itself?" Aramyn sat with his arms folded casually in front of him.

"I was afraid that I might be."

"That makes you nervous?"

Pandeena's lips pressed together tightly. "A bit. We try hard not to introduce ethics to Clan lands that are not Clan. But unusual circumstances..."

Aramyn looked thoughtful. "I nearly caught him once."

"The Serpent?"

The Guildsmon nodded.

"I didn't know you operated in Waejontor."

"We don't normally. It was right after those battle-clans found his estate and laboratories. The crime was so terrible ... genocide on a massive scale. Before they fled ahead of the clan, they used a device we call a Serpent's Tooth to inject every lycan on the estate with a massive dose of Devil's Silver. They were all dying by the time the Clan arrived. In addition to that, he murdered a Guildsmon named Dyllys, a lycan agent, who had uncovered the estate's location. He rited her."

"Oh gods..." Pandeena's face turned ashen.

"Precisely. Come back tomorrow, and I'll have that appointment set up for you. Just talk to Queiggy at the front desk to the Guild wing."

"Thank you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

BLOOD HARVEST

Adolf paced Gunther's antechamber wearing an irritable expression. "We can't wait much longer. They're investing him as duke in two days and declaring him a prince of Angrim."

"The only reason they aren't simply crowning him king is because Hartmut isn't ready to declare the others are all dead." Mikolai drew his feet up into the chair, pulled off his carpet slippers, and rubbed his toes.

Gunther reclined on the sofa with his hands behind his head, looking bored. "We're doing it tomorrow."

"Why the hell did we have to wait so long?" Adolf grumbled. "I've been ready to stick him since the day Gerik died."

"Gerik should have his vengeance," said Emil.

Gunther drew an exaggerated breath and exhaled loudly. "Because, the timing had to be right to have the best impact. The whole palace is ready for an investiture. The poor little duke dies, and here I am ready to step into his place."

"And just whose idea was that?" demanded Zygmunt, fiddling with his dagger restlessly.

Gunther gave him a silencing glare. "Whose do you think it was?" When no one answered, Gunther asked again, "Well?"

Adolf stopped pacing and looked at Gunther. "Brainerd's?"

"Exactly. And he'll be helping us by the way. He picked the spot, decided the time, and arranged for only his myn to be on duty in the gardens. If anyone asks, Jedrik and Dobrogost will say that we were never in the gardens during their watch. He also has a few surprises I can't discuss. You'll all meet me here after lunch tomorrow and I'll take you there. Iwona will bring Lukasz to us."

"Do we all get to stick him?" asked Flawiusz.

"I'll decide when the time comes. Certainly if he tries to break past you and escape then you will have to stick him and stop him. But I seriously doubt that will happen."

"Why?" Adolf started to pace again.

"I said, Brainerd has some surprises planned. That's all you need to know. Now stop acting like children. If you needed to know, I'd tell you. You don't, so I'm not going to. And that's all there is to it."

"But why can't we each bloody him?" Adolf repeated.

Gunther glared at Adolf. "That Euris that Talons brought into the palace to look after Berran is a pagan hellspawn. He can Read bodies. He'll know the exact moment that Lukasz died. We don't want to be anywhere near the gardens when Lukasz dies. Instead, we grab the schvartzer, mortally wound him, and hide him in the thickets to die where no one can easily find him. We get faraway while he's still dying so they can't connect us to it. Timing is everything. Now stop asking questions."

"They'll tear the gardens apart looking for him," said Adolf.

"And he'll be dead when they find him. I've already found the perfect spot to stash him. I know precisely where to stick him so he can't call for help and will die at the proper rate."

There came a knock at the door and Jedrik let himself inside. "I knew I'd find you here." He scanned their eager faces, noting that only Gunther seemed dispassionate. "Brainerd wants you all in the Kill Room for a briefing immediately. You must be fast and efficient tomorrow. He has assignments for each of you."

* * * *

Iwona kissed Lukasz thoroughly just before slipping from his bed in the early hours of the morning. "Remember that you're meeting me in the garden after lunch for a special treat. I'm going to give you a present you'll never forget."

"I'll remember. I promise," said Lukasz eagerly.

Two hours past dawn brought the tailors, making last minute fittings for his white and ivory investiture robes. A walk through of the ritual followed. Throughout it all, the only thing that Lukasz could think of was meeting Iwona in the garden. He suspected that she intended it to be a sweet assignation in one of the hidden little trysting spots where the undisciplined vegetation was thickest.

"What's the matter with you, Lukasz?" Hartmut demanded. "I've never seen you so distracted."

The boy jumped and straightened. "I'm sorry. I have a lot on my mind. This is a big step. And ... and I'm still grieving for Uncle Stefan." He lowered his eyes.

Hartmut hugged him. "Boy, we all miss Stefan. However, tomorrow is your birthday and the sooner this is done the better it will be for the realm."

"I understand." Lukasz forced himself to concentrate and made it through the last of the practice without a problem. That satisfied Hartmut enough to let him go after lunch for a bit of free time. Lukasz wore his elegant white robes outside instead of changing first because he wanted Iwona to see him in them.

He struggled not to race through the halls, but to walk at a sedate pace lest he draw attention. That was when he noticed the two guards that seemed to be shadowing him. Lukasz bolted up the stairs, raced down the hall, and then descended the kitchen stairs. He winked at Ermengard who was taking tarts from the oven, but did not stop for one as he usually did.

Lukasz emerged from the kitchen into the gardens and headed off to his right, looking for the bench where he expected to find Iwona. He passed two guards that he recognized as Dobrogost and Jedrik. They gave him a pleasant nod and continued on their rounds, heading in the opposite direction from him. Lukasz found Iwona sitting alone with her hands in her lap. When the young duke extended his arms to her, she stood up and laughed gaily. "Catch me."

Iwona lifted her skirts high, tantalizing him with her bare legs, and ran down the path. Lukasz grinned and ran after her.

Every time he caught up with her, she darted ahead of him again. "Iwona. Wait."

She giggled, let him almost catch her, and dashed into the willow thickets near the stream.

Lukasz burst through a stand of bushes and realized that Iwona had vanished. He stood glancing about. "Iwona, where are you?"

Gunther and his companions rose from the hedges and bushes, closing in a half circle in front of him with Iwona at Gunther's side. They had their long daggers out, and their eyes glittered with malice.

* * * *

Talons rose from the luncheon table when she saw Berran getting to his feet. "I'm meeting a friend in the garden, would you like to come with me?"

"A little bit of red feathers?" Berran asked.

"He's happier if he gets some attention in the afternoons."

"Certainly, just remember I don't move fast."

"Not a problem."

Warenhari and Vernados fell into step behind them, far enough back to be unobtrusive, but close enough to reach them if they ran into trouble.

"Wait! Wait, princess!"

A bevy of Beltrian ladies led by Lady Minka Chudzik, Gunther's mother, rushed down on Talons and Berran.

Talons halted with a glance over her shoulder at Warenhari.

He shrugged. "I didn't tell'em."

Lady Minka arrived out of breath. "What kind of dress will you be wearing tomorrow, Princess Talons?"

Talons gave Minka a cold stare. "I don't wear dresses."

"But—but surely..."

"Not for kings. Not for emperors. Not even for gods."

Minka shivered visibly, her face lost some of its brightness.

"Perhaps you would, at least, look at ours?"

"They've no time for you, Minka," said Lady Magnilda Dreslin.

The left corner of Talons' mouth quirked as she shared a glance with Berran. As fragile as Magnilda had seemed on the road to Varsyava, she was anything but that once she was back in her element.

Talons and Berran kept walking as his mother squared off with Minka and lit into her.

"What do you make of that?" Talons asked Berran as they finally got out of earshot of the growing quarrel.

Berran shrugged. "I would have thought you'd understand. Being a princess and all."

"I've never been a player. Your mother seems to smell some rot there."

"She's good at it. She hasn't appreciated the way they treated you before. And the turn around since it came out that you're a princess has her totally disgusted with them."

Talons chuckled darkly.

* * * *

Lukasz could feel the winds of their hate blowing across him. He drew his dagger, backing toward the willows. "What do you want?"

"We've come for your life," Gunther said in a flat voice.

Iwona extended her hand to Gunther and he laid several gold coins into it. She placed a kiss on Gunther's cheek. "Kill the schvartzer."

Then she scampered away as if nothing were happening.

Lukasz went sick inside, realizing that all those nights with Iwona telling him that she loved him had been a lie: she wanted him dead as much as Gunther. He should have listened to Talons. Knowing that he could not fight so many, Lukasz scanned for an avenue of retreat.

The attack came with chill precision.

Huge hands, so large they engulfed his wrists, grabbed Lukasz from behind and forced his blade from his grip. He heard his dagger splash into the stream. Lukasz struggled futilely in his captor's grasp, trying to stomp on his booted instep. The mon gave him a tremendous shake that rattled his head.

Then the mon holding him pinioned his wrists together with one hand, and Lukasz stiffened suddenly as a searing pain burned through his ribs. His mouth moving like a landed fish, Lukasz lowered his eyes to see the point of a stiletto withdrawing from his ribs as it was pulled from his back. The stiletto pierced him a second time, higher up and on the opposite side. The arcane, well-designed blend of poisons and venoms spread swiftly through his body, leaving him nauseated and weak. His brow furrowed deeply, and his lips trembled, drawing together and then peeling back from his teeth as he fought for each lungful of air.

"Damn ... you ... all..." Lukasz gritted each word out between his teeth.

Zygmunt grabbed Lukasz by the hair, pulled his head back, and forced a folded cloth into Lukasz's mouth with his fingers in the middle of the thick wad so that he could not be bitten. Mikolai whipped a piece of rope over Lukasz's head. Zygmunt shifted his fingers, and Mikolai snapped the rope in place, tying the gag smartly.

"That took the fight out of him," said a deep masculine voice behind Lukasz, somehow familiar through the muffling cloth.

"Hold him." Gunther plunged his heirloom blade into Lukasz's right breast, through the pectoral muscles and deep into the young duke's lungs.

His face twisting into a grimace of agony, Lukasz's legs shook, and his breath came in sharp gasps through his parted lips. Fear as intense as his pain sang a death song through his body and awareness. *You've killed me.*

With an adroit lift, Gunther freed his dagger. He tilted his head to the side, standing casually with one hand on his hip, the dagger poised for another strike as he gauged the three splotches of blood spreading across Lukasz's white robes. His lips twitched into a smile of satisfaction. "Let the schvartzer go."

The big mon holding Lukasz's wrists released him with a shove.

Lukasz staggered two steps forward, and collapsed, falling against a large willow tree, enervated by the shock of his wounds and the poison burning in his veins. He could see the mon now, all in black, his face masked and a hat pulled low.

Through his clouding awareness, Lukasz made all the connections that he had resisted making before and he knew who the mon was: *Brainerd stabbed me.*

Another piece of Lukasz's self-perceived reality shattered and dissolved like the parting mists of illusion.

"Finish here, then join me in the Killing Room." Brainerd departed.

Lukasz coughed up blood and froth, unable to think beyond his suffering. His fingers dug into the soil, getting mud and bits of grass beneath his nails as he tried to crawl toward the stream.

"Tie his ankles," ordered Gunther.

They worked as a team to subdue Lukasz, moving efficiently together. Zygmunt seized Lukasz by the ankles, flipped him over, and jerked him flat. He dragged Lukasz back, dropping him in front of Mikolai and Emil.

The instant that Zygmunt released him, Lukasz kicked at Mikolai as Emil grasped one of his ankles. Jarogniew and Flawiusz grabbed his legs and held them down. Adolf pinned Lukasz's shoulders to the ground with his knees and imprisoned his wrists.

Mikolai produced several strong cords from his pouch. Emil jerked Lukasz's boots off and kept his ankles still while Mikolai bound them. Lukasz struggled to pull free.

"Stop squirming, you filthy schvartzer!" Zygmunt shoved his blade into Lukasz's ribs with a twist.

Lukasz spasmed, groaning. Pain glazed his eyes. *Oh gods, I huuuuurt.*

One by one the youths stood up until only Adolf rested on Lukasz.

Empty-eyed and emotionless, Gunther regarded Lukasz as if the duke were merely an unwanted animal to be dispatched. "Pull his arms out of the way."

Zygmunt sheathed his dagger, snatched Lukasz's wrists and jerked his arms straight back above his head. "Here's more of what you deserve."

Mikolai tied Lukasz's wrists together, and then Adolf got to his feet.

Lying there, his helplessness secured, adrenaline warred with his wounds to keep Lukasz conscious.

Gunther knelt, and pushed his dagger under the duke's sternum, rotating it to the right so that the blood would empty into his stomach cavity, and slow the collapse of his lungs. Lukasz's body jerked and blood spewed from around the hole onto Gunther as he withdrew his blade with bits of Lukasz's organs on it.

The gag muffled Lukasz's screams and sopped up the blood gathering in his mouth. He curled into a fetal ball on his side, his fingers crumpling the torn edge of his robe, shoving it against the wound beneath his breastbone in a futile reflex.

"There, that should do it." Gunther wiped his blade and sheathed it. "Time to hide him."

Zygmunt released Lukasz, leaving him clutching his wounds while his life leaked out around his corded wrists. Far more than his body was dying: between Iwona's betrayal, Brainerd's treason, and Gunther's treachery, Lukasz felt as if his world had become full of lies.

They hovered around Lukasz with their eyes shining like hungry predators.

"Shouldn't we finish the cockwhore?" Mikolai toed Lukasz in the side, making him flinch.

"No, that Reader'll know exactly when he died. We must be well away from him and have our alibis in place."

Adolf toyed with his blade impatiently, a sneer playing across his lips as he watched Lukasz's white tunic steadily turning crimson. "Look here, Gunther. We should each stick the schvartzer once. Vengeance for Gerik."

A murmur of agreement ran through the boys, and Gunther realized how aroused by bloodlust they all were at seeing Lukasz bound and bleeding. He could easily lose control of them if he refused. "Be quick about it. We mustn't get caught here."

Lukasz's pain was so terrible that he whimpered between fits of coughing. The young duke met his cousin's eyes, searching for reasons in their depths, accusing with a groan of agony.

Gunther spat on him. "No schvartzer bastard is going to sit the throne."

They have murdered me for being born the wrong color.

"Asshole." Zygmunt Lukasz in his wounds.

Lukasz cried out behind the muting gag, which set off another fit of coughing. Blood soaked the gag and ran from the corners of his mouth.

"We'll all stick him. Vengeance for Gerik." Flawiusz knelt, and shoved Lukasz onto his back. Drawing his blade, Flawiusz

debated where to insert it. The heart and the brain were out according to Gunther's plan.

Lukasz's hands slid along his blood-stiffened robe, wiggling his fingers at the blade, his eyes pleading with Flawiusz not to stab him.

"Get his hands out of my way!" Flawiusz spat in Lukasz's face.

Emil and Jarogniew seized Lukasz's arms, yanked them above his head, and sat on them to hold his torso exposed.

Lukasz whimpered.

"Listen to him," said Emil. "He sounds like a dog."

Adolf sliced Lukasz's tunic open, cutting away large chunks of cloth and tossing them into the stream. Another flash of the blade, and Adolf tore Lukasz's pants down to his knees. "Pick your targets. Vengeance for Gerik."

Cold air blew across Lukasz's stripped body, chilling his flesh while the humiliation of his divestiture gilded his anguish with a hopeless wintry despair of the spirit. *Please, White Lady, let it end. Let it end.*

Adolf crouched on his haunches, watching the blood welling from the wounds and running down to pool beneath Lukasz. He dipped his fingers into the blood and wrote "asshole" across the top of Lukasz's chest.

They all snickered except Gunther, who might as well have been dead considering the total absence of emotion in his face and voice. He was there with the others, but stood somehow removed from them. Lukasz saw it, even if the others failed to.

If the eyes are windows on the soul, thought Lukasz, then there is no soul behind Gunther's windows.

"Open him up like a pig." Flawiusz thrust his blade into the duke's navel, ripping Lukasz halfway to his groin so that his severed entrails showed.

Lukasz's eyes bulged and he vomited blood against the gag, some of which oozed around it to dribble across his cheeks and chin. *Oh gawwds, the paaain. Let it end.*

Adolf slipped his blade into Lukasz's side beneath his ribs with exquisite slowness, enjoying the feel of the flesh parting, the sounds it made going in, and the sounds that Lukasz made. Then Adolf yanked the dagger down to Lukasz's hipbones, and pulled it out. "Like that?"

Tears soaked Lukasz's face as he writhed.

"Our god has a special place in hell for your kind." Gunther squatted, and shifted the blade in his hands.

Lukasz tensed in anticipation of the blow, and shuddered when it plunged into his ribs. *Let me die soon. Let it be over.*

"My turn." Emil, looked for a good spot that had not yet been bloodied. He crowded Gunther, whose sweating hand lost its grip on his golden-hilted dagger.

Lukasz convulsed. His vision diminished and the boys became faceless shadow shapes delivering him pain from all directions, without names to tell him which one had just pierced him with their searing tongues. It felt as if he had been suffering for hours, when it had been just three handfuls of minutes since Brainerd first stabbed him.

Gunther slipped sidewise and away from Lukasz. He reached for his dagger, but found Emil, Mikolai, and

Jarogniew blocking him. "Get it over with," Gunther grumbled. "It's taking too long. We must hide him."

"My turn, my turn," chorused Mikolai and Jarogniew, jostling Emil to the point that he barely managed to get his blade into Lukasz.

"I didn't get a good spot," Emil said. "They bumped me."

"Stop it," Gunther hissed at them. "He's dying too fast."

"I haven't done it yet." Mikolai shoved Emil out of his way. "I want to stick the pig."

Emil tumbled into Gunther, preventing him from reaching his blade still lodged in Lukasz's ribs.

Mikolai glanced over Lukasz's body, found a spot that had not been torn open yet, and stabbed the duke through the kidneys. "There! I did it. I stuck the little bastard."

The acute pain of the kidney strike paralyzed Lukasz. He lay unmoving, his eyes staring at nothing.

"Everyone's gotten a good spot, but me," Jarogniew said bitterly.

"Just do it," Gunther growled. "Haven't you understood anything I've said? We've got to hide him before he has time to die. If the Reader matches his time of death to our presence in the garden—"

Jarogniew threw Gunther an irritated look and administered a series of petulant jabs into Lukasz's hip and thigh. "I'm finished. Where're we going to stash him?"

Adolf pulled a stout pole from beneath the bushes with which to carry Lukasz like a deer carcass, suspended by his bound limbs. He put one end of the stick between Lukasz's

wrists and sidled down to the other end. Adolf lifted Lukasz's legs up and reached through them for the pole butt.

"We'll shove his body into that deep stand of briars near the wall and cover him up good." Gunther thrust Emil and Mikolai out of his way and went for his dagger again. "We need to be fast. He won't last much longer."

Mikolai shrugged. "He's already dead. He hasn't moved since I stabbed him."

Adolf grasped the pole, drew it between Lukasz's legs, and settled it on his shoulder. "Zygmunt, get the other end. Oh, my god!"

Dropping the pole in terror, Adolf threw himself backwards, landed on his butt, and tried to scramble out of the way on his hands and heels.

Little Bit gave an angry squawk, seized Adolf's neck in its beak and lifted him off the ground. It shook Adolf in fury. Flesh parted and bone gave way with a loud snap.

Gunther panicked and abandoned his blade in Lukasz's body.

The rest of the boys scattered, fleeing in all directions.

Little Bit ripped Adolf to shreds and looked around for the others.

Lukasz entered a state of grace that dulled his suffering and distanced his mind with the clarity of the dying.

They made a mess of me, Lukasz thought with odd detachment. *Gunda will never get me clean.*

He imagined Gunda bathing his dead body and weeping. It troubled Lukasz. He did not want Gunda to cry.

Little Bit nuzzled Lukasz, crooning with concern. Lukasz's gaze traveled down to the blade protruding from him. *They'll know ... when they find me ... Gunther did it.*

Enough evidence remained to betray his murderers. Berran and Talons would not let his death go unavenged. A sense of peace descended on Lukasz as darkness enveloped him.

Little Bit gave a resounding shriek that echoed throughout the castle grounds.

* * * *

Jedrik and Dobrogost shared uneasy glances as their patrol of the gardens dragged on and there was no sight of the boys. Brainerd had already passed them by several minutes ago, heading for the stables to look busy until returning to the salle once Jedrik alerted him that the boys had finished the job.

"They're taking too long," muttered Jedrik.

Dobrogost shook his head, his expression schooled to pleasantness to hide the nature of his softly spoken words. "Brainerd should have let us do it."

"He had his reasons. They won't dare touch Gunther. They'd hang us without a thought."

"They wouldn't catch us."

"Maybe ... uh oh, trouble coming." Jedrik pointed at the far side of the gardens as two figures walked steadily toward them.

"Damn it, Lady Minka was supposed to keep them occupied." Dobrogost sucked in a breath and started walking as if nothing were untoward.

Talons and Berran crossed the path through the rose gardens and headed for the path into the thicketed sections.

"Hello, my lady, Lord Berran," said Jedrik. "It's a nice day for a walk."

"It is." Talons eyed him in a way that sent a shiver up Jedrik's spine.

Unnatural woman. Brainerd will bleed her. "The snow jasmine is in bloom. There is a broad planting of it if you take that path."

"We didn't come to look at snow jasmine," Berran cut in.

Talons and Berran walked on as if the two guards were not there. A moment later, Jedrik spotted Warenhari and Vernados shadowing the pair protectively.

"Warn Brainerd. I'll wait for the boys."

Dobrogost obeyed.

A shrill, angry cry came from the farthest parts of the garden.

"Gryphon!" Jedrik's stomach clenched.

Four boys ran pell-mell into him. He grabbed Emil. "Stop all of you!"

Accustomed to working with Jedrik, Emil, Jarogniew, Flawiusz, and Mikolai all halted.

"Gryphon got Adolf," said Emil with his eyes wide and terror-filled.

Jedrik flicked his gaze across them. Judging by the amount of blood on them, they must have made a mess of Lukasz. "Butchered the little schvartzer, did you? Come on, we can't let anyone see you like this."

He jerked their shirts off them, rolled the shirts up, and rushed them to a secret entrance into the manor.

"Where's Gunther and Zygmunt?"

The boys looked at each other and shook their heads. "We don't know," said Emil.

* * * *

Berran and Talons walked into the garden, heading for the wilder parts where Talons liked to visit with Little Bit. Warenhari and Vernados followed.

Little Bit's cry of rage echoed through the grounds.

Talons immediately ran in that direction, leaving Berran to hobble after her, cursing. Three boys raced past him, and nearly knocked him down in their rush. Berran spotted Gunther running behind them, and grabbed him, lifting him off the ground. His leg might be lame, but his arms were not.

"Let me go, let me go," Gunther screamed, squirming in Berran's grasp. "There's a gryphon in the garden."

"Yes, I know," Berran said, his words as sharp and chill as ice. "What did you do to Lukasz?"

"Nothing. Gryphon got him."

"Not bloody likely."

Warenhari and Vernados emerged into the open beside Berran. Vernados seized Gunther, and Berran released the boy. With a quick movement, Vernados bound Gunther's hands behind his back with a large handkerchief.

"I didn't do anything," Gunther protested. "I'm royalty, you can't do this."

"Shut him up," Berran snarled.

Warenhari stuffed his glove in Gunther's mouth and tied it in place with a handkerchief. "You think he hurt Lukasz?"

"That's exactly what I think. Come on."

Vernados' expression darkened. "If Little Otter's hurt, I'll kill him."

Warenhari dragged Gunther toward the sound of Little Bit's angry noises.

Berran sucked in a breath when he saw Talons cradling Lukasz's blood-drenched body, the massive wounds. The young duke's head lolled lifelessly against her shoulder, his bound wrists rested on his sternum, and his corded ankles held his legs together draped over Talons' arm. The sleeves of his investiture robes held the back onto Lukasz, but the front was gone completely. His attackers must have removed it so they could watch his flesh part beneath their blades. His small clothes and Most of his pants were gone, except for a few bloody shreds dangling from his calves.

Berran brushed a gore-crusted string of Lukasz's hair back and saw the gag. He imagined the boy's terror, caught like that and it sickened. General Dreslin's stomach clenched up and then went hollow. His initial grief gave way to a rage as cold and implacable as stone on a winter's night. The golden hilt of the blade standing in the boy's ribs drew his eyes, and Berran recognized the distinctive ornamentation. His lips curled back from his teeth. "I believe that's yours."

Gunther thrashed, but not a word escaped the gag.

Berran's voice went soft as a blade in a velvet sheath. "You'll hang for this. By my god, you'll hang, if I have to do it myself."

Talons rose with Lukasz in her arms, and dismissed her troubled gryphon. "You've caught the murderer?"

"Yes. That's Gunther's blade."

Vernados' face went devoid of expression, but the predator that Talons had perceived in his eyes looked out of his dark orbs. Standing near Lukasz's legs, he trailed his finger down the boy's calf, and muttered in a voice both dark and empty, "I taught him to swim."

"He may have done the sticking," said Talons grimly, "but I wager there's someone older behind it."

"Is Lukasz dead?" Berran's throat constricted. He gave Gunther another hard shake.

"Not yet. It's time you met my husband."

Berran blinked, startled by the change of subject. "I care more about Lukasz than meeting your husband."

Talons' cold eyes promised a terrible vengeance to whoever was behind this attack, and only Berran's matching rage kept him from shivering before her gaze. "He's the only one who can save Lukasz."

She strode off, and Berran turned to Warenhari, pointing at a nearby oak tree whose branches overhung the blood soaked ground. "Hang him."

Vernados headed off to fetch the rope.

"We'll have it done before the Beltrians can interfere," vowed Warenhari.

Berran hobbled off after Talons as quickly as he could. Behind him, Warenhari shoved Gunther up against the oak and began to beat the youth with his fists, gritting between his clenched teeth, "This is for Lukasz."

Gunther spewed blood when an especially hard blow landed in his stomach, doubling him over.

Vernados passed Berran, returning with the rope and Berran gave him a grim, satisfied smile, certain that the next time he saw Gunther, it would be as a corpse.

* * * *

Talons spread a fraction of her divine aura over Lukasz to hold him together so that he would not die before she could get help for him. She fed her strengths and energies into his failing body. Talons prayed that it would be enough for the moment since she was a very minor yuwenghau, and one not born to the divine blood, but made from it when Isranon raised her from the dead in the sacred realm of Imralon. She was still very new to her gifts, but she had heard her husband, Dynarien, speak of doing this for others. However, she was not a Reader—of if she was, she had not learned how to do it yet—and could not tell how effectual her attempts were to help Lukasz.

The nearest door into the palace led through the kitchens. Ermengard and Gunda were there at the table chatting while Ermengard chopped vegetables. At the sight of Talons carrying Lukasz, Ermengard dropped her knife and sprang to her feet.

Gunda left her chair with a shriek. "They've murdered him!"

Ermengard grabbed Gunda and they held each other, weeping.

Talons passed them, entered the hallway, and started up the stairs with Berran hobbling after her as fast as he could manage and cursing his bad leg.

Zyta saw them, dropped her basket of laundry in horror, and followed with tears in her eyes. Maurychi encountered them in the hallway of the second floor, saw Zyta, and he put a comforting arm around her as they also followed.

"They'll pay for this," Maurychi said.

"I loved him so," Zyta moaned. "He was such a good boy. Kind and gentle."

More people began to trail after Talons and Berran. Loud wailing echoed through the halls.

Captain Yevhen overtook Berran. "Who did it?"

"Gunther," Berran said curtly and walked on.

Yevhen turned aside and went after Hartmut.

By then a long line had formed behind Talons and Berran. Saelac and Wilmot shoved through the crowd with several other Dresliners and cleared a path for Talons and Berran.

* * * *

When the boys had scattered before Little Bit, not all of them had fled in the same direction. Zygmunt crouched in the bushes and crept closer once he saw Talons dismiss the gryphon. He stifled a cry of outrage when he saw Warenhari brutally beating Gunther, who was the rightful king with Lukasz dead. Zygmunt considered putting his blade in Warenhari's back, but Vernados returned before he could gather his nerve to attack the much larger and more experienced Warenhari. The two myn went about their tasks

without speaking, cold and efficient. They removed the handkerchief from Gunther's wrists. As soon as the binding came free, Gunther struck at Warenhari with his fists. Warenhari's head jerked to the side, avoiding the blow, and he flipped Gunther around, slamming the youth face forward into the tree as he lifted him off the ground. Vernados pinioned Gunther's wrists and bound them in heavy cords before doing the same to his ankles.

Zygmunt sheathed his blade in despair, knowing that he could not fight them both, and self-preservation sounded a louder clarion call in his heart than rescuing his liege-lord. Instead, he watched in horror as Vernados swiftly formed a stout hangman's noose, and tested the strength of his knots. He put the noose around Gunther's neck, and snugged it down, getting it as tight as possible so that Gunther's breathing and the passage of blood through the prince's carotid arteries would both be cut off as soon as the prince's weight forced the final bit of slack from the noose. Grasping Gunther under the armpits, Warenhari lifted him as high as he could. Vernados threw the rope over a strong branch, and gave it a yank to test it, nearly dragging Gunther from Warenhari's grip.

Indicating with a nod that he had finished, Vernados moved a few paces back, and glanced at the damp splotch on the ground where Lukasz had bled and above which his murderer would soon be dangling. His eyes wide with terror, Gunther squirmed and thrashed, but it availed him naught. Warenhari dropped him and stepped away, sketching the Aroanan rune. Gunther kicked his legs as he swung, his body

twisting in its quest for air, but that only made the noose tighten that much more.

Vernados gave the rope several sharp jerks that lifted Gunther still higher, wrapped the end around the trunk of the oak tree, and tied it securely. He folded his arm, stepped back, and leaned against a tree with a casual air. While they watched, Gunther's face turned first purple and then black, his struggles slowed and finally stopped. The Beltrian prince hung lifeless in the noose, the small circling swings of his body gradually ended, and his corpse sagged like the penduline fruit of the gallows tree.

Vernados removed the gag and stuffed it in his pocket with an approving nod as Gunther's swollen tongue popped forth. He clapped Warenhari on the back and they walked off. "A simple garroting would have been faster, but we did well."

"You've done many of those?"

"When I was learning my father's trade ... several."

"Oh, that's right, your father was—"

"The Duke's executioner."

Zygmunt's stomach soured, bile rose to his throat, and he repressed an urge to vomit. He forced himself to steal back through the bushes until he was well away from the grisly scene. At first, he wanted to break into a run, but Brainerd's training overrode his instincts, and he glanced down at himself. Lukasz's blood had splattered his tunic. If the guards saw him like this, he would be arrested for murder. He pulled his tunic off, rolled it up so that the blood would not show, and walked with deliberate casualness to the side door of the salle. The people who would normally be there were all off on

the east wing, trying to discover what had happened. So Zygmunt was able to stroll through to the armory and down into the Killing Room.

* * * *

Brainerd had one horse that he never let anyone touch but himself. It had been a present from Gunther's father, Lord Hagen. The beast was a heavily built stallion that could carry him easily in full plate armor while fully barded. He named it Wrath.

When he left the boys after stabbing Lukasz, Brainerd came directly here and set to grooming Wrath. If anyone asked where he had been during the attack they would be told that he had been busy with the horse all afternoon, getting him ready for tomorrow's investiture procession.

"Hsst, Brainerd."

The armsmaster looked up and saw Dobrogost leaning against the door to the box stall. "What is it?"

Dobrogost gestured with his head toward a darkened corner amidst several bales of hay.

Brainerd put his tools away, wiped his hand on his pants, and followed Dobrogost into the shadows. "What is it?"

"Something's gone wrong. The boys took too long. Lady Minka could not keep the schvartzer bitch and Berran out of the gardens long enough. I left Jedrik waiting for the boys."

Shouting erupted from the yard and the garden. Both myn went to see what was happening.

"Damnit," muttered Brainerd seeing Talons with Lukasz. He glanced around to be certain there was no one about in

the stables, but it seemed that everyone had been drawn out into the gardens. "They've found the body already."

"A butchering like that takes time."

"That they didn't have! Get to the Kill Room and wait. I'll join you soon."

* * * *

Hartmut closed his ledger book and stared at Captain Yevhen. "If he dies, there'll be a blood bath in the palace before morning."

Yevhen leaned across the desk, resting on his palms. "There's no if about it, Hartmut. No one survives wounds like that. They must have gone at him like a pack of wolves."

Hartmut shoved his chair back and started walking. "You're saying 'they,' how can you know there was more than one?"

"I've had guards trailing him for weeks. He eluded them for some reason, but not for long. There was not enough time for a single mon to have butchered him like this."

Hartmut inhaled deeply, his head turning to the side in a quest for coherent thought at the image that Yevhen had just conjured in his mind. He spied the people clustered in the corridor around the outer door to Lukasz's suite. "Disperse them. And ... and don't let Brainerd inside."

"You think he had something to do with this?"

"Yes."

As Hartmut forced his way through the crowd watching from the doorway, a hush spread over them. He wondered what that meant. There were four Dresliners in the parlor of

the suite, keeping the crowd outside. They averted their eyes from his face as Hartmut passed them.

* * * *

When they reached Lukasz's bedroom, Berran threw back the quilts and Talons laid the boy down. Berran drew his dagger and cut the gag away, tossing both pieces into the far side of the room. The ropes on Lukasz's wrists and ankles followed.

Talons straightened Lukasz's savaged body.

"Why do this to him?" Berran's voice had an edge of distress as he fought to hold it together. "Why not one merciful stroke?"

Talons looked at him tight-lipped. "Hate."

"Too much hatred's been bred into Angrim and Beltria. This is what comes of it."

Eurus arrived, settled into a chair, stroking Lukasz's forehead in a futile gesture of comfort. The duke's skin was clammy, his face faintly blue around the lips. "He's nearly gone. There's nothing anyone can do. Only a lifemage could save him. And there aren't left. They're all dead. We had one in Varsyava. She was butchered five years ago."

Talons threw back her head and shouted, "Dynarien! Dynarien! Dynarien!"

Her husband appeared in a shimmer of golden light on the far side of the bed. Dynarien wore his golden armor, chain mail, and a golden breastplate with his device of an eagle holding blue roses in its claws and a wreath of blue roses around it. His red gold hair hung loose and wild about his

broad shoulders. A belt with two long blades girded his slender waist and a longsword hung at his shoulder. He glared balefully at the room as if answering a call to battle, spied Talons standing beside the bed where a small bloodied boy lay, and his expression softened.

A gasp went up from the watchers. Berran thought his heart would plunge into his throat the way it caught and hammered in a rapid exchange of still and busy. He could sense the brightly burning divine energies surrounding the newcomer.

"The Twice-Born Son!" Eurus slipped from his chair, and dropped to one knee, his old bones creaking. "Holy One."

"A god," Berran gasped. "She's summoned a god."

"Help my friend Lukasz..." Talons said.

Dynarien grasped Lukasz's wrist and Read him, his eyes growing grave. "I can strengthen him a bit, but I can't heal him. I need donors." The Twice-Born Son of Willodarus pushed up his sleeve and pressed his forearm to Lukasz's. He cast Shared Life and the boy breathed easier, his heart steadied as the divine energies flooded him along with a transfusion of blood.

Talons understood, having been part of such scenes before. "Eurus, match the blood types to Lukasz's and allow those who match into here."

Eurus rose from the floor and stepped into the parlor where he found Warenhari, Vernados, and three other Dreslin myn. He Read them. "Go into him, two at a time."

Then Eurus moved to the door into the corridor where many people were gathered, drawn by the sight or the word

of what had happened, soldiers, servants, and a scattering of noblewomen. Eurus shouted at the crowd. "Form a line. If you wish to help save your duke, form a line. I can only Read you one at a time."

Hartmut and Yevhen arrived. The old steward blanched when he saw all the blood coating Lukasz and the wounds in the duke's body. It was even worse than he had imagined listening to Yevhen. His face twisted and an anguished moan escaped his throat. He dragged a chair to the bedside and gripped Lukasz's limp hand, tears streaming down his face. "You can't die, boy. You can't."

Yevhen and six members of the palace guard immediately started ordering the crowd into a line. The captain pulled Eskild aside and whispered into his ear something that no one else heard. "It's happened. Put our plan into action."

Eskild nodded and departed in a hurry.

Eurus Read each of them, turning away those who were not compatible with Lukasz's blood type, ordering them to return to their chambers or back to their tasks, and sending those who matched into Dynarien. Everyone from servants to nobles clamored to be allowed to help, but Eurus had to refuse most of them because Lukasz's blood type was so uncommon. Dynarien stabilized him, despite the fact that Gunther's blade still protruded from his chest and Eurus was afraid to pull it lest it cause Lukasz to bleed worse.

Dynarien's eyes went distant, thinking furiously. "I'll fetch Britlyn."

Then Dynarien vanished as he had come.

* * * *

Brainerd emerged from the stables and watched Talons carrying Lukasz toward the palace with Berran struggling to keep up. Anger at Gunther threaded him. If the boy had done as he was told, the bitch would not yet know the schvartzer was dead and still be searching for him. Gunther and his friends had wasted precious time butchering the little bastard rather than hiding him.

A small crowd had already begun to form around them, and only Berran's shouts and curses were making them give way. Brainerd crossed the courtyard to the gathered people who were beginning to trail after Talons and Berran.

"What's going on?"

A servant turned a tearful face to him. "Someone murdered the young duke."

Brainerd formed a mask of concern over his features. "Dear god."

"His poor body is torn by terrible wounds."

"What kind of monster would do such a thing?" Brainerd growled.

"Someone without a heart."

Brainerd hurried on to find Hartmut. However, he failed to find the mon in either his study or his offices, so the armsmaster guessed that someone must have already informed the old mon and Hartmut would most likely be sitting with Lukasz's body.

Foolish old mon, weeping over the mongrel bastard no doubt.

An unusual number of the palace guard appeared to be heading for the royal wing, Brainerd wondered at that. There were far too many of them to have been summoned to protect Lukasz's remains. If they were looking for Gunther, they would not find him: the youth had to be safely hidden in the Kill Room by then. The further he traveled, the more crowded the corridor became, until he found himself held back by sheer numbers of the curious and worried four doors from Lukasz's chambers.

Brainerd heard Captain Yevhen and several soldiers trying to disperse the crowd. He started shoving his way through them and finally reached Lukasz's door.

"I need to get inside," Brainerd told Yevhen.

Captain Yevhen eyed him coldly. "You're not allowed in."

"Don't be foolish. If something has happened to the boy, I need to know."

"Hartmut specifically excluded you."

"At least tell me what's going on."

"It isn't for me to say."

"Everyone is saying the duke is dead."

Captain Yevhen shook his head. "I have nothing to say to you."

Brainerd snarled and then headed off to meet with the boys in the Kill Room. Lukasz was dead. He had to be by now. There had been enough poison on the blade that Brainerd slipped through his ribs to have killed a dozen grown myn, much less a single undersized stripling. Furthermore, Brainerd had witnessed the first part of Gunther's and the other boys'

attack. Gunther had chosen his targets well. Lukasz should have drowned in his own blood long ago.

* * * *

As Zygmunt had expected, he found the rest of his surviving companions in the Kill Room with Brainerd and his usual six guardsmyn, which included Dobrogost and Jedrik, all sitting on the benches. He flicked a quick glare at the two guardsmyn who had failed to keep Talons and Berran away from that section of the garden until he and his friends could conceal Lukasz's corpse. Gunther would still be alive if they had done their job right.

Everything had gone wrong.

The air in the chamber felt heavy with tension, not the sense of triumph that Zygmunt and his friends had expected to feel once they had executed the misbegotten duke. Seeing the gryphon with Adolf's neck in its beak had shaken them all badly. Zygmunt knew that his tidings would make it all the worse.

Brainerd looked up at him frowning. "What took you so long? Where's Gunther? We need him."

Zygmunt dropped his eyes, wondering for the first time why Brainerd always said *we* when he meant *I*. "He's dead."

"The gryphon?"

Zygmunt swallowed and shook his head. "Warenhari and Vernados hanged him on Berran's orders." He swallowed again, lowering his head in misery. "Gryphon only got Adolf."

"Bloody Dresliners, thinking they can waltz in here and do what they like," Brainerd snarled. "I'll put at stop to that. At least you made a fine job of that mongrel dog."

"Lukasz is dead?" asked Mikolai.

"How could he not be?" Emil glared at Mikolai. "I got my blade into him right through the kidneys. No thanks to you. You kept jostling me."

"You were supposed to be holding him open so I could get my strike in."

"So were you!"

"I was sitting on his bloody arm. I had to stretch to find a spot that hadn't already been used."

"Shut up," Brainerd ordered. "No quarreling amongst yourselves."

The boys all turned to Brainerd for approval as they detailed what they had done to Lukasz and for a moment their losses were forgotten.

"You did well, all of you. I'm proud of every single one of you. Now I must get back and appear suitably grief-stricken. I want all of you to stay here. I'll have food and bedding brought down. I must see what I can learn and plan our next move. With the royal house destroyed, we will need to choose a king." Brainerd's gaze swept the assembled boys, filling each with appetizing possibilities.

However, as soon as Brainerd departed gloom settled over the boys.

"I'm going to miss Adolf and Gunther," muttered Jarogniew, pulling at a strand of his blond hair that had fallen over his forehead.

Zygmunt listened to the guards discussing bringing down the necessities that Brainerd had ordered and it sounded to him as if they were expecting a siege. "How do you suppose they knew it was Gunther? Do they suspect the rest of us? I don't want to hang."

Emil snarled. "The Dresliners hated him. They're heretics. Besides, the little bastard got what he deserved, trying to get people worshipping demon gods. His so-called White Lady probably has horns and a tail."

Mikolai's voice suddenly trembled as he suggested, "Do you think Lukasz loosed those armies on Angrim just so he could be king?"

Jarogniew paled. "Don't say his name. What if he's not dead, but undead ... and he can hear us when we say his name. Name of the beast and all. What if he's a demon now?"

Jedrik laughed. "Not bloody likely with what Brainerd puts on his blades."

Zygmunt thought about it, remembering Brainerd's words after the armsmaster had stabbed Lukasz in the back: "That should take the fight out him."

"What does Brainerd put on his blades?" ask Emil.

"Something to sear the soul out of a vampire ... or a demon for that matter," Jedrik replied. "No, the little bastard's dead and he's going to stay dead."

Emil went silent, thinking. His sense of pride at helping to kill Lukasz had faded. The image of Lukasz's accusing eyes, filled with hurt and betrayal, began to bother him as none of the earlier murders had. Perhaps it was because he had known Lukasz as a person. Whatever it was, Emil had begun

to feel uncomfortable under his skin, and he wanted to weep. Only the fact that it would be taken as a show of weakness prevented him from it. Emil dared not appear weak in front of his companions and Brainerd's men.

* * * *

Dynarien reappeared, bringing a young man wearing white sleeping robes embellished with sun symbols and a brown dressing robe over them. "Can you heal him, Britlyn?"

She bent over Lukasz. "He's so young. Why would anyone wish to hurt him?" She grasped Lukasz's wrist, her gaze turned inward and after a few moments, she said, "If you link with me. I have the skill, but I'm not strong enough alone."

Dynarien put his hand on Britlyn's shoulder. Berran dragged a chair over for her and she sat down. Britlyn placed a long finger beside the blade, and drew it out of Lukasz with her other hand. The wound sealed as she passed her finger across it.

"A lifemage," Eurus muttered. "I thought they were extinct."

"There's only five left besides Dawnreturning. And he's the only master lifemage," said Talons.

Lukasz moaned loudly, his body jerking and writhing. His eyes opened but failed to focus.

Britlyn glanced at Hartmut still holding Lukasz's other hand. "Comfort him. This isn't going to be easy."

Hartmut nodded at her tight-lipped and pressed Lukasz's hand in both of his, patting the back of it. "Come on, boy. Be strong. We all love you. Be strong."

She placed her hands on Lukasz's chest. White light spread over the boy. He alternately whimpered and groaned, twisting beneath her hands. "Someone hold his legs and his shoulders, I don't want him moving too much. Lord of Light, I wish I had my circle here to help."

"I'm a Mender," said Eurus. "Very minor talent, but I can help."

"Then circle with me."

Another chair was drawn up, and Eurus sat down. He grasped the duke's ankle in a spot where he would not disrupt Britlyn, closed his eyes, and entered rapport with her. The white light became patterned with a web of soothing green.

Hartmut looked to be at the verge of tears. "Lukasz, don't die on me. I love you, boy. I'll make more time for you."

"Keep talking to him," Britlyn said. "Give him more will to live. I can heal his body, but only if he wants to live."

"Why wouldn't he want to live?" Warenhari asked.

Britlyn spared him a brief glance. "I'm sensing that he feels betrayed on some primal level. He wants to die."

Berran glanced at him, and then returned to watching in amazement as all of Lukasz's wounds closed and healed.

Lukasz stilled, breathing normally as if in sleep, his eyes closed. Suddenly, he writhed again, screaming out, "Iwona, why?"

Hartmut stiffened. "What does that slut have to do with this?"

Berran turned to Warenhari who stood in the doorway. "Arrest Iwona. Lock her in my closet where no one can reach

her. I want all of Gunther's family arrested also and locked in a room on this wing under guard."

Warenhari gave a quick nod, motioned to Vernados and Saelac, and strode out with them following him.

Britlyn eased Lukasz again, and sat back when she finished, looking tired and worn. She rotated her head to stretch her neck. "I've done all that I can at the moment. I'm only a journeyman. Not a master."

Berran studied the tiny woman that he guessed could not be much more than half-past four feet tall. She made him feel like a giant. Her dark hair and luminous white skin called to him, her ethereal beauty capturing his heart from the first instant that she appeared. "Will he live?"

"I think so," she said. "He'll still need rest and care for a few weeks. Several things worry me. He's lost his will to live. Something has left him heartbroken." She scanned the faces waiting for one of them to offer a reason for that and when none was forthcoming, she continued. "Someone needs to sit here with him at all hours. Two of those wounds came from a different type of blade, struck from the back, and ... and they must have been coated with the most virulent combination of arcane poisons and venoms in existence. I've never seen anything so skillfully created. It will take days to purge it all from his body. He's going to be very ill until I can get them all out."

Talons glanced at the blades everyone was carrying, flexed her arms, and brought forth a pair of stilettos. "Like these?"

Britlyn's eyes widened. "Yes, exactly." She touched Talons' blade.

"You won't find them poisoned. I don't use it." Talons turned to Hartmut. "Do you know anyone else who favors stilettos?"

Hartmut looked thoughtful. "Ask Brainerd. He'd know who he had trained in their use. He's trained hundreds in weapons over the past twenty years."

"I'm going to have a talk with Brainerd." Talons' voice went cold. "I'll beat it out of him, if he forces me to. Britlyn, describe the poisons."

Britlyn did so, and Talons' eyes narrowed as she listened. "Sidera Tyrins. That's one of her trademarks. She's the current matriarch of the Tyrins' branch of the Romilay clan."

Berran went colder. Even in Angrim, they had heard rumor of the Romilays and the Tyrins.

"Let's discuss this somewhere else," suggested Hartmut, as Gunda arrived carrying a pitcher of water, a basin, and some towels thrown over her arm.

"Everyone out! Out, out, out!" Gunda ordered with enough authority in her voice for a general.

Talons, Berran, and Hartmut made everyone leave the bedroom, but set guards in the antechamber. As they emerged, the people who were still waiting for word concerning Lukasz besieged them with questions.

Hartmut held up his hands for silence. "Our *king* lives. He is weak and resting, but in no danger. Mage Britlyn," he pointed to her, "has given us a miracle. She healed King Lukasz. The coronation, however, will have to wait until he is stronger. Those who attempted his murder will be brought to justice."

Several people ran to spread the word of the miracle.

Once Gunda was alone with Lukasz, she gently bathed the blood from his unconscious body, changed the sheets, got him into a soft sleeping robe, and tucked him in. "Poor, little Duke. Old Gunda's always loved you, Sweetling."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ONE BOY'S WAR

Anksha examined her puffy belly again that morning, measuring it with her fingers. When she turned her awareness inward deeply enough, she could detect Timadi's presence inside her and wondered if she would one day be able to link with him the way she did his father. Amiri and Randilyn could not find anything one way or another about it in the surviving texts, so Anksha would have to wait and see.

It seemed like a good morning to be about while the camp was preparing for the day's march. Nans wanted to make at least twenty-five miles that day, and Anksha knew she would have to scamper if she wanted to show anyone her belly.

She scampered through the camp until she reached the lycan section and spied Daree walking with Travis. After a moment's hesitancy, she ran up to Daree, opened her robe, and patted her belly. "I'm not flat as a flapjack now!"

Travis flinched, started to turn away, and Daree gave him an elbow in the ribs. He forced a smile. "You're a budding pumpkin. Even my old dog could see it."

"You look beautiful, Anksha." Daree beamed at her, and nudged Travis.

The Rowdy reached in his pocket and produced two candies wrapped in twists of wax paper. "Put a smile on your face."

"Thank you, Travis."

Anksha found Nevin in his tent that he shared with his cousin Olin. The older wolf had begun getting around more, but he tired easily. Anksha bounced up to him, placed a kiss on his cheek, and opened her robe. "Look. Look."

A slow grin spread across Nevin's scarred lips. "There's a baby there. Is that Isranon, son of Isranon?"

Anksha made a moue. "Timadi son of Isranon."

"I know that." Nevin ruffled her hair. "Shouldn't you get forward if you're riding with Isranon?"

She shuffled her feet, nodded, and scampered again. There was just time enough to feed from her blood-slaves while the camp was packing up and she rushed through like a tiny whirlwind.

The hostlers had the teams of horses in their traces, backing them up to the converted war wagons that carried her blood-slaves. The drivers did not trust the blood-slaves, since mistrust of sa'necari, blood-slave or not, ran deeply. The slaves were lined up behind their assigned wagons, waiting to enter. A nod from the driver that the horses were in place and their harnesses latched brought a nod from the guard that would ride with him. The sa'necari were loaded, their faces mirroring a wide range of emotions: resentment from some, resignation from others, and the strange happy smiles from the mind-torn. Anksha could hear the chains clanking as the guard secured them to the benches inside. The drivers refused to have the sa'necari loose in back of them, not even the mind-torn.

Her happy rush stopped short when she came face to face with Jingen and Stygean. The two boys stiffened. Stygean's

eyes went wide and his lips trembled. Then he straightened his shoulders. "Not my father, Anksha. Not today. He's so weak."

Anksha's lower lip pushed out beneath the lower one, and abruptly she snarled, her fangs glinting in the morning light, fully down—she could not retract them completely like other hemovores—and she glared at Stygean. "I should drain him. That's what I should do. The next time you're bad, that's what I should do."

Stygean swallowed and said nothing.

"If you hurt my Isranon, I'll bite you. I'll wither you fast and kill you ugly." Her patois deepened as she spoke in response to her emotions. "I eat bad children."

"I know."

Jingen smiled at Anksha. "We're being good."

"You better be."

She dashed past them and into one of the loaded wagons for a quick breakfast.

Stygean's face lost all color as he heard someone in the wagon scream, and he prayed that it was not his father. The Beast could be spiteful. A second scream followed the first, and he fled.

* * * *

Isranon decided that he had put off speaking with Disharyl Scathwick about Jingen as long as he could afford to. He had realized that he needed to focus on both boys equally and not so obsessively on Stygean. After the army made camp in the late afternoon, he sought out Disharyl who was working with

Amiri at that time of day. The sa'necari sat by the Ymraude's small fire, grinding herbs to powder under the watchful eye of Randilyn. The Ymraude nibari were immune to the mind-magic of the sa'necari and most others, so Amiri did not fear to leave Randilyn alone with Disharyl whenever she needed to be off doing something else. Disharyl's knowledge and skills approached Amiri's, which earned her favors and privileges in full measure to her cooperation.

"Randilyn," Isranon said. "I would like to talk to Disharyl alone for a while."

Disharyl paused and looked up at him.

"Certainly," Randilyn said. "Do you want me to leave? Amiri will be back soon."

"Perhaps it would be better if I took her to my tent and spoke with her there," Isranon said.

Disharyl set her things aside and stood up, wiping her hands on her hips. A glimmer of speculation danced across her face and vanished.

Isranon led her through the camp and gestured for her to enter his tent first. She smiled at that. Among her people, the master always entered first. Isranon settled on one of the folding chairs and regarded her for a moment.

Disharyl tilted her head, exposing her neck in a suggestive manner, and then crossed to kneel before him in the first position of submission. Isranon found himself staring down the front of her bodice at her substantial cleavage. She was a fine looking woman and clearly she knew it.

"I want to talk about your son," Isranon said. "You may sit down."

He indicated the other chair, but Disharyl remained kneeling. Isranon grasped her shoulders and raised her up. Disharyl rose on her toes, brushed her neck across his lips and her breasts along his chest. Isranon shivered, feeling his body react to hers. He shifted his grip to one arm and moved her firmly to the other chair, pushing her into it.

"I want to talk about your son," he repeated.

Disharyl lowered her eyes demurely, her head tilting again to invite his fangs, her back arched to call his gaze to her breasts for a nibble game. "Yes, my son." Disharyl's voice was soft and gratingly sweet. "Jingen is a good boy."

Isranon kept his tone and expression stern, hoping to stop her displays. His hatred of those who had participated in the rites went so deep that he had never knowingly or willingly had sex with his own kind. "He is obedient and helpful. However, I wish to make certain that he remains this way."

"Jingen will follow your teachings. I tell him how wise you are. If you were not wise and powerful, we would never have fallen into your hands, Lord."

Isranon did not like her words or her voice. "Do not waste your compliments, Disharyl. Words are cheap."

"My words are not empty," Disharyl said. "Allow me to prove them otherwise." She rose from her seat, opening her bodice as she moved, and wrapped herself around him. Her hand dropped to his crotch and teased his cock. "Drink from me and know the truth in my blood."

Isranon's eyes widened and he knocked her down. "Guards!"

A pair of lycans burst into the tent, glancing from Isranon to Disharyl. At his nod, they jerked her to her feet. Disharyl lowered her head, making soft weeping noises.

"Take her back to her quarters," Isranon told them.

Nevin came in frowning at the guards as he passed them and raised a thick eyebrow. "What was that about?" His words had a sibilant quality as his breath passed across his scarred upper lip, which was permanently half-split.

Isranon's cheeks burned and he glanced down at his hands. "I sent for her to discuss Jingen ... She tried to seduce me."

Nevin gave a coarse laugh, his brogue thickening with amusement. "I'd not want ta find tha one in ma bed."

"Seriously, Nevin. I don't ever wish to be alone with her again."

"I'll see to it."

* * * *

Knowing that she had once been a member of Liuthan's household, Isranon went to see Liuthan once Disharyl was gone. She troubled him. Although Jingen was the better behaved of the two boys, Isranon wondered exactly what Disharyl was preaching to him during their private time. Jingen's cheerful cooperation did not always ring true to Isranon's sensitive awareness; and his mother's rang even less true. Especially after having her throw herself at him.

He found Liuthan lying on his cot with his tunic open, staring at the ceiling. The marks of Anksha's feeding were on

Liuthan's neck. So he had been visited that morning. Isranon considered that.

"You're paler than usual, Liuthan," he said, pulling up a folding chair.

"You know how it hurts," Liuthan answered dully.

"Yes. I remember it. Take your tunic off and I'll mend it."

Liuthan smiled and stripped out of his tunic, then lay back again. The welts, streaks of scarlet, and pustulent places crossing his lower rib cage spoke of the advancing sickness that eventually befell all of Anksha's blood-slaves. His fangs came down.

Isranon frowned at his fangs. "I'll mend it, but I won't feed you. If you are that hungry, I will send a nibari."

Liuthan sighed. "Forgive me for wondering what your blood would taste like."

"Forgiven." Isranon placed his hands on Liuthan's chest, flooding him with the healing energies and watching the withering vanish again. Liuthan moaned with relief and relaxed.

"Tell me about Disharyl," Isranon said.

Liuthan quirked an eyebrow. "Do you wish me to tell you how I don't trust her? I never did. I don't now. She wanted me. We were lovers briefly before I married Chinisi. I suspect she never forgave that slight."

"You expected treachery from her?"

Liuthan gave a small laugh at the naiveté in Isranon's voice. "You know our kind. Our society is based upon it. Oh, we have our codes and our ethics, but who follows them?"

"No. I closed my eyes and ears to it when I came to live as part of Prince Mephistis Coleth de Waejonan's household. There is no 'our' kind ... except as accidents of birth. There was your kind and my kind. I made excuses for you. The same ones you made for yourselves."

Liuthan went silent for several minutes. "I have told my son to listen to you. I have told him that he will not be made less sa'necari because of it. He parrots back to me all the things I taught him. That we are like the lions in the forest. That we are the top of the food chain. That anything we can pull down and kill deserves it. That it is our right."

"And what do you say then?"

"That he should learn another path ... Keep an open mind. Despite what you do for me, I am weaker each time and it takes longer for my strength to return. I am not going to be there to raise my son. The only one who cares whether my son lives or dies is you. I want my son to live."

"So long as he obeys the rules and follows my teachings, I will protect him."

* * * *

Isranon heard sniffing as he walked past a wagon in the childrens' area as he returned from working with Liuthan. He saw the rest of the children playing not far off in a mixed group of sa'necari and nibari, a sight that normally gave him hope, and he wondered who was crying. A glance around soon revealed someone balled up beneath the wagon, curled against the wheel.

He eased down to his hands and knees and came face to face with Stygean. "What's wrong?"

Stygean hastily wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands, which left streaks of mud across his cheeks and forehead. "Go away. Let me be."

"Has someone hurt you?"

"I said let me be." Stygean lips curled back in a snarl.

"If someone has treated you unfairly, tell me and I'll make it right."

"Like you really care..."

Isranon worked not to lose his temper at Stygean's rude intransigence. "Tell me."

Stygean's eyes blazed. "The Beast makes my father scream."

Isranon wondered if that was true or simply a product of Stygean's fears. Anksha had promised to be gentler with Liuthan, but she was still an untamed predator at heart and always would be. "I'll talk to her. If that is the case, I'll tell her not."

"She makes him scream!" Stygean repeated with more force.

Isranon shifted to a sitting position. "Do the nibari scream when you rite them?"

Stygean appeared taken aback by the change in subject. "Why?"

Isranon kept his voice even so that the impact of his words came not from his tone, but from the words themselves.

"When you stick the blade into them, do they scream?"

Stygean licked his lips, remembering the handful of times he had watched his father riting nibari. "Yes. They start screaming even before the blade goes in the first time."

"Does it hurt them to die like that?"

"I've tasted their pain."

"How is it different ... what Anksha does to her blood-slaves and what sa'necari like your father have done and continue to do to helpless nibari? They bleed, they hurt, they die."

"It's different! My father is sa'necari. We're predators. It's the way we are."

Isranon gave a sad nod. "I saw you talking to Nolly the other day. Were you imagining sticking a blade into her?"

"I'd never do that. I like Nolly. She's sweet."

"But what about Jingen? What if I had given Nolly to him instead of to Jun? I'm certain that Jingen would like to rite her. I can see it in his eyes."

Stygean froze.

"Think about it. Think about Nolly laying dead on someone's altar with her soul shattered. Or perhaps Jingen would just take her into the woods and stake her out, rape her and stick her until she died."

Stygean scrabbled backwards. "I don't want to talk about it." He gained the far side of the wagon and scrambled to his feet. "I don't want to talk to you." Then he fled.

Isranon let the boy go, certain that he had touched something in him, but uncertain just what. Randilyn was right. The boy did have a capacity to care. The question was whether his capacity to care could override his sa'necari

Blood Harvest [Dark Brothers of the Light Book VII]
by Janrae Frank

instincts toward death magic and the eating of lives.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

FATE OF THE WOMEN

The bright sun burned through the chill autumn air that lay over the communal garden. The camp's women were out in force, gathering in the last remainders of the crops. Once the last of it was in, what was not going to be eaten soon would be cooked and preservatives added before filling the jars to keep it for the winter months.

The fifteen pregnant women, of which Kandaishree was the most swollen, kept to the most isolated sections of the garden with Preece standing lookout so that they could vanish into the nearest house should the priest or someone else who was not supposed to know about their condition appear heading in their direction. They would want to know who the father was and they could not tell them.

Malthus' child shifted restlessly in Kandaishree's belly. She paused with her hand on another tomato, released it, and pressed her fingers to her stomach. Kandaishree was trying very hard not to hate the child she carried.

Her five-year-old son, Gilzean, squatted in front of her. "He's kicking, Mama."

Kandaishree's throat tightened and she fought to keep the bitterness out of her voice so that she did not upset Gilzean. "Yes, your little brother is kicking."

Malthus had been in Wolffgard Village for nearly five months, and he had been here less than a week before he

raped all five of the sa'necari women who had taken refuge here, binding their minds so that they could not reveal what he was and what he had done. Four of them had become pregnant by him, just as Clodagh was. His potency was unnatural for a sa'necari his age, and Kandaishree suspected that was because of something his bio-alchemist mother, Sidera Tyrins, had discovered and given him. Sa'necari were usually sterile by forty and frequently as young as thirty.

Kandaishree returned to gathering tomatoes into her basket. The bright sun beamed down on her face. Malthus had made her a slut to the wolves by placing coercions and compulsions in her brain, just as he had the others.

"Kandaishree!"

She looked up at the sound of her name and her heart quailed. She sucked in too much air and felt dizzy. "Malthus."

The rest of the women in the garden glanced away from her, ignoring the scene. Kandaishree knew why they did it: he had taken the minds of every female in the camp. If they felt anything for her, it was pity—and relief that he had singled her out and not them this time.

He leered at her. "Come to your house with me. I want to talk to you."

"Gilzean, stay outside and play until I come for you."

"Yes, Mama."

He skipped off, heading for the other children farther in the garden. As always, Kandaishree saw so much of his dead father in him that it brought tears to her eyes. Sa'necari had murdered her beloved Domhnall simply because they objected to a lycan sleeping with a sa'necari woman. Her

wrists itched under the spellcord with their silver seals. She rubbed around the cords carefully, not wanting to set off the seals that would kill her for tampering with them. The cords cut her off from her powers, but it had always seemed like a small price to pay for the safety of her lycan child. Until Malthus got here and she found herself unable to protect either her child or herself.

Not that she could have anyway. Malthus was too powerful for her, even had she had access to her powers.

She gave her basket to one of the women working close to her and followed him into her longhouse. It had a dirt floor with a firepit in the center, and a room at either end, partitioned off by curtained half walls with a doorway and window facing into the interior. A small crude table sat to the right side near her bedroom.

"Sit down," Malthus indicated a chair.

Kandaishee tried to contain her trembling as she obeyed.

Malthus untied the sash on her lycan style robe and ran his hands over her bare stomach. "I wanted to feel my son moving in your belly before I send you away."

"Send me away?" Kandaishee's voice caught.

"I'm sending you to my manor at Carrion Crevasse. My mother will take care of you."

"What about Gilzean?"

"He'll be fine. You'll take him with you."

"I don't want him hurt. Please." Fear had her by the throat at the thought of something happening to Gilzean.

Malthus laughed and put his hands on her temples, lunging into her mind. It hurt and Kandaishee whimpered as he

tightened his compulsions. Suddenly she realized what he was doing and a sob broke from her lips. "Domhnall! Domhnall, no."

The memories of her dead husband faded through the desperately clutching fingers of her mind and vanished.

Malthus gave the arcane needles another thrust into her awareness and knowledge, stitching his spells through her and knotting them tightly.

Kandaishee's body relaxed. She hurt, yet an unexpected warmth and joy spread through her. "I'm so happy about our son. Your mother must be a lovely person."

"She is. She'll see that you're comfortable, and after the child is born, she'll teach you to be a proper sa'necari concubine."

"What about the others?"

"I will send them to join you soon."

* * * *

Malthus nodded to Preece as he passed him on his way back to the manor. Preece acknowledged the nod with a self-satisfied smile. They were getting closer to discovering Padruig's secrets, and all the clues seemed to imply a connection to the lawgiver, although they had not yet caught them together. If there was a link, then the Lycamornots would have to kill both myn on the same night.

Satisfaction warmed Malthus' core. He had the gang primed to attack, and he had finished up the last of the compulsions and coercions in Kandaishee. Malthus intended to do the rest of them over the next few nights—at least the

ones that needed doing. Rewiring a mind like Kandaishee's took time and care so as not to damage her psyche in the wrong ways. Lycans also took time because he did not want any of their people noticing too sudden a change in their personalities. Beth's mind had frayed away to nothing because Malthus had needed to work too quickly on it: there had been almost nothing of Beth left by the time that Egidius had rited her.

As he passed through the village, lycans nodded, waved, and greeted him in a variety of ways, many of them stopping to chat for a bit. Malthus basked in it. Returning wounded with his goods intact had raised his reputation to that of a local hero. He presented all of the fools with a pleasant exterior, and behind it he gloated that they had no idea he was responsible for the raiders murdering their people in remote locations throughout the valley.

Striding briskly into the manor, he encountered Kissie polishing the tables in the Great Hall. She paused and turned to him. "Master Claw's been asking for you."

"Where is he?"

"The Drawing Room."

Malthus headed upstairs, wondering what the old bastard wanted now. He found Claw at the table drinking more of the spelled rum. The chieftain looked haggard, as if he had aged twenty years in five months. *In a sense, he has*. The pain must have become constant except when Claw was too drunk or drugged to feel it.

The chessboard sat to the side.

"You wanted me?"

"You promised me a game and you didn't show up," Claw grumbled.

Malthus sat down and poured himself a drink from the same bottle as Claw. "I forgot. I'm sorry. I got word I was needed at the Sanctuary."

Claw frowned at him. "They have plenty of help there."

"They have boys," Malthus said smoothly, pulling at his mustaches. "They haven't a lot of experience, while I have."

"I'll grant you that." Claw rubbed his chest. "We'll have to play after dinner. I need a nap."

"I can't play then, ask Belgair."

"I don't want Belgair. He's too easy to beat."

"Claw, I promised that I would leave tonight to hunt. The children need meat again. I'll be gone a few days."

"You're gone more than you're here."

Malthus shook his head regretfully. "That isn't true and you know it. But I have responsibilities. Beth wanted me to take care of them."

"So you're going to take care of them?"

"I gave my word and I never break it." *I promised to kill you and your family ... and I am doing just that.*

* * * *

Malthus showed up with two horses and a pack animal at Kandaishie's home after the sun went down. Of all the women carrying his children, she was the furthest along. He knocked on her door, called for her to come out, and told her that it was time to leave. Kandaishie emerged with a small bundle of her belongings and that of her son, Gilzean. She

mounted the boy in the saddle in front of her and they rode north.

Malthus had told Merissa that he still felt responsible for the camp and needed to hunt for them as he always did. He regretted being away from her so early in their marriage, when Merissa was so hungry for his body—almost as hungry for him as he was for her. Her father was another matter. Malthus did not give a damn what Claw thought about his comings and goings.

They traveled along a hunter's trace as dawn rose and reached the place of scattered stones around noon. He had set an easy pace out of consideration for Kandaishée's condition. Gilzean spent the journey watching the imps leaping through the trees around them. Malthus, while glad to see that Gahni had returned, still wanted an accounting of why the imp warlord and his people had been absent the last time he came to the caves. They were supposed to be on constant guard, ready to kill anyone who ventured into this area to spy.

Kandaishée's eyes filled with tears of distress when she saw the bleeding table with a lycan body draping it. It stirred memories of someone else, but she could not reach them. To the right hand side of the table three yards off, stood poles with shackles at the top where victims could be hung by their feet, their throats slashed and their heads tied back to allow their blood to drain into basins.

Malthus cursed. Egidius' appeared to be offering more sacrifices for his cousin's soul. At this rate, Egidius was going

to exhaust their larder before they had time to take another set of hamlets and villages.

Egidius emerged from the cave with six humans in the Queen's livery, four other sa'necari, and a lamiae in her huge serpent form. Malthus noted that Egidius was sober and considered that an improvement.

As soon as Malthus dismounted, he went to Kandaishée and lifted her son down and then helped her to the ground. The myn surrounded her in a tightening circle. She knelt, her arms around her small son, looking frightened.

"Tie her to a pole, but don't hurt her," Malthus ordered.

Kandaishée wept, but did not struggle as they bound her wrists behind her around a pole and tied that to a metal eye in the back. Her son started to run to her, but Malthus caught his arm.

"Please don't hurt my son."

"No one is going to hurt him." Malthus sneered. "A child's mind is easy to alter."

"No, please, not Gilzean."

"Shut up, Kandaishée. Hold him, Egidius. I don't want him squirming."

The child's eyes were large with fear as he stood there frozen and staring at his mother.

Malthus put his fingertips to Gilzean's temples and lunged into the child's brain with needles of power. Gilzean whimpered. Malthus erased many of the boy's memories, and altered the rest. "Your name is Darmyk. Your mother's name is Merissa."

Kandaishée let out a long shriek.

"Your father's name is Isranon. He was taken by the Beast and your mother fears he's dead." Malthus continued to fill Gilzean's mind with information, right up to the present moment. As young as Gilzean was, his imagination would fill in the rest.

A vacant look came in the child's eyes. Kandaishiee screamed again.

Gilzean sagged in Egidius' grip. Malthus straightened with the boy in his arms and handed him to Egidius. "Take him to Lord Daemon. But first let me write a letter. The child is worth a lot to us, delivered alive and unharmed."

Out of the corner of his eye, Malthus caught the small form of the imp warlord, Gahni, approaching and he turned to face him. "Where have you been? I've passed through three times without encountering your folk. What kind of sentries are you?"

Gahni's face twisted up in hate and anger. "My tribe all gone."

"What do you mean your tribe's all gone?"

"All dead. Dawnreturning kill them all. All that's left are with me in north."

Malthus squatted and gripped Gahni's forearm. "I'm sorry for your loss. I will avenge them."

"How?"

"By killing his son and sending him the pieces of the child."

"You let me eat some?"

"Yes. That would be very appropriate."

* * * *

Caimbeul frequented only two women since his first survey of the camp: Kandaishee and Clodagh. After three nights of trying to get Kandaishee to answer her door, he finally let himself inside. The beds had not been slept in. He investigated the cabinets and dressers. Kandaishee and Gilzean's clothing was missing. A spellcorded sa'necari woman with a child would not be running away like this.

Suspicion raised the hairs on his neck. He began checking the houses of each woman that he knew was pregnant and in each of them he found the woman and her children gone.

Finally, he went to Clodagh. He almost did not knock, fearing that he would find her gone as well. There was an almost forgotten tightening in his stomach as his hand wavered at the door. He had not felt this way since Pandeena divorced him.

"Please, don't let them have taken you too. I—I love you."

Gathering his nerve, he knocked. No answer came. He put his ear to the door and listened. Sounds came through, grunting and whining. Someone was using Clodagh and it sounded like they were being rough about it. His hackles rose and hair started to sprout along his arms. He turned the knob and stepped inside, striding to the bedroom. Throwing back the curtain over the doorway, Caimbeul surprised Preece and Yren two upping her. Tears of pain streamed down her face.

Caimbeul seized Preece, lifted him off the ground by an arm and a leg. "Get off her. It's my turn."

"You'll pay for this," Preece said as he hit the ground.

"I doubt it."

Clodagh's scream made him turn and he caught Yren's arm as the youth tried to put a knife in his back. Whipping Yren's arm up behind his back, Caimbeul forced the blade from his hand and kicked it away. He tossed Yren out and dropped the bar.

"Are you all right?" Caimbeul asked.

Clodagh shook her head. "They were rougher than usual. They hurt me ... the baby..."

Caimbeul took her in his arms and held her, extending his awareness through her body. "The baby is fine."

They walked back to the bedroom. Caimbeul held her and stroked her and comforted her until dawn.

When it came time for him to leave, Clodagh took his face in her hands and kissed. "You must stop seeing me. It angers them. I'm afraid that they'll kill you."

"I'm not easy to kill, Clodagh."

* * * *

Only the human women remained in the camp with their children as refugees. Pregnancies put their secret brothel at risk of discovery by the lawgiver and the priest. In the middle of the night, Malthus carried a satchel of his mother's solutions to the problem on his shoulder as he gathered his seven Lycamornots and went to the house farthest from the center of camp first. He knocked on the door and Klari answered. She started to remove her clothing, and then panicked when she saw how many there were. Malthus had no intention of betraying himself by using his powers. However, he had brought along a small crystal rod that he

had told them was magic. He lunged and touched her throat with it, muting her voice.

Her mouth opened and closed as she tried to scream and found that she couldn't. Her hand went to her throat.

"Preece, Torquil, strip her and stretch her out on the dining table."

She shook her head in panic, backing away from them. Preece and Torquil seized her without a word and carried her by her limbs to the table. Klari struggled, but the two lycans were too strong for her.

"Oswyl, make certain the children don't wake up and come out."

"What are you going to do?" asked Shalto as Preece and Torquil went about their business and finished by tying her wrists and ankles to the table legs.

"I'm fixing it so she can't get pregnant. I just received a package from my mother." Malthus unshouldered his satchel and took several things out, setting them on another chair. A bottle, a needle with catgut through it, and a round, flat sided, blood-red crystal. He poured the bottle across her abdomen, took a tiny blade from his bag, and made a small incision just above her thigh.

She writhed and tried to scream.

Malthus shoved two fingers into the wound and felt around for a moment. Then he inserted the crystal and stitched her closed. He poured more of the liquid over her. "See if there's some liquor in the house. I'm sure she could use a drink. No one rides this one until the wound heals. We'll do the others a few at a time."

"What did you do?"

"The crystal has bonded with her organs and is killing her egg sacks. She'll be sterile by morning."

"Hssah," said Rheu. "You know a lot."

Malthus chuckled and tousled his head. "My mother wanted me to go into the family business, but I liked selling my sword better."

"What was that?"

"She was a bio-alchemist and bio-magicalist to Lord Feodras."

* * * *

Pandeena jumped into the Grand Central Hall of Ishladrim palace.

She strode up to the door to the Guild Wing and stared at the little man at the desk that barred her way into it. Queiggy had pecan colored skin and his face was a gaunt web of folds and seams. Queiggy's hair, which hung in half-tangled disarray as if he could never get it combed through properly, was a brown barely two shades darker than his skin. Overall, he looked like a walking stick that had sprouted limbs with the currycomb's catch of discarded horse's hair on top.

"Hello, Queiggy. It's that day."

"So it is. I'll have someone see you up."

He gestured at one of his assistants who were awaiting their next orders seated on a bench to his left hand. "Take Pandeena to the Grand Master. Announce her properly, Yusef or I'll take a stick to you."

The young mon, who could not have been more than sixteen, nodded with a serious air. "Yes, Master Quiegggy."

They traveled up two flights of stairs in the Grand Central Hall, down a northeastern hallway, and then up two more flights at the end before reaching a hallway that was almost entirely windows, some clear glass and others stained glass images of saints and heroes before reaching a final door. Yusef knocked politely and opened it. A huge black mon in pants with a lionskin wrapped around his waist, and a black tunic with the Guild emblem on his shoulder greeted them, leaning on a crutch.

"Master Mohanja, this is Pandeena Moonbow. Lady Pandeena, this is Master Mohanja Raam..."

"Enough, Yusef. Dismissed." Mohanja had a slow, considering manner as he indicated a chair. He exuded a kind of purposeful serenity. "Sit. They will be a few minutes yet. The queen was napping. This pregnancy has been leaving her more tired than the previous ones."

"I came to see..."

Mohanja gestured for silence. "Ceejorn likes to have Isen with him as much as possible."

Pandeena took a chair in the small circle of seats. At the head stood two with flaring backs like thrones and to either side of those were two chairs that must have been for advisors—Mohanja settled into the one on the right—and then two petitioners chairs opposite the throne chairs.

"You hurt your leg..."

"Hah! Now that is a tale. I nearly lost it. But I killed twenty lesser bloods before they pulled me down."

Looking at the huge mon, taller than Lokynen, but not quiet as heavily muscled, she could easily believe that. "And you lived to tell of it..."

"Because it happened at the doors of the High Temple, and the priests came to my aid."

The side door opened and two people came out. Pandeena knew instantly the tiny woman who looked pregnant enough to burst like an over ripe melon, had to be Queen Isen Ceejorn. She had large dark eyes with golden flecks in them that caused Pandeena to think of swans for some inexplicable reason. Pandeena shivered under the intense scrutiny of Isen's eyes. There was something uncanny about the young queen. Rumor said that she was just seventeen, yet her eyes seemed to bore into Pandeena's soul.

The Grand Master eased his tall, lanky frame into the throne and got his legs comfortable. "Now what is this all about?"

"Majesties," Pandeena rose and bowed to them. "I have come seeking a lycan. Brock Redhand is his name. The last that was heard of him was that he left for Creeya as a youngster. He last visited his family in Waejontor's Red Wolff Valley close to ten years ago, and told no one where he had been or what he had done. He told his brother that he if was ever desperately needed, to come and ask the Grand Master about him."

"It sounds like he's Guild," said Isen. "Is he very, very tall with bushy black hair?"

"I have no idea what he looks like, nor if he's Guild," Pandeena replied. "Only that his family has desperate need of him."

"Then you aren't looking to punish a Guildsmon?" Ceejorn asked, his brows knitting.

"No. His brother, the chieftain of Red Wolff is dying. I suspect some kind of poison, but I can't prove it. We need Brock to become regent over his brother's grandchildren."

"You Jumped here?" asked Isen.

"Yes, your majesty. But it would be better if I did not Jump him there. It would also be best if Brock did not come alone. The Butchering Serpent is in Wolffgard, our capital, and I believe he murdering Brock's brother, Claw."

Isen's face took on a distant quality and she stared at the wall, as if reading words on it. After a long silence, she shook herself. "A very dangerous opponent. I know Brock. He used to bounce me on his knees. I will send a unit of the Netherguard with him."

"And I will dispatch myn to Wolffgard, as well as contributing a unit of the Guild in disguise."

"Thank you."

"Furthermore, we will fly them to your borders and sneak them across," Ceejorn smiled and winked at his wife. "We're good at that, aren't we?"

"Yes, we are."

He patted her belly. "It's a girl this time. Our first. I was beginning to think she was giving me only sons."

Isen frowned at him. "Will you stop saying that?" She blushed and turned to Pandeena. "We have two sons. It might

be something to crow about if I'd given him eight sons and then a daughter. But noooo, just two sons and..."

Pandeena lowered her head with a small smile. "I'm very happy for your majesties. But does this mean you'll help me?"

"Yes," they chorused and then grinned at each other like a pair of happy children.

They chatted for several hours before Pandeena left and by then she felt much more hopeful.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BLOOD DEBTS

While violence erupted in every corner of the palace, as people screamed and died, Lukasz descended deeper and deeper into unconsciousness until it bordered on coma. He sought his own death, wanting never to wake again, wanting to never again feel the pain of his wounds, the sharpness of his betrayal by Iwona. And silent tears ran down his sleeping cheeks. His journey began the moment that Talons carried him from the garden, and he stretched himself toward the point of breaking the silver cord that held his soul to his savaged body, so that he would never again be hurt like this.

He did not hear Hartmut begging him to come back, nor did he hear Gunda crying. He heard only the peaceful silence that he craved as he went deeper and deeper. Whenever Lukasz wavered and considered turning back, he caught another glimpse of the blades flashing and heard the boys' laughter as they attacked him. Soon the only voice chasing him became Iwona's, and Lukasz fled from her.

Sometimes Iwona's voice was sensual and beckoning, as it had been all those times in his bed; other times she cursed him, telling him that he was fit only to die and that Gunther would make a better king; and still other times she told him that no one loved him and that no one had ever loved him.

As Lukasz sped on, searching for death, the landscape of his dream changed. He did not notice when the first coolness

of grass formed beneath his bare feet, damp and glistening as from a recent spring rain. The sun came out. A herd of grazing animals emerged from the trees, watching him curiously.

A voice spoke through the agony of Lukasz's nightmares and parted the last of them like wisps of smoke as she strode, armed for battle and twice as determined, calling to him in ways that no mortal woman could. "Heed me, little paladin. Come to me."

Abruptly, Lukasz was back in his room, standing at the foot of his bed and staring at his body. The sounds of weeping reached his ears and the presence of old Gunda, sitting beside him mourning, shook Lukasz. "Am I dead?"

"No, little paladin. But if you still wish to die after we have spoken, I will release you."

Lukasz blinked. Aroana stood a few feet beyond Gunda. "White Lady!" He glanced at Gunda. "She can't see you?"

"I've drawn the divine mist across her eyes. Come with me." She extended her hand and Lukasz placed his within it.

They rose through the roof of the palace like vapors and flew across the countryside that spread beneath them in the blazing colors of mid-autumn. Soon they reached a tremendous encampment where demons and monsters walked as well as evil myn. He saw women raped and men chosen from chained captives, taken to obscene dining tables, and eaten. Lukasz blanched and shivered.

"Be strong. They cannot see us. I'm taking you to speak to someone, just as I once took Berran to speak with his father."

Lukasz steeled himself and nodded.

They came to a large tent and entered through the roof of it, alighting beside a sleeping mon. Lukasz gasped, recognizing Clovis, Tancred, Willard, and Sewell. "The princes."

"We cannot help them. They will die in the spring. If anyone were to rescue them, these myn would die instantly from spells lodged in their brains."

"Zeist."

Clovis opened his eyes. "Lukasz!"

"Peace, Clovis," said the god. "None can see or hear us. Tell Lukasz everything you know."

Clovis did so and then grabbed Lukasz's hand. "Make a good king, Lukasz."

"But Gunther..."

"Is dead," said Aroana. "You are all that remains of the males of the royal family."

Once they had finished there, Aroana took him north again. When Lukasz realized that they had passed Varsyava, he asked her. "Where are we going?"

"To meet the special friend that I am sending you as a token of my love and your devotion."

They returned to the meadow where Lukasz had met the god the first time, and where his feet had led him just before Aroana arrived and summoned his spirit from his body. They alighted beside a pool of water. The herd of unicorn drinking from it moved around them curiously. Most of them were either white or gold, interspersed with bays, sorrels, and a few as black as midnight. Then Lukasz saw one that was

dappled gray with a creamy mane and tail, a tall stallion of proud mien.

"Pick one," said Aroana. "But remember, you'll be making him very lonely if you decide when we're done that you still wish to die."

Lukasz felt a sharp pang of guilt and conflict. He had read in his book how the chosen of Aroana, her paladins, were given fabulous mounts; usually the unicorn-horse hybrid called a wynderjyn. Only the greatest and most beloved received a unicorn, her sacred animal. Part of him still wanted to die, but now he was being offered one of his dearest dreams. There were many creatures that bonded in various arcane ways with humans; the moonwolves of the Taladrim, the shadow hounds of the Shardiths, the blue gryphons of the swan mays, yet none were as heavenly as a unicorn. An image swept through him of riding his unicorn and throwing back the forces of darkness; it tickled his heart with a sensation of joy and courage.

"That one." He pointed at the dapple gray.

"I knew you would never be able to resist him. That's Paeon."

"He's beautiful."

"He'll be at your gates in seven days time."

The unicorn came and put his head on Lukasz's shoulder, and spoke into the boy's mind.—*Hello, my brother. We will be good warriors together.*—

Lukasz shifted to gaze into Paeon's large dark eyes, the mirrors of his soul, and gasped as the bond came over him. He felt the unicorn's unconditional love, and with it,

experienced the true meaning of divinity. Lukasz threw his arms around Paeon's neck and hugged him. "I love you, Paeon."

The unicorn whickered and nibbled gently at his ear.

"Another thing." Aroana waved her hand over the pool and an image appeared. Two girls sparring. The larger one gave the smaller a hard whack with a practice blade, knocking her into the dirt. The smaller lunged and took the larger into the dirt. They rolled around for a moment before the larger called "Pax" and it stopped.

"Who are they?"

"The taller one is your sister Jocelsi."

"My sister?" Lukasz gasped. It was the girl from his dreams that used to comfort him, but he had eventually decided that she was imaginary.

"Yes. Your mother parted you at birth because Stefan required an heir after his brother died."

"And who is the other one?"

"The princess I intend for you to marry. Her name is Phaedrys."

A vision of Iwona flashed across his mind, and Lukasz gulped.

Aroana laughed and squeezed his slender shoulder. "It won't happen for some time yet. Iwona will be executed for her crimes. However, if you must have your bed warmed in the meantime, have Berran or Talons pick you a suitable mistress."

"I'll do that."

"Good. And now the final matter."

Aroana waved her hand across the pool again. It rippled and a new image formed. A mon with an incredible staff that bore a pegasus at the top stood at bay before a horde of creatures such as Lukasz had seen at the camp where Clovis was held. The mon lifted his staff and spoke words of power. Fire lanced down from the sky, destroying his enemies. Lukasz gasped at the sight.

"That is Lord Dawnreturning," said Aroana. "He is the greatest mage-paladin of Kalirion ever to exist, but he needs you as much as you need him. Dawnreturning requires a strong king to back him against other kings in the courts of light, to persuade them to his side, and to argue his case. He was born a monster, but chose not to become one and is instead a champion of the light, whether it wants him or not. I need you to become that king."

Lukasz fell silent on the journey back. When they entered his room, he saw that Hartmut had replaced Gunda, and if anything, the steward looked even sadder and more worried than the housekeeper had.

"Well," said Aroana, "have you decided whether you wish to live or to die?"

Lukasz squared his shoulders. "I want to live."

"Very good." The god kissed Lukasz on his forehead and he knew nothing more.

* * * *

Warenhari and Vernados turned up as Berran and the others arrived at the small drawing room that was used as the duke's private meeting chamber. Berran immediately took

the chair at the head of the table with no objection from Hartmut, who seated himself at Berran's right hand while Talons took his left after moving a second chair next to his for him to prop his damaged leg on.

Britlyn sat between Talons and Dynarien, looking worn and exhausted from her efforts. "Would it be too much to ask that someone get me a glass of brandy and tell me where I am?"

Warenhari went to the liquor cabinet and brought forth a variety of wines and liquors, setting them on the table with glasses. He poured a brandy for Britlyn. "There you go, my lady."

Berran inclined his head toward Britlyn. "You're in Beltria. You've just saved Duke Lukasz who was to be crowned King of Angrim tomorrow."

"Beltria?" Britlyn sounded alarmed. "I'm in Beltria?"

"Have no fear. You're safe. Lukasz and I are pledged to Aroana."

"Curiouser and curiouser," replied Britlyn, settling back in her chair, and speaking in a pixilated manner due to the extremity of her exhaustion. "Saved the King of Angrim ... how odd."

Talons leaned back in her chair with her arms crossed. "He's about to be the last surviving member of the royal house—just as soon as I execute his cousin."

Berran's mouth tightened and his lips thinned to the point of vanishing. "It's already done—or should be."

Talons lifted her eyebrow at Berran.

Berran glanced at Warenhari, who was finally taking his seat between Hartmut and Yevhen. "Is it done?"

Warenhari chuckled darkly. "Vernados put the noose around Gunther's neck while I held him up high, tied the end to the trunk, and then I released Gunther. He writhed and jerked nicely until he strangled to death."

Vernados' lips curled into a sneer of satisfaction. "A garroting would have pleased me more. I do them well. But I liked the way he danced."

Britlyn flinched at Vernados' statement. "His cousin?"

Talons gave a curt nod, her gaze evaluating the tension of her companions. "His cousin Gunther stabbed him. Adolf was another, but my gryphon got him. I'm certain there were others."

"Waste no time, Warenhari," Berran said. "This crime was racially and religiously motivated ... not merely a grab for power. I want every pagan in the palace gathered into this wing. I want the Crisorans out of it unless we have some way to prove their loyalties."

"It's already been done," said Captain Yevhen. "I sent a mon to activate a plan made years ago by Stefan and me. Also, all of the mothers and sisters of Gunther and his six friends have been placed under arrest. For they own protection, of course. They're locked into rooms on this wing."

"I'm Crisoran," said old Hartmut. "But I always agreed with Stefan that tolerance made for a better kingdom. Be kind to your subjects and you will have their love."

Captain Yevhen nodded. "I'm Badonthian, but Stefan and Lukasz have always had my faith and loyalty."

Hartmut's eyes crinkled. "I admit to being dumbfounded at how many of you were in the palace and city guards."

"It was self-preservation, really. Not revealing ourselves until the Princess revealed herself to Lukasz. But more it was a chance to protect our communities here. Someone has been carrying out a secret pogrom for over ten years. Thousands of our people die each year from Varsyava to as far north as Rublynca and as far east as Dzynbirg and Geswyn. Men, women, and little children." Yevhen's face grew flushed. "All of the bodies are found in and around Varsyava."

Talons acknowledged his statement with a lifted eyebrow and nothing more.

"I want the staff and servants protected also, if you can sort them," Berran went on.

"It's already been done," said Yevhen. "We're all known to each other."

"Self-preservation again?" Berran smiled.

"Indeed."

A furious knock came at the door and a guard came in. "There's fighting in the halls."

"Damn," said Dynarien, speaking finally. "How do I tell who to kill?"

"We're all wearing our runes out and this." Yevhen patted a band of gold, white, and green tied to his arm that no one had noticed before. "The runes are blessed, so no one else can wear them."

Talons rose from her chair. "Brainerd's made his move." She slipped out the door before anyone could stop her.

Britlyn glanced around. "Where's Eurus?"

Yevhen's expression turned smug. "My myn slipped him off the grounds. He's rousing the people on Lukasz's behalf."

Dynarien's brow furrowed in concentration, trying to remember something, and then he had it. "If I can catch one of the traitors as a focus, I can cast Revelation, and mark them all the way I did in Creeya."

He left without another word.

Berran cursed his bad leg, which prevented him from fighting beside his friends. "Warenhari, place Mage Britlyn in a safe room, a comfortable room. Captain Yevhen, please take charge. If I'm needed, I'll be in my chambers."

"Resting?" Warenhari asked.

"Beating the truth out of a slut."

Vernados rose and went to Berran's side. "You shouldn't handle this alone."

Their eyes met and knowledge passed unspoken between them. Berran did not have it in him to savage a woman; but Vernados did, especially under the circumstances. "Come with me."

* * * *

Berran's thoughts whirled as he went to his room, and despite the gravity of the situation, he found himself thinking about the captivating lifemage. That made what he had to do seem all the more horrible. He had been raised to treat women gently; yet here he was preparing to interrogate one as brutally as necessary to win the information that would lead to the one behind the attack on Lukasz.

He armored himself with the images of Lukasz bloody and savaged. When he entered his suite, he heard Vernados drop the bar behind them. Iwona must have heard them come in

because she went from silent to loud weeping. His stomach tightened at the sounds, adding to the discomfort of his body produced by his aching and throbbing leg.

Berran glanced at Vernados. The mon was as calm as Berran was troubled.

He would let Vernados do what the mon felt needed to be done to get the truth from Iwona.

Jerking the closet door open, Berran saw Iwona curled up in a corner, half-concealed by the drape of his clothing on the hooks. The light from a window interrupted the shadows and grazed her face. Apparently, she had given Warenhari a fight when he tossed her in because her blouse was torn and there was a bruise on her cheek.

Berran stepped aside and gestured. "Come out, Iwona. I want to ask you some questions."

She emerged with the tentativeness of a frightened animal, rubbing her tear-streaked face with the back of her hand. Her pale hair framed her face and cascaded over her shoulders in a disheveled veil. "What do you want of me? I haven't done anything."

"I haven't asked the questions yet."

Vernados stood to the right of Berran, one thumb hooked into his wide sword belt, and the other rubbing the hilt of his long dagger. The door partially blocked Iwona's view of him until Berran closed the door with a shove of his cane.

Iwona saw Vernados and flinched. "About what?"

Berran limped to the sofa and sat down, propping his leg. "What do you know about the attack upon the duke?"

"Nothing, my lord."

Vernados extended his arm to herd her closer to Berran, and she jumped away from him. Vernados' lips pulled back from his teeth in the ugliest sneer that Berran had ever seen on him. "Try to escape, and I'll kill you. Which would be a waste."

Iwona threw herself on her knees in front of Berran, sobbing. "Mercy. I don't know anything."

"Lukasz keeps crying 'Iwona, why?' You want to tell me the reason?" Berran kept his voice soft, yet unyielding.

Her eyes widened for an instant, and she glanced back over her shoulder to see that Vernados now stood directly behind her still wearing that disturbing expression. "The duke is alive?"

"Quite. And Gunther is dead."

"I didn't do anything," she protested.

While Berran could hear the terror in her voice, he could also catch a hint of wrongness. Iwona was not a good liar to the ears of one as experienced for his years as Berran. He exhaled heavily, gave a nod, and Vernados seized her arms. Dreslin pulled his dagger and cut the lacings on her waistband. Then he ripped her blouse open so that her large breasts hung forth. They were beautiful breasts, but Berran had seen finer. He sheathed his dagger. "Have you been sleeping with Lukasz?"

Iwona lowered her eyes as if she were searching for something. "He forced me into his bed."

Berran nodded again.

Vernados cut the edge of her skirt with his dagger, and ripped it away from her, leaving her wearing just her small

clothes. He slid his dagger back into the sheath and resumed his waiting pose without speaking, his face emotionless.

"Now," Berran began again patiently. "A naïve, inexperienced, not yet fourteen-year-old boy, who would not hurt the smallest creature, *forced* you into his bed?"

"He's the duke. I couldn't refuse." Iwona glanced at Vernados, and whimpered.

The soldier's face became impassive and he stood a silent predator carved in stone.

"I will assume that you seduced him. That still doesn't explain his unconscious complaints. What did you do to him?"

"Nothing. Nothing," she shrieked.

Berran hated his next words before he even got them out, yet he forced himself to say them. "Vernados, rape her and don't be gentle about it."

Iwona shrieked and attempted to scramble backwards as Vernados opened his pants and started massaging his cock to hardness. He kicked her in chest, slamming her onto her floor and pinned her with his foot.

"Bitch, you hurt him," said Vernados in a voice devoid of emotion. "Now I'll give you a taste of pain."

Dropping across her, Vernados sliced her small clothes away, sheathed his dagger, and forced her legs open with his knees.

Berran noted the size of Vernados' cock. It was difficult not to. The man was a horse, and for an instant Berran was mercifully distracted by wondering what a woman felt having that inside her. He had never watched someone else do it before, and fascination threaded the fabric of his shame.

Vernados made her scream, biting her breasts savagely as he pumped, grinding her into the floor while he said over and over, "You hurt him, bitch."

She tried to scratch him, but he pinioned her slender wrists in one hand and hit her in the face with the other. Iwona squirmed and whimpered as Vernados methodically abused her.

Berran's cock hardened, further shaming him. He noticed blood spreading onto the carpet beneath her hips, and he realized just how far Vernados was going in carrying out his orders. He focused his mind away, again visualizing Lukasz.

When Vernados finished, he rolled off her and stood up, giving her a kick in the side as he closed his pants, which had a smear of Iwona's blood on the crotch.

Iwona screamed again and curled up into a ball, sobbing.

By then Berran was breathing hard and having trouble containing his revulsion. "I can have Vernados do far worse, Iwona. What were you doing in Lukasz's bed? Besides fucking him, of course."

"Gunther paid me."

"Ahhhh, now we're getting down to it. Why did Gunther pay you to sleep with Lukasz?"

"I don't know. I don't know."

Berran extended his cane to Vernados. "Beat her."

Iwona managed to get to her hands and knees before the cane began descending on her. She attempted to crawl away, but the blows rained down upon her. Each strike broke the skin, leaving a bloody furrow. Every time she tried to stand, Vernados knocked her down. Every time she tried to crawl

under a piece of furniture, Vernados jerked her out. And all the while, the blows continued to come. She was swiftly turning into a bloody ruin.

"Tell me what you did? Why is Lukasz crying?"

"Gunther paid me ... he paid me to lure Lukasz out to them. I didn't know why. I swear it."

"Tie her up, Vernados," Berran said in as offhand a manner as he could manage. By then he was feeling sick to his stomach. His imagination supplied the images of a young boy in love with a scheming woman who had nearly lured him to his death. Tears gathered in the corners of his eyes.

"Tomorrow Lukasz will be fourteen ... and if Talons had not gotten us a miracle, he would be dead. He did not deserve death for a birthday present."

Vernados bound Iwona's ankles together, and then her wrists. She struggled, but he pinned her with his knee to the small of her back until he finished. "Now what, my lord?"

Berran turned his attention back to Iwona. "Gunther did not plan all of this, Iwona. Who did?"

"He'll kill me."

"Vernados will kill you. Vernados hanged Gunther and laughed while he died." Berran doubted that Vernados had laughed, the mon took his executions very seriously, but he said it for effect.

Iwona blanched. "If I tell you, will you let me go?"

"It depends on what you tell me."

She sucked in a breath. "Brainerd."

Berran exchanged a glance with Vernados. "Talons was right. I hope she knows what she's doing going after Brainerd. He's dangerous."

"So's Talons," responded Vernados.

It was easy to imagine the rest, so Berran turned his face away from the scene, extending his hand for his cane. Vernados wiped it clean and gave it to him. Berran heaved a sigh. "I'm going to rejoin Hartmut and Captain Yevhen. While I'm gone, strangle her and hang her body from the window."

"Yes, my lord." Vernados pulled a slender leather cord from his pouch, and snapped it around Iwona's neck while she shrieked for mercy.

Berran turned his back and walked away. As he removed the bar, Iwona's cries changed to choking noises. He almost turned back and rescinded his order, but instead Berran clutched at his determination to avenge the attack upon Lukasz and eliminate the conspirators. He stepped outside and closed the door behind him.

* * * *

Talons slipped through the halls in the growing darkness, her cloak of shadows pulled around her, keeping to the shadowed places where the magic in the cloak made her nearly invisible, a shadow among the shadows. Most of the lamps had gone unlit as the servants who normally lit them huddled wherever they could hide. The dead and dying littered the halls and corridors. She avoided the fighting as much as she was able to, but still left a trail of bodies in her

wake. A target waited for her and nothing would keep her from him.

As she reached the bridge into the barracks and armory section, a tremendous shriek went up, a resounding chorus of despair and utter terror. A flash of tendriled green power engulfed the palace. Talons smiled as it passed over her like a lover's caress, and she knew that Dynarien had found a good focus and now all of their enemies were marked on their foreheads for the traitors they were.

Ahead of her four guards reeled, stunned by the divine assault that left a skull and crossbones branded on their foreheads to scream 'traitors' to all who saw it. They brought their swords up in an unsteady attempt to block her way, duty to their conspiracy driving them. Talons pulled her sword.

It was a massacre.

Talons moved on, leaving four dead men behind her. When she reached the stairs, the assassin considered her choices: the salle, the barracks, Brainerd's office, his quarters, or the armory. If Brainerd felt confident that his coup would succeed, then he would be in either his office or his quarters. If, on the other hand, the mon was hiding; then the obvious place to hide would be the armory.

She went swiftly down the stairs to the bottom level, strode along the short corridor, and jerked open the door to the armory. A single lamp threw flickering shadows from the stacks of weapons, the swords on their pegs, and the barrels and boxes of arrows. She spied another door, half hidden behind some crates. Opening the door, Talons found a narrow

stairway. She went down cautiously, her instincts prickling like needles along the back of her neck and her arms.

Jerking the door open, Talons stepped through, startling the two guards standing nearby and the five youths who writhed on the floor clutching at their heads. Jedrik reached for his sword, but Talons was faster. She drew two throwing knives from her bandoleer, tossed, and put both into his chest, dropping him.

Dobrogost closed with her, wielding his broadsword in an overhand strike. Talons danced aside, pulled her longsword from her shoulder and a knife from her hip. She blocked his strike with her sword, slid along his blade so that the hilts locked and she held him off with incredible strength. Then she drove her knife into his belly.

The Beltrian collapsed, dropping his sword, and clutching at his entrails pouring forth over his hands.

The youths screamed, but none rose from the floor to oppose her.

"Next one who moves, dies," said Talons.

She took cords from her pouches and bound their hands behind their backs. Talons lifted their heads and saw the skull mark on their foreheads. Her gaze swept the room, taking in the seven sets of bedding: two must have been for Adolf and Gunther. A table sat in one corner with food and drink laid out.

"We—we're going to hang, aren't we?" Zygmunt asked.

"Probably." Talons spotted several lengths of rope coiled in a corner and that was when the ghosts who had died here began singing their eerie lament in her ears. She glanced

around again. "This room ... you've been butchering people here."

Emil paled. "We didn't do anything."

"You can't hang us," Mikolai said, finding a bit of defiance. "We're the last of the nobility."

"There's nothing noble about you," Talons responded. She took the rope and began linking them together starting with Zygmunt.

"But we're the last," Mikolai protested again. "Who'll rule with us dead?"

Talons chuckled darkly. "Lukasz."

When she finished tying them together, she marched them up the stairs. They had reached the middle of the armory when the far door opened and Brainerd stepped inside.

"You bloody whore! What are you doing with them?" Brainerd shouted.

Talons' smile did not touch her eyes. "Looking for you."

"Kill her, Brainerd! Kill her," Zygmunt cried.

The other boys added their voices in, urging the armsmaster on.

Brainerd's sword cleared the scabbard fast, and Talons noted that the big mon had impressive speed for his size. Drawing her longsword, Talons kicked the roped boys into Brainerd.

He staggered backwards, trying to disentangle himself from the boys. Talons lunged in before he could free himself, chopping at his sword arm with her kenda'ryl blade. Her sword bit deep and shattered his forearm as it parted the flesh to the bone. The artery spurted over the boys.

Brainerd screamed as his sword fell from his hands. Talons seized Mikolai by the hair and jerked him backwards, bringing the boys tumbling back towards her, and giving her an opening to strike again at Brainerd. She shoved her blade into his stomach with a ripping twist. Brainerd collapsed on the floor, clutching his spilling guts.

The boys shrieked.

"Shut up or die. Your choice," said Talons.

They all went silent. She prodded them out of the armory, leaving Brainerd behind to die alone.

* * * *

Lukasz opened his eyes in his great bed, stared up at the canopy, and turned on his side. The movement hurt. A groan escaped him. He felt as if every part of his body were tender, especially his abdomen and chest. His face tightened into a grimace. "I'm alive?"

Vaguely he remembered someone giving him a choice of whether to live or to die, and he had chosen to live; although at that moment, in pain with his faith in humanity shattered, Lukasz wondered if he had made the right choice.

He saw someone sitting on a chair nearby, watchful and alert with a naked sword across his knees. The mon turned toward him and Lukasz recognized him. "Warenhari?"

"You're awake!" Warenhari sheathed his sword, and went to the bedside. "We had begun to worry. Mage Britlyn said you just needed to rest, but White Lady, you've slept without waking through two nights and a day."

"A mage in Beltria?" Wonder touched Lukasz, only to suddenly dissolve into terror as an image of Gunther's face and a remembrance of the blades piercing him flashed through his head. A whimper half-escaped as he struggled to swallow it back. "Gunther."

"Is dead." Warenhari poured a golden liquid into a glass, raised Lukasz up, and put it to his lips. "You look like you're hurting."

"I am." The boy drank and Warenhari lowered him to the bed again. "Gunther?"

"His body dangles from a central tree in the courtyard, but he was already dead when we put him there. Vernados and I hanged him as soon as you were found. His blade was in your chest."

Lukasz tried to get his mind around the fact that he was still alive, when by all that he could be certain of was that he should be dead. "How am I alive?"

Warenhari sat on the edge of the bed and stroked the dark hair back from Lukasz's face. "Mage Britlyn is a lifemage. She healed you."

"Where did she come from?" Lukasz asked, convinced she had not been found in Beltria or Angrim where magic was outlawed. He would do something about that.

"Rowanhart. Talons' husband brought her. He's a god."

"A god? I was saved by a god?" The wonder returned to Lukasz's voice, blending with a growing sleepiness from the drug. The image of Gunther continued to bother him, and Lukasz grasped Warenhari's hand. "Gunther ... show me."

Warenhari lifted Lukasz in his arms, knowing the boy needed to see with his own eyes that his assailant was dead. He carried Lukasz to the window, seated him on the sill, and held him tight. Lukasz wrapped an arm around Warenhari's bicep, and peered out. "There," said Warenhari, pointing at the grisly rotting fruit of the gallows dangling from the largest oak tree in the center of the courtyard where everyone entering or leaving had to see it.

"He's dead. He's really dead. I'm safe." More shadows crossed Lukasz's face. "Brainerd. He stabbed me."

"Brainerd hangs on the far side of the tree. Talons gutted him."

Lukasz's expression eased, but he offered nothing further.

Warenhari sucked in a breath and shook his head. "We haven't caught all the conspirators. That's why only Dreslin myn are guarding you." He carried Lukasz back to bed and tucked him in again. "How many attacked you?"

Lukasz blinked drowsily. "Six? Seven? First blow ... I was stabbed in the back by Brainerd." Lukasz went silent for a bit. "I saw seven, including Gunther. Iwona lured me out there. Gunther paid her."

"Their names, Lukasz," Warenhari prodded gently.

"Adolf ... he said they had made a pact. They would each stick me as ... as part of the pact. Vengeance for Gerik. I didn't do anything to Gerik."

"I know. Did they stab you?"

"Adolf did. Zygmunt ... Flawiusz. Gunther ... Gunther again and again." Lukasz's throat tightened. "Emil and Jarogniew

and Mikolai were about to ... I don't think they had a chance to. Little Bit came."

Warenhari squeezed his shoulder. "Rest, my liege."

Lukasz watched Warenhari go to the door and speak to someone in the next room in voices too soft for him to hear. He began to feel the drug and slid into sleep.

* * * *

All of the prisoners were locked in the dungeons awaiting interrogation before their executions. They were all marked by the skulls burned into their foreheads. None of them would be spared. The trees in the courtyard hung with grisly fruit that had been dipped in tar to preserve them. Five special prisoners had been waiting for Lukasz to awaken and provide the last pieces of evidence. The women of their families knew where the boys were kept, but were not allowed to go near that end of the wing.

Word must have gone out concerning Lukasz's revelations, for as Berran, Vernados, and Yevhen headed for that room where Gunther's surviving friends were held, five noble ladies suddenly blocked their path with tear-streaked faces.

"Please don't kill our sons! Please!" Lady Adelajda, Emil's mother, threw herself at Berran's feet with her arms around his knees and nearly sent him stumbling down on top of her. "Please.

"Oh god, have mercy, they're just boys," said Lady Grazyna, Mikolai's mother.

"Brainerd made them do it. It isn't their fault," pleaded Lady Yachne, Zygmunt's mother.

"They're not listening to you. They're heartless bastards." Lady Minka, Gunther's mother, leaned against the wall across from them and one door down. "They hung my child for sticking a schvartzer dog who never belonged on the throne."

"Get out of the way or we'll lock you all up and not be gentle about it," said Berran.

Yevhen and Vernados exchanged shrugs, and started grabbing women. They shoved them into an empty room and locked them in.

When Berran reached the special prisoners, he stood gazing at them regretfully for a long time. They sat bound hand and foot to their chairs, and blindfolded. The minute that the boys heard them enter, the complaints, protestations, and pleadings began.

"Lukasz has confirmed your misdeeds," Berran said, ignoring their words. He threw his head back and considered the ceiling; Berran rotated his head, fighting the words he knew he had to say. His blood had been hot when he ordered Gunther's execution, and Lukasz's wounds had still been fresh in his mind when he ordered Iwona tortured for information. But now his blood had settled and these five were again just boys—boys who had fallen under the sway of an evil mon. Murderous boys, legally adult, but still just boys. Berran was only two years older than they were, and it caused him distress.

No matter how often he and the others had spoken of the necessity that these five be executed, no matter how strongly he agreed with that, no matter how inescapable the logic; once Berran was actually in the room with a group of the

condemned he felt that residual distress down to the core of his being—especially when they were so young.

Berran fought his way free of his musings and gestured to Vernados. "They're guilty of murder and attempted murder. Strangle them and see that their bodies are hung with the others."

"Yes, Lord."

The boys began screaming.

Vernados took his garrote from his pouch and looped it over Emil's head.

"Please," Emil shrieked, tears staining his blindfold and escaping to flood down his cheeks. "I'm sorry I stabbed him. I'm sorry. I don't want to die."

Berran felt sick to his stomach seeing Emil's terror. However, the boy's words had just proven his guilt. Berran had to assume that they had all gotten their blades into Lukasz, or been about to when Little Bit arrived.

The boy rocked his chair in a flinch reaction as the leather noose tightened on his throat, and he pissed his pants. Yevhen seized the chair arms and held it firmly in place.

Vernados jerked the cord tighter. Emil made a choking sound that degenerated into gurgling. Vernados held the pressure for a few minutes more. Emil's face purpled, his shoulders sagged, and his chin fell forward over the garrote. Satisfied, Vernados released the garrote, and nodded.

Yevhen put two fingers to Emil's throat. "Dead. Next one."

Unable to watch a second execution, Berran turned his back. He heard Mikolai make a sudden choking gasp and then go silent.

"Dead," said Yevhen.

Zygmunt began to choke and gasp.

Berran could not take any more, and stepped out into the corridor as he heard the third boy dying.

"Dead," said Yevhen.

Berran's stomach roiled and he felt close to vomiting. He walked away quickly, but not quickly enough: he heard Yevhen say "Dead" for the fourth time.

Although he did not hear it, Berran felt it in his heart when Yevhen said "Dead" for the fifth and final time. He wondered if he would ever become indurate to the requirements of his job.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TREASURE OF THE SOUL

Stygean was drawn to the edges of camp by a strange sound. He knew he should not have ventured to the edges, if they caught him here they would punish him. If he ran away into the forest, he had no idea how to provide for himself and survive—worse they would send Anksha after him. Yet they would think he was trying to escape if they found him here.

He wanted to turn aside. He knew he should. Yet the sound like a trilling bird, yet not like a bird, drew him. Stygean emerged into a small circle of trees and saw Isranon sitting with his flute to his lips.

"Are there words?" Stygean asked, his voice breaking upon Isranon's awareness.

Isranon lowered his flute, shifted his robe a bit, and turned to look at Stygean. "Yes, there are."

"Will you say them?"

"If you wish."

"I do."

*A twilight path that runs east of the sun
So that my hand summons Dawn before I die
To stand in the light, to know its touch
So my hand touches God before I die.
I will not fear my blood upon another's lips,
I will step into the flames of righteousness,
Sweet suffering of freedom for my belief,*

*I will burn, but I shall not rise in darkness
A path at twilight runs east of the sun.
Dawn now summons for me to die,
The path is barred, the gates are locked
I rest, I dream, from me they'll hear no cry.
I never found the twilight path of shadowed sun,
Yet sun it was. In the light I could not touch,
I built my house of sticks and set it burning.
For now my life in death is turning.
I stand within the womb of the flames.
I perish reaching for the dawn
My honor clean, my ash remains
I have not lived in vain.*

"It sounds so sad," said Stygean.

"Perhaps it is," Isranon said. "The song is a traditional one of my people."

Stygean blinked. "Sa'necari?"

Isranon shook his head. "No. The Dark Brothers. So much knowledge was lost when they all died."

Stygean shivered and could not understand why he did so. "The price of heresy is death," he murmured low before he could stop himself.

"As it has been since the time of my ancestor, Dawnhand."

"Dawnhand was a traitor."

"Dawnhand did not wish to become sa'necari," Isranon said quietly, with patience. "All myn should be allowed to follow their own paths so long as they do not harm others."

Stygean felt a squirming doubt in his mind. What the renunciate said made sense and he did not want to acknowledge it. "I am sa'necari..."

"You are a boy who has not chosen the path of his life yet."

"Will you play some more?"

"If you wish me too. Otherwise we will return to the camp."

"Please play."

"Sa'necari who have crossed over into the rites cannot bear the sound of a flute. It hurts them."

Stygean tilted his head in question. "Why?"

"Because the sound of a flute is the sound of life. It's melodies are treasures of the soul."

"Will you play and tell me about these treasures?"

For answer, Isranon began to play again.

* * * *

Cold. Cold. I'm so cold.

Iuf writhed in pain beneath Corbienne, his teeth clenched on a rolled up leather glove. She hauled the life from him in greedy pulls, her fangs sunk in his neck. Something was wrong. There was no paradise in her kisses this time, only hunger. Iuf shuddered and gasped, fighting an urge to scream and give them away. Then he went very still.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AN OLD WOLF'S LOVE

The first thing that Pandeena noticed when she began arranging her papers at her small desk beside the large slateboard was the many missing children. Over half of her class, comprised of children that lived at Sanctuary, were not there. She questioned her class, but received only shrugs and shaken heads for answers.

After several minutes of this, Pandeena's worries overran her sense of propriety. She gave the children the rest of the day off and went looking for Ailsa Softpaws, cousin to Nikko, who currently taught reading and basic math for two hours each morning. She found Ailsa in her garden, packing the turned earth in her garden with moss in preparation for the first snows which could not be more than a few weeks off.

"Ailsa, did you find that some of the children were missing?"

Ailsa looked up and straightened, wiping her hands on her apron. "So are their mothers. Several of the sheelings and longhouses are empty."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Ailsa appeared taken aback and hesitated before answering. "I assumed you knew. You live on the edge of the camp. You must have seen them go."

A chill of fear ran up Pandeena's back and raised her hackles. How could she have missed the departure of fifteen

women and twenty children? How could anyone have? "Thank you, Ailsa. I'll ask around."

"Do you mean you didn't know?"

"That's exactly what I mean."

She returned to the camp and asked the young wolves who worked there, starting with Shalto who had served as foreman of the camp's maintenance and building crew since before Beth disappeared. Pandeena found Shalto splitting more logs for the barns with his cousin Oswyl.

"How the hell should I know?" Shalto responded to her questions in a surly tone that few would have used with a priest.

Pandeena ignored it this time. Shalto frequently spoke to her like this because she had broken his arm last summer following his pushy attempt at seduction. "Perhaps I should have you replaced with someone who has a better eye for these matters."

"You can't do that. Clodagh's in charge."

"I can overrule Clodagh by going to Claw."

"Are you threatening me?" Shalto bristled and started to go hairy along his arms.

"I am. We know how the last time turned out ... now don't we?"

"I still didn't see them."

Once it became apparent that she would get nothing more out of Shalto, Pandeena began asking around the village itself. So far as she could tell, no one had seen the women and children leave. They had not gone over the bridge and they had not gone down any of the roads. Fleeing through the

forest seemed unlikely since none of the mothers had been lycan. The whole matter stank.

Pandeena went to the manor with reluctance dragging at her heels. She did not want to upset Claw, but felt that she had no choice. More and more, the priest felt convinced that the Butchering Serpent and his allies must have taken them, but why?

Kissie let her in and showed her up to the Blue Room. Claw looked worse than ever sitting by the fireplace playing checkers with Belgair. He had a blanket wrapped around him as if he had trouble staying warm despite the nearness to the fire. The lines in his face had become deeper, and his color paler. Since early summer, she had watched him aging before her eyes, and Pandeena almost turned around and left.

Claw pinned her with his gaze, which was as sharp as ever. "I can tell this isn't a social call."

Pandeena dragged a chair close and sat down. "I'm afraid it isn't." She sucked in a breath through her nostrils and noted that even Claw's scent was off somehow. "There's fifteen women and twenty children missing from the camp. Ten humans and all five of the sa'necari. The missing children were an almost even mix of human and lycan."

"Tell me about it. Did anyone see them leave?"

"Claw," interposed Belgair, "Sheradyn says that you're not to be stressed. Let me handle this."

"Shut up, Belgair," Claw snapped. "Stop interfering with me."

Belgair subsided immediately. Claw had become increasingly short tempered with him, and he knew better than to push it.

Claw poured himself another glass of Ildyrsetti rum and listened to Pandeena's tale.

"I came to you because I did not know what else to do," Pandeena said when she had finished with the story.

"Belgair get a search going and try to pick up their trail."

"What? And make them return? I say good riddance if they want that badly to leave."

"It's an order, Belgair," Claw snarled at him. "Get out and do it."

The villagers, the guard, the Lycamornots, and Malthus, all joined in the search. Yet despite searching for four days, no sign of the women and children was found. Clodagh, claiming that she now felt unsafe, moved Shalto, Oswyl, Preece, and Rheu into the abandoned longhouses on the compound over Pandeena's objections. Sheradyn kept her away from Claw during that period and eventually Pandeena gave up for the time being.

* * * *

Ever since the rest of the pregnant women disappeared, Caimbeul had feared for Clodagh. He had checked on a few of the other females each night, and discovered that they had all been sterilized with all the earmarks of Sidera Tyrins' craft. Matters were coming to a head with the Lycamornots: they had tried twice to ambush him and not succeeded. Shalto had tried various ploys to keep him out of Clodagh's bed.

Caimbeul knew that he had to make a decision about it all and he had to make it now. He had been wearing Padruig's form for days at a time, and it was slowly exhausting him.

Caimbeul lay in bed with Clodagh, stroking her body. Caimbeul extended his auric presence, wrapping it protectively around her, shielding her to the best of his ability. To work his power to this extent meant allowing her to recognize what he was doing. Gambling, he said, "I know someone who might be able to help you. Your womb carries the psychic echoes of rape."

She felt his power and her shoulders slumped. Some of the coercions in her mind loosened. "Then you know it's his."

Caimbeul frowned, feeling a prickling along his arms. "Whose?"

"If I say his name I'll die. He set a death command in my mind. That's why I'm the only pregnant one still here. He still needs me."

"Who is he?"

"I can't tell you." Tears began to come down her cheeks. "The child is sa'necari."

"Let me help you."

"You can't. Oh by the Nine Elder Gods, be merciful. When I was seven I was given a vision, and it was interpreted and sealed in my mind. I was prevented from remembering it until the wolf from the vision appeared."

The prickling along Caimbeul's arms increased until it was almost as intense as the day he had been struck by lightning when he ran under a tree during a storm as a cub. "Are you saying it's me?"

"Yes." Clodagh straightened. "The vision was this: if you rescue me, you'll die, but I'll live."

"Fate can be changed, if one's will is strong enough."

Clodagh pushed at Caimbeul's chest. "Please go away, and don't ever come back."

"No. You're coming away with me tonight."

Caimbeul put his fingers to her temples and sent her to sleep. He caught Clodagh as she fell backwards on the bed. Then he wrapped her in a stasis, but he felt the Serpent's power fighting him. Sealing the stasis would take too much power for him to retain this form. Padruig gave way to Caimbeul's shape. He sealed the stasis, and lifted Clodagh in his arms.

He carried her out of the longhouse, and a shape formed in the darkness.

"Where are you going with her?" Shalto demanded.

"I'm taking her home with me."

"You can't do that, old mon."

"I can do anything I damn well please. I'm your lawgiver and you'll show respect or you'll end up in the dungeons."

Shalto backed off. "You're making bad enemies."

"So are you."

Caimbeul carried Clodagh to his home and laid her in his bed. Then he slipped his hand inside his robe, placed his fingers on the godmark, and called out with his mind and heart.

—Pandeena, I need you. Please, come now.—

A shimmer of light shone in the corner of his bedroom. Pandeena appeared.

"What is it you need?" Her nose crinkled. "You both smell of sex. What did you do to her? Get too rough in bed?"

"Oh, please, Pandeena!" Caimbeul said irritably. "Don't start this now. She's pregnant."

Pandeena's face screwed up in a frown of distaste that Caimbeul remembered well from their marriage. "Old lecher, did you get her apron high?"

"Shut up and listen! It's the Serpent's."

Pandeena looked stunned as she walked to the bed, touched Clodagh, and Read her. "You've got a stasis on her. I didn't know you could do that."

"There's a lot you don't know about me, Pandeena. She has a death command in her mind. It was the only way to save her. Take her to your place for the night."

Pandeena sucked in a tight breath. "All right."

Caimbeul walked to the desk and opened the drawer. He pulled out all of his journals, shoving them into a satchel. "And these. All my evidence is in them. Take them someplace safe."

"You must think they're coming after you."

"I do. Shalto tried to stop me from taking her."

He added in the seed crystals, that he had used to prevent any of the females from getting pregnant by him when he was first sampling the illicit brothel in his efforts to discover how many of the women were involved. The crystals absorbed the fertile parts of a male's ejaculate and stored it for later release. Pandeena recognized what they were and lifted an eyebrow at him.

"Don't ask. It's in the journals."

"You're making them come after you. What can you possibly hope to gain?"

"A glimpse of the Serpent's face. They know I'm fireborn. He'll have to be with them when they come. I can tell you his identity through the godmark."

Pandeena's eyes softened and she hugged him impulsively. "You're taking a terrible chance."

"It will be worth it ... if we catch him. Now get out of here."

Pandeena took the satchel, lifted Clodagh in her strong arms, and Jumped.

* * * *

"Where's Clodagh?" Malthus demanded of Shalto.

"The lawgiver came and took her away."

"Damn it! We have to get her back. The lawgiver will use the slut against us all. He'll get every single member of your band outlawed or worse."

"Why?"

"Remember when the priest busted you and Oswyl up? She said she'd punish any wolf caught using the women. Well she'll go after all of you. Claw will send his guards to help her do it. Considering what became of Tempest, Nikko, and Beth, we'll probably all be chained in his dungeons and put to the question."

Shalto looked stricken at the suggestion of being tortured. "What do we do?"

"Gather your friends at my cottage immediately. I didn't spend years as a kandoyarin without knowing how to handle this kind of thing. Tell them to bring their masks."

"What are we going to do?" Shalto repeated.

"We're going to kill the lawgiver," Malthus snarled. "And the priest too. No one messes with us."

"Yeah," Shalto grinned savagely. "No one messes with us. I'll get them."

"I'll need to prepare a few things at the cottage. Didn't you tell me the lawgiver has fireborn blood?"

"Caimbeul is famous for it. That's why he's so long lived."

"I can take care of that." Malthus sneered.

Malthus headed for the cottage, carrying a satchel. Once inside, he opened the satchel, and took out a string of crystal globes. He Read them and picked out the ones he wanted. A tap and a word of command brought forth the contents of three of them. Several blades, all wrapped in various shades of silk came first. He set those aside. A wealth of vials, bottles, and jars came next, accompanied by bowls, mortars and pestles, measuring spoons, and stained brushes.

He considered his options carefully, and it came down to using a Devil's Silver base as he always did. His mother's family had discovered and refined Devil's Silver. It was an irradiated variety of silver liquefied in an arcane solution compatible with snake venom and other specialized toxins. Malthus had developed his own special recipe for death, comprised primarily of blended plant toxins, snake feces and venoms—venoms he had spent years painfully immunizing

himself against as his rite-enhanced resistances grew—and as a tribute to the toughness of lycans, Devil's Silver.

Normally he only coated his arrowheads and a single matched pair of long knives with it—knives he didn't usually carry. One arrow was all it took to kill a lycan. The more arrows he put into one, the faster they died. So far as he knew, no antidote for Devil's Silver existed.

He chose the most concentrated and deadly blend he had ever formulated using Devil's Silver, unstoppered the bottle, poured some into a bowl, and added from various other bottles. Malthus dipped his brush in. With careful, precise strokes, he poisoned each and every blade with it, leaving a dirty copper stain. When he finished, Malthus put that potion aside.

Then he turned to another set of bottles and vials. They would need to poison both Caimbeul's lycan and the fireborn aspects in order to be certain that Caimbeul would not rise if his body were burned. Fireborn tended to have at least two complete forms.

Everything clicked in Malthus' head and he realized that Caimbeul and Padruig were probably one and the same person. Yren had said that he smelled odd. Malthus would have preferred blades runed for slaying fireborn, but had none with him, and he did not have time for subtlety. Instead, he blended another new poison with an arcane acid and spelled it for death. This one would need to be poured into a body cavity through a large wound.

Yren arrived first, looking eager. "We're going to stick the old bastard?"

"Yes, indeed, Yren," said Malthus. "But since you're here first, I have a special task for you."

"Sure." He grinned at Malthus

"Once he's down, slit him open, and pour this inside him to kill the fireborn half so he doesn't rise." Malthus stoppered the vial tightly and handed it to Yren who put it in his pouch.

"Like undead?"

"Very much so. You don't want him coming back to life and eating us, now do you?"

Yren's eyes widened and he sobered. "Shiiiiitt, no."

"But you can do this?"

"Absolutely, I'm your mon."

"And I have blades for everyone, but don't cut yourself on the edges. They're coated with Devil's Silver."

"How the hell did you get that?"

"I told you, my mother is a bio-alchemist. I can get anything I want."

Yren grinned, snapped his stilettos from his armsheaths, and extended them to Malthus. "Poison all my blades?"

"Go have a sit outside and have a tankard while I work."

Yren left.

Malthus mixed up two more blends designed to kill fireborn and filled stoppered bottles with them. He put those in his pouches.

Preece slipped into Malthus' study. He watched him a moment. Malthus handed him a blade with a coppery shine down the middle. Preece leaned against the door facing as he accepted the blade. "Poison?"

"Devil's Silver and some other things. A specialty of my mother's."

"You must have an interesting mother," Preece said softly.

"I do."

"Mine's dead."

Malthus wondered where this was going since Preece never spoke of his family. To Malthus knowledge, Preece had simply turned up here a couple years ago as a green stripling and gone to work as a laborer, doing whatever odd jobs he could pick up, including harvesting.

"She always picked on me." Preece turned the blade back and forth, studying the edge without touching it. "This ought to slide into the cockwhore nicely. Mother said I'd never amount to much. Certainly not as much as my older siblings. I enjoyed watching her eyes when I killed her."

Malthus smiled thinly. "Was this revelation supposed to shock me?"

"Not at all. I think we're kindred spirits. Any time there's killing to be done, count me in. I'll follow you to hell and back."

Shalto stepped past Preece, casting a glance up and down him. "What's the plan?"

"We're not going after him tonight. We're just arming up. Tomorrow, we ride out of town on a group hunt like we've done so many times in the past. Only we double back at dusk."

Malthus tapped another globe, and several more objects appeared on his large desk: glass rods, two wands, talismans on chains, rings, and a box of darts.

"Hsaahh," Shalto breathed. "Globe of holding. Never thought I'd ever see one. Expensive."

Malthus chuckled. "And reasonably rare in most places."

"Where you get them?"

"Charas, but that's a long story and we don't have time for it." He placed three of the glass rods into a leather case with a flap lid and a belt loop. "I'll need these to deal with Caimbeul."

"Aren't we just going to stick him?" Rheu said, pushing between Preece and Shalto.

Preece gave Rheu's head an affectionate ruffling. Rheu was an orphan who had lived with Preece for a year now. Malthus suspected it was not a case of comfort nesting, for he had caught a glimpse of Preece fondling Rheu in the sweet pepper bushes near the stream. Yet, they both spent a lot of time with their sticks in the females.

Malthus explained it all again and by then Nesswen and Oswyl had arrived. He could taste the blood lust rising from the auras of the young wolves, just as it did when they hunted deer in the winter in wolf form. It would be a pleasure to watch them tomorrow.

"What if Caimbeul kills one of us?" Oswyl asked. "They say he was a fighter in his day."

Malthus regarded all of them. Oswyl was a liability that he needed to eliminate. He was too weak willed and worrisome. If any of them were seriously wounded in the fight ... Well, he would take along several vials each containing a fatal overdose of concentrated Pollendine, a powerful narcotic, in case one of the others might be foolish enough to ask a

healer to look at the wounded, and draw dangerous attention to the rest of them.

"You've all seen someone felled when an elk turned at bay, yet the pack continued to attack..." Torquil said.

"No quarter asked, no quarter given," Malthus said quietly, his steeped fingers tapping his lips. "We're all taking an equal chance. Shall I get us all some mead?"

Malthus spelled the tankards before bringing them in to ensure that all the gang was even more susceptible to his plans, and handed them around.

"The more you stick him the faster he dies," Preece said.

Malthus regarded Preece, thinking that the eighteen-year-old might be much more experienced in murder than he let on.

* * * *

Claw walked to his study, and dropped into his chair breathing hard. Just that much walking and he was exhausted. It grated on his nerves. Sheradyn had ordered him to take it easy, and Aisha was enforcing that by not allowing him out of the house. Malthus, they had informed him, would handle his duties for the nonce. That made him edgy and got on his nerves. Malthus was not lycan.

Merissa should have married a lycan.

What would happen to Darmyk without him to protect his grandson? The fact that Darmyk was godmarked would not be counted as much as the fact that he was sa'necari. The hatred of sa'necari went too deep.

He could only hope that when the time came, Pandeena could find Brock and get him here fast enough.

Claw opened a drawer in his desk, pulled out the last bottle of Faery wine, a glass, and poured himself a drink. He drank two glasses before he felt the chest pain start. A tremor of panic ran through him, and he drew a flask from his pocket. Claw poured the medicine into the glass on top of the wine, and drank all of it. Sheradyn had told him to keep the medicine with him at all times, and at the first symptoms to drink it. He probably should not have added it to the wine, but he didn't have another glass and didn't want to waste something as expensive and rare as that vintage.

The chieftain tried to hold his eyes open as he felt the heavy cottony sensation of pressure in his head. Claw fainted at his desk, his head folding forward over his arms.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

ALICE

When Lukasz woke again, Berran was sitting with him. The morning streamed through his window, gilding everything with gold. Crisp autumn air breathed across him, delighting his senses. "Good morning, Berran."

Berran smiled. "Morning, Lukasz."

Lukasz lowered his eyes. "Every time you or Warenhari come, you're here to ask more questions. What is it this time? Can't it wait a bit?"

"I'm afraid it can't. Tell me about Iwona, Lukasz. She made some wild accusations. Were you intimate with her?"

Lukasz's cheeks colored. "Yes. Gunther paid her to lead me into a trap." He swallowed and then described his assignation with Iwona that nearly turned into a death trap.

Berran considered. "Then I was right to have her killed."

Lukasz's shoulders slumped at the thought of the hangman's noose around Iwona's pretty throat, but there was nothing to be done for it. She had helped them try to kill him. "Yes."

"Did you like having her in your bed?"

The young duke, soon to be king, brightened slightly. "I liked it."

"Next time, don't sleep with a servant." Berran smiled ruefully. "Although I'm hardly one to speak. I've done my share of it."

Lukasz licked his lips and lowered his head. "I'll never do it again. Never."

Berran eased himself forward and lifted Lukasz's chin. "Saying something like that just gets you into trouble. It's a natural thing ... wanting to sheath your cock in a sweet flesh hole. I just think..."

"What?"

"That you should have a suitable mistress, someone from a noble family and not just a gutter whore hired from the streets. There's more to being a royal mistress than sex. Although that is part of it. She needs to understand the politics of sleeping with a king. She needs to be a political advisor, a confidante, and a comforter."

Lukasz's eyes rounded as he thought about that. "That's a lot."

Berran laughed. "You are too young to have realized this, perhaps. But the most influential women in a kingdom are more often the mistresses than the wives."

"So what do you want me to do?"

"Let Talons and me find you a suitable mistress. Someone who you can have on your arm in public and play Jack in the Orchard with at night to your heart's content without endangering yourself."

Lukasz remembered Aroana's admonition to get himself a mistress that Talons or Berran had chosen. "I'll be good to her."

"Is that a yes?"

The young duke nodded.

* * * *

Berran joined Talons, Yevhen, and Hartmut in the private drawing room that they had been using as a briefing room while they coordinated what needed to be done to the palace and other problems that cropped up owing to the recent coup attempt. He settled heavily into his chair and propped his leg up. He fixed his gaze on Talons. "I've been talking to Lukasz. He needs a mistress and he has agreed to let us pick, Talons."

"I wouldn't trust anyone in the palace. Most, if not all, the noble families currently have issues with him."

"We can't really look beyond our borders," Hartmut said. "Beltria has always been very isolationist and inbred."

"That needs to stop." Berran massaged his calf. "Can you get him someone like yourself, Talons?"

"That depends on what you're asking for. The only yuwenghau I know well are all in Imralon. You don't want a Night-Elf. So tell me what you want."

Berran snorted. "I don't require a god. She needs to be pretty, out-going, close to Lukasz's age. But she also needs to be politically savvy, have the manners of a noblewoman ... in fact I would prefer if she were nobly born. She needs to be a capable bodyguard."

"Are you asking for a Guildsmon?"

"If that's what it takes." Berran pressed his face into his hands for a moment as the stress began to show. "Damnit! I'm not going through this again. I want to keep Lukasz alive. And this seems the best solution. Iwona opened a kettle of nasty worms when she seduced and then betrayed Lukasz."

"Give me a week, maybe two. It all depends on what the Grand Master says. I can be in Creeya by this evening. Little Bit has been wanting a long flight for days."

* * * *

Lukasz lay in his bed speculating about having a mistress. Sometimes the idea of getting one this way seemed nothing short of terrifying, just like making a marriage of state, which his uncle had always told him that he would have to do eventually. Other times it brought him wet dreams and an aching in his loins that drove him to masturbation even though that was something he learned from Iwona.

From what he was hearing, the palace was preparing for her arrival with all the enthusiasm of a royal marriage, which felt intensely odd. When Lukasz remarked on the attractiveness of a servant to Berran, they stopped sending the pretty ones up with his meals.

Eurus was allowing him out of bed for brief periods, but never for long as Lukasz soon found himself weary and in pain. The healer assured him that it would pass in time. Getting well seemed to be taking an interminable number of days. He had no appetite, despite everyone pressuring him to eat.

* * * *

Talons sat in a comfortable chair in the Grand Master's study waiting for him. The walls were freshly whitewashed and hung with tapestried scenes of heroic deeds. His desk stood to the side where he could glance up and see out of his

window at the mountains. In the center stood a circle of comfortable chairs with two at the head that resembled casual thrones. She marveled at how much the room had changed from when she used to come here to see her grandfather. Talons did not regret giving up all claims to the throne, if anything she felt relieved.

The door to her left opened into the corridor that led to the rest of the palace, and to her right stood a door letting into the rest of the Star Room at the top of the spire. The right door opened and Grand Master Ceejorn emerged with Queen Isen on his arm. Isen glowed in a way that only happily pregnant women did. Her large belly protruded so far on her slender body that she waddled.

Talons rose and hugged Isen gently. "It's good to see you looking happy."

Ceejorn helped Isen into her throne chair, settled into his chair, and grinned in a silly fashion. "It's a girl. I got worried when she gave me two boys in a row."

Isen blushed. "We would have just kept trying, Ceejorn. It isn't as if I have any trouble getting pregnant."

The Grand Master blushed back at her.

Talons laughed. Since marrying three years ago, Isen had spent more time pregnant than not. They were a good match, despite the twelve-year age difference.

"So what did you come about, Talons?" Ceejorn asked as his face regained its normal color.

Talons told him Lukasz's story.

* * * *

"Records and Research," said Alice. "You're assigning me to Records and Research?"

"I hope you're not too disappointed," said Master Hezekiah. "But in the light of how your exams turned out, we felt that most suited your talents and skills and temperament."

"No, of course not. At least I'll still be a Guildsmon."

Actually, Alice wanted to scream and throw a fit. There was absolutely nothing romantic about spending the rest of her life as a clerk. It almost made some of those dusty old men that had come to her father's home to look her over as a possible wife appetizing. Almost.

There were three branches to the Guild: Deployment, Training, and Records. Alice had been very certain, up until that moment, that she would make it into Deployment and soon be off avenging the innocent and helpless. Now that would never happen.

She scarcely heard the rest of what Master Hezekiah had to say before he dismissed her.

Alice drifted toward the Student Common Room in a daze.

Excess daughters, like herself, and younger sons of the nobility tended to end up in Guild training here at the University where their god, Hadjys the Dark Judge, either confirmed or rejected them just before they started their final two years. Some never made it that far. Lord Bryndel Wrathscar, who had killed himself three years ago, had been rejected in his third year. Knowing that story well, Alice had always been grateful for each additional year that she passed

her exams. But records? Of all the boring duties to be assigned.

Come spring, she would be expected to spend half of each day at Records for her student internship; and she would be doing nothing but writing, filing, and occasionally looking something up for one of the masters or a senior clerk. A year of that and she would graduate into a full-fledged Guildsmon.

All of her friends would be in the Student Common Room, no doubt bragging about which of the branches they had been assigned to. Alice dreaded having to tell anyone which branch she was going into. When she reached the room, Alice found a bunch of female students excitedly reading something that had just been posted on the huge corkwood board that spanned one wall.

She leaned around and peered over the shoulder of a taller girl. The cause of the excitement was an open call for a volunteer.

Her eyes lit up. It was a strange request, but the rewards were very tempting. The legendary Talons Trollbane, greatest assassin that the Guild had ever produced, was offering to personally complete a student's training, one on one. The student accepting the assignment, which might prove to be permanent, was promised a substantial amount of money, and would be well provided for for the rest of her life by Talons herself.

Because it was an open call, it did not matter which branch the student had been assigned to. She wanted a girl to become a royal mistress and bodyguard. It sounded romantic, adventurous, and not at all boring. Certainly better than being

married to a filing cabinet. She hoped the king was not a dusty old man.

At half past fourteen, Alice felt ready to conquer the world, except that the world did not seem to want to be conquered by her. Her Guild specialty was poisons and antidotes, although she could handle blades and an obstacle course with the best of them. She could even rappel down a roof as fast as a cat could leap.

Alice read all of the requirements with growing excitement, certain that she fit them just fine—in fact she seemed to fit them perfectly—until she got to the last one and her heart sank. Talons wanted a girl that was already sexually experienced. Alice was a virgin. Oh, she had read all the popular naughty books that were being published in the dozens since that Dwarven printing contraption had arrived in the city of Havensword. Alice even owned, and had practically memorized, the 112 Positions of Delight, which was filled with scandalously detailed pictures.

Well, perhaps I can fake that one, Alice decided.

"I am *not* going to be married to a filing cabinet," she muttered and took off for the Patriarch's offices. "I'm going to seduce a king, conquer a kingdom, and vanquish his enemies."

She pushed past Patriarch Mikkal's secretary and burst into his office, filled with false bravado. "I'm volunteering."

The Patriarch was a thin mon, his white hair long on top and trimmed close on the sides, the skin of his face starting to sag in three long half circles beginning beneath his eyes

and softly shiny because of the fairness of his complexion. He lifted an eyebrow at her.

Someone in the chair closest to the desk shifted to look at her, and Alice's heart sprang into her throat and her knees nearly gave.

"Hello, do I know you?" Talons asked.

"I'm Alice Tormuth."

"Lady Alice Tormuth," Mikkal corrected.

* * * *

Alice's first ride on gryphon back left her breathless and excited, until they landed in the courtyard. She saw all the bodies hanging from the trees and could not entirely repress a shudder. Although Talons had told her about the attempted coup in detail, actually seeing the results gave her a visceral shock that she had not expected. They needed someone who could act as a strong queen in all but name.

Two myn came forward and introduced themselves as Lord-General Berran Dreslin and Hartmut the steward.

"Allow me to present to you Lady Alice Tormuth of Creeya," said Talons.

"Pleased to meet you," Alice said with a proper curtsy. "I hope that you've left a few villains for me."

Berran stifled a chuckle. "I'm certain that there are a few lurking somewhere."

"I can assure you that I'm very experienced. I can handle everything, including your dusty old king."

Berran burst out laughing.

Alice looked at Talons. "Did I say something wrong?"

Talons shrugged, her face deadpan. "Not at all."

"I think you're perfect, my dear," said Hartmut. He took her hand and kissed the back of it.

"So when do I meet my lover to be?" Alice asked as if she were discussing furniture or knick-knacks. "You do realize that I've been given the right of refusal if I don't like the look of him. Of course, choosing between a king and a filing cabinet is not a really good set of equivalences. So I may decide to take him, even if he is dusty looking."

Berran choked, and then exchanged an amused glance with Hartmut.

"Right now the king is sleeping. He's still recovering from his wounds," said Hartmut.

"Well, can I at least peep at him? I'm absolutely certain I shall die of curiosity if I can't before morning."

Talons pursed her lips and shrugged again. "Can't hurt so long as you're very quiet."

They took Alice through the palace and into Lukasz's suite. Talons indicated the bedroom and Alice stole into it. She slipped quietly up to Lukasz's bed and looked him over. Her eyes lit up as she retreated back into the antechamber and pressed her hand to her lips with a smile.

"Well, what do you think, Alice?" asked Berran.

"He's not dusty looking at all. In fact, he's adorable. I'll take him."

* * * *

A young girl Lukasz's age brought his lunch to him. Captain Yevhen left his bedside, helped her set the tray on the nightstand, and put the bed table across Lukasz's lap.

Yevhen gave Lukasz a knowing wink as he left, closing the door behind him.

Confused, Lukasz turned to the girl, who he felt certain he had never seen before. She had pale red hair that hung in ringlets that were gathered into blue ribboned clusters above her ears, green eyes, and an uncertain smile. At first Lukasz thought she was a servant, but then the quality of her pale blue dress with its silvery trim registered. "Who are you?"

"Lady Alice Tormuth."

"That's an odd name," said Lukasz as she placed a bowl of soup on his bed table, along with crusty bread and slices of cheese. He realized, in a moment of stunned delight, that this had to be his new mistress. That was why Yevhen had winked at him. Lukasz wondered if he had to court her, or if he could simply pull her into bed with him that very instant. He decided to err on the side of caution, although his member was rising to attention.

"I'm from Creeya."

Lukasz found himself feeling interested in her as a person, while resisting an urge to stare at her breasts and imagine her with her clothes off. "Did Talons fetch you?"

"Yes. My father has too many daughters and can't possibly dower them all off. I'm a cousin to the late Derryl Tormuth—he was marvelous—but you can't possibly have heard of him. We're the poor relations in the family."

Chatterbox. I'll bet you can talk enough for both of us.

"Are you Guild?"

"No," she said, adding quickly, "But I can take care of myself."

Lukasz lost his battle with his urges, and his gaze lingered too long on her breasts.

Alice saw where his eyes had gone and flushed. "You can see them, but only if you promise to eat while you're staring. Talons says you're not eating enough."

Lukasz remembered his conversation with Berran the day before—at least he thought it was the day before. He spent so much time sleeping that the passage of the days had become more than a bit confused. *What do I say to her? I'd like to stick my sword in your flesh hole? Not hardly, I think.*

Iwona had never done more with him than talk dirty and fuck. What he had done with Iwona seemed totally inappropriate for dealing with the little beauty in front of him.

"I'd like that. Do you like to read?"

White Lady, I sound lame. Will she think I'm foolish?

"I brought two suitcases of those new books, the one they make with a contraption," Alice said, as she unbuttoned her blouse.

He watched her breasts emerge gradually from her bodice, and once they were fully revealed, Lukasz savored the shape of them. Alice's breasts were smaller than Iwona's had been, but they were shapely apples with pert, dark nipples.

"You promised to eat," Alice said.

Lukasz ate and they shared stories while he glanced from time to time at her breasts. He hardly noticed when he finished all of his lunch.

Alice's breasts jiggled delightfully as she removed his dishes and his bed table.

Gods, she looks delicious. What do I say next? "Have you ... uhm ... done this before?"

Her blush deepened and spread over her breasts. "No. But I've read some of the naughty books."

"Naughty books?" Lukasz floundered inwardly. *Can I just say let me fuck you? Chatterbox isn't giving me a good opening. What do I do?*

"Oh, you know," Alice shrugged. "His ardor burned fiercely as he thrust into the palace of her pleasure..."

Lukasz goggled at the thought that such books existed. His cock was hardening into an agony of need and he could not quite get to the point. "Did you bring any?"

"Of course. Where did you think I got the idea of exposing myself like this? The heroine does it in *Love's Travails*."

She sat down on his bed and unfastened her bodice all the way to her navel. Lukasz gulped air, desperately trying to say the right words. He reached out and tentatively ran his hand over her breast. Alice shivered under his touch. "Did they bring you here to be my mistress?"

Oh gods, that was a dumb thing to say. She would not be sitting here half-naked otherwise.

"Yes. They said that if you liked me..." She swallowed as he began working her nipple skillfully. "And if I liked you ... and I do. I like you very much."

He was still very sore, but Lukasz managed to sit up better. "I like you too."

"Do you want to see the rest of me?"

The young duke sucked in a breath. "Yes. Can I fu—I mean can we..." Lukasz vacillated between the word and the euphemism. It had all seemed so easy with Iwona, now it seemed anything but.

Alice disrobed and sat again on the side of the bed. "Fuck me."

That did it. Lukasz walked forward a bit on his hands and had barely gotten his lips around her nipple to suck it, when his tender abdominal muscles cramped. He groaned sharply and released her, silently cursing Flawiusz for slicing him open. Alice wrapped her arms around him, supporting him when it appeared that Lukasz would collapse.

"Maybe there's a position for this that won't hurt as much," she suggested. "*In Love's Travails...*"

But Alice had already said the magic words, and Lukasz did not intend to get distracted from his goal. "Get under the blankets, Chatterbox."

Alice settled Lukasz back on his pillows and climbed between the sheets with him. With Alice's help, Lukasz managed to crawl atop her. She held him tightly while his breathing evened and he recovered from his efforts to get that far. Lukasz sucked her nipples to hardness and she responded by moaning loudly beneath him. The sound startled Lukasz, for Iwona had never been so noisy, but he decided he liked it.

From time to time, he worked his fingers inside her to check if she had become wet enough that he would not hurt her. He encountered the thick membrane of her hymen, and experienced a thrill knowing that Alice was a virgin.

A wave of nervousness hit him as he grasped his cock and poised it at the opening to her vagina, and he hesitated. "I'm putting it in now. If that's okay."

"Oh, for gods' sake, do it already."

Lukasz pushed into her, and she gave a small gasp as her hymen tore. They became a writhing mass of noisy passions. Alice burst into loud sobbing when she orgasmed.

Iwona had never done that.

Shaken and worried, Lukasz hugged her. "Are you all right? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"No. No," she said. "It was wonderful. It's much better than being married to a filing cabinet."

"A what?"

"Oh, never mind. Suck my nipples again."

* * * *

When Berran came to sit with Lukasz, he found Warenhari and Yevhen in the parlor grinning at each other like silly cats. Warenhari thumbed at Lukasz's door and touched a finger to his lips. Berran went quietly to the door and peeped inside. Alice's white shoulders showed above the blankets and she slept with Lukasz spooned around her.

"He has a decent mistress this time," Berran remarked, closing the door softly.

Warenhari licked his lips and nodded. "When they started getting loud, I went and had her things moved into the Duchess Room."

Berran glanced at the door that linked the duke's suite to that of the duchess. Alice could never be Lukasz's wife, because her family did not have sufficient rank, but from what Talons had told him and what he had seen so far, she would make a fine royal mistress. And Alice seemed more than capable of keeping Lukasz out of the wrong beds. "I didn't expect it to happen so fast."

"Sex is a special kind of comfort," said Yevhen. "If we hadn't acted quickly, who knows what might have ended up in his bed?"

"Another Iwona?" Berran sat down and placed his bad leg on a footstool that had been brought up for that purpose.

"Very likely." Yevhen walked to the window and stared out at Iwona's body dangling from the oak tree with the rest of the gallows fruits. All of the bodies had been dipped in tar to preserve them.

Warenhari joined Yevhen at the window. "And she can guard his back. The only reason she's not Guild is because they pulled her out of training early for this. But she's well trained nonetheless. I would hate to be the one to mess with Lukasz in Alice's presence."

"And if she gives him a child, all the better," said Berran.

THE END

SF/F/H FROM PAGETURNER EDITIONS

CAMPBELL AWARD WINNER ALEXIS A. GILLILAND'S ROSINANTE TRILOGY

Revolution from Rosinante

Long Shot for Rosinante

Pirates of Rosinante

THE CLASSIC SCIENCE FICTION OF STUART J. BYRNE

Music of the Spheres & Other Classic SF Stories

Star Quest

Power Meta

Hoaxbreaker

The Alpha Trap (1976)

The Land Beyond the Lens: The Michael Flannigan Trilogy
(writing as John Bloodstone)

The Metamorphs & The Naked Goddess: Two Classic Pulp
Novels

Children of the Chronotron & The Ultimate Death: Two
Classic Pulp Novels

Beyond the Darkness & Potential Zero: Two Classic Pulp
Novels

The Agartha Series #1. Prometheus II

The Agartha Series #2. Colossus

The Agartha Series #3: The Golden Gardsmen

Godman (writing as John Bloodstone)

Thundar, Man of Two Worlds The Land Beyond the Lens:
The Michael Flannigan Trilogy (writing as John Bloodstone)

Last Days of Thronas (writing as John Bloodstone)

The First Star Man Omnibus: #1 Supermen of Alpha & Star
Man #2 Time Window

The Second Star Man Omnibus: #3 Interstellar Mutineers
& #4 The Cosmium Raiders

The Third Star Man Omnibus: #5 The World Changer & #6
The Slaves of Venus

The Fourth Star Man Omnibus: #7 Lost in the Milky Way &
#8. Time Trap

The Fifth Star Man Omnibus: #9 The Centaurians & #10
The Emperor

The Sixth Star Man Omnibus: #11 The Return of Star Man
& #12 Death Screen

STEFAN VUCAK'S EPPIE NOMINEE SPACE SAGA "THE
SHADOW GODS"

In the Shadow of Death
Against the Gods of Shadow
A Whisper From Shadow
Immortal in Shadow
With Shadow and Thunder
Through the Valley of Shadow

JANRAE FRANK'S #1 BESTSELLING FANTASY SAGAS

Dark Brothers of the Light Book I. Blood Rites
Dark Brothers of the Light Book II. Blood Heresy
Dark Brothers of the Light Book III. Blood Dawn
Dark Brothers of the Light Book IV: Blood Wraiths
Dark Brothers of the Light Book V: Blood Paladin
In the Darkness, Hunting: Tales of Chimquar the Lionhawk
Journey of the Sacred King I: My Sister's Keeper
Journey of the Sacred King II: Sins of the Mothers

Journey of the Sacred King III: My Father's House
THE COSMIC KALEVALA

The Saga of Lost Earths—Emil Petaja (Nebula nominee author)

The Star Mill—Emil Petaja

The Stolen Sun—Emil Petaja

Tramontane—Emil Petaja

JACK JARDINE'S HUMOROUS SF AND MYSTERY

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #1 The Flying Saucer Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #2 The Emerald Elephant Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #3 The Golden Goddess Gambit

The Agent of T.E.R.R.A. #4 The Time Trap Gambit

The Mind Monsters

Unaccustomed As I Am To Public Dying & Other Humorous
and Ironic Mystery Stories

The Nymph and the Satyr

ARDATH MAYHAR'S AWARD-WINNING SF & F

The Crystal Skull & Other Tales of the Terrifying and
Twisted

The World Ends in Hickory Hollow, or After Armageddon

The Tupla: A Nover of Horror

The Twilight Dancer & Other Tales of Magic, Mystery and
the Supernatura

The Black Tower: A Novel of Dark Fantasy

Forbidden Geometries: A Novel Alien Worlds

HAL ANNAS' COSMIC RECKONING TRILOGY

I. The Woman from Eternity

II. Daughter of Doom

III. Witch of the Dark Star

THE HILARIOUS ADVENTURES OF TOFFEE

1. The Dream Girl—Charles F. Myers
2. Toffee Haunts a Ghost—Charles F. Myers
3. Toffee Turns the Trick—Charles F. Myers

OTHER AWARD WINNING & NOMINEE STORIES AND
AUTHORS

Moonworm's Dance & Other SF Classics—Stanley Mullen
(includes The Day the Earth Stood Still & Other SF Classics—
Harry Bates (Balrog Award winning story)

Hugo nominee story Space to Swing a Cat)

People of the Darkness—Ross Rocklynne (Nebulas nominee
author)

When They Come From Space—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning
author)

What Thin Partitions—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Star Bright & Other SF Classics—Mark Clifton

Eight Keys to Eden—Mark Clifton (Hugo winning author)

Rat in the Skull & Other Off-Trail Science Fiction—Rog
Phillips (Hugo nominee author)

The Involuntary Immortals—Rog Phillips (Hugo nominee
author)

Inside Man & Other Science Fictions—H. L. Gold (Hugo
winner, Nebula nominee)

Women of the Wood and Other Stories—A. Merritt (Science
Fiction and Fantasy Hall of Fame award)

A Martian Odyssey & Other SF Classics—Stanley G.
Weinbaum (SFWA Hall of Fame author)

Dawn of Flame & Other Stories—Stanley G. Weinbaum
(SFWA Hall of Fame author)

- The Black Flame—Stanley G. Weinbaum
Scout-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction)
Smoke Signals-Octavio Ramos, Jr. (Best Original Fiction
winning author)
The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton
The Star Kings-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder Award
winning author)
A Yank at Valhalla-Edmond Hamilton (Sense of Wonder
Award winning author)
Dawn of the Demigods, or People Minus X—Raymond Z.
Gallun (Nebula Nominee Author)
THE BESTSELLING SF/F/H OF J. D. CRAYNE
Tetragravitron (Captain Spycer #1)
Monster Lake
Invisible Encounter & Other Stories
The Cosmic Circle
PLANETS OF ADVENTURE
Colorful Space Opera from the Legendary Pulp Planet
Stories
#1. "The Sword of Fire"—A Novel of an Enslaved World". &
"The Rocketeers Have Shaggy Ears"—A Novel of Peril on Alien
Worlds.
#2. "The Seven Jewels of Chamar"—A Novel of Future
Centuries. & "Flame Jewel of the Ancients"—A Novel of
Outlaw Worlds .
#3. "Captives of the Weir-Wind"—A Novel of the Void by
Nebula Nominee Ross Rocklynne. & "Black Priestess of
Varda"—A Novel of a Magic World.
NEMESIS: THE NEW MAGAZINE OF PULP THRILLS

#1. Featuring Gun Moll, the 1920s Undercover Nemesis of Crime in "Tentacles of Evil," an all-new, complete book-length novel; plus a Nick Bancroft mystery by Bob Liter, "The Greensox Murders" by Jean Marie Stine, and a classic mystery short reprinted from the heyday of the pulps.

#2 Featuring Rachel Rocket, the 1930s Winged Nemesis of Foreign Terror in "Hell Wings Over Manhattan," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus spine-tingling science fiction stories, including EPPIE nominee Stefan Vucak's "Hunger," author J. D. Crayne's disturbing "Point of View," Hugo Award winner Larry Niven's "No Exit," written with Jean Marie Stine, and a classic novelette of space ship mystery by the king of space opera, Edmond Hamilton. Illustrated. (Illustrations not available in Palm).

#3 Featuring Victory Rose, the 1940s Nemesis of Axis Tyranny, in "Hitler's Final Trumpet," an all-new, complete book-length novel, plus classic jungle pulp tales, including a complete Ki-Gor novel.

4 Featuring Femme Noir, the 1950s Nemesis of Hell's Restless Spirits, in an all new, book length novel, plus all new and classic pulp shudder tales, including "The Summons from Beyond" the legendary round-robin novelette of cosmic horror by H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, C.L. Moore, A. Merritt, and Frank Belknap Long.

OTHER FINE CONTEMPORARY & CLASSIC SF/F/H

A Million Years to Conquer—Henry Kuttner

After the Polothas—Stephen Brown

Arcadia—Tabitha Bradley

Backdoor to Heaven—Vicki McElfresh

Buck Rogers #1: Armageddon 2419 A.D.-Philip Francis
Nowlan

Buck Rogers #2. The Airlords of Han—Philip Francis
Nowlan

Chaka: Zulu King-Book I. The Curse of Baleka-H. R.
Haggard

Chaka: Zulu King-Book II. Umpslopogass' Revenge-H. R.
Haggard

Claimed!-Francis Stevens

Darby O'Gill: The Classic Irish Fantasy-Hermine Templeton

Diranda: Tales of the Fifth Quadrant—Tabitha Bradley

Dracula's Daughters-Ed. Jean Marie Stine

Dwellers in the Mirage-A. Merritt

From Beyond & 16 Other Macabre Masterpieces-H. P.
Lovecraft

Future Eves: Classic Science Fiction about Women by
Women-(ed) Jean Marie Stine

Ghost Hunters and Psychic Detectives: 8 Classic Tales of
Sleuthing and the Supernatural-(ed.) J. M. Stine

Horrors!: Rarely Reprinted Classic Terror Tales-(ed.) J. M.
Stine. J.L. Hi

House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson

House of Many Worlds [Elspeth Marriner #1]—Sam Merwin
Jr.

Invisible Encounter and Other SF Stories—J. D. Crayne

Murcheson Inc., Space Salvage—Cleve Cartmi

Ki-Gor, Lord of the Jungle-John Peter Drummond

Lost Stars: Forgotten SF from the "Best of Anthologies"-
(ed.) J. M. Stine

Metropolis-Thea von Harbou
Mission to Misenum [Elspeth Marriner #2]—Sam Merwin Jr.
Mistress of the Djinn-Geoff St. Reynard
Chronicles of the Sorceress Morgaine I-V—Joe Vadalma
Nightmare!-Francis Stevens
Pete Manx, Time Troubler—Arthur K. Barnes
Possessed!-Francis Stevens
Ralph 124C 41+—Hugo Gernsback
Seven Out of Time—Arthur Leo Zagut
Star Tower—Joe Vadalma
The Cosmic Wheel-J. D. Crayne
The Forbidden Garden-John Taine
The City at World's End-Edmond Hamilton
The Ghost Pirates-W. H. Hodgson
The Girl in the Golden Atom—Ray Cummings
The Heads of Cerberus—Francis Stevens
The House on the Borderland-William Hope Hodgson
The Insidious Fu Manchu-Sax Rohmer
The Interplanetary Huntress-Arthur K. Barnes
The Interplanetary Huntress Returns-Arthur K. Barnes
The Interplanetary Huntress Last Case-Arthur K. Barnes
The Lightning Witch, or The Metal Monster-A. Merritt
The Price He Paid: A Novel of the Stellar Republic—Matt
Kirkby
The Thief of Bagdad-Achmed Abdullah
Women of the Wood and Other Stories-A. Merritt
BARGAIN SF/F EBOOKS IN OMNIBUS EDITIONS
(Complete & Unabridged)

The First Lord Dunsany Omnibus: 5 Complete Books—Lord Dunsany

The First William Morris Omnibus: 4 Complete Classic Fantasy Books

The Barsoom Omnibus: A Princess of Mars; The Gods of Mars; The Warlord of Mars-Burroughs

The Second Barsoom Omnibus: Thuvia, Maid of Mars; The Chessmen of Mars-Burroughs

The Third Barsoom Omnibus: The Mastermind of Mars; A Fighting Man of Mars-Burroughs

The First Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan of the Apes; The Return of Tarzan; Jungle Tales of Tarzan-Burroughs

The Second Tarzan Omnibus: The Beasts of Tarzan; The Son of Tarzan; Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar-Burroughs

The Third Tarzan Omnibus: Tarzan the Untamed; Tarzan the Terrible; Tarzan and the Golden Lion-Burroughs

The Pellucidar Omnibus: At the Earth's Core; Pellucidar-Burroughs

The Caspak Omnibus: The Land that Time Forgot; The People that Time Forgot; Out of Time's Abyss-Burroughs

The First H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Invisible Man; War of the Worlds; The Island of Dr. Moreau

The Second H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Time Machine; The First Men in the Moon; When the Sleeper Wakes

The Third H. G. Wells Omnibus: The Food of the Gods; Shape of Things to Come; In the Days of the Comet

The First Jules Verne Omnibus: Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea; The Mysterious Island; From the Earth to the Moon

The Homer Eon Flint: All 4 of the Classic "Dr. Kenney"
Novels: The Lord of Death; The Queen of Life; The
Devolutionist; The Emancipatrix

The Second Jules Verne Omnibus: Around the World in 80
Days; A Journey to the Center of the Earth; Off on a Comet

Three Great Horror Novels: Dracula; Frankenstein; Dr.
Jekyll and Mr. Hyde

The Darkness and Dawn Omnibus: The Classic Science
Fiction Trilogy-George Allan England

The Garrett P. Serviss Omnibus: The Second Deluge; The
Moon Metal; A Columbus of Space

ADDITIONAL TITLES IN PREPARATION

PageTurnerEditions.com

If you are connected to the Internet, take a
moment to rate this eBook by going back to
your bookshelf at www.fictionwise.com.