



# fireborn Law

**LYCAN BLOOD: VOLUME II**

**JANRAE FRANK**

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*by Janrae Frank*

LYCAN BLOOD: VOL. II

FIREBORN LAW

By

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## DEDICATION

To the memory of Leviathan, "Levy," my companion of eleven years. Seventeen pounds of love and loyalty, whose devotion never wavered. Because one of the things that dogs do best is love.

And also to Livejournal Fandom who rose up and fought the Strikethrough 2007 war and won.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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And last, but not least, Jack Kincaid for driving me nuts. Insanity loves company.

## THE EXILE'S CURSE

When the Serpent comes, they all shall perish,  
The Redhands fall like sheaves of grain, until only the Exile  
shall remain of those who own their name.

When fireborn law breathes hot upon the root

One born of fire shall perish for the truth

The exile's victory shall be his pardon

Those he claims will rule

The prince from shadows shall emerge

To sit a blood drenched throne

.... *Alistar Weems' dying words.*

## THE FIRST MOTHERS

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

We howled to the moon one winter's night  
And she howled back to give us might  
From all the packs gathered 'neath her light  
She chose among us one single wight  
Tala took that male to her silvery home  
She told the packs to hide, not roam  
From that mating, Navaryn came  
To make us men in more than name  
Navaryn, first mother to us all  
By her blood our shapes are tall  
Pandeena, second mother to us all  
When they howl, heed their call  
They gave us laws, the ways, and speech they changed all  
things within our reach  
The ways of culture we were taught  
To bring us from old Skawtsslund fraught  
By dangers vile and dangers fell  
So goes the ancient, ancient tale  
Navaryn, first mother to us all  
By her blood, our shapes are tall  
The woodland god, at their pleading,  
Opened a Gate Arcane to end our bleeding  
On the strands of Skawtsslund fraught

With the dangers mankind brought  
Pandeena, second mother to us all  
When she howls heed well her call  
We passed between the pillars tall  
To these new lands beyond man's pall  
We settled here and built our lives  
Where lycan kind can grow and thrive  
In a new world of hope and promise  
Beyond the reach of murdering Thomas.



## THE THREE BROTHERS

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

*.... St. Tarmus of Lorendon*

## CHAPTER ONE

### LAWGIVER

Pandeena Moonbow rode into the quiet village of Running Horse at the southern edge of the mountain fastnesses of Clan Silverpaw. She had not been here in centuries, yet it had changed little. Cubs played along the streets: in human form wearing scruffy traditional robes; rolling, barking, and darting about in wolf form; two who had mastered the hybrid form wrestled near a horse trough. People walked the tree-shaded main street, most of them wearing the traditional wraparound robes with loose ties, made of embroidered cloth for the bitches and rope for the dogs. The human clothing styles, prevalent in some of the larger towns, had not yet reached Running Horse. She saw few males in trousers and shirt, and no bitches; which made Pandeena all the more conspicuous in her freeranger-style dark green leathers, trousers and jerkin with a pale brown shirt. She carried a Sharani longsword at her shoulder and a pair of lycan fighting knives at her hips. A two-chambered bow case rode beneath the flap on her heavy lycan saddle.

One of the easiest ways to spot a lycan village was to see how green it was. Unlike the humans in other countries, they had not given up their connection to the natural world. They built up instead of out for the most part, to allow for gardens and trees around their businesses and homes. The balconies

of the buildings overflowed with flower boxes and roof top gardens abounded, all tended with loving care.

Two things made Running Horse famous: their strong, tough horses that regularly won the log pull at clan festivals and their lawgiver, Padruig Caimbeul, who was celebrated for his wisdom, even-handed decisions, and utter fearlessness. Pandeena pondered what kind of reception she would get from Caimbeul, considering that they had parted in anger a century ago. The average lycan lifespan was six score years, barring accident, disease, or violence. Caimbeul, however, was nearly five hundred years old. His paternal grandmother had been a fireborn, and he had inherited the lifespan, if nothing else.

Pandeena reached the village common, glanced across the expanse of open green, and spied the Lawgiver House sitting on the northeast corner of Roundtop Street facing the common. She turned her horse onto the green and cut across it, avoiding six sheep grazing there under the watchful eyes of two cubs.

The Lawgiver House was a human-style building—Pandeena noted that she was seeing more of those every time she ventured out into the lands of her people—a blunt brick structure with a columned portico across the front and tie-up rails in the yard. Two lycans sitting on the portico in wooden chairs stopped in their conversation to stare at her as she dismounted and tied her horse to the nearest rail.

She was accustomed to being stared at. Part of the reason was the way she dressed. The second reason was her looks:

Pandeena was beautiful, as befitted a granddaughter of the Moon God, Tala, Mistress of Wolves and the Hunt.

A young wolf, his silver hair like a touch of moonlight on a bright night, rose to his feet as she mounted the steps. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for the lawgiver."

"That's me. I'm Samuel Tarvish, lawgiver to Running Horse."

Pandeena extended her hand to him, palm up, fingers curved into a half-claw.

Samuel raised an eyebrow at that, grasped her hand and sniffed her fingers. "Lycan?"

Pandeena nodded. "I'm looking for Caimbeul."

"Pity that." The other lycan, a gray-beard on his chin, chuckled. "Pretty bitch like you ought to stay away from that old crosspatch."

She frowned. "We are talking about Padruig Caimbeul?"

"Oh, aye. He's retired now. All he does these days is drink and snarl."

"Where can I find him?"

Samuel led her inside, where he drew a map on a scrap of paper to show her how to find Caimbeul's cottage.

\* \* \* \*

Pandeena found a cottage exactly where Samuel had said, but, looking at it, she was certain it could not possibly be Caimbeul's. She wrinkled her nose in distaste. The place was little more than a rundown shack built out of cast off slatboards. One of the posts on the porch had rotted away,

causing the roof to droop. The sight of it gave her stomach an odd flutter, remembering how Caimbeul had once disparaged wolves who lived like this. The boards creaked as she mounted the steps and crossed the porch. She knocked on the door.

"Caimbeul?"

"Go away." The voice from inside the shack carried an edge of irritation marred further by slurring. "I don't talk to anyone."

Pandeena frowned. This did not sound like the Caimbeul she remembered. "I need you."

"Go away!"

She turned the knob and stepped inside. The interior shocked her worse than the exterior had. The Caimbeul she had known years ago had been clean and tidy, everything had a place, and he wanted everything kept in its place. A king's ransom in empty beer and whiskey bottles lay scattered over the dirt floor of the one room shack. The acrid scent of rotted food drew Pandeena's attention to the square table shoved in a corner, stacked high with filthy plates and pans whose odorous contents would not bear close inspection. A dozen empty mead kegs with their sides busted in stood silent witness to a recent fit of drunken rage.

"What do you want, Pandeena?"

Caimbeul's surly voice drew her gaze to a corner. The huge, grizzled wolf, nearly completely gray, lay on the floor with a bottle in his hand, and whiskey dribbling down his unshaven chin. He had developed a paunch. The tremendous biceps and muscular chest she had so admired had turned to

flab. Caimbeul had finally gotten old; and he had not aged gracefully. Only the craggy features, now lined and weathered, remained to suggest he had ever been handsome.

"I need a lawgiver." Pandeena kicked bottles out of her path and stepped further into the messy cottage.

"I'm retired."

"Are you, old lecher? I say you're sulking." Pandeena scanned the room again, trying not to stare at him. He had changed so much that she wondered if this had turned into a fool's errand.

"Go away, Pandeena. I've had enough aggravation." Caimbeul pushed into a sitting position and leaned his back against the wall. He took another swig from his bottle of whiskey and glared at her.

A faint frown drew lines across Pandeena's forehead. "Seems to me the only aggravation you've got comes out of a bottle."

"Oh for gods' sake, Pandeena. Let me be."

"I need a lawgiver and the best."

Caimbeul threw the bottle at her, sending a spray of whiskey across the room. "Get out."

Pandeena caught the bottle, looked at it, and saw there was some left. She wiped it off and drank it. "You're the best, Caimbeul."

"I'm old. I don't do it anymore." Caimbeul snatched up two empty bottles and threw them in a determined effort to hit her.

Pandeena side-stepped the missiles and the sound of shattering glass told her they had struck the wall behind her. "The Butchering Serpent is in Wolffgard."

"The hell you say." He stopped short with another two empties in his grasp. "Look at you ... a fresh face girl of eighteen for the rest of your life." Caimbeul smashed the bottle he was holding against the wall. "Where were you when I needed you?"

"You knew what I was when you married me."

"And you knew what I was when you divorced me."

"A lecherous old sot with no concern for my feelings."

Caimbeul flinched. "I loved you."

"Is that why I was always hauling your ass out of whorehouses when you went to Waejontor?" Her lips compressed into a tight line of annoyance.

Caimbeul averted his eyes from her cool, blue gaze, and changed the subject. "What's this about the Serpent?"

Pandeena folded her arms and stared at him for a moment before answering. "Are you really interested? Or just trying to avoid an argument?"

"Cut the crap. What's this about the Serpent?"

"Do you even know who he is? For all I know you've been too drunk to notice anything for the past twenty years. Or longer."

"I heard about it. Okay? Sixteen years ago, the Assassins' Guild tipped off a Battle-Clan that someone was kidnapping city wolves and murdering them wholesale. It was a lurid tale. Vivisections. Toxin testing. Mass graves."

"Would Fireborn Law like to take a shot at bringing him down?"

Caimbeul winced. "Don't call me that. Fireborn Law died in Skeleton Creek ... when they killed my son."

"*Our* son."

"You wouldn't know he was yours ... way you were never home."

"I loved him."

"You barely knew him." Caimbeul snorted. "I raised him alone."

"Not totally." Pandeena glanced away. "Look, I'll stop bringing up the past, if you will."

"So, back to the Serpent."

"Someone murdered the lawgiver ... well, tried to. Nikko Softpaws is with my mother. We don't know if he's going to live or not. He's in bad shape. His people think he's dead and it's best left that way."

"He tell you the Serpent attacked him?"

"No. Trauma wiped his memory. The only thing he knows is his name."

"Then how do you know it's the Serpent?"

Pandeena almost smiled. She could hear the quickening of interest in Caimbeul's voice. "It's a long story. Can I sit down?"

"The floor don't mind."

She cleared a space on the floor and settled cross-legged. "Nikko was shot with a special blend of Devil's Silver that only the Serpent is known to use. I decided to look into it. When I



got to Hell's Widow, Amos Raggat told me that Wolffgard's priest had died."

Caimbeul's eyes got that old familiar steel in them, and Pandeena knew that this was not a fool's errand after all. "Priest and lawgiver both?" He scratched at the stubble on his chin. "Sa'necari always send someone in to kill the priest and the lawgiver as a prelude to invasion."

"You taught me that."

"You learned something. Go on."

"Claw Redhand sent his best courier to fetch a priest from Shaurone. Cullen Blackwood."

"How is Cullen? I haven't seen him in years."

"Dead. Sa'necari butchered him. I suspect it happened in Hell's Widow."

"Damn." Caimbeul's hands clenched into fists, his mouth tightened, and his gaze roved the roof beams. "I used to win ... a lot betting on him. He could ride like Death over a battlefield. Cullen was a prick ... and a slut ... but he had a good heart."

Pandeena flicked a strand of golden hair out of her face. "I know. I didn't like him at first. He got on my nerves. I'm the one found his body. Kynyr Maguire asked me to scry for it ... so we could bring his remains home. They'd dumped him into a shallow grave outside Hell's Widow. That's why I think he died there. Cullen was given a proper burial and lies behind my shrine in Wolffgard."

"You think the Serpent did it?"

"I'm certain he did. According to Kynyr, one of the sluts from the Crimson Lady witnessed the murder. A mon in a serpent mask killed Cullen."

"Anyone can wear a mask, Pandeena."

"Put it together, lawgiver. Mask, signature poisons, signature arrows. It's him."

Caimbeul sucked in a deep breath, a calculating look came in his eyes, his manner focused and steadied. "I don't own a horse. Only clothes I got is what I'm wearing. I'm not presentable."

Pandeena eyed him for a second, trying to decide whether his statement was the beginnings of an excuse or a true suggestion of need. "Clothes and a horse ... I can provide them. Does this mean you'll come?"

"Count me in."

\* \* \* \*

New clothes and a bath did wonders for Caimbeul and Pandeena soon had him looking acceptable. She missed his long hair, but the mats and snarls had been so bad when she set to work on it, that Pandeena had been forced to cut it short and close to his head.

Caimbeul stood in front of the mirror in his room at the Sleeping Dog Inn and wagged his head at the image reflected there. "I can't say if I like it or not, Pandeena."

Her nose wrinkled at him. "I imagine it took a lot of scrubbing to get the dirt off."

"Well, yes and no." Caimbeul grinned and left her to make what she would of the implications. "So I'm to be Lawgiver of Wolffgard."

Pandeena had spent the past days giving Caimbeul more details, and he had mulled them over. The facts of the situation bothered him greatly. The previous lawgiver had been unusually young; Nikko Softpaws had received his place at the age of sixteen and held it for only three years when he disappeared. He was believed dead, although his body had never been found. Bits of his flesh had been discovered lodged in the teeth of several dead imps. Imps ate their prey alive. The bits and pieces of Nikko's flesh were Read, and found to contain traces of Devil's Silver, a deadly poison to lycans, but not to imps. Imps did not use Devil's Silver. Myn did. He had scrutinized all of the information that Pandeena had given him and found her reasoning sound.

"Does it bother you? The idea of being senior to all the lawgivers in Red Wolf?"

His eyes went distant and he crossed the room to a small table where his pipe and tobacco pouch lay beside a small box of lucifers. He settled into a chair, filled his pipe, and lit it. "A century ago ... I would have leaped at the chance. Gwythyr would have been proud of me ... he was anyway ... but you know what I mean." Caimbeul caught the look in Pandeena's eyes and made a fending off gesture. "I don't want to talk about our son. I'll try to stop mentioning him. But you must understand, Pandeena ... not a day goes by that I don't think about him."

Her eyes softened. "How does this affect your willingness to go to Wolffgard?"

Caimbeul looked away, his head lowered; then he sucked in a deep breath and straightened. "I'm not as sure of myself as I used to be."

"I know that."

"Have you picked our route?"

"The direct route is across the Hellblade Corridor. However, that's heavily patrolled and I don't wish to reveal myself. It would be in the best interests of our people if no one knew that the Second Mother was at large in the world again."

Caimbeul considered that a wise decision. Before the Lycan Rebellion of 997, Red Wolf had touched on Silverpaw in the north. When the Waejontori crushed the rebellion, they seized that strip of land and fortified it in an effort to isolate the two strongest of the Nine Great Clans: Red Wolf and Silverpaw. That area currently lay in the hands of the Waejontori Queen Tomyrilen the Bastard, who had raised a revolt against the Sharani.

"So you won't simply Jump us there?" He tried to keep his gaze on her face, but his eyes kept drifting across her exquisite body in spite of his best efforts; and he wondered by what cursed chance he had managed to fall in love with the Second Mother of the lycan race. All lycans, to one degree or another, traced their ancestry to Pandeena, a yuwenghau—a minor divine.

"Same reason."

Caimbeul nodded and puffed on his pipe for several minutes, thinking. "That leaves only making a detour through Waejontor proper. We'll still be dodging Queen Tomyrilen's forces until we reach Sharani held territory."

"We're taking the same route back that I took getting here. I know what I'm doing."

"There are things I will need to buy along the way."

"I guessed as much." Pandeena unfastened a pouch from her belt and tossed it to him.

Caimbeul caught it in mid-air with a speed and ease that belied his obvious age, noted the weight, and opened it. Coins filled the pouch, mostly silver, but with a substantial amount of gold. "All of this is mine?"

"I said I would take care of you."

A small smile lit his grizzled face. "You always were as good as your word."

"Don't spend it all on whiskey. A drink or two at the inns we stop at is one thing ... but if I catch you lost in a bottle ... I'm going to beat the unholy hell out of you."

"You have my word. I will stay sober."

\* \* \* \*

The final purchase at Running Horse had been two pack animals and a gentle gelding for Caimbeul. He had thrown a fit, wanting a spirited animal like he had ridden in his youth. Pandeena overruled him; she had no idea how badly his skills might have deteriorated after spending years in the bottle. The single thing she had no doubts about was the condition of his mind: he was as sharp as ever.

They rode out of Running Horse three days after Pandeena appeared at Caimbeul's shack, winding their way down through the western foothills of the Eiralyskali Mountains, heading into Waejontor proper. The Waejontori—and hence the Sharani also—considered the lands of the Nine Great Clans to be part of Waejontor. The lycans considered themselves independent and neutral. The Sharani had respected the lycans' right to rule themselves; while the sa'necari aristocracy of Waejontor never had even to the slightest degree, and with the rise of Queen Tomyrilen, were beginning to pressure the clans. The situation did not bode well for the lycans.

They entered Waejontor in the evening of their second day of travel, stopping for the night at a lycan-owned inn on the outer edge of the town of Skinner's Hollow. Pandeena got them rooms with a connecting door and had dinner sent up to Caimbeul's room. They sat together eating in silence, worn out by the tensions of the day. Pandeena had been bending her Wilderkin talents to avoid the guard patrols, the birds and the beasts alerted her whenever one was near and they got off the road.

Caimbeul pushed his plate away and settled back in the chair with his pipe. "You still haven't told me if you have a suspect."

"I do and I don't. It's hard to explain."

"Try."

"Claw Redhand extended a kindness to the women and children fleeing the war, by creating and supporting a refugee camp they call the Sanctuary."

"Humans?"

Pandeena nodded. "And five sa'necari women with lycan offspring. Some of the children are sa'necari-born."

That brought a frown to Caimbeul's face. "Sa'necari murdered his sons and he's taking their offspring in? Where'd he get that?"

"His grandson is sa'necari. His daughter had a bastard child by a Dark Brother of the Light, possibly a descendant of Dawnhand."

"I thought they were all dead. That massacre ten years ago...." Caimbeul took a long draw from his pipe.

"There were two survivors. Isranon and his sister. The sister perished three years later. According to Lokynen Willidar, Isranon is now calling himself Dawnreturning."

"What's the cub's name?"

"Darmyk. He's a sweet little cub. However, there are several odd things about him. He's Wilderkin. And he has a wine-stain birthmark on his left shoulder in the form of the Willodarian bear."

"Godmark?"

"I suspect so. I haven't been able to contrive an opportunity to examine it."

"We are living the old curse about interesting times. I've never heard of a sa'necari child who was godmarked and Wilderkin."

"Neither have I. But he is."

"I'd like to have a look at him."

"You will. Any way. There's a mon at Sanctuary who has a lot of influence with the young wolves. He's human. I touched

him, so I should know. However, I swear he tried to Read me."

"Mage?"

"No sign of it. His name is Malthus Estrobian. My gut instinct says that's not his real name. He came to the camp with two sa'necari born nieces, orphans. When Lokynen found Nikko, the young wolf said something that sounded like Marl or Mal or something like that, and that there was a sa'necari in Wolffgard who shot him."

"You have five of them to pick from."

"You mean the women? No, they've been there for several years now and they're spellcorded."

"So you think he meant Malthus?"

"Possibly. The mon makes me uneasy."

"Well, you've given me a lot to think about. I'll probably have more questions later."

After Pandeena had gone to bed, Caimbeul slipped downstairs and purchased three bottles of whiskey that he stowed in his packs. He would keep his word about staying sober on the road, but once he got settled into Wolffgard, Caimbeul intended to tie one on.

\* \* \* \*

As they descended out of the mountains where the lycan clan, Silverpaw, dwelled, the tangled forests gave way to larger and larger stretches of farmland, and the towns and villages grew closer together on the flatlands of central Waejontor. Despite the war, people still traveled. They passed peasants on the road; black clad Waejontori women in their



headscarves and shapeless dresses following the proper number of paces behind their men. A coach rattled past them at midday with a large armed guard. As the number of people on the road increased, it soon became clear to Pandeena that it would be next to impossible to avoid the Waejontori patrols entirely. They would become mixed in with the others and her animals spies would more easily confused.

What they did not see caused a sense of tension to grow in both of them: there were no lycans anywhere.

"Where have they all gone?" Pandeena asked, frowning at Caimbeul.

"I don't know, but we're conspicuous by their absence. And I think we're about to find out."

Pandeena followed his glance and saw a small unit of guardsmyn approaching them: dark myn in blood-red livery.

"Ho, lycans!" The captain shouted at them.

Pandeena reined in and waited. Had she been alone, or had Caimbeul still had all the skills of his youth, she would have acted against them at once; however, it seemed better to take a wait and see approach to this.

The Captain swung off his horse and stalked toward them. "Dismount and show me your papers."

She blinked. "My what?"

"Travel papers. All lycans in the Queen's territory are required to have travel papers. You must have permission to travel."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

The commander raised an eyebrow at her. "Clans wolves are you?"

Caimbeul dismounted and sauntered up to the commander. "We dinna know about this." He thickened his accent in a deliberate fashion, hoping to appear as a simple-minded farmer. "Ah'm takin' mah new bride home. She's a pretty thing, don't ya think?"

The commander glanced at Pandeena. "If you like them pale."

"Sa what we do about these papers?"

"You'll have to come into town with us. We'll talk, and if my commander likes your answers, you will be given papers and allowed to go on."

"An if ya dunna like them?"

"Matters could get rather ugly." The captain sneered at them. "I'm sure the garrison will enjoy opening your wife's legs."

Caimbeul frowned. "Ah dunna want thaht. Ah ain't hawd time ta swell her yet."

The captain chuckled at the stupidity of Caimbeul's answer. "If you don't cooperate, you'll leave with her swollen ... but it won't be yours."

"An' if'n ya like muh answers, Ah get her back untouched?" Caimbeul sounded puzzled, scratched behind his ear, and flashed Pandeena a cat sign that was hidden by his large head and thick neck.

Pandeena extended her Wilderkin talents, touching the Waejontori horses' nostrils with the scent of lions. They bucked and reared. Several bolted.

"What the hell?" The captain froze, staring at the spectacle incredulous.

In the moment of distraction, Caimbeul drew his knife, grabbed the captain by the shoulder, and plunged the blade into his throat with a ripping twist. The captain's eyes bulged in shock as he sank to his knees. Caimbeul jerked the blade out, turned, and remounted his horse. "Come on, let's get out of here."

A sharp tingling sensation swept through Caimbeul and his horse shuddered under him. He felt Pandeena's powers gathering for a Jump. They vanished from the road in a shimmer of golden light.

They materialized beneath a stand of beeches and Caimbeul had no idea where they were. The roads had changed a lot over the century that he had retreated gradually into the bottle in Running Horse.

"You should have done that in the first place."

Pandeena shrugged. "I wanted to see if you could talk us out of it."

"I tried. I'm rusty at that stuff."

"I saw that." Pandeena noticed that Caimbeul was shaking. "Are you all right?"

"I haven't killed anyone since Skeleton Creek."

"When Gwythyr died?"

"I put my blades up. This isn't even a proper knife." He pulled his blade and showed it to her as they rode.

"It's just a belt knife...."

"Yah. I'm surprised it worked so well."

"You must start wearing your blades again. It isn't safe."

"I don't own any." Caimbeul's expression darkened as if staring into the mouth of nightmares.

"Then I'll get you some."

He gave a mute nod and did not reply. His thoughts drifted to the pair of fighting knives wrapped in silk and buried in his packs—the ones he had not worn since he failed to save his son. "Where are we?"

"Sharani held territory ... or at least it was last time I was through here."

"Yes, but where?"

"Due west of Tamrath Falls."

Caimbeul scratched his chin, certain that his request would not go over well with her, but deciding to make it anyway.

"Can we stop off at Skullbones?"

"Why?" Suspicion crept into her tone. "What do you want there?"

"Stop off at that mage shop ... if it's still there."

A frown deepened on Pandeena's face. "The only thing you ever bought there was contraceptives ... those bloody seed crystals. We're almost killed and all you can think about is sex?"

Caimbeul winced, glaring at his hands as he summoned up the courage to respond, and wondered where he had lost it. It had always been easier to argue with her when a haze of alcohol lay between them. Some days he was painfully conscious of who she was and on other days, she was just Pandeena to him. Caimbeul was too self-aware not to realize how and why he wavered between reverent and irreverent with her. She was both one of his gods and simply a bitch he had gotten his bone into. Life was easier when he took the

latter view and he clung to it when he finally formed a response. "Why not? I've no intention of remaining celibate."

Pandeena snarled at him wordlessly.

"I'm male. Deal with it."

"Kynyr isn't like that."

*Kynyr?* "Who the hell is he?"

"Kynyr Maguire. Cahira Sinclair's grandson."

"Are you sleeping with him?"

"Not that it's any of your business ... not yet." Pandeena went arch on him, savoring her jabs in undisguised fashion. "However, we will be soon. Have you ever known a wolf that could turn me down?"

Caimbeul averted his eyes and did not speak to her for the rest of the day except to answer brief questions. Meanwhile, she prattled on about the 'noble' and 'handsome' Kynyr Maguire until Caimbeul wanted to hit him in the face.

## CHAPTER TWO

### KYNYR AND THE KID

The young guardsmon, Kynyr Maguire, strode through the second floor hallway, heading for the Blue Room. His golden ginger hair, so thick it bloused around his face no matter how tightly he tied it back, hung at his shoulders in a clubbed knot. A narrow fringe of close-cropped golden beard framed his face from sideburns to an inch from his chin. His lantern jaw, pronounced cheekbones with dramatic hollows beneath them, and cleft chin made him the visual epitome of lycan masculinity. This often produced more discomfort than pleasure.

Growing up, his four older sisters would start telling him how handsome he was just before admonishing him not to get dirty on pain of being whomped with a hairbrush. He had decided young that ugly cubs had more fun and probably got to go fishing more often. Fishing had been one of Kynyr's favorite childhood pastimes and they had been forever trying to prevent him from doing it. Kynyr had spent many hours making elaborate plans for eluding them and running off with his fishing pole at every opportunity. Now that he was grown and living away from home he rarely got to go fishing, but the reasons were different.

Claw had sent for him to come and play checkers. The chieftain had been sending for Kynyr with increasing frequency just to talk to him over checkers or chess. The

servants, as the Redhands insisted upon calling their small herd of nibari slaves, passed him along the way, going about their chores. They always smiled at him.

Redhand Manor had three main sections: the guard wing on the west, the main section where the family lived in the center, and the servants' wing on the east side. Ostensibly, the sections were only connected through doors that opened onto stairs wells on either end of the main hallway through which Kynyr walked. There were rumors of hidden passages and servants' passages that provided closer links with the rest of the house, but if they existed, Kynyr had never found them. The manor had been added onto many times over the five centuries of its existence, making it a veritable warren of halls, passages, drawing rooms, closets, and bedrooms.

The guardsmyn wing, where Kynyr had lived until two months ago, was the most recent addition. Claw had expanded his household forces to two hundred myn-at-arms over the last eighty years since the Lycan Rebellion of 997 had been crushed by their sa'necari overlords. He continued to expand it and still had room to hire another one hundred myn. In addition to his regular patrols that moved through the house and watched the manor grounds and their herds of sheep, goats, and racing horses, Claw had added a unit of at-large guardsmyn to the family section of the house that spent most of their time sitting with his bitches—Aisha his wife, two elderly sisters, Fianait and Searlait, and his daughter Merissa—eight myn and an officer to keep them company, walk in the gardens with them, and take them shopping. As a sign that Claw was adopting more of the human ways, he

declared Kynyr their *lieutenant*, although no one really knew how to interpret the title.

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

Claw sat stacking and unstacking the red and black wooden rounds, his pipe clenched in his teeth although the fire had gone out in it. The chieftain looked up as Kynyr entered. "About time you got here."

"It's my day off," Kynyr protested.

"You get those, do you?" Claw tilted his head, eyes narrowing in an appraising way.

The young guardsmon could tell that Claw was in one of those unpredictable moods that so often threw Kynyr off-stride. "I was out in the barn when Kissie found me. Larkspur needs more exercise than I have time to give her."

"You could sell her to me." Claw arranged the pieces on the board, with a nonchalance that Kynyr recognized as pure fakery. The chieftain had given Larkspur to Cullen Blackwood before he realized just how much horse she was. Larkspur



could outrun nearly anything on four legs and she was carrying a foal by Claw's top stud, Stormsong.

"No, sir. I couldn't. Cullen left her to me ... made me promise to take good care of her."

"Then you should hire a boy to take her out every day. She's a racer, Kynyr."

"On my wages?" Kynyr settled into the opposite chair and stared at the checker board.

Claw wagged a thick finger at him. "Don't give me that. I know your gram gives you a stipend. A couple of coppers a week isn't going to steal all your drinking money."

"I don't know a cub who could handle her."

"Don't lie to me." Claw brought his fist down hard in the middle of the checker board, knocking everything onto the floor. "Georgie Rogan says that dwarf of a cousin of yours rides her."

"Cooley?" Kynyr sucked in a breath, and swallowed back a groan. He wished the cub would stay away from the manor. Larkspur had belonged to the cub's murdered father, and so proved an irresistible draw to the boy. However, the last thing Kynyr and his family wanted known was that the cub was actually Cullen Blackwood's bastard son by the Madam of the Crimson Lady Brothel in Hell's Widow. When Cullen died, Silkie Faggini had sent the boy to Kynyr along with permission for his grandparents to adopt the ten-year-old. If these visits kept up, someone might start asking about Cooley and Kynyr worried that Cullen's murderers might come after the boy.

"That one."

Kynyr knelt and picked up the checkers, putting them back on the board.

"If that family of yours objects to mine so bloody much, then why the hell did you ever come to work for me?"

"My family doesn't dislike the Redhands." A note of caution entered Kynyr's voice, knowing how easy it would be to say the wrong thing and let slip matters best left private.

"Cahira..."

"Has issues. Gram doesn't discuss them. So I don't know what they are. I've told you that before. If you want to know what they are, you'll have to ask her."

"I intend to."

"Did you ask me here to play checkers or to interrogate me about my family?"

"Neither." Claw jerked his thumb at the cabinets on the far wall. "Fetch that bottle of Dragonsbreath and a couple of glasses. And while you're at it, close the door."

Kynyr could feel Claw's eyes boring into him with a thousand unanswered questions as he closed the door and fetched the whiskey. Claw snatched the bottle and poured for both of them as soon as Kynyr slipped back into his chair.

"You tell Cooley I'll give him two coppers a week to help Georgie with the horses in the mornings, including Larkspur."

"I'll do that. Now, what was it you wanted to talk about?"

"That no-good son-in-law of mine." Claw's lips pulled back from his teeth in a grimace of distaste.

"If you objected to Malthus that strongly, why did you allow the marriage? He's not right for Merissa."

"Crotchety bitches. All descended on me and complained I was ruining Merissa's life. If I hadn't said yes, I would never have heard the end of it."

Kynyr released a sigh, scratching at his thick yellow sideburns. "I know that one. The Dreaded Horde could be a bit much to handle."

Claw raised an eyebrow and chuckled. "Your sisters."

"Mine and Finn's. My six and his eight."

"You were neighbors?"

Kynyr gave Claw a long look. "I thought this wasn't going to be an interrogation."

Claw considered that for a moment and changed the subject. "Are you certain it wasn't Malthus put a knife in your back last spring?"

"Positive. He was walking away from me when it happened. The bitches and cubs were throwing rocks at me ... I guess because I bested him with the practice blades. Then someone ... it had to be lycan ... threw something sharper."

"Women and children ... they're humans."

"Yes."

"What happened then?"

"I keep telling you. I don't remember. I got hit in the head with one too many rocks. Going over and over this isn't going to make me remember." *If I ever find out who did it, I'll gut them.*

Claw stacked the red checkers up again and relit his pipe. He puffed for a bit. "I've got too many deaths now. I've

stopped sending my messages out on horseback. Someone's killing my couriers. Cullen was just the first."

Kynyr went cold inside. "There's been more?"

"Three. And then you add in the dead priest and the lawgiver. Pandeena's gone to get us a lawgiver. Someone good."

"I thought she was visiting relatives..."

"That's what we wanted folks to think."

Kynyr put his black checkers in their places on the board before answering. "I can see your point. But what has this to do with Malthus? You said that was what you wanted to talk about."

"Make your move. If anyone walks in on us, just shut up."

Kynyr nodded and started playing: suddenly all the invitations to play made sense—the invitations that he was not allowed to refuse—now that the crafty old chieftain had a mon in his household that he did not fully trust, the games had become a way of covering for conversations that Claw did not want anyone to take notice of.

"So tell me, Kynyr. Is it true you beat Malthus?"

"I did."

"The young wolves are all saying you're the best I've got. You trained with Todd Sinclair. You ought to be."

"Finn did also ... but I'm better than Finn." Kynyr tensed. "I wish that hadn't gotten out. Belgair has been pushing for a fight with me ever since people started talking about it."

"Pretty hard not to." Claw chuckled and jumped two of Kynyr's piece. "He shows up with two of your uncles threatening to tear the place apart."

"He didn't!"

Claw shrugged with another laugh. "Nah. But when you said Todd Sinclair was your grandsire, I didn't know you meant that *Todd* Sinclair."

"Can we stay away from the subject of my family?"

"We can try. I don't know that Malthus had anything to do with what's happening around here. But then I don't know that he hasn't. The only thing I do know is that since the wedding he's kept my daughter in bed all day with her legs open and dumped his nieces on my family to watch."

"You want me to go back to keeping an eye on him?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going into Hell's Widow tomorrow. Aisha gave me a list of things to pick up for the manor. Would you mind if I spent a couple of days there? I want to talk to the prostitute who found Cullen's body."

"Still not going to tell me her name?" Claw gave Kynyr that edgy, appraising look again.

"No. She's frightened enough as it is."

Claw blew a heavy breath out through pursed lips. "Don't go alone. Cullen was good with his blades and they still got him. I want to know how. I want to know who. Once I know who, I want you to take him out."

"And if it's Malthus?"

"Kill him." Claw jumped another of Kynyr's pieces. "King me."

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Kynyr's head whirled from the long conversation with Claw. He had promised his grandmother, Cahira Sinclair, that he would pick up some things for her at Hell's Widow when he went to pick up supplies for Aisha Redhand, Claw's wife, tomorrow. As he crossed the yard to walk into the village of Wolffgard, he noticed several children playing in the gardens.

Searlait, Claw's youngest sister, sat watching them. She looked much like Kynyr imagined Merissa would when she reached Searlait's age. He could see the faded beauty in the aristocratic lines of Searlait's face, the wealth of ginger hair mixed with gray and a single white streak at her left temple. A basket of embroidery sat beside her and she held a hoop with a square of cloth in it, stitching, and looking up periodically to check on the children. Malthus' two nieces, Ros and Lyrry, romped with Darmyk Redhand, Cooley, and the two Scott cubs, Rory and Hamish. It looked like a game of tag. Darmyk's maned hunting cat, Kenly, lay beside Searlait's feet drowsing. Darmyk had been a year old when he acquired Kenly, and the name was actually the child's mispronunciation of 'Kynyr' in an attempt to name the cat after him.

Kynyr gestured at Cooley. "I'm going to see Gram and I'd like to have a talk with you along the way."

"I didn't do anything wrong." Cooley shuffled his feet as he joined Kynyr and stood staring at his toes for a few moments.

"I didn't say you did. But we need to talk." Kynyr saw Rory and Hamish start toward them and waved them off. "Alone."

The two brothers shrugged and went back to playing.

"Am I in trouble?" Cooley asked, an uncertain frown wavering on his scruffy face. Small for his age, Cooley looked

eight years old rather than ten. Kynyr hoped the cub would get a bit more height than his late father. Cullen had stood only five feet, four inches tall and taken a lot of kidding for his height. Which, now that Kynyr thought on it, might have been what had made Cullen so feisty.

Kynyr noticed a puffiness around Cooley's left eye, stopped walking, and flicked a long strand of white hair that was just darkening into blond back from the cub's face. Under all the dirt was a bruise. "You got into another fight?"

Cooley's expression flashed into sullen. "They were picking on me."

"Did they hit you first? Or was it just words?"

"They were calling my Ma a slut."

"They know about your mother?"

Cooley twisted away from Kynyr. "I told Lany O'Connor my mother was Silkie Faggini. I didn't think he'd tell."

Kynyr stopped and dragged Cooley unresisting into a hug. He ruffled his hair. "You mustn't tell people these things. Especially not about your father." Kynyr took a deep breath and expelled it in a huff. He had not wanted to frighten Cooley, but there seemed no other way to get him to keep his mouth shut. "Did your mother say anything about why she sent you to us? Why she let us adopt you?"

Cooley shook his head, his expression flashing from sullen to sad. "I miss my Ma. I guess she just don't want me any more. I always was a problem."

Kynyr grasped Cooley's hand and started walking with him again. "She sent you to us because she loves you."

"That don't make no sense."

"Cooley, did she tell you much about your Dad's death?"

"Just that Da got killed. Courier's a dangerous job."

"There's more to it. They tortured him to death for information. He died rather than give it to them."

"He was brave."

"Yes, he was." Kynyr ruffled Cooley's hair again. "Your Ma is afraid they'll try to kill you also. That's why she had us adopt you."

Cooley's eyes went large and he made a choking sound. "Ki-kill me?"

"Like they did your dad. That's why you must never tell anyone who your folks were. I'm sure Cahira can fix the situation concerning that slip of your tongue. But it mustn't happen again."

"Ma gave me up because they were gonna kill me?"

"Yes. Like your father."

Cooley burst into tears.

Kynyr stopped walking and gathered Cooley into his arms, patting his back. "Todd and I aren't going to let anyone hurt you. But you must keep your mouth shut."

"I will."

"Good." Kynyr hoisted Cooley onto his shoulders, grasped his legs firmly, and walked on with him.

Cooley's sniffles gave way to laughing and their mood eased.

"Before I forget ... Claw wants you to come to work in the barns for two coppers a week. Half days, mornings."

"Really?"

"Yes. You'll be exercising Larkspur and Bucky as well."



"Bucky's awesome. I've sat on him a few times ... but I haven't exactly ridden him."

Kynyr tried unsuccessfully to repress a smile at the audacity of the boy getting up on his big war-trained stallion. "You've been up on Bucky ... hmmn. Does Georgie know that?"

"He made me get off him."

"You stay off Bucky until I get back from Hell's Widow. Then I'll show you what he can do and how to handle him."

"He's a war horse, ain't he?"

Kynyr half-choked and then smiled. *Observant little scamp.* "Yeah. Todd trained him."

"Could he teach me to train them?"

"What would like to be when you grow up?"

"A courier like my Da was."

"It got him killed. Are you sure you want to do that?"

"I'm not afraid."

Kynyr lifted an eyebrow at that. "Really?"

"Train horses?" Cooley suggested hopefully, watching Kynyr's face for a reaction.

"That's better."

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Cahira's Potions and Notions stood on Elmind Street, around the corner and down two blocks from the Difficult Horse Tavern that Kynyr and his friends frequented. Underneath the words on her sign were three sets of symbols that the largely illiterate lycan community could understand: a mortar and pestle; a serpent wrapped staff; a book, a bottle

of ink, and a quill. The shop combined Cahira's four specialties; apothecary, healer, scribe, and translator. She could read and write in six languages, and she spoke ten. Even for a lycan that was unusual. Most could manage to speak four—lycan, common, Sharani and Waejontori—and read none.

Cahira Sinclair was that rarest of lycans: a mage. She had no large talents; nothing great enough to call herself anything except a generalist. However, Kynyr's grandmother had literally dozens of minor talents that she put to such skilled use that her lack of a major gift often went overlooked by those who did business with her.

Kynyr sat Cooley down when they reached the shop. Cahira and Todd Sinclair, Kynyr's grandfather, lived on the second floor. Todd had turned half of the third floor into a salle and taken on a handful of students for combat training. The retired Battle-Clan armsmaster had become a teacher again.

Cooley rushed into the shop, whooping about his new job, and Kynyr followed slower to give the cub room to brag and receive some notice from his adoptive parents. A pleasant array of display cabinets, wood halfway up and clear glass the rest, filled two sides of the shop with shelves built from floor to ceiling behind them. The rear of the shop had a low cabinet that flanked a long table with six chairs around it. Cahira sat at the table, totaling things in her ledger.

His grandmother was a tiny bitch, barely five feet tall, with a long blonde braid hanging down her back. Despite her

years, a soft beauty lurked around the delicate bones of her face along with the laugh lines around her mouth and eyes.

Kynyr leaned against a wall with his arms folded loosely and smiled at Cooley. Cahira noticed him and waved a piece of paper.

"Here's my list."

Kynyr strolled over and nodded as he took the list from her hands and shoved it into his pouch. "I need to talk to Todd for a bit."

"He's in the salle."

"Is there anyone with him?"

Cahira shook her head. "He's just working out."

"Okay."

Kynyr headed down the hall and went up the stairs to the third floor. He stepped into the room as quietly as he could, although his horseman's heels clicked on the wood and gave him away to his sharp-eared grandfather.

"I'll be right with you, Kynyr," said Todd without hesitating in working through his forms.

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

Todd left the mat, turned and bowed to it in a conspicuously Creeyan manner, before gesturing at the table and chairs on the far side of the room. The old mon had trained in the Creeyan and Sharani forms as well as the lycan arts. He had trained his children and his grandchildren with a mix of discipline and patience like an iron hand in a velvet glove. As a result of that, Todd and Cahira's huge extended family was the closest thing to a Battle-Clan that the village of Longbranch had.

"You've got that look in your eyes, Kynyr. Something on your mind?"

"Yeah." Kynyr considered his words before saying anything further. They both knew that Cooley was proving to be a challenge. The cub meant well, but he was having trouble fitting in. It was not just the differences between city wolves and clan wolves. Cooley had been raised in a brothel with only the children of prostitutes to play with; more to the point he had been the lone lycan cub in the bunch. The only lycans Cooley had known had been a handful of whores who worked for his mother; his father who rode into town from time to time and stayed only for short periods; and the males who came for their jollies. Now, at ten-years-old, the cub found himself thrust into a lycan clan community as a misfit among his own race. "Cooley. I'm going to Hell's Widow tomorrow."

"Your Gram said. Are you going to talk to his ma?"

Todd Sinclair had a strong, hearty face. The folded lines running from the wings of his nostrils to the outer edges of his lips were deep; the crinkles around his dark blue eyes were crevices in the stalwart earthiness of his features; his

heavy eyelids did not lend themselves to clear expression of emotion, making any effort to read his features difficult even for those who knew him well. His calm, centered mien suggested a man who did not go looking for trouble, but once it found him would be utterly relentless in dealing with it.

"Yeah. I wanted to go before now, but Claw wouldn't let me until he was sure I had healed up."

"Wise decision." Todd settled into a large chair that he reserved for himself alone. "Is he still bothering you about who your grandfather might have been?"

"He stopped trying to convince himself that I might be his great-grandson once you spoke to him."

"That's good." Todd regarded Kynyr for several moments. "You should never have come to Wolffgard. You're the spitting image of Tarrant Redhand. More so than your father."

Kynyr looked away and then back, trying to hide his discomfort. "That's what everyone there keeps telling me. You're probably right. I never had someone try to kill me before ... except for the time Claw sent us to deal with those outlaws. But that's different."

"You think it happened because they figured out you're Tarrant's grandson?"

"I don't know what to think. Right now, I'm more concerned about Cooley. He told Lany O'Connor that he was Silkie's son. That was what the fight was about."

"She was Cullen's favorite whore for many years." Todd rubbed his forefinger across his chin. "It's only a hop, skip, and a jump to seeing Cullen in him."

Kynyr put his hands on the table, laced his fingers, and leaned toward Todd. "That's what worries me."

"You think they'll make a try for the cub?"

"I think the ones who killed Cullen have agents in Wolffgard, possibly in the manor itself."

"So?"

"They killed Cullen in front of Silkie. Until I know more, all I can do is make guesses."

"Make them."

Kynyr glanced away again, wishing that Todd would not put him on the spot this way. It made him uncomfortably aware of the difference between them in terms of age and experience. Todd was the master of strategy and tactics, of discernment and logic—things that Kynyr, although he was considered a master by many of his peers among Claw's guardsmyn, still struggled with. He always worried about appearing the fool in front of Todd. "One. They tortured Cullen to get the names of Claw's other couriers. There's been three more killed. Claw's stopped sending messages by horseback. I don't know how he's doing it now."

"Next guess?"

Kynyr exhaled loudly. "Second concerns Silkie. I think they made her watch him die to intimidate her."

"Good so far. Why would they intimidate her?"

"To take control of the Crimson Lady. Brothels are good places to learn things. Males will spit out stuff to the whores without considering where the information might go from there."

"Now, connect it up to Cooley and I'll give you my thoughts."

"They must know that Cullen and Silkie had been lovers. They may even know that Cooley is Cullen's, although Silkie implied that no one but Cullen knew it. So there's two possibilities. They could be after Cooley because he's Cullen's. In which case they intend to kill him. Or they could be after Cooley because of Silkie, in which case they want him alive as a hostage."

"You're awfully certain they're after the boy."

"Silkie must have reason to think so, Todd. Otherwise why send him to us?"

"Good point. However, I doubt they want him as a hostage."

Kynyr blinked, a sense of unease creeping along his arms. "Why not?"

"We're not dealing with humans or lycans. We're dealing with sa'necari. Sa'necari would not need a hostage. They would simply cram Silkie's mind full of coercions until there was nothing she could do but obey."

"No. I don't think they would. Psi craft like that always has side-effects. Personality changes. Someone would notice."

"Only if they paid attention, Kynyr. No one pays attention to whores. Which is probably the reason males betray themselves so freely to them."

"Cullen did." Kynyr's mouth tightened.

"Cullen was an odd wolf. We'll see what we can do to fix the damage Cooley's caused himself."

"I'd like you to train him."

"He's not emotionally stable. The fight with Lany O'Connor was not the first one that Cooley's had."

"Training could help that." Kynyr met Todd's eyes with a calm steadiness. "The cub's life is on the line. If you don't train him, he'll die."

"Gut instinct?"

"Yeah."

"I'll teach him avoidance. But until he stops fighting with the villagers, I'm not going to teach him the arts of war. I don't want to see him kill another child just because they taunted him."

"Understood."

"Then I'll start with him this evening after dinner."

Relief blossomed on Kynyr's face. "Thank you."

Todd lifted his hand to forestall more talk from Kynyr. "But I expect something in return."

"What?"

"You'll answer all of my questions."

"About what?"

"I want to know everything you learn in Hell's Widow tomorrow. Everything his mother tells you. There will be other questions. Something bad is going on in this town and I want to know what."

Beneath Todd's calm exterior, Kynyr could sense an edge he had never seen before, and it prompted his agreement.

"So be it."

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The Difficult Horse Tavern, 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. Hereward Wiggins, the owner, brewed his own mead from locally produced honey and it was considered the best in Wolffgard.

Barrels with spigots jutting from them lined the rear wall behind a polished bar of walnut heartwood. Sturdy chairs circled the round tables placed throughout the common room.

Kynyr occupied a table with his three closest friends, who had become his subordinates in the new unit that Claw had formed. His spiritbrother, Finn MacIver, sat at his right hand. Finn's pale hair hung in a long silken tail to the middle of his back with a neat orderliness that Kynyr envied every time he had to fight with his own discipline resistant mane. Ramsey Fitzgerald had the chair to Kynyr's left. Three tankards of mead had lent a rosette flush to his fair skin and heightened the color in his round cheeks until they nearly matched his fiery red hair. Eideard Doyle, the oldest of them at twenty-four sat directly across from Kynyr. His dramatic cheekbones broke the symmetry of his otherwise bland square face, framed by crinkly ash blond hair that was caught at his neck with a twist of leather.

Hereward's four buxom daughters waited tables at the Difficult Horse, flirting with the customers in a manner that skirted the edges of propriety, strictly 'look but don't touch.' The tavern master kept a spiked club behind the bar and everyone in the village knew better than to test his temper—especially where his daughters were concerned. When it got

too busy in the evenings, the two nibari Hereward owned would be sent out to help with the orders.

Kynyr's eyes roved the room, searching for his favorite, LoraKady—or Kady as most called her. She was Hereward's eldest, a sweet-tempered bitch with flaxen hair that hung past her hips and a ready smile that suggested mischief. He frowned when he did not see her. "Where's Kady tonight?"

Finn glanced around the room before answering. "I don't know."

"She hasn't been around much since that Cullen business." Ramsey tilted his head to the side and contemplated his tankard as if he knew something he felt reluctant to share. "There's rumors going around about her."

"Like what?"

Eideard gestured at Rachel Wiggins with his tankard, indicating he wanted another. "Spit it out, Ramsey ... or I will."

Kynyr's frown deepened. "One of you tell me."

Ramsey looked uncomfortable, so Eideard growled something under his breath and then repeated it louder. "They're saying Kady is a slut. A bunch of those wet-tailed wheat-grinders that work at the mill." Eideard snorted derisively. "They're saying they got their rods into her ... and she liked it."

"They said that here?" Kynyr sounded incredulous. "What did Hereward do?"

Ramsey licked his lips and took a drink from his tankard. "That's the odd thing. Nothing. Acted as if he hadn't heard it, and I know damned well he had."

Kynyr blew a breath through pursed lips and scratched his sideburns. "I don't know what to make of that."

Rachel Wiggins, Hereward's youngest, sashayed up with a large tray of full tankards. "Another round?"

Finn and Eideard shoved their empties at her along with a five penny piece. Rachel took the empties and the coins, then placed full tankards in front of them.

"Where's Kady?" Kynyr asked her.

Her smile died and her mouth tightened. "How should I know?"

Rachel moved on to another table and Kynyr stared at her back with one eyebrow lifted.

"What's the plan for tomorrow, Kynyr?" Eideard asked, sipping at his mead.

"We're doing it different. Full arms. Armor."

"That'll mark us, Kynyr." Ramsey leaned across the table. "They'll know we're guardsmyn. The Sharani garrison will get antsy."

Eideard snorted. "Those she-devils aren't stupid, Ramsey. I'm sure they already knew that Claw's errand boys were guardsmyn."

"Probably. But the road's not safe anymore." Sitting his tankard aside, Kynyr got to his feet. "I'll be back in a bit."

"Where you going?" Finn started to push his chair back and follow.

"Out back for a bit of relief." Kynyr's mouth twisted into a crooked smile.

"Oh."

Kynyr passed through the common room and down the short hallway past the kitchen to the back door that opened on the alley. The sheltered rectangle that held the tavern's neatly sorted trash stood to the left of him and beyond that the dingy square of the privy. Kynyr felt as if the beer had gone right through him and filled his bladder to bursting as soon as it passed his lips. He put his hand on the door knob of the privy and started to turn it when a voice from within loosed a string of curses followed by "I ain't done yet."

Kynyr hissed between his teeth, knowing there was no way that he could hold it much longer. He glanced up and down the alley before slipping around behind the privy. Kynyr opened his pants, lifted his bone out, and relieved himself against the stone wall of the tavern like a dog marking territory.

As he finished lacing his pants closed, he heard a muffled cry and the sounds of a struggle. He came around as quiet as he could and saw two myn holding a bitch down while a third moved atop her. They had her skirts shoved up to her chin and a roll of cloth in her mouth. She writhed and jerked in a futile effort to get free.

"Be still you stupid whore or I'll beat the shit out of you," one of them growled.

Kynyr thought he recognized the voice, but was not certain as he slipped up to them. He kicked the one holding her left arm in the head, grabbed the one riding her by the collar and slammed him into the side of a building. The third released her and scrambled away as Kynyr's sword cleared the sheath.

"Kynyr Maguire," one of them spat at him.

"Cormic Parry." Kynyr leveled the sword at him.

Cormic's eyes widened and he backed farther from Kynyr. Then they all broke and fled.

Every since the day he beat Malthus Estrobian with a practice blade, most of the young rowdies did not want to fight him. It gave Kynyr a bitter satisfaction since that was also the day that someone put a knife in his back because they were afraid to try and take him from the front.

Kynyr sheathed his sword, knelt down, and gathered the young bitch in his arms. "Let me help you inside. Do you need a healer?"

"No."

The light from the tavern windows fell across her face. "Kady Wiggins! I'll get your father."

"No! He doesn't give a damn."

That did not sound like Hereward Wiggins. He had always been fiercely protective of his four daughters. "Kady, he's had all the dogs scared to touch you."

"My sisters, yes. Not me." She burst into loud sobbing. "This has happened before. He told me to get used to it ... that you can't rape a slut."

"You're not a slut, Kady."

"He thinks I am."

"Why?"

"Cullen."

"But I thought nothing happened."

Kady lowered her head and her shoulders drooped. "We'd been doing it for weeks ... meeting at the Commons after midnight. Dad had me checked by the midwife when rumors

started flying. When Baroucha told him I was not a virgin, he turned his back on me."

"You're lucky you didn't get pregnant."

"Cullen used eelskins. He didn't take chances with that."

"He was your first?"

Kady swallowed and managed a small nod.

"Come on. I'll take you to Cahira."

"No. I'm all right." Kady pushed away from him. "Forget this happened." She got to her feet and fled down the alley.

"Kady!"

She hesitated at the mouth of the alley and glanced back at him.

"I'm going to beat the shit out of Cormic Parry, Kady. I promise."

She dipped her shoulders at him, turned, and vanished into the street.

Kynyr walked back into the tavern feeling troubled. The soul of Wolffgard seemed to be rotting away at its roots and he could not figure out why. He paused at the table he had been sharing with his friends.

"I'm going home."

Finn frowned. "You got that look in your eye. What happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

## CHAPTER THREE

### A SIP OF DEATH

The trip to Hell's Widow and back had proved to be uneventful. With the Waejontori Rebellion against their Sharani occupiers growing more heated, large numbers of Sharani troops had been pulled out of the more remote areas that bordered the various lycan clans, and fielded elsewhere. As a result, Sharani forces no longer patrolled the stretch of road between Hell's Widow and Red Wolf. The main portion of Malthus' forces operated in the north and northeast with the goal of preventing the lycans from crossing into either Creeya or Iradrim. He also had a few units in Hell's Widow testing plans for interdicting the road and cutting Red Wolf off from Waejontor. Eventually no one would get in or out of the valley.

The only people who knew that Malthus was sa'necari were those who had already fallen so deeply under his sway that they could not reveal him. He passed for human by wearing the simple golden ring on his right hand that Lord Brandrahoon had given him, which was an ancient sa'necari artifact. Hoon had a huge hoard of such things, and when Malthus had learned that Hoon was actually Brandrahoon the ancient vampire, he had stopped being surprised by any of the small gifts that were frequently bestowed upon him by his benefactor.

Malthus had the latest shipment of goods from his mother and a few things that Heironim had been saving for him carried up to his study by two guardsmyn and three servants. Another of Claw's guardsmyn would drive the wagon on to the Sanctuary Refugee Camp where the last of his purchases would be unloaded and sorted out by the bitch who ran the camp, Clodagh Demarist.

When he married Merissa Redhand, he had insisted upon having a study. The manor had plenty of unused space. He shooed them all out as soon as everything came up and then locked his door, dropping the bar.

The first crate he opened contained three bottles of wine marked with a "C." Heironim had had his sanguiner blend this special for him. He got a corkscrew from his desk drawer and opened the first one. It was laced with blood.

Malthus put the bottle to his lips and took a small amount into his mouth, rolling it around his palate. "Ah, Cullen, what a delightful vintage you've become."

He fetched a glass from the cabinet near the rear and poured himself a glass of it before settling in his chair. He closed his eyes and leaned back, savoring both the blood and the memory of how Silkie Faggini—he felt certain that was not her real name—and Ellie Remus had looked when he shoved the blade into Cullen's chest. He had jacked Cullen's lover of many years, Silkie, next to his cooling body. Malthus finished it off and poured a second glass, sipping at it as he opened the rest of the crates.

Heavily packed in straw were six bottles of a rare whiskey, fifty-year old Cair Dairmid from Doronar. A small lycan clan



produced it based on an old family recipe. People said it was the smoothest whiskey on the continent, especially when aged like this.

He gathered the bottles up and carried them to his desk. Malthus took another sip of wine. Gifts of rare liquors delighted Claw; and his capacity for alcohol was prodigious.

Malthus sketched a sa'necari rune on the first bottle with his finger. It glowed darkly for a moment and then vanished. "Here's a little more death for you to drink, Claw."

He runed each of the bottles. So far, Malthus had seen no signs of suffering in the old wolf, although his calculations had estimated that Claw should have begun experiencing heart trouble weeks ago. *Perhaps, I'm being too subtle. I'll give it another week and take another approach if I must.*

Then he drank the last of his glass of wine, put the cork back in and filled his arms with the whiskey.

He carried it to the Blue Room where he knew he would find his father-in-law at that time of day. A dining table that could seat forty dominated the near side of the room. The opposite side had two clusters of overstuffed chairs and sofas with end tables. A row of cabinets lined the same side of the wall as the door. A stack of serving tables filled a corner. The walls were pale blue and the carpets and curtains were a dark blue.

Claw sat at his chair near the window, letting the afternoon breeze cool him. He held a wooden soldier in his hand, turning it this way and that before working on it again with his knife. The old chieftain enjoyed making toys for his grandcub, Darmyk. He had changed out of his work clothes

into a comfortable robe that wrapped around and closed with a sash.

Malthus set the bottles on the table beside his chair, and gestured at them.

"What have you got there?" Claw set his whittling aside, leaning close to see. A smile spread over his face. "Cair Dairmid!"

"Presents from my mother. I wrote her that you liked such things."

"Considerate mon." Claw opened a bottle. "Get me a glass."

Malthus fetched glasses for them both and poured. The curse on the bottle was keyed to Claw and presented no danger to anyone else—unlike poisons.

Claw took a sip and rolled it around in his mouth. "This is good. I've not had anything so smooth in years."

"I'm glad that you like it. If there is anything special you would like her to find, tell me and I'll write her."

"I'll do that. What all did you pick up in Hell's Widow?"

Malthus lowered his head, gave a tiny nod, and a smile that failed to touch his eyes flickered across his lips. "I went mainly for the Sanctuary. Clodagh needed several things that could not be found in Wolffgard. For the children mostly."

"So you're going to keep working there?"

"A bit. I gave Beth my word on it before she died. I'm a mon of my word."

"I guess you're okay for a human." Claw refilled his glass.

The lycan capacity for drink always surprised Malthus. He had seen Claw down six doubles in a row and barely feel it. "I'm glad you think so."

"You should be. Tell me, did you see any sign of bandits? The merchants that come through are complaining of them."

"Not a one."

"Aisha's sending Kynyr to Hell's Widow tomorrow to pick up some things for her."

"I could have picked them up for her."

"That's Kynyr's job. She likes sending him. She's a picky old bitch and likes things done a certain way. She's got Kynyr trained and that's that. Ahg..." Claw leaned back in his chair with a grimace, rubbing his chest.

"What's wrong?" Malthus asked solicitously, extending his gifts in a low level scan for a taste of Claw's discomfort.

"...chest pains. I've been getting a lot lately."

*I'm sure you have.* "Has anyone looked into it?"

"Baroucha. She's given me something for it."

*Ahh, Baroucha. I've been neglecting you lately.* "Perhaps you should rest. I'll send for a servant."

Malthus reached for the bell on the table and Claw covered it with his hand. "I'll rest when I'm damned well ready to."

"So be it. If you'll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to." Malthus rose and left.

As he reached the stairs, Merissa turned the corner. She lifted her long skirts to free her feet and ran to him. He pulled his lovely, ginger-haired wife into his arms and kissed her deeply.

"I missed you, darling," Merissa said when he ended the kiss.

"I missed you too." He glanced around to see that no one was near and cupped her breast, thumbing her nipple. "I'll show you just how much after dinner."

Malthus grasped her hips and ground his pelvis into hers. "Yes, indeed I will. And all night long too."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus stood for a moment, staring at the front of Baroucha's dingy shop on Main Street a block and a half from the Difficult Horse Tavern where he spent many afternoons drinking with his friends from Sanctuary. The green paint had cracked and peeled. He shook his head at it, wondering that she had any customers at all considering how badly she had neglected the outside.

Like most shops in towns and villages, whether lycan or human, Baroucha's living quarters were upstairs above her work rooms. Ordinarily a village as large as Wolffgard—practically a small town in size—would have had several healers and midwives. Yet, until Cahira Sinclair had set up shop, Wolffgard had had only Baroucha.

It had not taken Malthus long to discover why. Baroucha resented competition. Gossip was her chief weapon and she wielded it with great effect to drive out anyone who dared to set up a competing shop and business. She tolerated the human apothecary, Atreius Ivanstern, only because he had access to drugs and herbs that she could not come by—

mostly through connections in Creeya—and he was willing to sell to her at discount.

The bell on the door rang as Malthus entered and Baroucha looked up from the table where she sat discussing a bottle of medicine with a middle-aged bitch wearing one of the traditional lycan robes that wrapped around and tied with a sash.

A tiny sneer touched Malthus' lips at the high collared dress Baroucha wore despite the blazing heat of late summer. He had not been by to feed on her in weeks, yet she still wore those dresses as if expecting to find his fangs in her throat at any moment.

"I need to talk to you for a bit. Privately."

"Just a moment." Baroucha turned back. "Just one teaspoon, morning and evening."

The bitch slid Baroucha two coppers, took the bottle, and left with a backwards glance at Malthus. He flipped the sign on the door to "closed," and dropped the bar across it so that they would not be disturbed.

"What do you want, Malthus?" Baroucha's hand went to the mottled skin on her neck, her eyes filling with tension. She looked like an oversized toad and Malthus doubted that the old bitch had ever been pretty.

"Let's go into the backroom for this."

She preceded him into the backroom, which was a maze of cabinets, tables, and bookshelves with a sofa along the farthest wall. Malthus noted with satisfaction that Baroucha had replaced the ratty old thing she had had before his visits

began with one covered in an overstuffed burgundy brocade that had pillows piled high in the corners.

She settled in a corner against the pillows and unfastened the bodice of her dress. "Payment first?"

"Always." Malthus seated himself beside her and ran his finger along the loose, wrinkled skin on her neck.

She watched his fangs descend from their sheaths, her heartbeat quickened, and she breathed in small rapid pants. "Go on. I'm ready."

Malthus' sneer broadened. Baroucha had been one of the smart ones, and never fought him. His coercions had gone into her mind with ease and he had not been forced to layer them as he did with the others.

She shivered as he licked along her neck and stiffened for an instant as he sank his fangs into her. Because Baroucha was always so cooperative, Malthus triggered her endorphins once the first taste of her blood was in his mouth. She relaxed with a sigh, eyes distant, and a smile playing across her face. He wondered what she dreamed of as he sucked.

"Alistar ... Alistar..." She moaned.

*She always says that name. A lover perhaps?*

He pulled out of her and wiped his mouth off on a handkerchief. "What have you been giving Claw for his heart trouble?"

Baroucha blinked, shaking off the visions he had given her. "Foxglove extract."

"Excellent. When do you send him his next bottle?"

"Morcar is picking it up this afternoon. Why?" She fingered the tiny wound before closing the neck of her dress.

"Give me the bottle."

"That's it sitting on the table."

Malthus rose and followed her pointing hand to the table nearest the door. A cluster of jars sat in the nearest corner of the table and just beyond it, a six ounce bottle. The bottle had a colorless liquid in it with instructions, written in a neat hand, pasted to it. Malthus carried it over to her work table. He took a slender chain from his pouch that had nine globes of various colors on it. He tapped a lavender one and a small crate appeared on the table with an assortment of bottles, spoons, an eyedropper, glass mixing rods and other.

"Carrying globes." Baroucha pulled out a chair and sat down across from him. "What are you doing?"

Malthus' sneer became a true smile that lit his eyes. "I'm killing Claw."

"I'll get blamed for it." Her voice took on a nervous edge. "They'll kill me."

Malthus chuckled. "They'll never know. I started killing him weeks before my marriage."

"Poison?"

"Nothing so primitive." He unstopped the bottle, and took a bottle from his crate. He unstopped that and dipped an eyedropper into it, he added a precise nine drops to the foxglove extract. He dipped a glass rod into the bottle and stirred it well. "That should bring the heart attack on faster."

"You're going to kill them all, aren't you?"

"Of course."

She sucked in a deep breath as an expression of wonder took years from her face. "Alistar's curse. You're delivering Alistar's curse."

"What's this?" Malthus closed the bottle of foxglove extract and put his tools away.

"Alistar Weems. Tarrant Redhand and Todd Sinclair murdered him. He cursed them as he was dying ... said all the Redhands would die."

"Interesting." Malthus stroked his oak leaf beard.

"You'll have to kill Kynyr too." Baroucha's word sped up as her excitement grew. "And Branduff Maguire to get them all. And his daughters too."

"What do you mean?"

"Branduff Maguire—Kynyr's father—he's Tarrant's bastard."

"Sooo." Malthus licked his lips. "The resemblance everyone speaks of isn't a coincidence."

"Cahira thinks she can elude the curse that my Alistar ... my precious Alistar ... laid upon them ... by not letting anyone know Kynyr's a Redhand. Not even Claw knows. She threatened to kill me if I said anything. But I want them dead. I want them all dead. They killed my Alistar."

"We'll have our vengeance, Baroucha. I promise you. They killed my brother."

Malthus realized that he would not need to play with her mind any longer: she saw him as an ally, rather than a master.

"And Todd Sinclair, too. Please?"



"Of course." He reached across the table and patted her hand. "I'll arrange it all. Be patient. This isn't something that can be rushed."

"I understand. Oh, praise the dark gods you came."

"Yes. Praise them indeed."

\* \* \* \*

The information that Baroucha had given Malthus burned in his mind like a bonfire. Until then, his desire to see Kynyr Maguire dead had been purely personal; now it had become business and business always came before pleasure. Had he not returned so recently from Hell's Widow, he would have set out again. Heironim Traxton needed to know this about Kynyr. The messengers that Hoon used to carry missives between them kept erratic schedules—they only appeared when they had something to bring Malthus—so he could not trust that they would appear in a timely fashion. That meant trusting one of his lycan cat's paws further than he liked. They all worked at the Sanctuary, so he headed for it.

Passing the Difficult Horse, Malthus saw three of them emerge from the tavern: scrawny Yren who always looked half-starved; huge Torquil the smith's apprentice; and Preece, the one he wanted to talk to. Preece's only loyalty was to his purse and the person who put the most coins into it, which happened to be Malthus.

"Hey, Preece!" Malthus made a come here gesture.

Preece excused himself from his companions and swaggered across the street. "What you need?"

The tall, raw-boned lycan went shirtless in the late summer heat and wore his drawstring pants so loose they hung around his narrow hips. The sheaths of the long knives hanging from his belt were strapped to his thighs for an easy draw. Preece's dead, world-weary eyes—at odds with his youthful face—spooked his peers, yet intrigued Malthus. His thin lips disappeared into an off-kilter twist that passed for a smile as he regarded Malthus.

"Well?" Preece rested his knuckles on his hips.

"Meet me at the cottage. I have a task for you."

"Coins in it?"

"And more."

"I'll see you there." Preece's gaze slid sideways and Malthus glanced to see what he was looking at.

Kady Wiggins walked away from the door to the dry goods store with her head down.

"Promptly, Preece."

"Yeah."

Preece overtook Kady in three long strides, caught her by the shoulders, and pushed her up against the side of Atreius Ivanstern's apothecary. "Hello, slut."

"Let go of me." She twisted in his grasp.

"Have a drink with me at the Striped Dog tonight?"

"No."

"Either the Striped Dog tonight, or stay off the streets after dark, Kady."

"Are you threatening me?"

Preece shrugged. "The weapon's friendly."

Malthus did not wait to hear the rest of the exchange, but started walking. He reached the Sanctuary and strode past the Willodarian shrine that marked the entrance. The shrine, built of yellow stone and white pine, was a simple box with two wings that contained the priest's apartments on the right and the school room on the left. Children played across the open ground beyond the shrine, enjoying an unexpected holiday with the priest gone to visit her relatives in Silverpaw and not there to teach her morning classes.

He slipped around to the back on the shrine on a whim. An arch and a low, white stone fence marked off the cemetery. There were only two graves in it: Tempest Anstey, their former priest who had died of heart failure, making him Malthus' first victim in Wolffgard; and Cullen Blackwood. Malthus puzzled over how Pandeena had managed to locate his remains. He stood beneath the arch and gazed across at the head stones. With any luck, Maguire would be joining them beneath the ground in the next few days.

"Malthus?" Clodagh stepped out of the shadows, wringing her hands. "Three new females arrived today."

"Human?" Malthus turned away from the graves.

She nodded. "And one sa'necari."

"They spellcorded her?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll take care of it before I leave today."

Malthus walked off.

His cottage lay on the far west side of the camp, beyond a dense stand of sheltering forest and almost upon the banks of the Bonnie Draw River. He had picked this spot for the

privacy it gave him. The house was a human style dwelling and far nicer than the traditional longhouses that were going up elsewhere on the camp grounds. The large front room served as both kitchen and living room. It had two bedrooms and a study. Malthus fetched pen and paper from the study and carried it to the square table in the living area, along with sealing wax and a candle. If it started to get dark before Preece arrived, it would not do to let him discover how well Malthus could see in dim light—a talent the sa'necari shared with the lycans.

He quickly wrote two letters, one to Heironim, and the other to Dymier Bianco who ran the Devil's Dance Inn. Malthus had just gotten them sealed when Preece gave a perfunctory knock at the door before sauntering inside and joining him at the table.

"So what's this about?"

"Letters. They must be delivered today. No questions asked."

"What's in it for me?"

Malthus slid two silver nobles across the table and Preece scooped them up.

Preece frowned. "You've given me far more for nothing."

"There's more. Take both letters to Dymier at the Devil's Dance Inn. He'll you lodging and all the liquor you want on my tab. Plus a token that will get you into the Crimson Lady to fuck any and all whores you wish. You'll spend the night at the Inn in case there's a reply coming back for me and return tomorrow evening. I'll have more coin for you then."

Preece shoved the letters into his belt pouch and stood up. "The sooner I'm gone, the more time for fun."

"One thing." Malthus gestured for Preece to wait a moment. "There's a chance you might encounter Maguire tomorrow. I'd prefer he didn't see you."

Preece's face lost all expression and his hands settled on the hilts of his blades. "I'm not afraid of Maguire."

"That's not the point. Just do as you're told."

"So long as you're paying for it." Preece turned and left.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### HEART'S DESIRE

They rode west for a day toward the town of Skullbones. The nearer they got to the town, the quieter Caimbeul became. Pandeena had stopped shoving Kynyr in his face, yet the subject still came up. The way that Pandeena's eyes brightened at his name bothered Caimbeul in a way that sent a poignant ache through him, which in turn forced him to realize how much he still wanted Pandeena. He assessed himself, and reluctantly admitted that he had nothing to offer her compared to a young wolf. Female yuwenghau were not as promiscuous as the males. Therefore, Kynyr Maguire had to be an impressive individual.

"But so was I ... once," he muttered under his breath.

"What did you say?" Pandeena nudged her horse closer to his.

He glanced at her with his head lowered. "An idle thought. Not worth repeating."

"Come on. Tell me what you said."

"You must need me desperately to come all this way just to drag me out of my hovel."

"Mother insists that I work within the laws. If we break the laws and customs we spent generations encouraging, then we will destroy all that we have achieved."

An idea sparked, but he decided to bide his time. Caimbeul straightened in the saddle. "She's right. It probably would. But not all change is bad."

"Vigilante justice is wrong."

The vehemence in her tone made Caimbeul straighten in the saddle. He suspected that far more was going on in Wolffgard and Hell's Widow than Pandeena had yet told him. "Agreed. What is it you are expecting me to do?"

Pandeena's mouth tightened. "Find the evidence we need to nail him into a chair."

"Into a chair?" Caimbeul had never heard of doing that as a punishment before.

Pandeena's expression tightened still more. "That's what he did to Cullen ... drove spikes through his shoulder blades, hipbones, wrists and ankles ... nailed him into a chair."

"Shit." Caimbeul flinched at the image. "And you think it's this Malthus fellow?"

"Yesss." She hissed, wrapping her tongue around the word. "Yess!"

"Because of Cullen?"

"Among other things. I've reached for his spirit, but he doesn't answer."

"Could they have rited him?"

Pandeena shook her head. "I would have sensed that." Her face darkened. "There wasn't much left of him. They shoved him into several layers of canvas sacking and buried him. Parts of him were missing."

"Testicles, liver, kidneys, and heart." Caimbeul's eyes went distant. "Probably took his entrails as well. I'll wager you found his body cavities emptied."

"How did you know?"

Caimbeul shrugged. "Maybe I'm not as out of touch as I seem. There has been a vogue among the sa'necari for the last ten years. Their bio-alchemists have been using lycan organs in fertility potions."

"Ghastly."

"Irony is ... it doesn't help. They're still going sterile at thirty."

"They'll try anything ... even butchering our people because we're fertile."

"They've started marrying their children off as soon as they can consummate."

"They must lose a lot of girls in childbirth."

Caimbeul shook his head, his eyes going hooded. "Before marrying, the girls get their first rite. It strengthens them. Girls as young as eleven having babies with no difficulty. They'll never match us for numbers ... but they don't have to. They're deadlier than we are."

"I'll never understand why the humans support them."

"Perceptions of Authority, Pandeena. Same thing that keeps our people going."

"You've explained that before, but I'll never grasp it."

"You don't want to."

Caimbeul let the conversation drop as they entered Skullbones.



It was a dirty town, filled with dust from the dirt roads and a few scattered trees that looked half dead from lack of care. The buildings were thrown together, ramshackle wooden structures and those in the center were dead stone and brick, sharing side walls.

"Which inn, Pandeena?"

"Three Lizards. It's lycan-owned."

Caimbeul gave a nod. Lycan establishments located away from clan lands tended to have threes and sevens in their names because of the religious aspects: three gods, Tala, Navaryn, and Pandeena; and according to legend, Pandeena had borne seven sons at a single birthing and those sons had founded the first clans. Caimbeul had always intended to ask Pandeena about whether that had been true—about her sons—but never found an opportune moment to ask. He had, long ago, discovered her reticent to speak about the old world from which their people had come and the things that had happened there. The last time she had been to old Yurth had been at the site of a battle she called 'Culloden Moor,' and any of her people who had failed to get through the Gate Arcane, during the three weeks she managed to hold it open, had been abandoned. Neither she nor Navaryn had ever gone back after that.

He eyed her for a moment, with more questions in his head than she would ever answer—and asking the wrong question would serve only to get them quarrelling again. "I'll meet you there later. I'm going to see if the Scarlet Angel mage shop is still here."

Pandeena's face flushed. "Go on and get your damned crystals so you can start shoving your bloody bone into every available hole."

Caimbeul winced. He had always been circumspect in scratching his itch, never doing it among his own people, always crossing the border into Waejontor when he felt like playing Jack in the Orchard. Clan wolves tended to look down on it more than city wolves. Even the custom of the Wild Cousins—a form of unwed serial monogamy, practiced originally as a way of determining that a bitch was fertile before marriage—had begun to noticeably die out, and Caimbeul had never been able to decide whether that was a good thing or bad one. "Maybe I should get you some ... considering you're going to open your legs to Kynyr Maguire as soon as we get home."

"I have all the control over my fertility that I need."

Caimbeul gave her a glance full of slightly naughty guilelessness. "Didn't stop me landing you one in the belly."

"I wanted Gwythyr, damn you. I wanted him and you got him killed. It's your own bloody fault our son is dead."

Caimbeul sucked in a deep breath and kicked his horse into a canter, turned down a side street and then an alley to lose her. He reined in near a privy behind a tavern and just sat there. His stomach had clenched up and he felt a disturbing pressure in his chest and a tightness in his throat. Caimbeul leaned his head as far back as he could get it and closed his eyes. "I failed you, Gwythyr ... failed you. And I'm so damned sorry. I miss you."

A mon opened the door to the privy and emerged lacing his pants up. He stared at Caimbeul for an instant. "Watcha doin' there? You some kind a privy peeper?"

"I'm lost and need directions."

"I thought you dog-nosed bastards never got lost. You was peepin'."

"Why would I do that?" Caimbeul sneered. "My cock is bigger than yours, human." He kicked his gelding into a trot and left the alley, ignoring a string of obscenities shouted in his wake.

Caimbeul rode down to Main Street—it amused him that nearly every town and village he had ever been in had a Main Street—and turned off onto Loren Lane. Three blocks farther and he spotted the sign: Scarlet Angel Mage Supply. The name made it sound as if there were dozens of mages in Skullbones. However, unless things had changed a lot since he was last here, most of their customers were ordinary folk who bought potions, charms, candles, and incense. A bell rang on the door as he entered.

The shop had changed in subtle ways. The shelves along three walls behind glass topped counters were the same. The curtain covering the rear door into the backroom had been replaced with strings of glass and ceramic beads that brushed the floor. The small table in the center, beneath a sign that bore the symbols for tarot readings, palmistry, and casting the stones, was new.

A small, clean-shaven mon emerged from the backroom. "Can I help you?"

"Yah. Is Giuliano Albertus around?"

The mon's eyes narrowed and he studied Caimbeul before answering. "Granddad has been dead fifty years, fireborn."

Caimbeul tensed. "You know what I am."

"I can see auras and spirit-forms. The firebird sits on your shoulders. Your aura shimmers like the fires of damnation."

"Who are you?"

The mon tilted his head and squinted at Caimbeul as if looking for something more than he had first perceived.

"Luciano Albertus. I inherited the shop from my father ... more or less."

"What do you mean?" Suspicion crawled along the lawgiver's arms and up the back of his neck.

"Lemyari have a taste for mages. I'm not one, so they leave me alone."

"Then what are you?"

"Can't you tell?"

"I'm not so rude as to Read people without being asked to."

"Complaint noted. I'm a psi spiritworker. I don't have enough power to interest them, so the Lemyari haven't tried to sink their fangs into me ... yet."

Caimbeul's lips curled back from his teeth. "They probably won't. Folks say spiritworkers taste rancid."

"Touché." Luciano's mouth pursed into a droll smile. "So what can I do for you?"

"Two dozen seed crystals. Half a dozen memory stones, capable of holding an encryption. Three ounces of Moon's Mourning Green."

"That's an expensive order."

"I have plenty of gold."

"You'd better. As to the Moon's Mourning, I have the raw white, but not the green. I tell you what, if you'll take the white—I don't get much call for it, most people don't know how to process it right—I'll throw in a free palm reading and I promise not to peek."

Caimbeul chuckled. "I'm fairly certain I'm peek proof." He reached into the largest of the three pouches hanging from his belt, came out with thirty Sharani double-gryphons, and made three stacks of coins on the counter. "However, I'll take you up on the offer. Will that cover everything?"

"More than." Luciano's eyes saucered and his eyebrows shot up almost to his hairline. "You're Padruig Caimbeul, aren't you? Fireborn Law? My father told me stories about me when I was little."

"Keep the change and forget you saw me."

"Of course. Only let me warn you. The sa'necari are looking for you. Two of them came through yesterday. They know you've left Silverpaw." Luciano gestured at the table. "Sit down while I bag up your purchases. Then I'll give you that Reading I promised you."

Caimbeul settled into a chair, muttering an old Creeyan proverb. "Reputation is a double-edged sword. It cuts both ways."

Luciano returned and placed a burlap sack with Caimbeul's purchases on the lycan's side of the table. "Give me you use hand, not your birth hand."

The lycan extended his right hand. The shopkeeper stroked his finger along the lines in Caimbeul's rough paw. Luciano

frowned deeply as if something troubled him. The first part of the reading covered matters that could easily have been gleaned from old tales about Caimbeul and did not explain the look on Luciano's face.

"There's something you don't like there. Just spit it out and get it over with."

Luciano's brow wrinkled all the way to his hairline. "So be it. Your lifeline is split into two possible paths. There's a decision in your future."

"There's a lot of decisions in my future."

The shopkeeper sucked in a breath. "Yes, but the wrong choice will get you killed. If you follow the path of your heart..." Luciano swallowed and his mouth tightened. "If you follow your heart, you won't see the new year. If you keep logic uppermost, you'll see another century of life ... at the very least."

The memory of holding his murdered son in his arms flashed through Caimbeul and he jerked his hand from Luciano's grasp, growling. "Maybe I don't want that century."

Caimbeul grabbed the burlap sack and stalked out of the shop.

\* \* \* \*

In the course of their travel, Caimbeul's stowage on the pack horse increased steadily, until Pandeena began to wonder what he was buying along the way. When they camped for the night outside Hell's Widow—they could have stayed at an inn, but Pandeena had developed a massive dislike for the place after finding Cullen Blackwood's

butchered remains—she decided the time had come to follow her gut instincts and have a look at everything.

When Caimbeul went into the trees to relieve himself, she pounced on his packages and bags. The first one contained four bottles of Dragonsbreath, a whiskey more famed for its potency than its taste. She put the bottles aside and kept going through. Bottles of Dragonsbreath were stuffed everywhere. By the time she heard him returning, there were twenty bottles of whiskey lined up.

Caimbeul sauntered into their campsite, tying his pants closed. "I've a gut instinct, Pandeena. I think we'll..." He stopped and stared at the mess she had made of his belongings, the bottles of whiskey standing in a row. "Aww, shit."

She faced him with her hands on her hips. "You promised to stay sober."

"I ain't touched a drop since we left Running horse."

"That's not what this looks like."

"I only bought a few." Caimbeul's brogue thickened with discomfort. "An' I ain't been drinkin' it."

Pandeena pointed at the bottles of whiskey. "Twenty is more than a few."

"Who's counting?"

"Me."

"You always did. Look, Pandeena. I only promised not ta touch it while we was on the road. Remember?"

"Well, I'd hoped you'd give it up."

Caimbeul forced a half-hearted chuckle. "And ruin my reputation?"

"It looked fairly wrecked four weeks ago ... when I found you."

"Ah, well. I had my reasons."

"Excuses."

"You always were a hard bitch." Caimbeul sidled over, wrapped his arms around her, and cupped her breasts while nuzzling her neck. "Forgive me?"

"None of that you old lecher," she scolded, unable to completely school the fondness from her voice.

"Just once for old time's sake?"

"No. The relationship's been over for a century. Let it go."

Caimbeul withdrew his hands. "It was nice ... living in that little house ... watching the boy grow up."

Pandeena softened. "I loved our son. It broke my heart when they killed him."

"It could be nice again."

"No, Caimbeul. It's over. We're just friends now. I like it that way."

Caimbeul rocked back on his haunches with a sigh. "The least you could have done was to Jump us to Wolffgard."

"I don't want them to know what I can do." Pandeena straightened and carried her bedroll to the horses. She tied it to the back of her saddle.

Caimbeul followed her. "You really think this Malthus is the Butchering Serpent?"

"I'm certain of it. The evidence, however, is only a little dog and a seriously wounded young lawgiver who can't remember his own name and who everyone thinks is dead."



Caimbeul pulled at his stubbled lip. "Well, once we get there, I'll think of something."

"I'm sure you will. You always did before."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CRIMSON LADY

The morning light shining in Preece's eyes woke him. He cringed away from it, shading his eyes with his hands. His stomach soured and burning bile rose to the back of his throat. Lurching to his feet, he staggered to the window, shoved it open, and vomited onto the roof of the veranda below him. Preece turned about and stared into the room, trying to remember where he was and how he had gotten there.

"Bit of a hangover, dearie?" a droll voice asked from the bed.

Preece glared at the naked whore lying on her side in the bed with her head propped on her hand.

She had long, silken black hair and voluptuous curves; and seeing her made some of the pieces click into place in his mind.

"This is the Crimson Lady?"

She giggled. "You been here all night."

"Shit." I was supposed to spend the night at the inn. Preece's glare deepened into a scowl.

"Hair of the dog's on the table if you need it." She pointed at a bottle of whiskey in the middle of a small round table standing midway between a dresser and a wardrobe.

"You got White Fire in this place?"

"Sure. Costs extra." She got out of bed and padded across the room to the dresser where she took a small silver box out and a metal tube. Picking up a hand mirror, the whore carried it all to the table and laid out lines of white powder from the box.

"Silkie says it's all on the House."

"So it is." She handed the tube to Preece as he joined her.

He snorted two lines and smiled as the drug hit his system, banishing all traces of the hangover, and sending a rush of energy through him. *Malthus must have incredible influence. I wonder how far it goes?* "What's your name?"

"Lola."

"Okay, Lola." Preece decided to test the limits of Malthus' influence and Silkie's hospitality. A sneer spread across his lips that almost touched his eyes. "I want to take a bottle of this stuff..." Preece tapped the lid of the box. "With me. A big bottle."

"You're asking a lot. Amphereon that pure is expensive."

"Is that a no?"

Lola rose and shrugged into a filmy robe, sashed it closed. "Of course not. How big is big?"

"Twelve ounces?"

"Might as well ask for a pound."

"Can I get it?"

She looked at him with her head tilted and an expression blended equally of contempt and idle speculation. "Of course. Any thing else you want to take with you?"

"Two bottles of that good whiskey. A bottle of rum."

"Is that all?"

"And you."

"Hah! You finally hit on something you can't take with you."

"I didn't want you. I got a flaxen-haired bitch that's just begging for it."

"What's her name?"

"Kady."

Lola flounced from the room.

Preece did a third line of White Fire and then dressed. He had finished belting his knives on when she returned with a burlap sack. Preece checked out the contents and left without another word.

When he reached the Inn, he found the common room empty except for the owner, Dymier, who was sitting with two other myn at a table near the bar. Both myn were Waejontori wearing their long black hair tied back. The mon to Dymier's right was nearly as tall as Preece and clean-shaven; the other was of average build and slender. Yet when Preece met their eyes, predator recognized predator. Preece had never been one to stand down from a challenge, so he sauntered over and addressed Dymier. "Anything going back?"

Dymier handed him two letters and Preece put them into his pouch.

The tall one sized Preece up with a sweep of his gaze. "So you're Malthus' new courier. What's your name?"

"Preece Malloy ... if that's any of your business."

"It is my business. Next time bring them directly to me."

"Where?"

"Offices of the Green Sheaf Grain Merchants. I'm the owner. Heironim Traxton. This is my associate, Dorjan Calendri."

Preece's eyes narrowed. "And when I mention your names to Malthus, he'll know you?"

Dorjan chuckled. "Oh, very good."

"I expect you to," said Heironim and flipped a gold crown at Preece.

The lycan snapped the coin out of the air without blinking and shoved it into his pocket. "If that's all, I'm gone."

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr tucked a pair of loaded crossbows under the seat of the wagon and a case of quarrels. Rumors from merchants coming through Red Wolf Valley claimed that the road to Hell's Widow had gotten rougher since he last went there. They were entering in large, armed parties instead of one or two at a time as they once did. The harder that Queen Tomyrilen's forces pressed the Sharani armies; the more Sharani turned their attention in her direction and the more they neglected the isolated districts that they had once patrolled and guarded.

In times past, Kynyr and his friends had gone to great lengths to avoid being marked out as Clan guardsmyn when in Hell's Widow. This time they would be wearing chainmail under their civilian clothing, and carrying horse bows. If someone shot at them, they intended to shoot back. The lycans were as good with their bows as the freerangers were and could fire accurately from the saddle at a full gallop,

getting off each shot in less than half a minute. Kynyr wished he could have barded the horses, but Claw had overruled him on it. They were going to be conspicuous enough as it was.

His companions waited on their horses. Ramsey Fitzgerald with hair as red as a whore's petticoats and a temperament so mellow and steady that it proved a mon's nature could not be judged by the color of his hair; tow-headed Finn MacIver, Kynyr's spiritbrother since early childhood, who had missed being youngest by two months; and sandy-haired Eideard Doyle, the oldest of them at twenty-four, and the most outspoken. They had all served Claw Redhand since they were sixteen; and were good with their weapons. However, guardsmyn in an informal lycan household did more than guard and fight. They also worked the herds, mended fences, ran errands, and did general tasks around the manor and its properties.

The lycan saddle had been adapted from those used by the freeranger companies that roamed the continent in service to the Willodarian Temples. It had a front swell and a horn instead of the cavalry pommel favored by many armies, a substantial skirt, and a side flap to hold a horse bow and quiver, as well as a hook for a coiled rope. They were used primarily for herding stock, but the lycans could fight from those saddles as well.

Heavy sheepskin pads showed beneath the saddle skirts.

"You think we'll have trouble?" A twig went round and round in Ramsey's mouth: a substitute for his pipe since he did not like trying to smoke in the saddle. Most dog lycans smoked pipes and so did some of the bitches.

Kynyr climbed up on the wagon before answering, released the break, and started turning it about to drive out of the yard. "I doubt we'll have any on the way out. Most of the trouble seems to be with people heading toward the valley, not away from it."

"Bandits, you think?" Finn rode up alongside Kynyr as the wagon rolled out onto the path and they headed for the bridge over the Eirlys River.

"That's the rumor," Kynyr replied. "We'll need to keep our eyes open on the road."

"We ought to be able to handle bandits." The twig whirled and bobbed in Ramsey's teeth as he talked around it. "They're usually poorly armed, untrained, and disorganized. Like that band we routed two years ago."

Stands of white pine and blue spruce shaded the broad dirt road. Shadowy canine forms moved beneath the trees, lycans patrolling in full wolf form, watchers whose job was not to engage the enemy, but to sound the alert should something untoward occur. The wheels of the wagon and the hooves of the horses churned up the dirt on that dry late summer morning. Heat had already begun to gather over the road despite the earliness of the hour.

Kynyr went quiet as the support columns on the bridge came into view. When Cooley had first arrived, riding his father's horse and carrying a message for Kynyr, the guardsmon's friends had tried various ways to get him to divulge the contents of Silkie's letter. All to no avail. Finn knew more than the others, but even he gained only the merest outline from Kynyr. The questioning had slacked off

until three weeks ago, when Pandeena had brought Cullen's broken remains home for a proper burial. Planning for the journey to Hell's Widow for supplies, had sparked a fresh round of them; and Kynyr knew that his three companions expected to finally have their answers. It was getting more difficult to deny them that.

"It wasn't bandits that killed Cullen." Kynyr's eyes took on a distant look.

"Sa'necari?" Finn asked.

"I got a letter from one of the prostitutes at the Crimson Lady saying it was sa'necari that murdered him."

Ramsey eyed Kynyr closely, curiosity filling his face. "She say how she knew?"

"She saw them do it."

That information surprised all but Finn; and it was several minutes before Ramsey ventured another question. "Which one is she?"

"No." Kynyr shook his head. "I can't tell you that."

Eideard watched them for a long time. "Can we come along?"

"To the Crimson Lady?"

"Yah."

"You can't be there when I talk to her."

Eideard shrugged. "I didn't expect to. I just want to dip my wick. I haven't been laid since before I got cut up two months ago."

"I have no problem with that. I might do it myself." Kynyr smiled with a startling grin as he shook off his misgivings concerning the journey. Hell's Widow was roughly half a day's



ride from the manor and Wolffgard Village. "I haven't had bitch under me in half a year."

Finn gave Kynyr a sidelong look. "What do you mean you haven't been laid in six months? Your bed was never empty from the time you was fourteen."

"My choice, Finn. I don't want to talk about it."

Eideard lifted an eyebrow, glanced at Finn and Ramsey, gave a nod at Kynyr's back and they shared a shrug. "It's my opinion that those myn who tried to grab Cullen off the street were sent by the same ones who later killed him."

"The night we were going to the Crimson Lady with Cullen?"

"Yeah. I owe the little shit my life." Eideard lowered his eyes, and rolled his shoulders as if trying to shake off the grip of a bad memory. "I'm the one who's been leaving offerings on his grave ... ever since the priest brought his remains home."

"Look, guys," Ramsey interrupted. "The only proof—if you can call it that—that sa'necari were involved is a letter from one of the whores at the Crimson Lady. There was no evidence of dark magic involved in Cullen's death ... no psi traces of his having been fed on. The usual earmarks were not there."

Kynyr gave a small nod. "That's why I want to talk to her."

"Don't scare her, Kynyr." Ramsey's tone stayed quiet and gentle. "Don't buy everything she says either."

"I don't play intimidation games with bitches, Ramsey. I learned a lot from the Dreaded Horde."

Finn let a broad grin slide across his face. "HAH! She's lycan, isn't she?"

"I didn't say that." Kynyr shot back with a flash of defensiveness.

"You said 'bitch' not woman or female." Finn's grin broadened in triumph.

"Ellie!" Eideard crowed. "It must have been Ellie. She was Cullen's favorite and lycan. Cute little thing. Her cunt sucks ... oh mon, does it ever!"

"Shut up until we're across the bridge." Kynyr slowed the wagon down as rest of the stout wooden structure came into sight. "If one of the Bridge Guards catches a word of this it will be all over the village before we get back."

The bridge guards lounged on benches set back among a thick stand of fragrant white pine and cedars three spear lengths beyond the bridge on the lycan side where a heavy barrier of brush and briars offered them concealment from people approaching from the opposite side. They had a policy of getting a look at anyone arriving at the bridge from the Waejontori side before showing themselves, although they were clearly visible from the lycan side.

A couple of them waved at Kynyr and his companions as they passed.

Tree trunks formed the support columns of the bridge that spanned the gorge that had been cut through the sheer stone walls by the deep cataract known as the Eirlys River. The rushing roar of the Eirlys filled the air, drowning out the calls of circling birds. On three sides the land descended into rugged canyons and twisted valleys that looked like a giant

had ripped his fingers through the soil. The lycan clans preferred to make their homes in hard to reach places, areas that could easily be defended against invasion.

The half-walls of the bridge's sides offered limited shelter while not blocking the view of people approaching it. Kynyr's wagon rattled onto the heavy boards. Eideard nudged his horse past the wagon to take the point. Finn and Ramsey followed him. The wagon was a hard spot to fight from, even with the crossbows, and severely limited Kynyr's options in a fight. That put the burden of defense upon the other three.

Kynyr had placed Morcar Ross in charge of the other four myn in their unit, the ones who remained behind to keep watch over Aisha, Searlait, and Fianait. Their responsibilities used to include Merissa, but since her marriage Malthus had insisted on removing her from their care.

The late summer heat made the chain mail he wore seem twice as hot and heavy to Kynyr.

They traveled in silence for nearly an hour before Eideard brought up the subject of the letter again. "So the letter was from Ellie?"

Kynyr gave him a sidelong glance, as it became clear that his friends were going to keep pressing him both about the letter and the identity of the prostitute who had sent it to him. "It wasn't from Ellie."

"We've been waiting a month for you to tell us and we are not taking no for an answer now." Eideard dropped back to ride closer to the wagon. "When you say one of them saw him killed, does that mean it happened at the brothel?"

"Spit it out, Kynyr." Finn gave him an irritated look.

The three wolves were Kynyr's closest and most trusted friends, yet the idea of involving them in the investigation troubled him. He thought back to the fight months ago that had nearly gotten Eideard killed. Of the three of them, Eideard was the most headstrong and apt to act without consulting the rest of them. Kynyr knew that he could count on Finn and Ramsey to follow his lead and obey his wishes in the matters. Eideard, however, still had the instincts of the loner he had been before Kynyr befriended him. "If I tell you what I know, you must promise not to talk about it with outsiders ... And..." Kynyr held up his hand to forestall comments. "I want your promise that you won't go acting on your own initiative. You'll consult me and if I veto it, you'll accept that. Anything else could get us all ... her included ... killed."

That brought a chorus of oaths and promises. Kynyr let it all die down before going on. "The letter was from Silkie. She didn't give me any details. And Cooley brought it."

"What the hell was Cooley doing in Hell's Widow?" asked Ramsey.

"Cooley isn't my cousin. He's Cullen and Silkie's son." Kynyr waited for a reaction and when he got none, continued. "Silkie loved Cullen. He had his faults ... but she loved him. They tortured him to death in front of her. The rest is guesswork, but Todd agrees with my guesses."

Eideard sucked in a breath. "Damn."

"She asked us to adopt Cooley because she felt he would be safer with my family than in Hell's Widow."

Eideard edged his horse to the side where he could glance over his shoulder at the others as they rode. "I'd say the cub just got himself three new uncles. What do you say?"

Ramsey and Finn nodded their agreement.

"We'll help you look out for him and teach him what we can." Eideard moved back into his place riding point.

\* \* \* \*

Preece got off the road as soon as he felt certain that no one was following him, turning his horse onto a game trail that paralleled Cataract Road until roughly two hundred yards from the bridge onto Clan Red Wolf lands. He watched the road as he traveled, screened from view by thick clusters of oak and elm and the occasional thicket of hawthorn.

The day was quiet and he passed no one until a little past noon, when the creaking of a wagon and the rhythmic beat of hooves on the hard packed dirt alerted him to myn coming from the opposite direction. Preece dismounted and put his hand over his horse's nose to keep the beast quiet. He had started to come down from the effects of the White Fire and felt sorely tempted to open the burlap sack and do another line of it. The stuff made him feel good.

He had been doing lines the day he killed his mother. She caught him and demanded to know where Preece was getting the money for it, asked him if he'd been stealing again: White Fire was an expensive habit. When she launched into her usual rant about him being a 'thorn in her side,' Preece gave her a thorn all right—a long sharp steel one in the belly. Then he had dragged her into the woodshed and settled in to watch

her die. The experience had been a revelation, filling him with sensations of power and exaltation that he still savored ten years later. Those rants of hers, combined with his knife skills, had given him the nickname Thorn back when he lived in Dragonton on Torment Lake. The only one in Red Wolf allowed to call him that was his fourteen year old roommate, Rheu.

The wagon rolled closer, the sounds of it shaking Preece from his reverie. Now Preece could make out Maguire driving with his three companions ranged around the wagon. They were armed for bear, swords and bows as well as their long knives. Something was up. Those simple-minded clan wolves might miss the connections, but Preece was still a city wolf at heart—it made him smarter than the rest—and he knew a game when he smelled it. It was beyond coincidence that Malthus had bribed him so expansively just to get two letters delivered and now there went Maguire on his way to Hell's Widow. Preece regretted that he had never learned to read, because Malthus was running a game of some kind and the nature of it was probably in those letters. Moreover, there appeared to be a lot of money in it and it somehow connected to Kynyr Maguire or the Redhands or both.

He wondered if Maguire would be coming back from Hell's Widow on his wagon or in a canvas sack tomorrow. Irritation pricked him and Preece's lips curled away from his teeth. His thoughts drifted to the day of the riots at Sanctuary nearly three months ago.

The practice field had been Malthus' idea. Originally it had been a small clearing north of the corrals and barns where

the camp's animals were kept, at the edge of a densely forested section. Torquil the smith's hulking apprentice had shown up with practice blades the day after Malthus purchased his swords. Preece had been skeptical of Malthus' claims to having been a kandoyarin—mercenary—until watching him humble Torquil. When Malthus offered to teach the wolves who worked at the Sanctuary, Preece had been the last to join in, preferring to take everyone else's measure first.

Within a week the young wolves had cleared an area that, according to Shalto, was as large as the Great Hall of the manor itself and they all started showing up for a couple of hours every afternoon to practice and learn from Malthus. A few trees dotted the cleared area, but all the rocks, boulders, and brush had been removed from the center, leaving a half-moon of trees, vines, and bushes on the far side. They had tree rounds and an oak log for those waiting their turn to sit on. A long trestle table stood off to the side near the remaining woods, covered in various kinds of practice weapons made of weighted wood and ranging in kind from knives and swords to axes and quarterstaves.

Preece noticed that Kynyr's wagon had gone around a curve and out of sight. He took his hand from his horse's nose, hung the dangling reins on a bush, and pulled the burlap sack from the saddle. Squatting, Preece opened the sack and took out a box lined with wax paper. Lifting the lid off, Preece's eyes gleamed with more life than he usually displayed as he dipped his little finger into the white powder and tasted it.

"Damn, this is pure. One for the road." Preece dug the little tube out of his pocket, arranged two lines of White Fire in the lid, and snorted it. The sensations of incredible well-being hit fast. Preece put everything away, climbed into the saddle and moved out onto the road.

His mind drifted as he traveled. His memories expanded and grew larger than life as he relived the day of the riot.

*Preece slipped into the bushes with Rheu on the far side of the practice field. He liked little boys every bit as much as he did the bitches. Rheu was the longest relationship—if you could call it that—which Preece had ever had: nearly three years. Rheu had been an eleven-year-old street cub in Skeleton Creek when Preece rescued him from two slavers on a whim and made the cub say 'thanks' by sucking him off. Preece thought that was the end of it until he discovered Rheu had followed him out of town on a stolen horse. The cub worshipped Preece and never said no about anything. Preece liked that, and so he kept him.*

*Rheu snuggled against Preece, slipping his hand down the front of Preece's pants to stroke his bone.*

Preece grabbed Rheu's wrist and stopped him. "Listen."

"What?" Rheu withdrew his hand and glanced back through the bushes, frowning in question at the hoots and whistles coming from the practice field.

Preece threw himself down on his belly and squirmed closer for a better look. "It's that bloody guardsmon, Maguire."

They watched Kynyr Maguire swagger across the clearing as if he owned the place. Malthus walked up to Kynyr and



they spoke for a moment. Preece strained his hearing trying to catch what they were saying, and caught almost nothing; although the nature of the conversation became clear when Maguire stripped to the waist and picked up one of the practice blades.

"Oooh, he's gonna fight Malthus."

"Yah." Preece's gaze swept Kynyr. The guardsmon was built like a fighter and moved like he might know his stuff.

"Malthus'll kick his ass."

"What if Malthus loses? I hear Kynyr's good."

Preece's eyes narrowed dangerously. "If Maguire wins, I'll kill him and he'll never see it coming."

"You're good, Thorn."

The fight lasted for close to half an hour. Preece had never seen anyone make Malthus work so hard or long. There was no question in Preece's mind that he was watching a pair of masters pushing themselves to their limits. They were both breathing hard and drenched with sweat. Preece had room in his life for just one master swordsmon: Malthus. The duel gradually brought both combatants closer to where Preece and Rheu had hidden for their tryst.

"Shall we call it a draw?" Maguire asked.

Malthus snarled and lunged at Kynyr with an upsweep strike at the lycan's head. "No."

Kynyr leaped to the side, his sword snapping into an upright block. He sprang forward with a feint to Malthus' stomach and kicked him in the side of the knee hard.

Malthus' leg gave. He swung about on Kynyr as he dropped to one knee. Kynyr circled left. Malthus managed a

furious attack, the blades clanging together, as he tried to stop Kynyr from getting behind him before he could get to his feet again. Kynyr engaged Malthus' blade and trapped the edge on his crossguard, forcing Malthus' arms up. A swift kick below Malthus' sternum sent the kandoyarin sprawling. Kynyr brought his blade to rest against Malthus' chest over his heart.

Rheu's eyes saucered. "Shit!"

Kynyr snarled at Malthus, his lips drawn back from his teeth. "If this were real, you'd be dead."

"Asshole." Preece drew his left knife, balancing it for a throw as he shifted into his hybrid form.

Rocks showered Kynyr. He flinched and stepped back. All of the females and children were throwing rocks. The males stood laughing and pointing at him.

Rheu giggled and reached for a rock to throw. Preece toed the youth in the side and shook his head. Rheu dropped the rock.

Malthus rolled away from Kynyr with a chuckle. "If rocks were blades ... you'd be too."

Kynyr spun about shouting. "Stop it."

He threw down the wooden practice blade and sheltered his face. A rock caught him on the cheek, leaving a long cut. Rocks came from all sides, striking him in the head, chest, back, and stomach. He staggered toward the trees. "Hell's goat-sucking ... Stop!"

Malthus walked across the clearing as if nothing were happening.

"Malthus! Tell them to stop."

*The silver blade snapped from Preece's hand, thrown with such force and accuracy that it plunged to the quillons in Maguire's back. Preece smiled all the way to his eyes as he watched the guardsman collapse in the dirt.*

"Back so soon, Preece?" Odhran called out to him as Preece crossed the bridge onto Clan Red Wolf soil.

Preece glanced up, startled by Odhran's voice. He had been so lost in his thoughts, riding the drugs racing through his bloodstream, that his arrival at the bridge had not registered. "Money goes fast when you spend it at the Crimson Lady."

\* \* \* \*

The Three Candles Inn in Hell's Widow stood three blocks off Main Street on Wheelwright Road in the lycan section of town. Most of the various citizenry called it the 'ghetto,' and the term always bothered Kynyr because he saw it as a bad reflection on his race. The ghetto was the prettiest quarter in Hell's Widow. The buildings shared fences, but not walls as they did in the human sections. Every shop had a garden along the sides, flower boxes on the upper floor windows, planters overflowing on the balconies, and rooftop gardens. They rode into the yard, and the hostler, Jordi, appeared in the door of the livery stable.

Kynyr reined the horses in, set the break, and climbed down. He dug in his pouch, brought out a silver, and tossed it to Jordi. "Do a good job."

Jordi caught the coin and shoved it in his pocket. "Yessir. I will, sir."

The four myn entered the inn through a side door just off the kitchen. Amos Raggat's wife, Nainsi, walked to the door and waved at Kynyr. "Good to see you back."

Kynyr gave her a nod and a smile and kept on walking. They found Amos in the common room, attending to some other customers. Kynyr grinned at the fat lycan, who reminded him of an apple dumpling on legs.

"You'll be wanting rooms for the night?"

"One room. One of those Comfort Nesting rooms you got with two double beds."

Many unmarried lycans still practiced the old custom of Comfort Nesting, taking wolf forms and piling up together to sleep in a non-sexual manner.

"Comfort? Or watching your backs?"

"A bit of both."

"Cullen?"

"What do you think?"

Amos gestured for them to come into the keg room behind the bar. Casks were stacked two deep along three sides and a rectangular table with six chairs occupied the center of the room. He pointed at the chairs, fetched a bottle and glass from a shelf, and sat down. Ramsey moved to the door and leaned against the wall with his arms crossed loosely. Amos glanced from Ramsey to Kynyr. "You come in armed like that." Amos gestured at their swords. "Everyone will know you're here on Clan business."

"I decided that safety was more important than discretion this time." Kynyr watched Amos pour, lifted his glass, and sipped the whiskey. "Good stuff."

"I just laid in several cases of Tormuth Whiskey. Ever since that priest ... what was her name? Pandaira found the body ... folks have been laying bets as to how long it would be before Claw sent someone to look into it. I guess you're it."

"Pandeena, not Pandaira."

"Yeah her. That's the one. When Cullen didn't come back that first night, I had my suspicions. Then this cub, Cooley comes by with a note from Silkie saying Cullen was dead and Larkspur belonged to you." Amos knocked his whiskey down in a gulp and poured another. "Made me nervous as hell having that horse here, but I knew better than to try and get rid of it. Claw would have tacked my hide to the wall. Staining her black was my idea."

"We're going to the Crimson Lady to have a talk with Silkie."

"I'd talk to Ellie Remus also. Ever since Cullen died, she's had a lot of money to spend."

Eideard gave Kynyr an 'I told you so' glance. Kynyr shrugged at him.

Ramsey sauntered over and claimed his glass of whiskey. "If we don't come back from the Crimson Lady, let Claw know about it."

Amos turned from Ramsey to Kynyr. "I don't like getting involved with the Clan. I'm a city wolf; you know how most of the clan regards us."

Kynyr scratched at his sideburns, looked away, and then back. "Amos, you're involved just because we always stay here. If we don't come back and you don't send word, Claw

will have fifty soldiers pounding on your door even if brings the Sharani garrison down on him."

"Sounds like the old bastard. Okay, I'll do it."

"Anything else you want to tell us?"

"Nah. Just be careful."

"We will, Amos. Don't you worry about that."

\* \* \* \*

The Crimson Lady Brothel stood on Corbie Way, six blocks south of Main Street. The elegant old mansion, with its fluted columns and wide portico, had been built by the sa'necari family that established the town ten centuries ago to trade with and keep an eye upon the eastern lycan clans, such as Red Wolf and Silverpaw. The Sharani had wiped out the family twenty years ago, at which point the manor had been abandoned until Silkie bought it over a decade past.

Corby Way was a jewel in a dark hole. Any thing and everything illicit could be found on the streets around it: from prostitution to gambling to street drugs and opium dens. However, Corbie Way belonged to Silkie Faggini and she reigned over it like a queen—or at least, that was what Kynyr had always been told. He doubted that was true any longer, suspecting that Silkie had become a bird in a gilded cage as soon as the sa'necari moved into the neighborhood.

The Crimson Lady had thirty prostitutes in residence at all times, more or less since there was always some turnover, and new girls frequently showed up. A mon had to go as far south as Skeleton Creek or west as far as Dragonton and Torment Lake to find a larger whorehouse. Although most

people avoided discussing it, the Crimson Lady was the largest employer in Hell's Widow with a restaurant and a well-stocked bar on the premises.

The lycans had no outright nudity taboos, only situational ones. When they ran as wolves, the shift back to human or hybrid forms required a tolerance for the naked human form long enough to grab a robe or activate a charm of changing that produced the illusion of clothing. None of them paraded nude down the streets of their villages and towns.

No matter how often Kynyr had come to the Crimson Lady during the four years he had lived at Wolffgard, the provocative attire of the girls who earned their living on their backs caused his body to react in ways that the casual wolfskin nudity of his people did not. His bone hardened the moment he walked into the foyer with Finn, Ramsey, and Eideard at his back.

The greeters, two of the working girls, rose from a plush sofa wearing the sheerest of linen fabric through which the dark circles of their nipples could be seen and the thatch on their loins. The thin fabric served only to heighten the sense of titillating obscenity.

Cullen had once claimed that he had done one of them right there in the foyer with people passing around them. Cullen Blackwood had been a bone-happy little bastard, sticking it into every female that he could coax into opening her legs to him, talking incessantly about whores and horses as if those were the only things of importance that existed in the world. He had also been a staunch friend who had backed Kynyr in several confrontations. Standing there, in the foyer

of Cullen's favorite brothel, Kynyr found that he could not stop thinking about him.

"Kynyr Maguire!" One of the greeters strutted up to him, tilting her breasts in a manner that demanded to be squeezed. "Don't you remember me? Ellie? Ellie Remus."

*Ellie.* His stomach clenched and he lost his arousal. She had been Cullen's favorite. Kynyr had bedded her several times back when he still came regularly to the Crimson Lady. Her hair, as pale as fresh cream, hung loose to her waist. Kynyr stood five foot eleven, and Ellie's head came to the tip of his nose.

He stiffened as she brushed against him. "Cullen wanted to marry you."

The lycan whore flinched away from him. "Cullen? I haven't seen him in months."

"He's dead."

All the color fled from Ellie's face and she seemed to fold in on herself as she withdrew toward the hallway leading to the Main Hall, then broke, and ran. Kynyr watched her go, seeing signs of guilt in her excessive reaction. He wondered if Eideard's guess concerning Ellie's involvement could be right. There was no way that she could not have known that Cullen was dead. According to Amos, the entire lycan community of Hell's Widow had been talking of little else for over a month.

Erotic tapestries and paintings dominated the walls of the foyer to the Crimson Lady. A huge desk of polished dark wood stood guard at the far end with a matchstick of a clerk sitting there with an appointment book open in front of him. A stack



of other books rose like multicolored soldiers in a long, low wooden box to his left hand.

A long padded bench lay to the left hand of the desk with two young boys who worked as runners sitting there. Kynyr glanced at them as he strode up to the desk.

"I want to talk to Silkie."

"She's not taking customers." The clerk, who called himself Flavio Ricci, frowned at Kynyr.

"I'm not a customer. You go tell her Kynyr Maguire is here."

"I'm not supposed to..."

"Either you tell her, or my friends and I go looking for her."

"Guardsmen?" Flavio's eyes went to the sword riding at Kynyr's shoulder.

Kynyr could see where matters were headed. He decided to keep things as open and above board as seemed safe, so as not to be misunderstood. If the clerk wished to play push and shove games, then it seemed best to bring Claw's influence into play. "We're on a clan matter."

"Something important?"

"Rather."

A shrewd look entered Flavio's eyes. "Wouldn't have to do with the murder everyone has been talking about for months? Ever since that visiting priest found the body."

"Maybe."

Flavio gestured at one of the boys, who sprang from his seat in answer. The clerk whispered in his ear, and sent him

running. "Have a seat in the Main Hall. I'll have Silkie's answer in a moment."

Kynyr and his companions headed through the doorway to their right.

Flavio took a sheet of paper from the drawer, dipped his pen in the ink well, and scribbled a quick note. He blew on it to dry the ink, folded it three times, and waved it at the remaining boy. "Take this to Master Traxton at the Green Sheaf."

The boy put the note in his pouch and ran out.

\* \* \* \*

The office that the boy showed Kynyr to had a heavy door designed as much for defense as style, and Kynyr guessed it would take a lycan in hybrid form several whacks with a great axe to even begin to break it down. The boy opened the door, gestured for Kynyr to enter, and then closed it again when Kynyr passed.

The mon behind the desk looked to be in her early forties, Kynyr decided, although he sometimes found it difficult to judge the age of humans whose lifespans were so much shorter than lycans. Her coppery skin and black hair marked her as Waejontori and the aristocratic angles of her face retained the traces of a fading beauty. She wore her make-up tastefully done, rather than blatant like the other prostitutes; and the tight bodice of her dress thrust her ample breasts into a youthful illusion with the edge of the upper curve showing at the neck.

Silkie rose to greet Kynyr, extending her hand.

The folds of her skirt fell askew across the slight puffiness of her belly that seemed contradictory on her slender frame. Something about it niggled at Kynyr as he lifted Silkie's hand to his lips, and kissed it.

"I've never seen such manners from a lycan." Silkie gestured at a chair. "Did you come here about Cullen or Cooley?"

Kynyr settled into a chair. "Both."

"How is my son?" She flicked back a loose strand of hair. "I hated giving him up ... but if he'd remained with me..." Silkie heaved a sigh. "They would've killed him."

"I told him that. He was feeling abandoned."

Kynyr assessed Silkie for a moment. She could not have been young when she had Cooley. Her looks had held up well. Her puffy stomach drew his gaze again and, having grown up in a female dominated household, Kynyr realized what he was seeing: Silkie was pregnant—and early enough along that most would have failed to notice it.

"Tell him I love him. That I did it because I love him."

"I have. He's got Cullen written all over him."

"I know. Has anyone noticed?"

Kynyr shook his head, his eyes narrowing as a guarded edge entered his voice. "Not yet. So you're a Waejonan."

Silkie closed her eyes and ran a hand over her face. Her shoulders drooped. "I'm human. Do you know what the sa'necari-born do when they produce a freak like me?"

"I know very little about your people, beyond what they do to mine."

"My people? They're not my people. I ran away. I whored for my bread from the time I was twelve. I tell people I was fourteen, but that's a lie. To save face. Since you don't know, I'll tell you what they do with the human children that are born to them. They sacrifice them."

Kynyr's insides tightened. "Mortgiefan?"

"No. For the girl children it is called 'marrying Bellocar.' They dress her as if for a wedding. A divinator dressed as the god has sex with her. Then he puts a blade through her heart, opens her belly, and reads her entrails for omens. I'd rather be a whore than dead."

"I'd have to agree with that."

"I expected you sooner. Cullen's been dead for months."

"Someone shoved a blade in me."

"Oh, gods." Silkie tilted her head back and to the side, sucking in deep breaths in an effort to steady herself.

"Who killed him?"

Her eyes went distant, troubled, as she returned her gaze to Kynyr. "I loved Cullen. I never told him so, but I did. Otherwise I would never have borne Cooley. I've aborted before ... taken tansy. I wanted Cooley."

"Who killed his father?"

"Please be patient with me. I've had no one to talk to since that day. I'm certain they have spies in the Crimson Lady. I don't know who they are, but I know they're here."

"Okay." Kynyr licked his lips, crossed his arms, and settled back in his chair. "Tell it."

"One of them came and tried to buy the Crimson Lady. I refused. I didn't know he was sa'necari. Usually I can spot

them, but this one I couldn't. He blended in like a viper on a branch. Some how, he subverted one of my girls and she betrayed Cullen ... drugged him. He never had a chance."

"Shit." Kynyr sat forward in the chair, all his instincts rising to attention. "It was Ellie, wasn't it?"

"It was Ellie. She seemed genuinely shaken when we were forced to watch them kill Cullen. For a time, I thought she was as much as victim as I was. Since then, I've changed my mind about her. I think she was horrified—not because it was Cullen—but because she had never seen anyone tortured before."

"And you have?"

"Yes."

Silkie pulled a drawer out and laid it on the desk, and then she bent around and felt in the vacant shelf. A moment later, the madam produced an ornately carved box which she laid on the desk and returned the drawer to the shelf. A tap on the lid and a word of command opened it.

Kynyr gave a low whistle. "Mage locked."

"You know about these things?"

"My Gram's a mage."

"A lycan mage?"

"Yeah."

Silkie favored him with a brittle smile. "How rare. Are you?"

"No." Kynyr shook his head. "None of us inherited the gift. She's got twenty-six grandchildren and none of us have it."

"But you grew up around magic. I sense it on you."

"More or less." Kynyr caught himself before his hand could go to the amulet he wore against his skin. "Go on about Cullen."

"First you must see what's in the box. Not everything. Just one ... or two." Silkie took out an ivory round hanging from a long golden chain. "You know what this is?"

"Can I touch it?"

Silkie extended it to him.

Kynyr took the ivory, closed his fingers over it, and let his eyes go heavy-lidded. He sensed the energy in the stone. It left a metallic taste on his tongue and an itch in the back of his throat. "Modified memory stone. Gram calls them truth stones."

"Very good. I used this on Ellie one night while she slept. There are no coercions, no triggers, no sways, no arcane influences in her mind. She's clean. She betrayed Cullen for money and gifts."

"Shit. Shit. Shit."

A smile that contained a wealth of sorrow spread across Silkie's face. "Cullen used to say it that way. Always three times."

"I guess that's where I picked it up."

"They broke Cullen's arms and legs ... crushed his fingers and toes ... nailed him into a chair..." Silkie's smile tightened into a grimace as she rushed through the description to get it over with. "They shoved a silver blade into his belly, gave it a twist, and then locked us in with Cullen to watch him die."

"Did he suffer long?" Kynyr repressed a shiver at the thought of a belly wound. He doubted that even his Gram's gifts could mend one.

"Four days. It wasn't the belly wound that killed him. A mon in a serpent mask put a blade through his heart four days after they locked us in with him. They caught a second courier ... one who was more forthcoming than Cullen had been."

"The Butchering Serpent?"

"Yes. What's more ... I'm pregnant."

"Cullen?"

"The Serpent. He manipulated my body somehow." Tears burst from Silkie's eyes. "He filled—" Silkie made a choking sound, mastered herself, and forced the next words out.

"Filled my belly the same day he murdered the only mon I ever truly loved. Cullen wasn't even ... cold yet. The Serpent took me on the floor beside his dead body, triggered my ovaries and ... oh gahds."

Kynyr's brow furrowed, his eyes narrowed, and he glanced away, unable—for a moment—to look how the toughness he had always associated with Silkie seemed to have been leeched out of her. "You could lose it."

"They'd kill me if I did. They check me every week ... make certain that monster's abomination is growing. I'm at the edge of the change ... a lot of women die trying to ... birth one at my age."

"Who are they?"

"I've only seen one of their faces. They were masked. I don't know where they took me."

"Who is he?"

"If I tell you his name and you go after him, they'll know I told you. They'll kill me. Or worse."

"If you don't tell me his name now, I'll come back. And I'll keep coming back until you do."

"Get me out of here. Get me out of Hell's Widow and I'll tell you his name. I'm watched constantly. I can't seem to go anywhere that he doesn't know about it. He flaunts his knowledge to frighten me."

"I might know a way to get you out, but it's risky. I'll be back in three or four weeks. That's the usual pattern for Claw sending me here on errands."

"I'll be waiting."



## CHAPTER SIX

### BAD NEWS

Pandeena dismounted from her horse, a blunt faced yellow dun of sturdy Silverpaw breeding. She had a pack animal tied to a rope that connected it to her saddle, as did her companion, Caimbeul. They walked together toward the stout wooden bridge.

Seven lycan guards in gigantic wolf form emerged from the thick stand of fragrant white pine and cedars three spear lengths beyond the bridge where a heavy barrier of brush and briars offered them concealment.

Odhran, a slender lycan in his hybrid form, accompanied them, wearing a loose robe over trousers.

"Welcome back, Pandeena," Odhran said. "We've missed our priest."

"I've brought you a lawgiver, as I promised," she replied, thumbing at Caimbeul.

Odhran eyed the grizzled lycan walking beside her. "Who is he?"

A large smile of anticipation spread across Pandeena's features. "Caimbeul of Running Horse. He has come to serve Clan Red Wolf in their time of need."

All seven of the wolves changed to myn to greet Caimbeul as Odhran stared open-mouthed at the newcomer. He recovered quickly and rushed to greet the legendary lawgiver. "I'm honored to meet you. Honored."

Caimbeul gripped Odhran's hand and sniffed his fingers. "You'll do."

Odhran returned the gesture, and then glanced at Pandeena to explain what the lawgiver meant by that, but Pandeena just shrugged.

"Let's go see the chieftain, Caimbeul," Pandeena said. "You'll need to introduce yourself and establish your presence."

"Of course," Caimbeul responded. "I've not seen young Claw in decades."

Several of the bridge guards glanced away and repressed chuckles that emerged instead as snickers.

"Well, he's not young any more." Pandeena cast a disapproving eye in the direction of the guards and the snickering subsided.

Caimbeul shrugged. "None of us are."

Odhran goggled at the easy way their young priest handled the legend walking at her side.

They approached the tremendous manor house; three stories high and built of blue-veined yellow stone. Elaborate gardens surrounded the back and east side. A stand of oak thickets started across a cobblestoned walk from the gardens and spread across the road with a mixture of elms and hawthorn copses. A large, smooth boulder rested placidly beneath a spreading elm close to where the thickets began. High, dense hawthorn hedges enclosed the rear and easternmost side of the gardens with short, carefully manicured hedges dividing the rest into sections interrupted by ivy-covered arbors.

A large barn and stables swept out to the west side, with pasturage behind it divided by a combination of tall split rail fences and hawthorn hedgerows that rose from stone reinforced embankments. The simple practicality of water troughs and hitching posts in the courtyard contrasted sharply with elegance behind it.

Caimbeul had never been to Wolffgard before and had not been on Red Wolf soil since the Lycan Rebellion, when Waejontor annexed that swath of land now called the Hellblade Corridor and cursed—or consecrated depending on which side you were on—it with the blood of lycan princes from each of the Nine Great Clans.

Pandeena spied the woven arbor standing in the middle of the garden at the same time that Caimbeul did: a wedding arch. The bride and groom walked through it together in symbol of their joining. It would be left there until the bride became pregnant, and then taken down as a signal to the community that their mating had proved successful. A lycan bride's duty was to produce her first cub as soon as possible. The sooner an arbor went down, the more the male's reputation in the community increased.

"Who married?" Pandeena asked.

"Our princess. We were beginning to think she wouldn't ever stop lusting after that filthy sa'necari who abandoned her."

Pandeena smiled back at Odhran. "Who was the lucky wolf?"

"Not a wolf. But, at least he isn't sa'necari." Odhran's tone sounded a bit off, and Caimbeul wondered at that.

Pandeena tilted her head to the side. "Who?"

"Malthus Estrobian. He's a strong male. He'll have the princess swollen with a proper heir for old Claw in no time."

The breath caught sharply in Pandeena's lungs, tightening her chest, and she glanced at Caimbeul, who gave her a tiny nod. "I'm happy for her," Pandeena lied.

"A wedding is always a happy event," said Caimbeul. "I can't wait to congratulate them."

"The lawgiver from Sweet Fishes presided over it. He's gone back to his village now. I expect you'll want to visit all the villages," said Odhran.

"In time ... in time." Caimbeul pulled at his grizzled chin.

Odhran knocked on the manor's door and a nibari answered. The delicate brunette was hugely swollen in the last stages of pregnancy. Claw had acquired a young nibari stud last winter named Klaudi, and to test his fertility had bred three of his females to him as soon as they came into season. Nibari had a ninety day cycle, rather than the twenty-day cycles of human and lycan females, with a two week window of fertility. Rumor had it that Klaudi had been thoroughly exhausted by the time that all three of the females had caught.

"Hello, Isbeth." Odhran winked at her belly with a grin. "We're here to see your master. Pandeena has brought the new lawgiver."

Isbeth nodded to him, and ushered them into the great hall. A huge hearth at the far end dominated the room and there were four looms set out to the side of it. Clusters of furniture filled the chamber. Six people sat in the hall.

Merissa's mother Aisha, and her paternal aunts, Fianait and Searlait, sat at their looms near the hearth working the delicate kazamerie wool that their family was famous for. Aisha had gone grey with age and very little of her youthful brown coloring remained in her heavy hair. Fianait, although younger than her brother Claw by a handful of years, had thinning white hair that she wore in a bun. Searlait, the youngest, had a single white streak through her fading chestnut hair. Merissa had been a change of life child for Claw and Aisha; looking at Searlait, Pandeena could tell that Merissa had gotten her coloring from Claw's side of the family.

Merissa sat in a chair near the looms with Malthus beside her, his hand possessively on her arm. She had the flushed look of a newlywed when the mating began in earnest. Pandeena noted that Merissa had set aside her usual attire—human styles that showed her body off—and wore instead the traditional lycan wraparound robe that could be easily opened to facilitate their shape changing. However, Pandeena suspected that shape changing was not the reason Merissa wore it, since it also made it easier for Malthus to get her clothes off. Pandeena had no doubt that Malthus would get a child on her very quickly—if he was fertile. A lycan child would inherit the valley, since Merissa's bastard son Darmyk had been born sa'necari.

If Malthus were the Butchering Serpent, as Pandeena suspected, then he was sa'necari and they were rarely fertile at the age that this mon appeared to be. Yet, when Pandeena had touched him briefly several weeks ago, she had detected

nothing to suggest he was anything more than true human. If he was not the Serpent, then he was allied with that mysterious, faceless sa'necari who had systematically murdered hundreds of her race. Of that, at least, Pandeena was certain. Some kind of link did exist. She hoped that Caimbeul would uncover it.

She shook herself free of her thoughts before she stared too long at Malthus and gave her suspicions away.

"Congratulations on your marriage, Merissa and Malthus."

"Thank you," Merissa responded politely. She regarded Caimbeul closely. "For some reason, I expected you to look like my Uncle Brock, Aunt Fianait's twin brother."

Fianait chuckled. "Brock was such a handsome young wolf."

"Have I disappointed you?" Caimbeul asked.

Merissa blushed. "No, not at all."

Claw sat near the hearth in a large chair with a stand beside it. A small pipe rack with six pipes and a jar of tobacco rested in the center of the stand. He put his pipe aside, and rose when they entered. "Pandeena, who have you brought us?"

"Our new lawgiver. Caimbeul of Running Horse is now Caimbeul of Wolffgard."

Caimbeul and Claw looked to be the same age, both grizzled and gray, yet still hardy. The three old lycans at their looms gave Caimbeul polite dips of their shoulders and went on about their weaving.

Claw looked astounded at his good fortune, and the bright smile that spread across his grizzled features took ten years off his age. "I met you when I was sixteen."

Padruig Caimbeul shook his head. "You have it wrong. We met several times during the Rebellion. We spoke last on the Day of Despair ... just after they dumped Tarrant's body at your feet."

"You're right." The shadow of remembered nightmares gathered in Claw's dark cobalt eyes. "Memory has become a labyrinth. Bright and clear before the Rebellion and lost in shades of gray until a few years after it."

Claw shoved the dark mood aside and gestured for everyone to sit with a wave of his hand. "Isbeth, get us some mead and some wine. As I recall, you'd rather have red wine, than mead, Pandeena?"

Malthus frowned slightly, and then lowered his head with a glance to the side at Merissa. "Let's go upstairs. There are things we should be doing."

Merissa flushed, placed her hand on his, and rose with him. "You'll excuse us?"

Pandeena nodded and settled into a chair beside Caimbeul. "Certainly. And, yes, Claw, you remembered my preferences."

Isbeth headed for the kitchens at a gesture from the chieftain.

"Yah. My great grandbitch was fireborn," Caimbeul said. "I figure I've still another five or six centuries left in me."

"And we'll be glad to have them." Claw took up his pipe, scraped it out and refreshed the tobacco, then struck a lucifer and lit it. He had barely taken four puffs when he set it aside,

sagging back in his chair with a grimace, kneading his left arm.

Pandeena frowned. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Claw growled, in an annoyed tone, adding grudgingly, "I've been getting these pains."

"Have you spoken to the healer?" Pandeena leaned forward in her seat, regarding Claw for a long time. "The valley depends upon you. You must take care of your health."

"I don't need her. They go away." He made a dismissive gesture and started smoking again.

"How long have you been having them?"

"A week or two. It's nothing. It'll pass."

"Is Kynyr around?"

Claw shook his head. "He's gone to Hell's Widow for a few days. Errands. He'll be back tomorrow."

"I'm looking forward to meeting this Kynyr Maguire," said Caimbeul. "I have heard a lot about him." *I'm going to break his bloody nose and then see if Pandeena can still call him handsome.*

Pandeena flushed. "Come on. There's things you need to see. People to meet."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa climbed the stairs to the suite she shared with Malthus. Her parents had moved her into a larger suite of rooms, now that she shared her bed with a husband. Malthus walked with his arm around her, whispering eroticisms into her ear and kissing her neck.



As they went down the hallway, Darmyk ran up to her. He pulled at her skirts. Kenly, his maned hunting cat stalked along behind him, his ever-present companion, and guardian that at one hundred and fifty pounds no one in their right minds would mess with. Darmyk was nearly three years old, but like most children of lycan blood, he was as coordinated as a human child of seven and precocious in his speech.

"Mama, I want to show you something."

She looked into his eager face, and felt a twinge of unhappiness. Since marrying, Merissa had very little time for her son, except when Malthus went into the village for something, over to help with the refugees at the sanctuary camp, ran errands in Hell's Widow, or off to hunt in order to supply the camp with meat. The rest of the time he spent opening her legs at every opportunity. It was not that Malthus was unskillful—no, he was very good in bed—just that there was so much of it, and so little of anything else.

"I can't right now, Darmyk. Please go play with Ros and Lyrri."

Darmyk looked intensely disappointed. "All right, mama." He walked off with downcast eyes.

She watched the little boy go and it tugged at her heart that she couldn't play with him as much as she used to.

"He'll be okay." Malthus slipped his arm around her waist and nibbled at her ear. "He needs to learn to do without you more. Especially once we give him a little brother or sister."

"I know."

Merissa had confided her feelings to her mother about Malthus' sexual appetites, and been advised that it would

pass, that it was natural at this point in a marriage, and that she should give him what he wished like a proper wife. Her father had been blunt and to the point as soon as they exchanged their vows, telling her and Malthus, "Get me an heir. One that will be acceptable to the clans."

The clans rarely allowed themselves to be governed by a bitch; it nearly always had to be a dog wolf. Neither she nor Darmyk would be acceptable to the elders should something happen to her father.

They entered their chambers, and Malthus locked the door. "I don't want the children walking in on us." He pulled his tunic off and tossed it onto a chair.

Merissa opened her robe and let it fall to the floor, revealing her body.

Malthus sat in the chair, drew his boots off, and untied his pants, shoved them down and stepped out of them. He stood, and Merissa could see that he was already aroused. Malthus took her hand, and led her into their bedroom.

She lay down and he climbed onto the bed beside her, running his hands over her. His fingers circled her stomach. "When it swells, how will you feel?"

"Happy," Merissa answered. "I want your child, Malthus."

He kissed her forehead, her mouth deeply, and then each of her nipples. "Each day, I dream of seeing my son sucking on those lovely breasts."

"But we might have a daughter...."

"Whatever, I'll love it." He probed between her legs with his long fingers, played with the knob of her clit. "I want a large family, many children. Some of both. Humans are not

as long-lived as your kind. I'm thirty-six. I haven't a lot of time to make them."

"I know.... "Merissa said, and then gave a long moan of pleasure as he aroused her body, making her impatient to have him inside her.

Malthus licked his way along her and tormented her nipples with his teeth. His cock bobbed tantalizingly against her clit. "You'll always look more beautiful to me when you're swollen with my children, than when you're slender without them."

"Seed me," Merissa moaned again. "Seed me."

Malthus reached down, guiding his knob inside her warm, wet sheath, and began to thrust.

\* \* \* \*

Odhran followed Pandeena and Caimbeul as they left the manor after their conversation with Claw. "Shall I fetch your horses?"

"Nah, I'd rather walk." Caimbeul scratched at the stubble on his chin.

"Our lawgiver was teaching the morning classes at the camp," Odhran said. "And then our priest, that was old Tempest, taught the second half, religious stuff and so forth."

"Tempest Anstey?" Caimbeul asked.

"Why, yes, Master Caimbeul."

"Caimbeul's my name, not Master Caimbeul," he said, then added with a wink, "Though to listen to her..." he thumbed at Pandeena, "you'd think it was Old Lecher."

Odhran looked uncomfortable as Pandeena grumbled under her breath and waved him away. "I'll show Caimbeul around. Do you have a lawgiver house?"

"Yes. But it hasn't been lived in since Nevin left. Nikko stayed with his mother."

"Nikko's the dead one?" Caimbeul asked.

"Yes," replied Odhran. "It will probably take a day or two for the house to be made livable." He scratched at the back of his head. "Actually ... Cahira Sinclair used the house for a bit after Kynyr was wounded."

"Caimbeul can stay with me until its ready," Pandeena told him.

"As you wish." Odhran hurried off.

Pandeena turned to Caimbeul, with her hands on her hips, and a stern expression. "Next time you're wondering why I divorced you, think about how what you just said sounded."

"Then it wasn't just the boy?" Caimbeul asked, sobering.

She looked away from him in discomfort. "No. Losing him was just the last cut of the knife."

"I'm sorry."

"Yes, I'm sure you are," she said, going suddenly brusque. "Come on. If I had thought that anyone else was up to the task at hand, I would never have asked you."

The rustic village contained mostly the traditional longhouses of variegated stone, with newer frame houses sprinkled through, painted in the forest colors beloved of the lycans. A single main street traversed the village, which was almost large enough to be called a small town, with numerous residential side streets. They passed a large assortment of

shops and establishments, including two eateries, a couple of taverns, a dry goods, a tanner's, and toward the end a blacksmith and a harness-maker. The majority of lycans were no more than semi-literate, hence the graphics on the signs over every place of business.

A block from a large tavern, the Difficult Horse, Caimbeul saw a sign that made him stop in his tracks and stare.

#### BAROUCHA'S POTIONS

"Tell me that's not Baroucha Seaver..."

Pandeena glanced at the sign. "I'm afraid it is."

"Shit. Let's go. I'll want to think about this."

Where human villages tended to be dirty, with streets of dead brown, packed down earth, the lycan main street was thick with trees of all kinds and grass growing in a wide swath down the middle. Trees shaded the fronts and sides of every building, with tree rounds and benches for sitting scattered through with comfortable abandon. The lycans were fond of sitting outside and gabbing with whoever happened by. People stopped to nod at them and acknowledge their priest Pandeena in a mix of politeness and curiosity as they sized up the newcomer walking beside her.

She introduced Caimbeul as they walked, knowing that word of his arrival would sweep the village, and everyone would know by nightfall.

At the northeast end of the village, the road divided into a Y, with the left hand road leading to the refugee camp and the right hand continuing on to the next village. They took the left branch and walked along the shady path until they reached the camp.

The sanctuary proved to be mostly a cluster of woven cone-shaped sheelings that required dropping to your knees before crawling inside. Smoke rose from ventilation holes in the roofs. A long house built of stone stood at the center with a chimney in the middle of its roof. Several smaller buildings of wood stood half finished. A short distance away three more stone houses were being raised as permanent shelters, as well as others that were still being constructed by the refugees with hired-help and volunteers from among the lycans. Most of the workers were teenagers, yet they moved to their tasks capably and without hesitation. All lycans were reared to a trade as soon as they could walk, and at fourteen they took on an adult's work as they were then considered to be of legal age. All of the land had once belonged to Beth Ryan, a lycan who had donated and supervised most of it until her death early in the summer, and was now run by Clodagh Demarist under the auspices of the Willodarian Shrine.

Several young myn paused in their work to regard them. Caimbeul's glance went to the spellcords on a female's wrists. "How many sa'necari did you say are here?"

"Five. All women with children. I'm told they allowed themselves to be corded in order to have sanctuary here for the children. Two of them have lycan children."

"Interesting. Lots of cubs here," Caimbeul observed.

"Well, yes, but then that's the reason they're all here. Women with children can't run as far and as fast as males, so they needed a place to go to ground as close to their home territories as they could. Although the one from farthest away

is Diantha. She tried for the Sharani border, because she was close on it. But the Battle of Phligethyn forced her to turn back. Two of her three children perished before she reached here."

Pandeena pointed to a slender dark mon, who stared dully across the yard. "Only her twelve year old daughter survived. They had both been beaten and raped during their flight here. I'm told the daughter was given tansy shortly after arriving to abort what those assholes shoved inside her."

Caimbeul stared at his hands for a time. "There's no way to keep our people out of the war."

"It isn't a question of keeping our people out of it. The assholes have brought it to us," Pandeena growled. "You were further from it when you were at Running Horse in Silverpaw. Red Wolf is on the leading edge of it. This time, don't let me down."

Caimbeul lifted her eyes to hers. "I won't, Pandeena. I swear it."

"Come on and I'll introduce you to Clodagh." A note of impatience entered Pandeena's voice. "She runs the camp under my supervision."

Pandeena walked up to the central and largest longhouse, where she knocked on the door. An attractive bitch, pretty in a round-faced way, answered.

"Welcome back, Pandeena," Clodagh said in a pleasant voice. She looked Caimbeul up and down speculatively. "Is this our new lawgiver?"

Pandeena wondered why the way Clodagh sized up Caimbeul sent a shiver over her. "This is Padruig Caimbeul, previously of Running Horse."

Clodagh's eyes widened at the name. "Oh, my, you did bring us a good one. Please, come in." She stepped back from the door. "Let me get you something to drink. I have tea, mead, whiskey."

Caimbeul started to step in and Pandeena's hand on his arm stopped him. "No, thanks. I still need to finish showing Caimbeul around. Perhaps later."

"Come any time, Lawgiver. Day or night," Clodagh said.

As Pandeena led Caimbeul back toward the corner of the compound where the shrine lay, he asked her, "Is Clodagh a slut?"

"She certainly is not," Pandeena snarled, and then went silent, thinking furiously. "What made you ask that?"

Caimbeul pulled at his whiskery chin. "She's not my type. But I think she was flashing her tail at me."

Pandeena's brow furrowed. "The previous bitch who ran this place was a known slut of enormous proportions. She was killed a few months ago. I simply cannot imagine how Claw could have placed another one like that in charge."

"I may be wrong sometimes about dogs, but I'm rarely wrong about bitches."

The Shrine to Willodarus proved to be a simple building, a square box with two wings, located in a shady yard with grass and flowering hedges. "My apartment is on the right wing. The left is the schoolroom," Pandeena explained as they walked around the building.



She took Caimbeul to the back and pointed out an area directly behind the shrine, marked off as a graveyard by a dotting of white stones. A wooden arch framed the entrance with the likeness of the Willodarian bear atop it. She walked through and indicated one of the headstones of the two graves. Caimbeul's glance, however, went to the one beside it because someone had left grave offerings on it: a tiny wooden horse and a wealth of flowers. He knelt and lifted a pine wreath covering the name.

CULLEN DIOMEDES BLACKWOOD. 1017-1077 AQ.

Caimbeul rubbed his hand over his eyes. "Gods, he was still young."

"Look at the other one. You knew Tempest Anstey, didn't you?"

Caimbeul frowned slightly, again pulling at his chin. "What of it?"

"That's his grave."

Caimbeul's eyes looked as if he were searching for something inside himself, as he asked. "What did he die of?"

"A heart attack—they say."

"That's the one thing he couldn't die of," Caimbeul growled under his breath.

"So you know about Teakamon linking his heart to a tree."

Caimbeul's eyes slewed around and he snapped low, "Shut up. To your left. We're being followed."

Pandeena dropped to her knees and began cleaning off Tempest's headstone. From the corner of her eyes, she saw Shalto and Oswyl watching them. She knew that the two

sixteen-year-olds spent an uncommon amount of time with Malthus. "Let's go inside. I imagine you're thirsty."

"I definitely am," Caimbeul said in a loud voice. "You wouldn't happen to have some Dragonsbreath with you? Best whiskey there is."

"I hate it. But I may have something you'll like just as much." She led Caimbeul in through the back door, made a left turn in the corridor that wrapped around the back of the shrine and opened a door to her left. She nodded at the one on her right and further down. "That one opens into the shrine itself."

Pandeena's apartment contained three cozy rooms, a sitting room, kitchen, and bedroom. Caimbeul poked his nose into the bedroom and whistled at the huge bed that dwarfed the rest of the furniture. "There's room for more than two in that one."

"Don't get any ideas," Pandeena admonished.

Caimbeul popped back out and trailed her into the sitting room. "You have any idea why they were following us?"

"Suspicious only. I battered them severely some weeks back for trying to climb my back in a very insistent fashion."

"Same old Pandeena." He grinned. "Dogs their age are always trying to climb every bitch in sight. They'll get over it."

"Yes, well. I have a lot more to be concerned about besides two youngsters with nutsacks for brains. So, has any of this put questions in your mind?" She picked a chair that sat against the wall furthest from the door, and next to a sofa.

"Lots. To start with, what's this about a proper heir?" Caimbeul asked, as he settled on her sofa.

"I told you about that." Pandeena brought him a beer and sat in a chair across from him.

"Remind me."

"Merissa has a bastard child by a sa'necari lover."

"Right. That's why Claw built the camp. I remember now. It's a shame his sons were executed. I told old Romney Silverpaw that nothing good would come from rebelling."

"Don't bring Tarrant and Logan up to Claw again. You saw how it still hurts him to think about them. Claw loved his sons. I think that's why he's so drawn to Kynyr. It's startling how much he looks like Tarrant."

"So that's why you're so eager to get into bed with him!" Caimbeul took a swig from his glass. "Tarrant turned you down. That must have stung."

"Tarrant was genuinely in love with Bridget Silverpaw. That's why he turned me down. I can't fault that." Pandeena lowered her head. "I saw them rite him. There was nothing I could do. They had consecrated the ground. I couldn't get close."

"I know. I saw you there."

Pandeena's head snapped up. "I didn't see you."

"I didn't want you to." A tiny smug twist touched the left corner of his mouth.

"But..."

Caimbeul leaned forward in his chair, propped his feet up on the edge of another chair, and pulled his boots off to rub

at his toes. "Just because I never demonstrated any talents, does not mean I don't have them."

"Shut up, Caimbeul. I suspect that the boy, Darmyk, might be the last descendant of Dawnhand.... Claw and his household are very close-mouthed about the boy's father, so I can't be certain. And his mother's just married a mon I believe is connected to the Butchering Serpent."

"It's possible he has some small mage gift, perhaps? Nothing that you've said, none of the evidence you've offered really proves that he's not the Serpent." Caimbeul sat back with a heavy settling of his weight, his arms draping the chair arms and his hands closing on the ends. The chair creaked. Caimbeul's huge size translated into a three hundred pound wolf whenever he changed.

Pandeena could not remain in her chair long, stood and walked to her window. She opened the shutters and stared into the garden. Two shapes moved in the trees at the edge. "Keep your voice, down, Caimbeul. They're still out there."

"This is not good," he growled. Hair sprouted and lengthened along his arms, spreading over his face in black and gray.

She faced him again, speaking quietly. "Malthus felt perfectly human to my touch, and if he had not tried to Read me, I would have assumed there was nothing out of the ordinary about him."

"I will want to speak with the young lawgiver I am replacing here."

"They think he's dead, Caimbeul." Pandeena paced back and forth with her glass of wine in hand. "I want to leave it

that way. If the Serpent learned that he had failed to kill Nikko, he'd find a way to strike at him."

"They'll hear nothing about him from me."

"Caimbeul, we've been over this before. Sometimes I think you only remember the parts you want to remember, and forget the rest. Nikko can't even remember his own name. Although.... "Pandeena paused for a moment, thinking. "He did remember the dog's name when I took little Moss to my mother's. That was the first thing he said. Moss. And then he looked at me for confirmation that the dog's name was Moss."

"Trauma. I won't do anything to upset him." Caimbeul scratched his hairy arm. "Pandeena, will you please stop pacing, you're beginning to get on my poor old nerves. I'm not a young wolf anymore."

Pandeena frowned, and sat down. "His heart is damaged. Upsetting him could kill him."

Caimbeul ran a hand through his shaggy hair, and made a despairing sound. "I understand that. I said I wouldn't upset him. I simply want to see him, to smell him."

Pandeena pursed her lips and blew through them. "We'll do that once you're settled in."

Caimbeul's tongue slid from the side of his half extended muzzle and hung there like a hungry dog. "I'd rather settle in here."

"None of that, you old lecher," Pandeena said. "We're not married any longer."

Caimbeul heaved a great sigh, his muzzle shrinking back into his face. "You do know how to hurt an old mon. I'll make you a trade. I find the proof that this Malthus is the Serpent,

or link him to the Serpent so that you can find the whoreson, and you give me a night in your bed like old times." He gave her a wicked grin full of little boy naughtiness.

"Caimbeul...."

"One night. Just one." His voice turned mournful.

Pandeena's lips parted and she raked her teeth over her lower lip. "One night."

Caimbeul's face brightened with eagerness. "The night of my choice."

"Caimbeul! You're going to try and catch me in season, aren't you?"

The old wolf shrugged, with a guilty smile.

Pandeena's eyes widened into an affronted stare. "Our son is dead. Making another isn't going to change how I feel about you. We're just friends. If I did decide on another child ... I'd get him from Kynyr."

*Kynyr.* The old wolf dropped his eyes. "You want my help, those are my terms."

"You should do it for the good of our people. Or vengeance for Cullen."

"I'm feeling selfish in my old age." Caimbeul crossed his arms and sat back. "Besides, you can't blame an old mon for trying, can you?"

"One night. Of your choosing. Don't ask again and keep your hands to yourself until then. And, you're sleeping on the sofa until they get the house ready."

"Another thing, Pandeena. The Butchering Serpent is one of the most dangerous sa'necari in existence. Therefore, I want you to mark me."

"Are you sure? You refused when we were married."

"One of our lives might depend on our being psychically linked through your Godmark."

She considered that. "Open your robe."

Caimbeul opened his robe completely, which caused Pandeena to look at his crotch.

"Well, you needn't have showed me that, I have no intention of climbing onto it." She placed her palm on his chest, and accepted his allegiance. Her touch seared his flesh, but he did not wince from it. When she drew back her hand, the wolf's head brand of the Second Mother was burned over his heart.

\* \* \* \*

Kandaishee hurried back inside her house when she saw Pandeena and the newcomer arrive. That grizzled old wolf had to be the new lawgiver. Caution had become a watchword now that she could no longer conceal her pregnancy. She dared not let either of them see her, because they would demand to know who had gotten the child on her. Clodagh could still go about freely because she was not showing yet.

The house had a dirt floor and two half walls at either end with curtains over the windows and doors leading into the central chamber, like all the traditional lycan longhouses. Kandaishee's bedroom lay on the left hand side, and her little son Gilzean's on the other. She went into her bedroom and curled up on her bed, crying. She felt the little jerks as Malthus' child moved in her belly. Her pregnancy was the furthest along of all of them. The spellcords on her wrists

itched, but she feared to touch them lest she set off the deadly seals. Malthus had some method of concealing his nature beyond anything Kandaishree had ever heard of, or else he would be corded like her four sa'necari companions. Since the rebellion began, the lycans would not allow uncorded adult sa'necari in their valley.

Even had she not been corded, Kandaishree doubted that she could have fought him off the day he raped her and shoved his child into her womb: the Butchering Serpent was simply too powerful.

The child inside her moved again. Kandaishree put her hand on her belly, running her fingers across herself. She had surrendered to Malthus' arcane intrusions, rather than risk having her mind ripped open and forcibly altered, because of her small son who would have suffered had her mind been too damaged to care for him.

Those memories made her rise from her bed. Kandaishree left her room and went to his. Gilzean lay curled on his side, a little stuffed wolf clutched in his hands. She had made the toy for him herself when they first came to the valley. The five-year-old already looked so much like his dead father that it brought tears to her eyes.

She straightened the blanket around him. The nights lately had turned cool with the first hint of autumn. Feeling the shivering hands of memories tightening through her, Kandaishree returned to the main room of the longhouse.

"Why couldn't they have left us alone?" Kandaishree muttered angrily. "Why? They stick their damned bones into



lycan bitches often enough. What was wrong with my marrying Domhnall?"

She knew the answer. Sa'necari condemned interracial marriages involving their women. It was all about the bloody gene, their males wanting to hold onto every female who could produce a sa'necari child. The sa'necari gene was recessive. When a sa'necari female married a lycan, the children usually were all lycan as Gilzean was. When sa'necari bred with sa'necari, the result was always sa'necari. Oh, there were rare exceptions of a human child resulting and Kandaishiee had heard of a few. She had known a couple in the priesthood who were rearing their freakishly human offspring as a sacrifice to Bellocar.

A vision flashed through her mind of the farmhouse on fire, and Domhnall shouting for her to flee. She saw him outlined against the burning house in his hybrid form, struggling to fight off the six sa'necari males who had attacked their home. Kandaishiee felt Gilzean's fingers clutching her tightly as she fled into the forest. Domhnall's death scream echoed through her mind as clearly as it had that night, ululating through the darkness.

The heaviness of the flashback brought Kandaishiee sobbing to her knees. Beth had sheltered her in this camp. She and Gilzean had been the first of the refugees. The Chieftain Claw had insisted that she be corded and sealed from her powers. So long as Gilzean was safe, what did that matter?

"Domhnall, if your spirit can hear me, I didn't want this child." Kandaishiee pressed her hands to her belly. "I swore I would never bear another man's child. Forgive me."

Then she thought of Beth, her only real friend among the lycans. The lycans had found pieces of her near Iudris Meadows, but not enough for the Readers to say how she died. Kandaishiee believed that Malthus or one of his allies had rited her.

His coercions, sways, and triggers were now too deeply and well set in her psyche and body for her to ever be free again. Malthus owned her, as he did all of the other females in camp, including Clodagh, the camp supervisor.

With his spells lodged in all their brains, he had turned it into a discreet brothel for his favorites among the lycan youth who flocked to emulate him. At last count there were nine pregnancies in the camp. They had no access to contraception, nor to Baroucha—Malthus did not want them going to a healer—and the lycans seemed not to care what happened to them. Except Clodagh, but Malthus' seed was growing in that belly also. Four of them were pregnant by Malthus, herself, Clodagh, and two other sa'necari, Laleyna and Oliffyia. Of them, only Clodagh was not conspicuously swollen yet.

Malthus was as freakishly fertile as he was powerful.

Kandaishiee wept for all of them.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus sat his desk smacking the two letters Preece had brought him against his palm. The missive from Heironim had had only two lines written in it:

*"The bastard prince goes home in a sack. Count on it."*

The second letter had come from Flavio and was a list of Preece's expenses. The only item that Malthus had raised as eyebrow at was the pound of White Fire. He wondered whether Preece intended to use it or sell it or both. It was worth at least fifty Double Gryphons—more money than Preece could earn in ten years doing manual labor. If Preece had an appetite for street drugs, Malthus had plenty to offer him and that would put Preece more firmly under his thumb.

He slipped from the manor at midnight while the household slept and walked in the garden as he did each night. Living at the manor made him privy to more information, but it had its drawbacks. There were too many people to observe him there, and he needed to be accessible at some point each day in case messages came from Lord Brandrahoon.

He shivered at Brandrahoon's name. Malthus had not known that Lord Daemon, who had hired him to infiltrate the Red Wolf community and command the conquest of it, had actually been the ancient vampire—brother to Waejonan, founder of the kingdom and the sa'necari cult from which their race had risen. Brandrahoon had regained his lands and estates that had been seized four thousand years ago by Waejonan, who had exiled him. Queen Tomyrilen, who led the Waejontori rebellion against the Sharani occupying their land,

rode with him at her right hand as her first advisor above all others.

*Brandrahoon ... Merissa is mine. I'll not yield her up to you.*

Malthus paced into the trees, letting the deepest shadows envelop him. He should never have written that letter to Lord Daemon, telling him about Merissa and Darmyk. Hoon wanted them because they belonged to the last descendant of his brother Isranon Dawnhand. Malthus could almost consider giving Hoon the boy, but not Merissa. He loved Merissa; she had borne a sa'necari child. Usually the lycan gene was dominant over the sa'necari gene, and a child of such couplings was born lycan. But Merissa—No, Merissa was his. If she could bear one sa'necari child, then she would likely conceive mostly sa'necari children. He would keep her belly filled continuously, deliciously. They would have a huge family, one that boasted of his unusual virility.

He ought to write his mother, and tell her how well the potions and arcanes she had treated him with since adolescence had slowed the progressive infertility of his kind—if anything her efforts had enhanced his fertility beyond anything his kind ever possessed. His mother Sidera Tyrins, currently employed as a toxicologist and bio-alchemist by Lord Hoon, had been quietly and systematically setting up laboratories in the dungeons of Carrion Crevasse, Malthus' hidden manor, in preparation for his return there. The Tyrins, a branch clan of the Romilay family, had specialized in poisons and venoms for generations, including the discovery and refining of Devil's Silver and experiments with genetically

altered and enhanced breeds of vipers using a mutagenic arcane they had developed.

The flapping of wings in the trees above him drew Malthus from his thoughts. He tensed when he saw the bat, wondering if Sergei had returned. The Lemyari messenger had raped Malthus' seven-year-old niece Ros, and left her for dead with a small quantity of his venom in her blood stream. Malthus had managed to pull Ros out of the paralysis, but the child remained weakened. It enraged him, and he raised power to rip the undead soul out of the messenger.

He opened his necromantic senses and threw a low level scan into the trees. The bat up there was definitely undead and vampiric. "Come down, Sergei, and I'll rip your throat out."

The bat fluttered out of his reach to another cluster of trees, and Malthus followed, with a hand on his sword. In the shadows stood a slender mon, her lips curved into a sneer.

"Having trouble with Sergei?" Zinzi asked, taking the messenger's pouch from her shoulder.

Malthus frowned, stepping cautiously toward the slender vampire. "I heard you were dead."

She laughed low. "As dead as undeath."

"In Minnoras...."

"Oh that." Zinzi extended the pouch to him. "That was someone else's head that Hoon found on his gatepost. I sent in a changeling first. I suspected that traitors had been killing my birds, so you can understand my caution."

Malthus took the pouch from Zinzi, removed the letters, and handed the pouch back. "I can indeed."

Hoon, like many of the older Lemyari, favored turning mages. Malthus wondered why he had never suspected before that Zinzi might have been a mage, but then Lemyari mages tended to hide or disguise their talents, favoring discretion over display.

"Having trouble with Sergei?" Zinzi repeated.

"He raped my niece. If he comes back, I'll kill him."

Zinzi smirked. "I'm sure you'll try. But I'll ask Hoon to keep him away."

"I would appreciate that." Malthus turned on his heel, walking toward the manor.

"My payment," Zinzi called after him.

Malthus paused and looked at her. "I don't owe you. I haven't anything going back."

After weeks of no messages, Malthus had not come prepared to pay. However, there was one payment that was always accepted. He pushed up his sleeve and extended his wrist. "A couple of sips, and no more."

Zinzi grinned then, and came to him. Her fangs descended from their sheaths with the distinctive tiny hook at the bottom that marked her as vampire. Malthus did not flinch when she took his wrist and plunged her fangs into him, although he had not fed anyone in years, except Ros when he called her back from the edge of death with his own blood. Zinzi took two strong pulls, hauling as much of his blood as she could in the sips allotted to her.

"That's enough," Malthus growled.

Zinzi withdrew, swiping her tongue over the wound to close it. "Delicious. You aren't bad looking. You could come to my bed anytime."

"I don't sleep with vampires." Malthus turned and left her.

"Rude bastard," Zinzi muttered, and changed.

Malthus walked back to the house, drawing his cloak more tightly around his shoulders. The first cool nights of autumn had arrived with the waning of summer. He let himself into the manor through a servants' door in the rear, passing with swift silence through the corridors, past the sleeping chambers of the nibari and those of the lycan servants. The guardsmyn, who might have been more alert to his passage, slept in another wing above the salle. Claw had expanded the manor over the last ten years, almost as if he were gathering his household for war.

*Well, he didn't do it fast enough. The war is upon him and he's not ready or strong enough to stop us.*

Malthus thought back to the increasing frequency that he saw Claw grimace and knead his left arm. The chieftain was ill. *Stupid wolf, I'm killing you and you don't know it.*

He crossed the broad landing of the second floor staircase, heading for the study Claw had given over to him at his request. He opened the door and locked it behind him, easing down the bar that would prevent it being opened even if the mon on the other side had a key. Removing it would give him time to hide whatever he did not wish to be seen. He knelt at the fireplace and got a blaze going there, before settling at his oaken desk with the letters that Zinzi had brought him.

Three letters. One from Hoon, one from his mother, and one from Egidius. Zinzi must have been making a circuit, picking up payments at each stop.

He slid his fingers over the seal on his mother's letter. Sidera always put a mage seal beneath the wax one. If anyone except the one for whom it was intended tried to open the letter, the missive would destroy itself. Sidera had a distinctive and powerful mage gift, which was why her father had chosen her—out of all the offspring his harem had given him—to be the principal inheritor of his estates. Women could not, under normal circumstances, inherit properties, titles, and great estates in Waejontor, but every rule was made to be broken—with the right influence.

Malthus popped the letter open with the proper word of command.

*Malthus,*

*I'm so very happy to learn of your marriage. I can't wait to meet her. From the description of your successes with your concubines, I expect that I'll have a legitimate grandchild soon as well.*

The special chambers have been readied at Carrion Crevasse for your concubines, and I have sent talented people there to see them through their laying in times. Also, the dungeons and laboratories are finished to your specifications, stocked, and prepared. The first captives you sent have been confined per your instructions. Your cousin Tarentia has moved into quarters there to serve as your seneschal and primary assistant as she did at the previous manor.



Not a word of this place has escaped to either Hoon or the queen. I am grateful concerning your warnings. I would never have dreamed that Lord Daemon was Hoon, much less Brandrahoon.

Your loving mother,  
*Sidera Tyrins*

Malthus smiled in satisfaction after finishing the letter. His mother never let him down. But that was to be expected, considering that he was her only child. Sidera had been Lord Feodras' toxicologist and bio-alchemist, designing poisons and antidotes on his behalf. Lord Feodras had made her his mistress against her will, got Malthus on her, and forbidden her other lovers. With her sylvan blood, she was still young enough for other children, but so far had not chosen to make any since Feodras' death. Malthus wondered what it would feel like to have a sibling from his mother. All of his paternal siblings were dead. Two of them at his own hands. The only brother he had experienced any closeness to had been Troyes. But Isranon had killed Troyes over Merissa, and then gotten his bastard child on her. The little bastard would have to die—and his father also.

He folded the letter, took it to the fireplace, and shoved it into the flames. Once he had it burning well, Malthus returned to the desk and considered the final two. The one from Lord Hoon made him nervous, and he left it for last.

*Malthus,*

*When you are ready, Laetus has his units positioned to take the village of Three Stones. That's one of the four we picked out for first strikes. Give the word and we'll take it. As*

*per our agreement, forty percent of the women and children captured will be sent on to Carrion Crevasse to await your pleasures, the other ten percent of your share will be held in the caves to meet your needs. Four from that last steading we burned are still available for use, although I admit I'm getting very hungry for a rite.*

*Egidius*

Malthus carried that letter to the fire and burned it also.

*A rite. Yes, a rite would be so nice. I haven't felt a mon die beneath me in weeks.* Malthus' cock grew hard at the thought of slipping it into a dying body. That made him think of Merissa. He put Hoon's unread letter into a secret compartment at the bottom of his quiver of arrows, and then headed for the bedroom to wake his wife.

A pleasant thought occurred to him and Malthus smiled in anticipation. *This time tomorrow, Kynyr Maguire will be dead.*

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### PLANS

The meeting room lay deep in the bowels of the renovated grain warehouse known as the Green Sheaf. It had no windows. Wards against scrying had been drawn upon all four walls, floor, the ceiling, and the door. A long table that could easily seat forty or more occupied the far end, while sofas, low tables, and chairs filled the area nearest the door.

Nine sa'necari held their seats along the sides of the great table, watching their leader, Heironim Traxton sitting at their head. Heironim privately called himself "Lord Traxton" although he had no right to the name. The sa'necari, one of Malthus' two right hand myn, had been born Heironim Calderone, one of the last Lord Traxton's many bastards. He and Malthus Tyrins—who currently called himself Malthus Estrobian—rited Lord Traxton when they were mere boys in retaliation for his refusal to legitimize Heironim. Traxton had died screaming with his bastard offspring's cock up his ass and a knife in his ribs.

Nine green glass jars clustered to Traxton's right hand and a rolled map lay to his left. Heironim tapped an impatient rhythm with his forefinger on a folded note.

"I called you here, because Kynyr Maguire is in town. Flavio sent word. He's looking into the death of Cullen Blackwood."

"We've been expecting that." Dorjan Calendri sat at Heironim's right hand in the place of honor as senior among Heironim's lieutenants. Average height and slight of build, his amaranthine eyes were the deepest of those present, a sign that he had tasted the fruits of death in the rites more often than the others. They showed their true eyes at these meetings, casting aside the cloaking spells that allowed them to pass for human.

A sa'necari on the far side of the table curled his left hand up as if it held something and made a hammering motion with his right. "That runt screamed like a pig when I drove the spikes through him."

Dorjan caught a glimmer of irritation in Heironim's eyes and glanced at his companion. "Shut up, Nelek."

Nelek shrugged his left shoulder and said nothing.

They had all known each other since childhood, some since birth. Sidera Tyrins and her household had raised, trained, and educated them. They were all sa'necari-born; either bastards or orphans—a few of them were both—of sa'necari nobility who had perished at the hands of the Sharani occupiers. Sidera called them the Band of Friends, and her iron lessons had given them surprising cohesion and discipline compared to other sa'necari groups. They had bonded and fused into a formidable force despite their small numbers—or perhaps because of it—Dorjan was never certain.

"The note's from Flavio?"

Heironim glanced at Dorjan with a curt nod. "This isn't a personal vendetta. Maguire called it 'clan business.' Claw has made his first move and sent Maguire to ask questions."

"He won't learn anything. The whores are all bought in one way or another."

"It isn't enough." Heironim crumpled the note and threw it at the wall. "The high and mighty Kynyr Maguire ... have any of you gotten a look at him?"

Nelek waved his hand at Heironim, and received permission to speak. "We got a look at all four of them. Three blonds and a red-head. I'm not certain which is him. It's the same four stopped me from taking Cullen the first time."

"Which one put the knife in your belly?" Heironim leaned forward on his elbows.

Dorjan watched Nelek's face. Sa'necari were hard to kill, especially after they had gotten fifteen or twenty rites under their belts. The wound had been easily healed with a bottle of fresh blood; however, Nelek had been the butt of the joke ever since.

"The one with the whitish hair."

"Finn MacIver." Dorjan supplied the name from a sheet of descriptions that Malthus had given them.

"Tomorrow you can return the favor, Nelek." Heironim favored Dorjan with a smile, suggesting that he might yet be forgiven for his own failure: Dorjan had failed to stop that cub of Silkie's from escaping. But who would have dreamed the cub could ride like that or that the horse Cooley had been up on could have been so fast and have had such tremendous stamina. Dorjan's mount had dropped dead trying to overtake the cub. The horse Cooley had ridden that day had been black, not sorrel, and yet the more that Dorjan thought on it,

the more convinced he had become that the horse must have been Cullen Blackwood's celebrated Larkspur.

"Kill them all, Dorjan. Let them get close to home ... close enough to feel safe and then do it. Tie their bodies to their horses and send them across the bridge as a warning to Claw Redhand. It's time the lycans knew the road is ours."

"We get too close and we'll have the bridge guards on us."

Heironim handed the jars around. "Just shoot them and fade before the guard can catch you."

Dorjan noted the runes—actually sa'necari ideograms—on the nine green glass jars: Sidera had given the toxin a rating of nine, putting it a shade above curare and just below Lemyari venom on the Romilay Scale. The jars had broad mouths and cork stoppers, perfect for popping open and dipping arrowheads into the contents; although some of them preferred to pour a measure in a bowl and apply it to their weapons with a brush.

"Something new?" Dorjan inquired, breaking the long silence.

"Very. Still Devil's Silver based, but the neurotoxic elements are stronger ... work faster. Dorjan, you're in charge. Don't disappoint me."

"I won't." Dorjan took the jar and opened the lid, stared into the contents. The acrid odor that arose from the jar burned his nostrils. The smell would fade when the toxin dried, but it made unpleasant working.

"I want four units of five with an officer each. Black shaft arrows are to be issued to only two of the archers in each group."

"Why so few?" Nelek scowled. "Why not all of them?"

Dorjan wished that Nelek would not argue. It only irritated Heironim. The black shaft arrows were poisoned, while the red shafted ones were not. Dorjan had no idea why Malthus wanted both in play at once, but he knew better than to argue with him. So did Heironim.

"Just do as you're told." Heironim unrolled the map and pinned it flat with paperweights. He tapped a spot on the map and they all leaned in to see it better. "The road dips and bends here, just before it comes in view of the bridge. Heavy tree cover. The wagon can't move fast and he won't be able to turn it. Enfilade them from the sides. Block their retreat front and rear."

\* \* \* \*

Eideard and Ramsey were waiting in their room when Kynyr arrived with Finn trailing him. Kynyr could see the questions in their eyes as he sat down on the bed and started pulling his boots off. The room felt cramped, rather than cozy, with two large beds squeezed into it, a table that seated four, a couple of dressers and a sofa.

Silkie's words had disturbed him enough that Kynyr kept running them through his mind. He had an easy way to get Silkie out, but it involved first bringing his Gram to Hell's Widow; and he doubted that Todd would agree to risk her that way.

"How'd it go?" Eideard sat in a chair near the window, watching Kynyr.

Ramsey sat in the middle of the bed he would be sharing with Eideard, bare to the waist. Rust-colored hair bristled on his muscular chest. "I asked for Ellie, but she was booked until midnight ... knew Kynyr didn't want us there that late."

Kynyr tossed his boots into a corner near the bed, peeled his tunic off, and started unlacing his mail. Ramsey whistled at the blue-violet shimmer of Kynyr's armor. "When did you get that? It's kendaryl isn't it?"

"Early solstice gift from Gram. Made in Iradrim."

"That don't come cheap." Eideard went closer to get a good look at it. He tapped a small square of metal in the form of a shield near the shoulder. "Maker's mark. Eitri Nevskaya. Shit, Kynyr, he's the best out there. Your gram must have money."

Kynyr pushed Eideard away. "She's translating a book for their High Priest. Cahira got this in trade ... more or less."

"Ellie..." Eideard moved to a chair.

"I told you to stay away from her." Kynyr paused with his fingers on the lacings to scowl at all of them. "If anyone speaks to her, it will be me."

Finn scanned their faces and tongued his lips. "You see the way she fled when Kynyr brought up Cullen?"

They all nodded.

"Looked suspicious to me. What'd Silkie say?"

Kynyr exhaled heavily, and let his gaze drift across their faces. "Remember your promises, friends. Silkie says Ellie drugged Cullen. He was taken without a fight."

Eideard's face went livid with rage and he unleashed a string of curses. "Someone should gut that bitch."



The room went silent and everyone stared at Eideard until Kynyr spoke. "I know Cullen saved your life, but you were always the one who hated to see him coming."

"A mon changes, Kynyr. Down there on my knees, hurting so bad I could barely move ... knowing the next blow would kill me ... and Cullen shoves a blade into the asshole's kidneys. I've never seen a mon look so welcome."

"There's that," Finn interjected. "What are we going to do about Ellie?"

"We are not going to do anything. I am." Kynyr shrugged out of the padded linen shirt he wore beneath his armor. The amulet that Silkie had sensed—an azure crystal with a runed band on it—hung from a golden chain around his neck.

Eideard's teeth peeled back from his teeth, hair sprouting along his arms. "I say kill her before she sends another of us to the butchers ... if she hasn't already."

"Move too fast, Eideard, and we'll put our feet in a badger hole. We need to talk to Todd before we do anything."

Finn's gaze traced the scar on Kynyr's chest from the long silver blade that had gone completely through him. Kynyr noticed the glance and grabbed a robe. He had never felt awkward before without his clothes on, but the way people stared at the scar bothered him. There were very few things that could scar a lycan, among them silver—especially runed silver—and kendaryl blades.

Eideard's face began to grow a snout as he snarled at Kynyr. "You're being too cautious."

Kynyr met Eideard's gaze, calm and steady. "I'm your commander as well as your friend, Eideard, and we'll do things my way."

"Fuck your way!" Eideard spun about and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm taking a walk."

"You shouldn't go alone."

"Fuck that!" Eideard ran out before anyone could stop him.

Finn grabbed his shirt and started to pull it over his head.

"Let him go," said Kynyr, a frown of irritation marring his handsome features. "And hope he walks it off without getting into trouble."

"Kynyr..."

"No. Finn, he'd probably take a swing at you. Then you'd have to whip his ass and I'd have to order him flogged. None of us want that."

Ramsey stretched out on the bed and then popped back up. "Kynyr's right. Give him some space. I'm going down and see about getting us a bottle of whiskey."

Finn pulled his shirt on and headed for the door. "I'll go with you and see what Nainsi's got cooked. I'm hungry again."

"You're always hungry." Kynyr grinned at him as the mood faded.

"I'm still a growing cub."

"Well, growing cub, bring me something back to eat also."

"You'll tell us the rest of it, Kynyr?"

"Yeah. But I suggest eating first. You won't feel like it afterward."

Ramsey paused at the door beside Finn and turned back to glance at Kynyr. "That bad?"

"Worse."

\* \* \* \*

Eideard prowled the back streets, struggling with himself, trapped between his promise to Kynyr; and his unspoken vow of vengeance for Cullen. He could not put his finger upon the point when he had first begun to suspect that Ellie had played a role in Cullen's death; only that he had had a gut instinct about it long before they rode off to Hell's Widow. His anger pulsed hot and then cold and then hot again. He passed an abandoned house on Skull Road, turned back, and stood staring at it.

In an effort to distract himself, Eideard climbed the steps onto the porch of the house and peered through a window, wondering what had happened to the people there. His sharp lycan eyes made out the edges of the furniture. Whoever had once lived here must have departed suddenly, leaving with only the clothes on their backs because nothing looked out of order. Eideard found the door unlocked and stepped inside.

Only the thick layer of dust laying over everything and the odor of mold gave signs of the long absence of the inhabitants. He wandered into the kitchen and spied a pot on the wood stove. The contents of the pot had turned into a dry green dust that made his nose wrinkle.

Eideard made an idle search of the bedrooms. Children's toys lay in disarray upon the floor of the closest bedroom as if they had been whisked away on very little notice. The bed in the adults' room lay undisturbed, the comforters still smooth. He put his face to the spreads and sniffed them. The scents had faded to almost nothing, yet what traces he could catch suggested the people who had lived here had been humans. The bed had huge sturdy posts and a canopy.

A wisp of imagination stretched Ellie Remus on that bed, her wrists and ankles bound to the posts. He thought of how he could make her scream as Cullen must have. The silver spikes had still been lodged in Cullen's shoulder and hip bones when Pandeena brought the courier's remains home. The lycan customs held that friends or family prepared a body for burial. Cullen had had no surviving family; therefore his friends had prepared his remains: Kynyr, Eideard, Ramsey, and Finn. Seeing all of Cullen's broken bones had bothered him as much as the spikes. It sickened him to think about it, and yet he could not stop thinking and remembering both what he had seen and what he had heard concerning Cullen's death. The only comfort, slight as it was, lay in Pandeena's assurance that Cullen had not been rited, that his soul had gone home to the Mother.

"Wergeld is owed," Eideard muttered, recalling Kynyr's admonitions to stay away from Ellie. "You've no right to keep me from getting vengeance for Cullen and wergild for Cooley."

Eideard made his decision, walked two blocks up to Corbie Way, and four blocks west to the Crimson Lady. Lights

gleamed in all the windows. The brothel was the only place still awake and busy at that midnight hour. He stared at the doors, picturing the suffering that Cullen must have gone through before he died, and little Cooley without a father. The Sinclairs were good to the cub, but it wasn't the same. Cullen had taught his son to ride; Eideard could see the similarities in the way they rode, now that Kynyr had revealed the facts of the matter to him. He wondered how he had missed it before.

Customers passed him, coming, and going, none of them making eye contact. Eideard sucked in a breath and entered the Crimson Lady. The two greeters in the foyer stood talking to other customers. Their filmy dresses left too little to the imagination, and the lycan's body reacted despite the fact that his taste did not run to dark females.

The scrawny clerk still sat at the desk, meticulously dressed in black and crimson silk, his copper-skin glistened, and a thick layer of kohl lined his large eyes. Flavio wore his long black hair in oiled braids that matched the current Waejontori fashion, and was so conspicuously coshorach that it made Eideard's skin crawl. He had no problem with most men who preferred men, so long as they kept their hands and suggestions away from him. Flavio, however, always had some lewd comment to make whenever Eideard showed up. He wondered if the clerk did the same to the other wolves, and resolved to ask his friends if they had been subjected to it also, or if Flavio simply singled him out for attention. If Flavio had been lycan, Eideard would have called him out, and either beaten him bloody or put a knife in him. As it was,

the wolf had to take a strong hold on himself to deal with Flavio, since he had to go through the clerk to reach Ellie.

Eideard went to the desk.

Flavio grinned at him. "Back for more?" He winked at Eideard. "You know what they say about lycan dogs?"

"I don't want to hear it."

Flavio's grin widened, as if he enjoyed his bit of play. "That your appetites and stamina is second only to the sa'necari ... and that you have the biggest cocks of all."

The hair rose on Eideard's neck. After tonight, he would not dare to return to the Crimson Lady, and he yielded to a fey urge. "I'm here for the bitches—not the dogs. One more remark from you and I'm going to break your bloody neck."

Flavio winced and went business-like. "Anyone in particular?"

"Ellie Remus. I was told she'd be available after midnight."

"You're in luck. Ellie is free. However, her prices have gone up."

Eideard reached in his pouch and brought out two gold nobles, four month's pay that he had managed to save up for this trip to Hell's Widow, and slid it across the desk at the clerk. If Kynyr had not been picking up the tab for their drinks, most of that would have already been spent. "That enough?"

"Certainly. Shall I have someone show you upstairs?"

"I know the way."

Eideard walked through the brothel, outwardly calm and easy, inwardly a spinning top of turmoil. He had arrived without a plan, but he had begun to formulate one since

leaving the derelict house. The wolf rapped twice on the door, pushed it open, and walked inside. Ellie Remus stood near the window, gazing out, and turned at the sound of his arrival.

"Hello, Eideard. I haven't seen you in a while."

"I've been busy." His gaze roved her fragile body, seeing how Cullen could have fallen for her so hard. All of his friends, including Kynyr, had been with her at least once. Ellie was popular with all the lycans, one of only four working at the Crimson Lady as whores, and it had not surprised Eideard that her prices had gone up.

She wore a filmy robe with a loosely-tied sash. The front gaped enough for Eideard to see the edges of her dark rose-colored nipples. Ellie tugged the sash and the robe fell open, revealing everything that so delighted the male eye. She sashayed up to him, pressed her body against his, and stroked his bone. "My, you're so big and hard."

Eideard closed his eyes, sucking air in long deep draws. His arm shot out, crushing her to him. "Make a sound, and I'll kill you."

"What have I done?"

Her eyes went wide, so like a frightened doe's that it shook Eideard. He clutched at his resolve to steady himself to the task. "You know what you did."

"This is about Cullen isn't it? Whatever Silkie told you, it's a lie."

"I haven't spoken to Silkie. Kynyr did."

"But..."

"Claw sent us."

All the strength seemed to drain out of her; all the fight—what little she possessed to begin with—vanished, replaced by a helpless resignation. "I told them he would."

Eideard resisted asking the obvious question, wanting to get her out of the brothel first. He guided Ellie to a chair and sat her down. He took spellcords from his pouch and a gag.

"What are you doing, Eideard?" Ellie asked in a tiny voice thick with fear.

"Depends. You call out for help and I'll have a blade in your belly before they get here. It's an ugly way to die."

"I know." Ellie shuddered, but did not resist as Eideard spellcorded her wrists to prevent her shape changing, bound her hands behind her back, and shoved a gag in her mouth.

He went through her belongings. Several items of clothing must have cost more than a year's pay for a guardsmon like himself. It sharpened his belief that Ellie was being well-paid for more than just betraying Cullen. He spotted her jewelry box on the dresser and opened it. The wealth in gems and precious metals took his breath away. "What are you still doing here if you've got all that?"

Eideard dipped his hand into the treasures and started shoving it all into his pouches. This would provide for Cooley well. Toward the bottom he found two rings that made his stomach clench: Cullen's rings. "Damnit all, I was right."

Eideard shifted to his hybrid form, threw Ellie over his shoulder, and went to the window with her. He poked his head out and looked at the roof of the veranda that circled the brothel, gauging whether it would hold his weight.



As he climbed onto the roof, Eideard scanned the yard. Ellie's window faced the rear gardens and there was no one about on this side of the Crimson Lady at midnight. He edged along it and when he reached the end, he jumped to the ground and ran into the darkness with her. Half a block from the brothel, he slipped into an alley and kept off the streets until he reached the abandoned house on Skull Road.

He carried her into the bedroom, and threw her down on the bed. Untying her hands, he left her wrists spellcorded and fastened them to the posts. Eideard did the same with her ankles, and only after he had her securely bound did he take the gag out.

Ellie whimpered and Eideard could see the tears glistening on her cheeks in the moonlight.

Eideard pulled a chair up and sat down beside the bed. "How much did they pay you to drug Cullen?"

"I didn't..." Ellie flinched at the rage in Eideard's eyes a moment before he backhanded her across the face.

"How much gold does a mon's life cost? You knew they were going to kill him."

"I didn't know. They said they wanted to talk to him."

"Bullshit." Eideard hit her again, splitting her upper lip. "Lie to me again and I'll cut you open. You're not stupid, Ellie. You stole Cullen's rings. You wouldn't have done that unless you knew he wasn't coming back."

"Damn you, Eideard!" Ellie's face crimsoned into a mask of anger. "Damn you! You think I liked opening my legs to that little bastard? I hated it when that undersized freak climbed onto me." She spat, landing a glob on Eideard's cheek.

Eideard wiped his cheek off and smashed her in the nose, breaking it. "Don't call him that!"

"That's what Cullen was! A goddamned freak. Yes, I knew they were going to kill him. I told them put the blade in his belly. Give him the Weems' Cure, I told them. Satisfied?"

The sheer hatred in Ellie's voice sent hair sprouting along Eideard's arms. "He was a good wolf."

"How can you say that? You didn't like him any better than I did. You told me so yourself."

Eideard flinched, guilt and shame flooding his face. "I learned different. Who killed him?"

"They'll kill me."

"I'll kill you." Eideard pulled his knife and pricked her belly.

Ellie released a long shriek, followed by broken sobbing. "Heironim Traxton."

"Who's that?" Eideard dragged the knife along her thigh, splitting the skin.

She flinched and writhed as Eideard cut her again. "Owns the Green Sheaf."

"Tell me how they killed him? About the spikes."

"They nailed him into a chair."

The encouragement of Eideard's blade brought the full description of the sordid affair from Ellie. It confirmed everything that Kynyr had told them. His face grew flush with rage.

Eideard unfastened his pants just enough to get his engorged bone out, without removing any of his clothing, not wishing to contend with unlacing his armor. "I paid for one last ride, whore, and I'm going to get it."

"They'll kill you, Eideard. They'll kill you for what you've done."

"Maybe." Eideard climbed onto the bed and settled between her legs. "Cullen loved you ... told me he wanted to marry you."

"I'm sorry, Eideard." Her tone softened, became pleading, filled with helpless femininity. "I'm sorry. Please believe me."

A haunted look entered Eideard's eyes. "Did he scream when they stuck him in the belly? Or was he too far gone already?"

Ellie whimpered and tears rolled from her eyes. "Please, don't."

He shoved his cock into her. Terror had left her vagina dry as a bone, but Eideard did not care. He hurt her, thrusting as hard and fierce as possible. "Did he scream?"

"Yes. Yes, he screamed. Oh, gahds, Eideard. Please stop."

Eideard pumped his way to a climax that did nothing to alleviate his rage. He pushed off her when he finished, and removed his tunic. Eideard tossed his tunic onto the floor, and drew his knives. It would be easier to wipe the blood off his chain than get it out of his tunic.

"Let me go, Eideard. Please let me go. I'm sorry. I'm very sorry about Cullen."

"Cooley's an orphan because of your treachery, whore."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." Her pleading broke off in a scream as Eideard plunged his knife into her belly with a yank to the side.

Eideard climbed off the bed, leaving the blade inside her. "Now you know how he felt."

"You bastard! Bastard!"

"You deserved it."

"Oh gahds ... gahds it hurts." Ellie writhed in pain, tears flowing harder over her face.

Eideard regarded her, his lips twisted in distaste. Part of him wanted to leave her there, let her die slowly. Caution demanded that he finish her. He had to get back to the inn before Kynyr sent the others looking for him.

He jerked his blade from her body, grabbed her nipple, and pulled her breast to the side to give him easy access to her heart. Eideard drove the blade into her and raked it around, ripping the organ. Blood spurted on him. Ellie shuddered and went still, her eyes staring sightlessly at the canopy of the bed.

Eideard pulled his knife, cleaned it on the bedspread, and used a corner of it to wipe his chain. He backed away from her, shaking so hard that it took him several tries to get his blade into the sheath. The enormity of what he had done caught up to him. He had never killed a bitch before ... and never killed except in self-defense. Regardless of what Ellie had done, this had been murder. Plain and simple.

He fumbled with his tunic, struggled into it, and fled out the back door into the alley behind the house. Disoriented and dizzy, swept up in a physical reaction worse than any he had ever had before to killing, Eideard found himself staggering and stumbling by the time he reached the yard of the Three Candles Inn.

Taking several deep breathes to steady himself, Eideard slipped in through the kitchen door and forced a steadiness

into his stride that he did not feel. He reached the rented room, got undressed and slipped into bed with Ramsey.

\* \* \* \*

Dorjan's four units began slipping out of Hell's Widow at midnight. They would reach the rendezvous point by dawn and move into position from there.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### WAYS OF RAGE

Caimbeul threw the blanket off and sat up. His back ached from sleeping wrong. One night on Pandeena's sofa, enduring her litanies about Kynyr Maguire, had convinced Caimbeul that the sooner he moved into the Lawgiver House the better. He had begun to fantasize about slamming his fist into Kynyr's face as soon as they were introduced. Time away from Pandeena would, he hoped, allow his temper to cool down before Maguire got back from Hell's Widow. Taking an—apparently—undeserved swing at someone as popular in the village as Kynyr Maguire would not help his reputation any.

He straightened his clothes as he stood up and crossed the room to dig in the cabinet where he had seen Pandeena put that bottle of whiskey last night. Jerking the door open, Caimbeul ran his gaze across stacks of plates, glasses, cups and saucers, but found no bottles of anything that resembled liquor.

"Damnit. She hid it." Annoyance fired his blood and he stomped out of the apartment into the little garden, rubbing at the sleep lingering in his eyes. He walked around the side of the shrine.

The broad dirt path into the center of the Sanctuary opened up before Caimbeul. Lycans who worked at the camp had already begun to arrive. He knew that some of them lived there, having been given food and shelter in addition to their

meager wages. Fifteen young males were scattered across the open ground in little groups, some of them sitting under the trees, others standing. They all took note of him, sizing him up at a glance. The air felt pregnant with threats and suspicion.

Caimbeul's mind raced through all the possibilities for the attitude he perceived among them. It could have come from the fact that he was the new lawgiver. It might have been because he spent the night with Pandeena, although he doubted that they would credit it if he told them that he had slept on the sofa and not in her bed. Young wolves tended to think with their genitals instead of their brains at times—especially those from the lower classes and all of those present were definitely members of the bottom rung of lycan society. The third possibility bothered him the most and he could not really say why: they knew he was the wolf who had been known as Fireborn Law in his youth. That double-edged sword called reputation cut two ways. Caimbeul knew that he needed to feel out people in the village, learn things, and become acquainted with the citizens—discover the nature of the dichotomy he sensed at work in Wolffgard. He had to learn before he acted, pick his battlefields before he fought whatever he might find himself up against. There was still too much that Pandeena had not told him—or perhaps it was simply that she was not aware of it.

Things began to click into place in Caimbeul's mind. There were matters that Pandeena, priest and yuwenghau, would never be able to learn; places in their society where she could

not walk; places where she was not admitted. No wonder that she needed him.

Five young lycans lounged on tree rounds beneath a chestnut tree. Their attitude and body language made him think of city wolves. He recognized two of them as Shalto and Oswyl, the pair that had been observing them in the cemetery the other day.

A tall, lanky fellow, wearing drawstring pants that looked ready to slide off his hips, made a circle with thumb and forefinger and began poking the middle finger of his opposite hand through the circle in a suggestive manner after indicating Caimbeul with a thrust of his chin.

Shalto brayed with laughter. "She must like gray dick."

A small, scrawny youth with reddish brown hair bent over his folded arms, his body shaking with loud cackles. "Must be the wrinkles. Tickles her flesh hole."

Caimbeul decided not to address the comment, made a mental note of their faces, and started down the path that would take him to the village. He had just reached the road when he spotted Odhran riding up, leading the gelding that Pandeena had bought him.

"Lawgiver!" Odhran drew rein in front of him. "I suppose you'd rather ride. Your packhorse has been unloaded at the Lawgiver House."

Caimbeul took the reins of his mount from Odhran and climbed into the saddle. "Lead on."

"If there's anything you need, just ask."

"A better horse."

"Do you want to do that right now?"



Caimbeul licked his lips. "Nah. Do that tomorrow. Show me the Lawgiver House. I'm moving in today whether it's clean or not. I don't want another night on her sofa."

Odhran chuckled at the acerbic tone in Caimbeul's voice. "So the house first?"

They rode along the broad dirt road, close to the side to take advantage of shade thrown by the clusters of oaks and maples.

"Inns? Taverns? Places where folks get together?"

"We have two inns and five taverns. When they took the last census ... that was about ten years ago ... the population of Wolffgard, if you add in the manor, was over two thousand. And most of them were under the age of sixty. Can you imagine having that many young people? We should really be calling ourselves a town, but the elders keep rejecting those suggestions."

Caimbeul narrowed one eye and closed the other. "I've seen bigger."

"Lycan?"

"Yeah. So tell me about these taverns. Give me the names in order of popularity."

"Well, the Difficult Horse is the biggest ... and the most popular." Odhran scratched his ear and thought for a moment. "I guess the Striped Dog would be next. The Dog and the Partridge. The Hunt. The Sheep's Clothing."

They reached the Lawgiver House without incident. Caimbeul dismounted and stood in the yard, staring at it and scratching his head while Odhran gave him the history of the

place. He only listened with half an ear, but figured that he had gotten all the important parts.

The Lawgiver House was an eccentric pastiche of various styles of human architecture designed by Maldwyn Softpaws, Nikko's father, with too much interference from Claw Redhand. As a result it stood four stories high with a basement equally divided into store rooms and dungeons. It had balconies, parapets, gargoyles, towers and dormer windows, as well as other architectural nightmares that made Caimbeul wince just to look at it. He could see why Nikko had preferred to live with his mother.

Rivalling the manor for size, it had taken ten years to complete. Rumor had it that Claw had built this house as a way of relieving the sense of emptiness that had plagued him after the deaths of his sons, turning it into an obsessive hobby and Maldwyn's artistic bane.

Caimbeul dug his fingers into the inner corners of his eyes as Odhran imparted that last bit of information to him. He had never had more than passing contact with Logan, the younger of Claw's twin sons; but he had known Tarrant well.

Odhran led Caimbeul inside and gave him the keys to the various doors.

The short, broad foyer led into a sitting room to the right hand and a hallway directly ahead. Nibari bustled about, cleaning and dusting.

Odhran gestured at them. "Claw sent them to get the place in order."

"Are there any servants attached to this monstrosity?"

"Not since Nevin Scarface left. However, I'm certain that Claw would be willing to give you some."

"I'll think about it." Caimbeul spied his packs piled on a table in the sitting room. "I'm not used to having company." He sauntered over and sat down on a sofa, propping his feet on the table beside his packs. "You!" He gestured at one of the nibari, a shapely brunette. "Get me two glasses."

Caimbeul thumbed at the sofa where he sat. "Sit down." He leaned forward and snagged one of his packs onto his lap, taking out a bottle of Dragonsbreath. The nibari returned with the glasses and he ran his eyes over her body as he poured whiskey for Odhran and himself. Nibari, the genetically altered humans, were the most docile and compliant of creatures. The best thing about them, to Caimbeul's mind, was that having sex with a nibari slave was not considered a stain upon a lycan's reputation among the clans. It had been decades since Caimbeul had made the bottle his only companion. He studied her. "What's your name?"

"Dulcinea, if it pleases you, Master."

"Are you in season?"

"No, sir."

"You'll warm my bed tonight?"

She favored him with a sweet smile. "As you wish."

Odhran gave Caimbeul a long, sidewise glance.

"I ain't had any in thirty years, I'm entitled to it," Caimbeul growled.

Odhran lowered his head and chuckled. "I guess so."

Caimbeul handed Odhran a glass of whiskey and took a swallow from his own. "Maybe I'll see about buying some nibari of my own."

"They're expensive."

"I can afford them." Caimbeul took another drink, contemplating the luxuries he had not had in far too long, and which were now his again. "I want to ask you some questions, Odhran."

"Ask."

"Tell me about this Kynyr Maguire to start with. What does he look like?"

"Tarrant Redhand. That's what everyone says. I wouldn't know myself. He'd been dead nigh on sixty years before I was born."

Caimbeul scratched behind his ear in an attempt to hide his irritation. The more people that said Kynyr looked like Tarrant; the more tempted Caimbeul became to hit first and ask questions later the moment someone introduced them.

\* \* \* \*

Sunlight lanced through the windows, glinting on Kynyr's golden hair as he sat on the edge of his bed, pulling on his boots. Ramsey and Finn had already carried their gear down to the stable and were getting their horses saddled and the team hitched to the wagon. Eideard lingered, staring at a knothole in the wall with a pensive air that made Kynyr wonder if his friend was trying to muster the courage for words.

Kynyr glanced at Eideard time and again. "Something you want to tell me?"

"What would you say, if I told you..." Eideard's voice dribbled off to a coarse whisper and he lowered his head until his chin nearly rested on his chest. He swallowed and his eyes searched the floor. "If I told you I ... know who killed Cullen?"

"I'd ask how you got the information." Kynyr finished with his boots, stood up and walked over to stand in front of Eideard while he buckled his blades on.

"What if I didn't want to tell you that?"

"Then I wouldn't trust the information. Where were you last night? I waited up past midnight."

"Walking."

"So, you were just walking around and someone on the street decided to whisper the name in your ear? Not bloody likely. Where did you go? Who did you talk to?"

"Walking! I was just walking." Eideard's face flushed and he clasped his hands together. "Just walking."

"You went to see Ellie, didn't you?"

"No!" Eideard jumped to his feet and headed for the door. He paused with his hand on the knob. "I didn't go anywhere near Ellie last night."

"If I find out otherwise, there'll be hell to pay ... and it won't come from me. It will come from Claw."

Emotion flickered across Eideard's face and vanished before Kynyr could decipher it.

"What did you do?"

"Nothing! I went for a walk. That's it."

"Get your gear together we're going home."

Eideard plunged through the door as if a demon had him by the tail. Kynyr exhaled heavily, his brow furrowing. Something was bothering Eideard. Kynyr had half a mind to drop by the Crimson Lady, but doubted that anyone would be up this early and he did not want to spend another day in Hell's Widow. He had one of those itches, which Todd called a gut instinct, that the longer they stayed in town, the more danger he and his companions were in.

\* \* \* \*

Pandeena had been postponing introducing herself to Cahira Sinclair as long as she could. She doubted that Kynyr realized yet that she was chasing him, but he would if he caught her hanging around his grandmother all the time. She glanced back every few blocks to be certain that Caimbeul had not followed her. The last thing she needed was to have a jealous ex-husband making a scene in Cahira's shop.

Main Street in Wolffgard dead-ended at Cheshire Road in the north near the path that led down from the refugee camp that Pandeena lived on the edge of. Heading from the camp into the village, her long legs ate the distance with an easy, swinging stride. Kynyr was due back that afternoon and she planned to accidentally-on-purpose encounter him at Cahira's. He reminded her of Tarrant Redhand in ways that made her mouth water and her loins grow damp.

She strode down Main Street, nodding to the myn who greeted her in passing. Most of the villagers had welcomed her with open arms. As she neared the center of the village, near the broad green common, she spied three coming out of

the Difficult Horse Tavern that had been a constant source of aggravation: Preece Malloy and the two Beggins cousins, Shalto and Oswyl. They lived and worked at the camp. Those three were scum of the worst order, and if she could have found a way to get rid of them she would have. In fact, she had tried to persuade Clodagh to dismiss them and gotten nowhere.

There was something off-kilter about Preece that Pandeena had trouble defining. For one thing, his dead, jaded eyes and indolent smile bothered her. The second was far harder to identify, but she could sense a deeper rot in his soul. He went bare-chested in the heat, his drawstring pants slouched around his lanky hips. If they had been any looser his pants would have slid to his yard. A pair of long fighting knives hung from a worn leather belt, the sheaths lashed to his thighs for an easy draw, and his pants legs bunched around them. While his sturdy bones could easily have carried more weight, Preece did not lack for muscle and the long curves of his biceps looked like hammered steel. Years of working in the sun had weathered his fair skin to a nut brown. A length of leather held his long, mustard brown hair in a tail at his neck. Pandeena knew that many of the younger bitches found him attractive in a bad wolf way. She had given up on arguing with them to stay away from Preece.

She saw nothing remarkable about Shalto and Oswyl. However, they had attempted to forcibly seduce her a few months back. It had taken them weeks to fully recover from the beating she gave them.

Preece Malloy spotted her first and punched his companions. They all glanced at her. Shalto grinned and said something that Pandeena could not quite catch. Then Preece lowered his hand, palm up, and made a sexually-suggestive poking motion at her with his middle finger.

Pandeena ignored it, although it made her hackles rise. She turned down Elmind Street south of the Difficult Horse, and walked two blocks further to Cahira's Potions and Notions. The shop was only a month old. Cahira had arrived in Wolffgard a little over two months ago to look after Kynyr, who had been wounded by an unseen assailant during a riot at the camp. Pandeena's inquiries as to what had caused the riot had so far produced nothing.

Baroucha, the other healer in Wolffgard, had been steadily losing business to Cahira. Rumor had it that there was an old rivalry at work there. Pandeena could understand why as she stood in front of Cahira's brightly painted shop. The windows with boxes of flowers along the bottom had a welcoming look that Baroucha's dingy shop lacked. She had briefly known Baroucha eighty years ago; an unpleasant young healer who had become involved with one of the most infamous lycan mages ever to exist: Alistar Weems, notorious for his alleged power of the Evil Eye. Alistar had been summarily executed by Tarrant Redhand and his mentor, Todd Sinclair.

Pandeena stopped in her tracks with her hand on the door knob, frowning. "Todd's dead. This can't be the same Todd Sinclair. Todd, Cahira, Baroucha ... it's too much coincidence."



She pushed the door open and a bell rang as she entered. The bright interior equaled the outside for welcome. Cases lined the room, polished wood halfway up and glass the rest with neat wooden shelves behind them. A long table sat at the rear with chairs around it. Two cubs stood on ladders stocking the shelves, while a third handed things up to them. She recognized Cooley Sinclair on one ladder and Rory Scott on the other. Rory's younger brother, Hamish, was the one handing jars and bottles to them.

They all turned to look, pausing in their efforts to restock the shelves.

Rory Scott climbed down and approached her. "Can I help you?"

"I'm here to see Cahira. Is she around?"

"In the back." Rory pointed at a door behind the table, and returned to his ladder.

"Thank you." Pandeena walked into the back room. She stared for an instant at the old lycan bitch grinding herbs with mortar and pestle, seeing something familiar about her—just peel away the years and—"Cahira Maguire."

"Pandeena!" Cahira looked up from her grinding, her eyes widened into saucers. "Oh my gods, you haven't changed at all." Setting aside the mortar and pestle, Cahira sprang to her feet, rushed around the table, and threw herself at Pandeena.

"Long-lived blood ... I've got long-lived blood." Pandeena wrapped her arms around Cahira and they held each other for a long time. "Now I know why Kynyr looks so much like Tarrant."

Cahira started shaking. "You mustn't tell anyone. I'm begging you, Pandeena."

The terror in Cahira's voice moved Pandeena. "I won't. Does Claw know?" She walked her over to a sofa along the back wall.

Cahira shook her head and leaned back. "He thinks Branduff is Todd's."

"The last time I saw you ... you were sixteen and so swollen with Tarrant's child you could hardly move."

"Let's not talk about Tarrant. It still makes me cry."

Pandeena hugged her again. "So be it. But you must tell Claw."

"No!"

"But Kynyr is the rightful heir. He's Red Wolf's prince."

"No. Branduff's a bastard. He doesn't count." Cahira pushed free of Pandeena. "I never wanted Kynyr to come here. He's so stubborn."

"Hello, am I interrupting?" Todd came in, buckling his blades on as he walked; a pair of long knives at his hips and two broadswords at his shoulders. "I thought we might go for a walk."

Pandeena's expression brightened in a mix of pleasure and surprise. Age had put lines in Todd's face and a sprinkling of gray in his red hair, but she could still recognize the man she had known during the years of the tragic Lycan Rebellion eighty years ago. She bounded across the room and grabbed him. "Creation! They told me you were dead ... killed in that ambush when Tarrant was taken."

Todd blinked. "Do I know ... Pandeena? By the gods, Pandeena! You haven't changed at all."

"Long-lived blood. You look so well. I can't believe it."

"If it hadn't been for a peddler named Dyna and her grandchildren I wouldn't be here."

"Dyna..." Pandeena half-choked on the name. Suddenly, she saw the Trickster's signature written over everything.

"You know her? Our attackers left me for dead. Her grandchildren found me. Bodi and Lilac."

"I'm surprised it wasn't Sugar and Pie." Pandeena hugged him again. "They're coming to Wolffgard."

"But..."

"Long-lived."

A smile curled across Todd's face. "We have a lot of catching up to do. I'm a grandpa several times over. Have you met Kynyr?"

Pandeena's cheeks reddened. "Met him? I've been drooling over him for weeks."

Todd laughed.

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul drew every eye as he entered the Difficult Horse with his lawgiver runes showing. There were not many wolves his size. He stood six foot five inches and weighed three hundred pounds. Except for the beer belly, Caimbeul was not fat.

Hereward Wiggins came out from behind his bar with two tankards of mead, grinning. "On the house. Welcome to Wolffgard, Lawgiver."

Caimbeul settled at a table with Odhran and accepted the offering with a nod. "I'm liking this place already."

"That's good. I can't stay much longer. I have bridge duty today."

"What do you do exactly?"

Odhran cocked his head to conceal a glance at table near the back of the common room to the far right of them. "Odd jobs mostly. I'm a tinker by trade; however, I share the civilian watch on the bridge. I've been doing it since our lawgiver, Nikko Softpaws, died. There's three of us. I also help out around Sanctuary four days a week."

Caimbeul's eyes tracked to what Odhran had glanced at and recognized the same five wolves who had made the risqué comments to him earlier. A dark-skinned mon sat with them. The only dark face in a sea of fair ones made it impossible to miss him. "Does Malthus come here a lot?"

"Yeah." Odhran downed the rest of his tankard and pushed back from the table. "Those young dogs sitting with him ... they're the Lycamornots. Rumors cling to them like spider silk on a fly. I don't have time to talk now." Odhran rose to his feet. "I'll come by this evening after work, if you've more questions."

"I'll have plenty."

\* \* \* \*

The closer they got to home, the more Kynyr found himself thinking about Kady Wiggins. He had a promise to keep. Kynyr intended track down Cormic Parry and beat him bloody for what he had done to Kady. One thought led to another,

and Kynyr found himself wondering if Kady knew how to dance. The Autumn Eve Faire was only three weeks away. Kynyr decided that this year he would ask Kady to go to the Faire with him.

"You're awful quiet, Kynyr." Ramsey nudged his horse up alongside Kynyr. "We're nearly home and you haven't said three words the entire time."

"Lot on my mind." Kynyr scanned the road ahead, refusing to look at his friends.

"Thinking about Silkie?" Finn rode up on the other side.

"Nah, he's thinking about Cullen." Ramsey shouted, riding in the rear.

"I'm thinking I want to get home." Kynyr cracked the reins across the backs of the horses. They threw their shoulders into it and picked up the pace.

"Aw, com'on, Kynyr," Finn whined. "Tell us more."

Kynyr scooped the two crossbows from under the wagon seat and put one next to his leg and the other on his lap. His eyes narrowed and lines of tension appeared around his mouth and across his forehead. "Todd says the best place for an ambush is close to home."

"It's been too quiet." Finn slid his bow out and strung it. "They could be out there."

"That's my thought." Kynyr scanned the tree line for figures in the shadows. "Folks let their guards down when they get close to home."

"Todd Sinclair..." Ramsey's brow furrowed with sudden insight. "Same one rode with Tarrant Redhand?"

"Yeah, he is."

Eideard knotted his reins, let them drop, and controlled his mount with his legs as he strung his bow. "Should've told us. We could have been learning from him all this time."

Finn shifted to his hybrid form and the others followed suit. "What do you think, Kynyr?"

"Why the hell you think I got the crossbows out?" Kynyr shook himself free of his brooding. "Ramsey, take the point. Be careful."

Ramsey swung to the side and urged his horse into a canter. He had scarcely gotten past the lumbering buckboard when he nocked an arrow to the string with a shout. "I see them! Whip those horses up!"

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

Ramsey leaned low over his horse, firing rapidly.

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

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

"Shit."

Eideard and Finn raced ahead of him, firing back at their attackers. Ramsey rode hard beside the rattling wagon. Kynyr tried to reload the crossbow, but the out of control wagon seemed to hit every rough spot in the road, jarring him.

"Tala, Night Hunter, Mistress of Wolves be with me..." Kynyr murmured the beginnings of a prayer.

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

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

He saw Ramsey fall with arrows in his chest and back.

"No!"

Kynyr drew the amulet from beneath his shirt, grasping the azure crystal tightly. They could not save him; but they could avenge him. "Cahira! Cahira, help me! Ambush!"

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

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

"Kynyr!" Finn sprang from the saddle, and ran toward him.

"I can't leave you behind."

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

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

Then darkness claimed him.

\* \* \* \*

Two riderless horses bolted past Dorjan as he put an arrow into the belly of Finn MacIver. Dorjan nocked another arrow to the string, watched the lycan stumble to his knees, and released it, sending the last one into his chest. Finn crumpled, collapsing onto his back to lie unmoving. A thin sneer crossed his face as he lowered his bow. Putting so many arrows into them had been a bit of overkill—the first poisoned arrow to hit them had ensured their deaths—but stopping them from reaching the bridge before dying, stopping them from giving



warning, that had required shooting them until they fell down and no longer moved.

"That's all of them."

He raised his arm, signing his myn to move out onto the road. Dorjan wanted a closer look at his handiwork before signaling withdrawal. He unstrung his bow and slid it back into the case hanging at his side.

Nelek trotted up to Dorjan and walked at his shoulder. "If any are alive, shall we finish them?"

"No need. The poison's done for them." Dorjan strode past Eideard lying in the middle of the road face up, and paused near the overturned wagon, surveying the bodies, and counting the number of black shafts in each of them. "They look like porcupines. They're all dead, Nelek."

Ramsey curled on his side against the base of a tree, four black arrows in his back and two in his chest, his face a frozen rictus of suffering, eyes clenched. Blood soaked Kynyr's leg—there were no other marks on him; yet the poison had brought him down and he lay motionless, his fingers resting against Finn's cheek.

Dorjan walked over and stood staring down at Kynyr. "So much for Kynyr Maguire."

"That one's the bastard prince?" Nelek kicked Kynyr onto his back.

"Yeah."

"Shouldn't we cut them open and take the parts?"

Dorjan considered for a moment. "Heironim said nothing about it ... one way or another."

"Twenty gold for their grapes. Ten for the heart and liver. That's too much to let go to waste."

"I agree. Start with Kynyr."

Nelek knelt and sliced Kynyr's tunic and shirt down the front. The kendaryl armor glistened in the sunlight. Nelek's eyes widened and he whistled low. "Look at that. No wonder we couldn't hit him."

Dorjan peered over Nelek's shoulder and grinned. "The armor's mine."

"Bastard." Nelek tugged at the lacings, heard Kynyr groan, and glanced at Dorjan. "He's still alive."

"He won't be once you open him up." Dorjan laughed. "We ought to charge extra. Royal grapes."

\* \* \* \*

"You remember Baroucha? She—" Cahira broke off, her eyes wide. "Todd! Todd, Kynyr's hurt! They've been ambushed."

Pandeena stood up as Cahira did and grabbed her wrist. "How do you know?"

Cahira pulled a chain from beneath her dress and let it dangle through her fingers. A blue crystal hung from the chain; nearly half of it was darkened. When it went completely black, it would mean that Kynyr was dead. Within a few seconds it had turned three-quarters black. "He's dying."

"We'll never get there in time." Pandeena felt as if her heart was being torn out of her.

"Yes, we will." Cahira extended her hand to Pandeena.

"Take my hand. We'll Jump."

"You don't know where they are."

"The crystal does. I'll follow it."

Pandeena grasped Cahira's left hand as Todd grasped her right. Cahira's power swept over them and they vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Odhran sat on the bench beneath the aspen trees, talking with the guard. His duties as bridge-watcher had been reduced since the arrival of Caimbeul the other day. He would no longer be making the decisions about whether to allow strangers to cross the bridge or not. Instead, Odhran would send for the lawgiver to judge whether or not to allow them on clan lands.

He actually felt more than a little relieved by that. Odhran had never liked making those decisions, constantly worrying about making a mistake in those troubled times.

"So what do you make of this Caimbeul?" asked Sergeant Lon Anglesey.

"I'm impressed with him, Lon." Odhran could not bring himself to call Lon 'sergeant.' This latest idea of Claw's to call his officers by human ranks felt awkward on Odhran's lips and he avoided it as much as he could.

The sound of iron shod hooves clattering across the bridge brought their heads up. Two riderless horses, with lycan saddles on their backs, bolted across the bridge, lathered and sweating, eyes wild. Instinct and habit had brought them home.

Odhran rose to his feet and started forward, his heart hammering in his chest, the loud beats pounding in his ears with the relentlessness of a smith shaping metal.

Lon grabbed him, pulling him back. "Stop. Don't frighten them. That's Eideard and Ramsey's horses."

The guardsmon reached in his pocket, bringing out an apple he had intended to eat as a snack. Lon held the apple out, murmuring softly to the animals as he advanced toward them. "Come on, you little ladies."

The two mares hesitated on the lycan side of the bridge, trotted hesitantly onto the path, regarding Lon with doubt and suspicion.

"Come on, Vicky. Come on, girl." Lon eyed the other horse, Ramsey's mare, Walker. If he could get Vicky, then Walker would follow.

Vicky—short for Victory—hesitated two yards from Lon, her ears pricked and her eyes calmed. She whickered as he continued to approach her slowly. Lon smiled when she took the apple from his hand and ate it. He took hold of the dangling reins, patting her. His eyes widened, seeing what he had feared to find. "Odhran, get Belgair. There's blood on the saddle." Lon brushed his finger through the blood. "And it's fresh. This just happened."

Lon grabbed the reins as Walker came to stand beside Vicky, and shouted at his myn. "Blow the alarm!"

The horn call rang out.

Odhran ran for the manor, shouting to everyone he passed. "Kynyr's been ambushed. Eideard's horse came back without him. Blood on the saddle." Villagers, those who were

armed, ran for the bridge. In the front yard, Odhran spotted Searlait and her bodyguard, Robert Morcar herding the children from the garden and into the safety of the manor. The little prince, Darmyk rode his maned hunting cat up to the door with his two step-cousins, Ros and Lyrri, close behind him. One of the servants, Kissie, held the door for them, fear written across her gentle features.

Searlait turned to face him, her aristocratic face tight. "What's happening? That horn call..."

Odhran slowed to a walk and halted before her. Morcar moved closer to hear his message as soon as the last of the children were indoors. The blocky guardsmon was referred to as a "black lycan" because of his stiff raven hair that he kept shaved close to his head and the light olive cast to his skin. They were a minority among the fair skinned wolves.

"Out with it mon," growled Morcar, his square jaw set in a hard angle.

"Eideard and Ramsey's horses came back without them. There's blood on the saddles. Either they were ambushed, or the clan is under attack. The guards are on the bridge and sending myn to investigate. But they need reinforcements. We don't know what's happening."

Morcar nodded. "I'll tell Claw as soon as we're all inside."

"I'll tell him now." Searlait gathered her skirts and ran for the manor.

Odhran turned and saw guardsmyn rushing out of the barracks door.

Georgie Rogan and the other hostlers led saddled horses into the yard and went back for more. The guardsmyn

mounted up swiftly, without waiting for orders. Then Belgair came barreling out of the barracks, grabbed his horse, and headed out. The rest followed their captain.

A swift reaction had been trained into them and grounded by experience. They all knew their roles and went to it. The village volunteer militia began arriving. It looked like a war to Odhran, even though he had yet to see the enemy.

\* \* \* \*

The door to the Difficult Horse slammed open and a lycan in homespun trousers and robe stumbled in, clutching a stitch in his side and breathing hard. "Kynyr's party has been ambushed!"

All save two sprang to their feet and poured from the tavern: Malthus and Preece Malloy. A tiny smile brushed the corners of Malthus' lips and he lowered his head to conceal it. "The thorn has been plucked from my side."

Preece's jaded gaze rested on Malthus' face. "You arranged it."

"Did I?" Malthus lifted his head.

"There's more to you than meets the eye." Preece gazed over the edge of his tankard before downing the last of the contents.

"Is there?"

"I've only one complaint, Malthus." Preece banged the tankard on the table. "I wanted in on that kill."

"You're good, Preece ... but Kynyr was better."

"Not from the back."

"We ought to join the others before they start to wonder."  
Malthus left the tavern with Preece walking beside him.

Preece leaned close to Malthus as the door closed behind them and whispered into Malthus' ear. "I knew Kynyr was coming home in a bag when I passed him on the road yesterday. I'm not stupid."

"That's why I sent you."

## CHAPTER NINE

### VENGEANCE

Cahira Jumped them to a stand of trees near the dip in the road. From where they stood, Pandeena saw five myn; and beyond them the overturned wagon and Eideard's still form on the road. She drew her sword, turned to say something to Todd and saw that he was not there. Todd's gifts seemed undiminished by his years.

Pandeena closed her eyes to reduce distractions, and reached into the forest with her Wilderkin senses. She touched the minds of every predator close enough to make a difference, summoning the bears, the lions, and the wolves. Then she reached farther along the psychic scale and called the antlered stags, and everything that had size as well as tearing fangs, sharp claws, or long horns. Within moments, the forest seethed with deadly life and the fullness of her rage. Then the screaming began as beasts set to their work.

She approached in silence, and brought her blade down across the neck of one mon. Bone gave with a loud snap. She spun about to kill another just in time to see Todd clamp a big red-furred hand over a mon's mouth, shove a blade into his kidneys, and drop him.

She sheathed her sword and robbed a body of its quiver and bow. Pandeena pulled an arrow from the quiver, noted the black shaft, and extended her senses along it.



"Devil's Silver and a taste of something else. Let's see how they like it."

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr's armor lay atop the slashed remains of his tunic, beside his sword belt and weapons. Nelek slashed his pants open and jerked them down. He cupped Kynyr's testes. "He's got big ones. They'll bring a good price."

"Don't start with those." Dorjan's gaze kept drifting to Kynyr's armor. Kendaryl in any form was a rare prize. He drifted closer to the armor, glanced back to assess Kynyr's size as compared to his own, speculating on whether the armor would fit him without a lot of alterations.

"Why not?" Nelek released Kynyr and glared at Dorjan. "Don't tell me it has to be done in some kind of bloody order. It's just meat."

"I can see you've never done this before." Dorjan, with obvious reluctance, moved to stand beside Nelek where he could observe better. Contempt touched the edges of Dorjan's mouth. Nelek had always struck him as not particularly apt at arcane matters, failing either to study or pay enough attention to the lore and rites.

"I'm no meat man."

"Precisely. The organs are to be used for arcane matters. Therefore, Nelek, they must be taken in a specific order to avoid arcane and vibrational contamination."

"Don't lecture me. Just tell me how you want it done."

"Don't cut anything off until I've looked at the entrails. Start the first cut just below the sternum and end at the

groin. Then a cross cut at the hips. Split him open carefully so you don't damage anything. You do want to get a good price for his parts, don't you, Nelek?"

"Yeah."

"Then do as I say."

Kynyr twitched as Nelek made the first cut across his belly. Nelek glanced at Dorjan again. "He's alive, I tell you."

"So?" Dorjan's eyes lit with interest. "Open your awareness, Nelek. He's dying. Savor it. Savor the fact that he feels the blade, but can't do anything about it."

Nelek stroked the cut with his finger and then sucked Kynyr's blood off it. "Nice."

"Yes." Dorjan sauntered over to the armor and knelt, examining it. The maker's mark brought a smile to his face. A true master had crafted it. "He's close to my size. It won't take much alteration to make the armor fit me."

A choking sound made Dorjan turn. Nelek had his hand inside Kynyr, just starting to peel back the first layer of skin. The black shaft of a poisoned arrow protruded from Nelek's back. Eyes wide in shock, Nelek shuddered as two more arrows erupted from his chest. Nelek tried to rise to his feet, turning toward the archer. Another arrow hit him and he jerked around, sagged to his knees, and pitched forward onto the ground beside Kynyr.

Dorjan sprang to his feet, seeing bears and lions emerge from the forest. Screams sounded on all sides of him as the animals tore his myn apart.

"Wilderkin! There's a bloody Wilderkin out there."

A tall, blonde bitch stepped into the open, fitting another shaft to the string.

Dorjan threw up his shields in time to block the arrow that the bitch released, the arcane energy crushing it.

"Sa'necari!" Pandeena snarled, dropped her bow, and drew her sword, charging across the stretch of open ground.

A monstrous red lycan in hybrid form followed her with a broadsword in each hand. Dorjan's myn tried to rally, but Todd sliced his way through them as if they were children with sticks.

Dorjan cupped his hand, drawing together the strongest death web he could and tossed it at the bitch charging him.

Pure golden light flared around Pandeena and her divine glory shone forth. She turned his spell with a gesture and her sword shattered Dorjan's arcane shields. He staggered back from her.

"Yuwenghau!" Malthus and Heironim might have been able to stand against her, but Dorjan knew instantly that he was overmatched. He retreated toward the wagon.

Pandeena's gaze fell upon Kynyr and she unleashed a howl of grief and rage that sent a shiver of terror through Dorjan as he guessed they must have been lovers. Malthus had made a bad mistake targeting Kynyr.

He threw every spell he knew at her and could not so much as slow her down. Dorjan stepped into the middle of the spilled goods scattered over the ground before he realized it. A bottle rolled under his foot, and he lost his balance.

Her sword came at him hard and fast, he barely managed to get his own up to block her swing. Pain shot through his

arm at the impact when their blades met. His arm went numb and the sword fell from his fingers. Dorjan shrieked, spun about, and tried to run. His foot caught on the edge of an overturned crate and he fell. His skin broke out in cold sweat as he scrabbled in the litter, anticipating her blade in his back.

It was not long coming.

She brought her foot down on his leg so that he could not escape. Dorjan twisted and whimpered.

"Bloody sa'necari," Pandeena growled. She stomped his leg, shattering the bone and then stomped the other.

Dorjan screamed.

Pandeena kicked him over on his back and rested the point of her sword at his throat.

"Just do it," Dorjan pleaded. "Fast. Make it fast."

"Remember Cullen?"

"Oh, gods, no. Please. Just kill me."

Pandeena drove her foot into his belly, rupturing his organs.

Dorjan screamed again. He was Steeped-in-Death: she could torture him a long time before he died. "Mercy..."

"So be it." Pandeena poked his left eye out and then his right.

Todd appeared at her elbow. "Finish him. Kynyr's alive."

Pandeena's expression brightened for an instant and she shoved her blade into Dorjan's heart, passing it through his chainmail as if it were paper.

\* \* \* \*

Cahira waited until the battle ended before she emerged from the concealment of the trees. Her mage gifts were too minor to have offered much in the way of defense. Todd and Pandeena had killed twenty-five myn in a handful of minutes. She had always known how dangerous her husband could be, yet he had never been anything but patient and gentle with her. Stepping over and around the corpses, her healer's nature could not resist the feelings of revulsion gathering in the pit of her stomach.

She headed for the young wolves lying too still upon the ground. The first one she reached was Eideard. He stank; his body having released its wastes at the approach of death. There was a cyanotic cast to his flesh.

She knelt down and touched his face, Reading him. Cahira recoiled from the psychic scent of Devil's Silver. The lycan healer mastered herself and Read further. Life still flickered within him, but he was too far gone to be helped. Arrows had gone through both lungs, his spleen, and his belly; and the poison had eaten the rest of him.

Eideard's eyes fluttered open, glazed with pain. "Tell Kynyr I'm ... sorry." He coughed up blood. "All my ... worldly goods ... give Cooley ... all my worldly..."

Eideard's face went slack, his eyes staring.

Cahira swallowed and closed Eideard's eyes. Tears slid down her cheeks. She had become fond of her grandson's friends during the brief months she had been in Wolffgard. She straightened wearily, and looked about her. A prayer formed in her heart and emerged on her lips, whispered

softly. "Kalirion, Lord of Healing ... let me save one of them ... at least one of them."

Pandeena sat cross-legged on the ground with Kynyr cradled in her arms. Todd carried Ramsey into the middle of the road and laid him down beside Finn. That old look Cahira remembered so well had returned to his eyes: the haunted calm of the battlefield. She picked her way through the debris and joined them near the wagon.

"Eideard's dead."

"He was a good mon." Todd broke off the ends of the shafts in Ramsey's body as he spoke. "He had no family. I'll see he gets a proper burial."

Pandeena glanced up at her. "Kynyr's alive."

"Oh, thank the gods." Cahira knelt beside her. All the wounds appeared to be in his legs. The kendaryl mail had held against the arrows. She grasped his pants leg and ripped it open to his knee. One look at the necrosis around his wounds and the hope fled from her face. "Devil's Silver."

Todd finished his work with Ramsey and started on Finn. "Ramsey's pulse is thready. I don't think he'll last much longer."

Pandeena brushed her fingers across Finn and then Ramsey. "There's Devil's Silver ... in all of them."

"Finn?"

"He's not as bad as Ramsey. I need to get us back." Pandeena's power swirled and swept out around them. She carried them all, including Eideard's body, the corpses of the myn they had killed, the wagon and its scattered contents, even the dead horses to Wolffgard Village, materializing in

front of Cahira's shop. The transported carnage spread along half a block.

Passers-by stopped in their tracks, stared for an instant, and then rushed to help them. Others ran off to tell of what had happened. Word swept through the village like wildfire and help arrived in many forms. The difference between human villages and lycan ones showed immediately. Without being asked, people began piling the spilled goods in front of Cahira's shop. The bodies of the enemy dead were tossed together on the far side of the overturned wagon. Knackers arrived and removed the dead horses. Pandeena carried Kynyr into the shop while Todd followed with Ramsey. Grizzled old Hereward and one of his patrons lifted Finn up between them and bore him inside, while Hereward's daughter Kady rushed around them to Cahira.

"Can I help? Please ... Kynyr's been good to me."

Cahira turned to Kady with a dazed expression. "I'll need all I can get." She swallowed and said the dreaded words. "Devil's Silver."

Kady showed surprising presence of mind, entering ahead of Cahira and going to the kitchen where she filled basins with water.

Cahira turned to fetch her medical case and satchel, only to find Rory and Cooley standing behind her holding them. The cubs had learned fast and reacted well in situations that would have paralyzed an adult. "Take them to the guest room for me."

The two cubs rushed to the stairs and climbed swiftly. Cahira followed as well as her aged knees would allow. Soft

furry hands closed on her arm, steadying her and she looked down to see Hamish in hybrid form.

"Let me help you."

Even in hybrid form, Hamish was too small to be much assistance, but Cahira's could sense the love in his offer. "I can manage. Go down and see about moving all the spilled merchandise into the shop?"

"Sure." Hamish darted back down the stairs.

She reached the guestroom and saw that Rory had already opened her case and satchel, arranging everything in the order she liked. Todd and Pandeena had undressed Finn and Ramsey, laying them side by side on the large bed.

"Rory, fetch Claw. Cooley, find the lawgiver. Todd, where's Kynyr?"

The two boys shot out of the room.

Todd looked up with one of Cahira's scalpels in his hand, and tossed a bloody arrowhead into a dish. "His room. Triage, Cahira. Finn and Ramsey are worse off than he is."

Pandeena, working on Finn, nodded. "I've heard you're a Mender."

"Yes ... but Devil's Silver ... there's no antidote."

Pandeena held up a silencing hand. "There is and there isn't. You mend the internal injuries and let me worry about the Devil's Silver."

Cahira hesitated.

"Trust me."

Kady arrived with a basin of water and a stack of wash cloths. She shooed Todd away from Ramsey and began



cleaning the blood off him. Todd set a chair by the bed so that Cahira could comfortably see to Ramsey.

"I'll start on Kynyr." Todd picked up a bottle of astringent and pocketed the scalpel before walking out of the room.

Cahira took a deep breath to steady herself. She stuck her finger into the wound in Ramsey's side and Read him as she worked. The tear in his spleen needed only a nudge to close: the lycan clotting factor had already been hard at work on that. She closed the first of the lung wounds and started on the second when she felt his heart stop.

"Nooo!" Cahira pounded him in the chest.

Pandeena left off on Finn and came around the bed. She placed her hands on Ramsey's chest and sent a surge of raw power into his heart.

Ramsey's chest heaved and his eyes opened. "Ca-Ca ... hira?"

Cahira snapped her fingers at Kady. "Pollendine. Three fingers. The bottle's labeled."

A fit of coughing seized Ramsey, bringing up blood and froth. Cahira wiped his mouth and chin off.

Pandeena returned to Finn, dug the last arrow out, and shoved a roll of bandages into the wound to slow to the bleeding. "I'll be right back."

She raised her arms and vanished in a shimmer of golden light.

Kady brought the glass around to Cahira. "She Jumped."

"What you see here, stays here."

"Right."

"Now lift him up a bit. Support his head."

Ramsey swallowed the violet liquid and they eased him back down. "The ... others?"

"Finn's next to you. Kynyr's in his room."

"Eideard?"

"I'm sorry."

Ramsey's mouth tightened. He closed his eyes and slipped back into the darkness.

Cahira got to her feet and Kady moved her chair to the other side so that she could start on Finn.

Kady set to bandaging Ramsey's wounds, glancing frequently at Cahira, as if mustering the courage to ask something. Cahira caught the looks each time she finished Mending one of Finn's wounds. Although Cahira could not do a true healing, such as the lifemages did, her gifts closed the damage to his lungs and other internal injuries with the precision of a highly-skilled surgeon. The best Assassins' Guild surgeons could not have done it better. Cahira was bone-weary by the time she finished with the belly wounds, and weariness added to her growing impatience with the looks that Kady kept giving her.

"I see those questions in your eyes. I don't bite, Kady."

"Do you need an apprentice? I'm a good nurse."

"I hadn't thought about it. I'm already teaching Rory, Hamish, and Cooley."

"There's a lot they can't do, 'cause they're littles. Nursing's the one thing I'm good at ... besides waiting tables."

"I hadn't really thought about it," Cahira repeated.

"Please, Cahira. I'm desperate." Kady gave her a beseeching look. "I need to move out."

"Why?"

"Ever since my father caught me with Cullen, he's been impossible."

"What do you mean?"

"He says I'm a slut."

"Are you?"

Kady shook her head. "Just Cullen. We only did it a few times before Da' caught us."

"Pregnant?"

"No."

"Then you're lucky. I've dispensed a lot of tansy lately. Mostly to unweds."

"But we only did it a few times..."

"It only takes once, Kady. With three patients under my roof, I can use the help." Cahira raised her hand to forestall interruptions. "However, if you're going to be living under my roof, you'll keep your legs crossed."

"I promise."

"I'll hold you to it. You'll have to sleep on a cot in the storeroom until we can rearrange the living quarters."

"I can do that."

"You'll have to help with the shop. Rory can show you how to do it. Now, I must tend to Kynyr. Fetch your things while I'm up there."

\* \* \* \*

A grim calm settled over Todd as he worked on Kynyr, turning his efforts into a meditation. His eyes flicked to the long cuts crossing his grandson's stomach each time he

finished getting an arrow head out of Kynyr's leg and packed the wound.

"You're not dying on me, boy. We got there in time. You're not dying on me."

Todd finished with the arrows, broke open a package of surgical catgut and a sterile needle. He threaded the needle and set it aside. Then he shaved and swabbed the wound with alcohol, pulled the pieces together and carefully stitched Kynyr's belly closed.

He brushed a strand of golden hair back from Kynyr's face, grasped Kynyr's hand in both of his, and held it tight. "You're not dying on me."

"My turn." Pandeena laid her case next to Todd's box of catgut. "You love him."

"He's mine. Blood doesn't matter. He's still mine." Todd sucked in a deep breath. "Most cubs ... their first word is da or ma ... Kynyr's was Todd. He came crawling across the floor with his nappies sagging, put his hand on my foot, looked up at me, and said 'Taahdd.' Just like that."

"I'll do everything in my power to keep him alive, Todd. I promise." Pandeena squeezed Todd's shoulder. "Now why don't you go see if you can find Cooley? He ran off crying. Rory and Hamish are looking for him, but they could use some help."

## CHAPTER TEN

### AFTERMATH

Claw dismounted across the street from Cahira's shop, tied his horse in front of the dry goods, and stood for a moment with his hands on his hips surveying his ruined wagon. There were arrows in the side boards and he noted the two different types of fletching, recognizing it as a code. He half-dreaded what he would find once he got inside. Claw hated losing young wolves in his service. Despite the tough exterior he presented to the world, restraining himself from the flamboyant displays of grief common to his people, he still mourned deeply when they died.

His two guardsmyn, Gorgarty Burr and Erskine Faraday, dismounted beside him and walked at his back as Claw made his way across the street, picking a path through the remaining debris.

Gorgarty sneered at the wreckage. "Looks like Maguire finally got his comeuppance."

"Shut up, Gorgarty," Erskine growled. No one liked the big stupid oaf, while Kynyr had always been well-liked by most of the older guardsmyn. "It looks like a war."

Erskine's eyes scanned the wagon. "See there? From the location of the arrows that struck it..." He pointed at various spots that fairly bristled with feathered shafts. "I'd say he got enfiladed."

"So pretty boy got his ass shot off." Gorgarty released a loud guffaw.

"Shut up, Gorgarty. Someday one of us is going to shove your words down your throat."

Claw paused with his hand on the doorknob of the shop. "You heard him, Gorgarty. Shut your ugly mouth."

Kady came out of the backroom as the bell rang telling her that someone had entered the shop. She had gotten her stuff packed in minutes and cajoled two of her father's customers into carrying it down for her. The shop and the living area upstairs were filled with people coming and going. Several of the neighbor bitches had brought food and were fixing tea and sandwiches for those working with the wounded.

She knew that Rory had gone after Claw, so she answered his questions before he asked them. "Pandeena and Cahira are upstairs working on them. We put Eideard's body in the storeroom for the moment."

Claw grimaced. "He was a good wolf. How are the others? Kynyr?"

"It's still touch and go. Devil's Silver."

"Rory told me." Claw headed for the little hallway that led to the stairs. Erskine followed him, but Gorgarty lingered behind leering at Kady.

When Claw reached the second floor, two middle-aged bitches—whose names he could not remember—came out of the kitchen. The chieftain realized, with a lurch, just how seldom he came to the village. He never went among his people for pleasure any longer.

"If you're looking for Pandeena, she's in with Finn and Ramsey." The brassy-haired blonde pointed at a door far down the hallway. "If you're looking for Cahira, she's in with Kynyr." She pointed at a door near the kitchen.

"Thanks, uhmn..."

"Annie."

"Annie. Right. How're my myn doing?"

Annie's face darkened with distress. "They almost lost Ramsey twice. Cahira doesn't think he'll make it till morning. Finn's not much better."

"Kynyr?"

"His wounds aren't serious ... but the poison..."

"Does anyone know how this happened?" Claw's voice filled with ire.

Annie winced at his tone. "All I know is what I've overheard. Pandeena and Cahira..."

Erskine glanced sidewise at Claw, watching for a reaction.

Claw gave a nod and headed for Pandeena without another word. Erskine trailed after him.

Pandeena heard them come in. "Just a minute," she said without raising her head.

They stood and watched her work. Pandeena sat by the bed, carefully removing Ramsey's bandages. Claw winced at the blackened skin around the edges of the wounds. She used a scalpel to remove the necrotic skin, smeared a golden salve into the wound, and covered it again with light gauze.

"Will that help?" Claw walked over and stood at her shoulder.

"It should." Pandeena laid a narrow board on the bed and bound Ramsey's arm to it. Then she opened a small casket, took out some long needles stained with a goldish substance, stuck four of them into his arm, and left them there.

"What's that?"

"A variation on the Creeyan art of inoculation. Something better's been developed in Rowanhart, but I haven't been able to get my hands on it." She straightened and rubbed the back of her neck.

Erskine took that as an invitation and put his big hands on her neck, massaging the muscles. "You're tired."

"I know it. But I can't stop yet. There's still Finn and Kynyr to do." She glanced over her shoulder at him, noting the chocolate and claret livery of a guardsmon. "Do I know you?"

"We've met a few times."

"I don't remember your name."

"Erskine."

Claw growled and Erskine moved away. "What are their chances?"

Pandeena noticed him for the first time. "Chances? I'd say it depends on how much strength they have left to fight it."

"Odds, bitch. Give me the odds."

She blinked at his tone. "Ramsey is terribly weak. I'll be surprised if he makes it until morning. If he does, he has a fighting chance. Same for Finn."

"And Kynyr?"

"His wounds weren't as serious to start with ... they're all in his leg. Devil's Silver is nasty stuff."



Claw's eyes narrowed. "You know an awful damn lot for someone your age."

"I'm older than I look." Pandeena gathered her things and moved to the other side of the bed to work on Finn.

"How old?"

"None of your damned business."

Erskine chuckled. "Never ask a bitch her age."

Claw turned on his heels and walked out. Erskine lingered. "You look like you could use a drink. Could I buy you one when you're finished?"

"No."

\* \* \* \*

As he put his hand on the knob, Claw heard Cahira singing, weaving her spell words to focus her gifts. He hesitated, uncertain of his welcome despite the fact that she had sent for him. Easing the door open, he stood two steps over the threshold and watched Cahira working on Kynyr as he had with Pandeena and Ramsey. Todd sat on the opposite side of the bed, holding his grandson's hand and bathing his face with a wet cloth.

"Come on, boy," Todd said in that slow, steady voice of his. "Come on. You're not dying on us. You hear me?"

Claw sucked in a breath and leaned his head back to stare at the ceiling. He had half-hoped for four years—ever since first laying eyes on Kynyr—that the handsome young wolf would turn out to be his great-grandson. The resemblance to his murdered son was uncanny. Kynyr even had Tarrant's easy self-confidence. Having Kynyr in his employ was like

having his son back again. Todd has dashed all of that two months ago when he unequivocally stated that he had sired Kynyr's bastard father, Branduff, on Cahira.

Kynyr moaned, shifting restlessly, his head moving back and forth. "No, Finn. Keep going ... keep going. Fiiiiiinn!"

Claw moved closer to the bed on Todd's side. "Kynyr?"

"He can't hear you." Todd glanced up as Claw stopped beside him. "Kynyr doesn't even know we're here."

"Fever?"

"Yes. The poison's eating him up inside."

"At least they accounted for several of them."

"No." Todd shook his head. "I did."

"Killing was always what you did best, Todd."

"Be quiet or get out!" Cahira snapped.

Todd stood up and tossed the wet cloth at Claw. "You and Cahira need to talk. I'm going to check on Kady. Make sure the cubs haven't overwhelmed her."

Claw studied the wall for a moment, threw the cloth into the basin of water, and picked one of the arrowheads out of the dish Cahira had been tossing them into. "Swallowtails. Wicked looking thing. Ought to see if Ranoul can make something nastier that we can give them some payback with."

Cahira brandished a scalpel at Claw. "Hold his hand. He doesn't thrash as much if someone's holding him. Kynyr's not conscious, but touch still registers."

Claw settled into the chair vacated by Todd and grasped Kynyr's hand, patting and squeezing it. The old chieftain studied the young wolf's suffering face. He tensed, seeing the

resemblance to his dead son so strongly that it flashed memories through him. Once more he saw his twin sons, Logan and Tarrant executed in rites of mortgiefan while he watched unable to do anything, his wife Aisha held hostage to his cooperation.

"Todd's a bloody liar! Kynyr's mine."

Cahira's lips curled back into a silent snarl. She Mended the deepest parts of the wound, cut away the blackened flesh, and applied Pandeena's odd salve to it. Then she glared across Kynyr at Claw. "There's a curse on your house."

"Yah ... and I've heard twenty different versions of it. Weems' Curse they call it. Bullshit, Cahira. All bullshit. There is no bloody curse."

"Isn't there? Where's your brother? Where's your sons? Darmyk can't inherit. He's sa'necari. One of those monsters that destroyed your family. The Redhands are a dying breed. You're the last. They'll put some other family on the throne after you're gone."

"Is that why you sent for me? To shove this bloody curse in my face?"

Cahira stiffened. "The law says that the chieftain must be sent for when his guardsmyn are wounded or dead. I've kept the letter of the law. Now get the hell out of my home."

The chieftain retreated to the hallway and leaned against the wall, breathing hard. The tightness and shooting pains in his chest were back with a vengeance. He took the bottle of foxglove extract from his pouch, popped it open, and took a swallow of it. Baroucha had told him to measure it carefully, but most of the time Claw never bothered to. His doses were

erratic. Sometimes he forgot them. He should have told Aisha about it, but Claw had not wanted to worry her.

"Claw?"

He glanced up as he slipped the bottle back into his pouch and saw Todd standing by the stairs. "I'm leaving. Your bloody wife told me to."

"We need to talk."

"I'm leaving."

Todd gave Claw a long, searching look. "About Cullen. Come upstairs with me."

The big lycan started up the stairs without waiting for the chieftain's reply. Claw pushed away from the wall and followed. By the time he reached the third floor, the chieftain was panting and the chest pains had worsened. He stumbled on the last step and nearly fell on the landing. Todd caught Claw's arm and steadied him. "Are you alright?"

He guided Claw down the hallway to a large room divided by a mat on one side and mirrored the entire length of it. Racks of practice weapons stood in the corner nearest the door and at the far end sat a square table with four chairs and a cabinet behind it.

Claw settled into a chair and Todd brought a bottle of whiskey and two glasses from the cabinet. "Whiskey?"

"Yeah."

Todd poured. "What's wrong with you? That bottle..."

Claw glared at him. "Tell me about Cullen."

"Show me the bottle."

Claw took the bottle out and set it beside the whiskey. "You tell anyone and I'll run you both out of town."

Todd read the label. "Heart trouble? How long?"

"Couple a months. Thought I had it hidden, but a week ago my damned son-in-law caught me having one of those spells."

"Cahira should have a look at you."

"She won't do it."

"I could talk to her."

"Forget it. Tell me about Cullen."

"Are you still looking for his family?"

"Law says I have to. A year and a day."

"I can tell you where to find his son. But I want your word you won't share that with anyone."

"You have it."

"It's Cooley. He's Cullen Diomedes Blackwood, jr."

"Why all the secrecy?"

"We think that Cullen's murderers are looking for him. When he made that ride to Wolffgard two months ago, some myn chased him down the road. Cooley gave Larkspur her head and she outran them."

"Good horse, that one."

"Ayup."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Quietly transfer Cullen's assets to Cooley. We'll set up a trust for him until he's of age."

"Consider it done."

\* \* \* \*

Kady tried to ignore Gorgarty. The way that he stared at her, undressing her with his eyes, made her skin crawl. She

looked about the shop for something to do, and saw the cases of jars and bottles sitting between the two ladders that Rory and Cooley had been using earlier. Reading the labels, she matched them up with those on the shelves and put them away.

"I saw them moving yer stuff in as we turned the corner." Gorgarty followed her, folded his arms atop one cabinet, and leaned across it. "What are ya doing here?"

"Working." Kady stiffened. "I work here now."

"On yer back or standing up?"

"Leave me alone. I'm working."

"If ya say so." Gorgarty shrugged, his eyes resting on her rump. "Cullen ever give it to ya up the ass?"

"That's none of your business." Kady returned to the crates of supplies and took out a small bottle. It had the name written on it in three languages, only one of which Kady recognized. The late priest, Tempest Anstey, had taught Kady her letters. Although she was not a good reader, Kady could sound out most words and this one surprised her:

Amphereon. Normally Amphereon was blue. Apothecaries and healers color-coded drugs with natural food coloring. This was white. The purest, most expensive form there was of it—which the addicts called White Fire. She had heard it discussed many times working in her father's tavern. Cahira must have an outstanding supplier to get her hands on it. Kady turned about, trying to decide where to put it and spotted a locked cabinet. She went to the back, sat the drug on the table which Cahira used for a counter, and started

looking for the key. Kady would be glad when Cooley and Rory got back to help her learn where things were.

"What ya got there?" Gorgarty sauntered along in her wake and picked up the bottle. He squinted at the label as if trying to read it. Gorgarty popped the stopper out and sniffed it. "Wheeew! Amphereon. Bitch, that stuff will really stiffen the bone. Wanna see mine?"

Kady snatched the bottle out of his hand and realized that the stopper was not there. "Give me that!" She grabbed his hand, trying to peel his thick fingers open.

Gorgarty laughed at her, clenching his fist around the stopper. "Let me nuzzle yer teats and ya can have it."

"Please don't do this to me. It's my first day. They've got wounded upstairs. Please."

"Pretty Boy Maguire took it in the ass." Gorgarty chuckled, shrugged Kady off, and went around behind the table after her. "Wish I'd been there to see it."

Kady glanced about frantically for a place to flee to. Gorgarty had cut her off from the door to the hallway. She spied the door to the backroom, and retreated through it.

He followed her. "Good place. Ya want to do it on the sofa? The floor? Or up against the wall. Ya were doing it standing up when yer da caught ya."

"Get out of here!"

Kady realized that she was shaking, and shoved the bottle onto a shelf so that she would not spill it. There was only one door and she would have to get past Gorgarty to reach it. She darted to Cahira's worktable and put that between her and the guardsmon.

The table pressed against a cabinet that blocked the end off, completing an L-shape with the wall behind her. She was trapped.

Gorgarty glanced at the area. "Ya sure ya want to do it there? Not much space."

"Touch me and I'll scream."

"Scream." Gorgarty shrugged. "No one helps a whore."

"I'm not a whore." Kady backed up as he came around the side and started toward her, opening his pants. "Kynyr..."

"Oughta be dead soon." Gorgarty loosed a sour laugh. "Guess Todd'll be slipping ya the bone soon. If ya like geezer bones..."

"Shut up." She slapped his face.

"Like it rough, Kady? Is that it?" Gorgarty grabbed her wrist and twisted it, sending a sharp pain up her arm. "I got no problem with that."

"Let go." She jerked her arm, trying to free it, finally repeating the futile effort with the bottle top, and attempting to pry his fingers loose from her wrist.

"How rough ya want it, Kady?" Gorgarty grinned, seized her golden hair, and yanked her head around. His fetid breath and dirty teeth made Kady's stomach roil as Gorgarty brought his face close to hers. He covered her lips with his own, forcing them apart.

Kady set her jaw and clenched her teeth together.

"Open them."

Kady's eyes glittered with the desperation of a cornered animal and she kept her mouth closed. She shook her head.



Gorgarty slammed his fist into her solar plexus, knocking the air out of her. "Play nice."

Kady sobbed for breath, a freshet of tears dampening her cheeks. What little fight she had had to begin with evaporated. Between Cullen's death and her father turning on her, Kady Wiggins had been gradually losing her sense of self for several weeks. She knew it full well, but saw no way to recover it. The spark of hope that Cahira had given her mere hours ago faded and died like a blown out candle.

He shoved her against the wall, rubbing his pelvis along her body. "Ya'll like me. I'm not a runt like Cullen. Once you've had me inside you, Kady, you won't want anyone else."

"I don't want you." Her voice cracked and her head moved listlessly, as if trying not to think about what was happening to her. Ever since word had gotten out about her losing her virginity to Cullen Blackwood, the males had been getting more and more insistent with her. Her father had stopped protecting her, writing her off as a slut after having her virginity checked by Baroucha, the midwife. Kady felt helpless and abandoned. She knew that if she screamed, her reputation would condemn her. No one would believe that she had not come on to Gorgarty and then changed her mind.

"Course ya do. I seen the way ya been looking at me. Everyone has. They keep telling me ya want me."

"Please stop." Fear made her legs weak. "Don't do this."

Gorgarty squeezed her breasts. "No one's gonna catch us back here, if that's what ya're afraid of." He mouthed her

nipple and blew a hot breath through the fabric, moistening the cloth. "Not like when you did it with Cullen in the alley."

Kady tensed as he rubbed his big body over hers, making humping motions with his cock against her loins. She could not think and words deserted her, reducing her protests to simplistic repetitions. "I don't want you. Please don't do this."

"I do it good. Ya're gonna like this." He fumbled with the lacings on her bodice, lifted one of her pale breasts out, and gave it a perfunctory squeeze. "Nice."

Resignation crept into her voice and she turned her face away from his, surrendering to despair. Resistance had gained her nothing in the past except rougher handling. "Get it over with."

"I knew ya wanted me." Gorgarty rolled her skirt up and tucked the end into her sagging half-open bodice. He lifted his engorged member out. "I get it in and ya'll know what I mean."

Her gaze flicked across his cock, drawn to the sight out of dread, her lower lip trembling. Blue veins stood out in Gorgarty's thick pinkish spear and the uncircumcised tip had an odd bend in it. A giggle laced with hysteria escaped her. "Cullen was bigger."

"Hah! Right."

Kady sobbed as he shoved his hand into her small clothes. "I hate you."

"Not for long." Gorgarty slipped his fingers between the lips of her vagina, and poked them inside her. "That's real sweet." He shifted her small clothes down more to get them out of his way, grabbed his yard, and pushed into her with a

grunt. "Don't that ... feel good? Ya tell me if that don't feel good."

Her stomach soured. A silent chant formed in her mind.  
*It'll be over soon. It'll be over soon. Don't fight and maybe he won't hurt me again. Just let him do it ... let him do it.*

The fullness inside her felt like a nightmarish intrusion. She resisted an urge to let her bladder go and pee on him, certain that he would kill her if she did. Cullen's considerate love-making seemed so distant at that moment. Kady burst into soft weeping. "I'd rather have a blade in my gut."

"Liar. I'm ... giving ya ... the best fuck ... ya ever had." Gorgarty punctuated his words with grunts as he thrust in and out of her. "Ya got the ... tightest little cunt ... I ever been in."

Kady's sobbing worsened.

"I'll buy ya a drink ... and we can do it ... again."

"You're ... raping me."

"Can't rape the willing. Oh. Oh, there it goes." Gorgarty spurted, filling her with his milky seed. "Now, wasn't that fun, Kady? Wasn't that fun?" He pulled his flaccid, spent member out and kissed her on the nose. "I'll be back around when I get off duty. We'll have a drink at the Striped Dog and do it in a bed."

A trace of courage seeped into Kady as she pulled her bodice up. "I'm not going anywhere with you. I hate you. I begged you not to. You're an ugly, nasty gutterfucker. If I'd had a blade, I would have stuck you."

Gorgarty chuckled, lacing his pants closed. "I'll be by around six. Wear something nice."

"I hate you. I hate you."

"Scum," said a weary voice behind Gorgarty.

Strong hands seized the guardsmon by the collar and the seat of his pants, jerking him backwards. Gorgarty flailed at the cabinets.

"Break something, and I'll break you." Todd Sinclair hauled Gorgarty out from behind the cabinets, and then propelled him toward the door.

Freed, Kady sank to her knees and huddled against the cabinets, Gorgarty's thick, milky cum soaking her small clothes and skirts. "I hate you, Gorgarty."

"She wanted it."

"You raped her." Todd's voice held not the slightest trace of emotion, just an eerie stillness to his words.

"Ya can't rape a slut."

"You're banned from this place."

"I'm a guardsmon!" Gorgarty twisted in Todd's grasp, tearing the neck of his tunic as they reached the front room. "I'll bust ya up, old mon."

Todd raised his knee between Gorgarty's legs, a short calculated strike. Gorgarty shrieked. The aging Battle Master released the younger guardsmon's clothing, grabbed his wrist, and stepped in with the simplest of hip throws, laying Gorgarty out on the floor. His foot came down on the guardsmon's neck and rested there in quiet threat. "You're trash. Complain to the lawgiver and see how far you get. If Kady wants to press charges, I'll support her."

"She's just ... a cheap ... slut." Gorgarty sobbed for breath, clutching his balls. "Ask anyone."

"What'd he do?" Erskine leaned against the door frame at the edge of the hallway.

"Raped Kady Wiggins in my backroom." Todd moved aside, watching Erskine warily.

"Ya can't rape a slut! Tell him, Erskine!" Gorgarty threw a worried look at his companion. "Ya can't rape a slut. She wanted me to do it."

Erskine shook his head with a shrug. "Not my problem, Gorgarty."

Seeing that Erskine had no intention of intervening, Todd kicked Gorgarty in the side. "Touch her again and I'll feed you your balls. You saw those bodies in the street?"

"Yah."

"I did that. Don't mess with me and mine. Understood?"

Something in Todd's calm manner got through to Gorgarty in ways that yelling obscenities would not have. He hesitated, looking again to his companion for help that was not forthcoming. "Yah, I got it."

"Get him out of here."

Erskine jerked Gorgarty to his feet and shoved him through the door. Gorgarty recovered his attitude as soon they were out of Todd's sight.

"I'll kill him." Gorgarty snarled. "I swear I'll kill him."

Erskine regarded Gorgarty, his mouth set in a line of contempt. "Don't press your luck. He rode with Tarrant Redhand."

"He's old."

"And you're stupid." Erskine closed his fist and hit Gorgarty in the face, decking him.

Gorgarty lay on his back, rubbing his chin. 'Why'd ya do that?'

"Because you're stupid. It's going to get you killed."

"What do ya mean?"

"Assuming you did get lucky with Todd—Kynyr's got a lot of friends who won't take kindly to something happening to his grampa. That includes me. Touch his family and we'll give you the Weems' Cure."

"Ya wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul surveyed the broken, over-turned wagon and the bodies littering the street around it. The only mon he knew who could have Jumped an entire scene of carnage and its debris to a street in Wolffgard was Pandeena. He had been having a drink at the Difficult Horse when word of this had reached the place and the tavern's patrons and others had rushed out.

He arrived too late to see the wounded carried into the shop. Twenty-odd dead bodies had been lined up along one end of the block. Caimbeul pulled his lawgiver runes from beneath his shirt and let them dangle from the golden chain in plain sight. He had only been in Wolffgard for two days, and had not yet had time to make his presence well enough known to be recognized on sight. He sauntered over to them and noticed that at least three of them were sa'necari.

"Don't leave them here." His voice broke across the silent myn carrying the bodies. "Take them to the commons. One of

you get an axe and chop their heads off. We don't need any unpleasant surprises. Get a bonfire built to burn them."

"Who are you to be giving orders?" A lycan snarled at him. Caimbeul flicked his runes. "Your new lawgiver."

A slender fellow nudged the one who had challenged Caimbeul. "That's Fireborn Law ... Padruig Caimbeul."

They all stopped work to stare at him.

"Get some wagons over here. It'll be easier to get them moved." Caimbeul headed for the door to Cahira's shop just in time to see Erskine deck Gorgarty. "What's going on here?"

Gorgarty scrambled to his feet, rubbing his jaw. His eyes fell upon Caimbeul's lawgiver runes. "Slipped my bone into a slut what was begging for it. That arsehole Sinclair's saying I raped her. Ya can't rape a slut."

Caimbeul favored him with a skeptical glance. "What's your name?"

"Gorgarty Burr and I ain't never put my bone into a bitch that didn't want me."

The lawgiver scratched the side of his nose as he glanced at Erskine. "Who owns this shop?"

"Cahira and Todd Sinclair," responded Erskine. "Same Todd Sinclair that rode with Tarrant Redhand. They're Kynyr Maguire's grandparents."

Caimbeul snorted and a wicked grin bloomed on his lips. "Todd's the one put a silver spike through Alistar Weems' belly ... and Weems' crime was rape. Don't push him, Burr, and don't push me. If the bitch wants to press charges ... I'll have you in a cell like that." He snapped his fingers.

\* \* \* \*

Todd returned to the backroom and found Kady huddled on a sofa crying.

He walked over to a cabinet, took out a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. Todd set them on the table and settled himself, gesturing at the other chair as he filled the glasses. "Come here. You need a drink."

"Don't tell Cahira. Please don't tell her." Kady sank into a chair and grasped her whiskey with shaking hands.

"Why?" Todd knocked his whiskey down and poured a second one.

Kady took a swallow of whiskey and felt the warmth of the liquor spread through her. "Because ... She told me to keep my legs crossed or she'd throw me out. I'm barely here and now I'll be out on the street."

Todd stared into his glass, rubbing his forefinger across his lower lip, and thinking. "Why'd you let him do it? Why didn't you fight him?"

"What good would it have done?" Bitterness laced Kady's words. "Every time I've fought, they've just hurt me worse and still gotten their bone into me."

"You could have screamed."

"Who would have believed me? My reputation..."

"Is unearned." Todd stroked Kady's head in a calming gesture. "One love affair does not a slut make, Kady. If one of those hot-tailed dogs bothers you, come to me."

"Todd..."

Sinclair pulled a silver from his pocket and put it into Kady's hands. "Get yourself some trousers. Loose enough



that you can move freely. Same with the shirt. Claw's guardsmyn have only the most basic of training. They're little more than brawlers ... except for Finn and Kynyr. Work hard and I'll show you how to knock them on their faces. Starting with Gorgarty."

"But I'm not a dog."

"I've taught bitches as well as dogs. You'll learn."

"Okay." Kady drank her whiskey and poured a second. By then her shaking had begun to ease.

"And don't brood about it. Think of yourself as a wounded soldier and get on with your life."

Kady could not think of what to say to that, so she simply nodded.

"For the time being, don't go anywhere in town alone. Take one of the cubs with you. I'm sure that Rory and Cooley will be happy to walk you places. I'll explain what happened to Cahira. Then she'll Read you. If that asshole left a present in your belly, it's easily gotten rid of."

Kady's fear, shame, and humiliation began to ease under Todd's kind words. She remembered Kynyr rescuing her in the alley that night, trying to comfort her afterwards, and she knew where he had gotten that attitude now. "Thank you, Todd. Thank you so much."

"Excuse me?"

They both turned and saw Caimbeul standing in the doorway.

"Caimbeul! It's been years!" Todd's eyes lit up and he gestured at the table. "Sit. I'll get you a glass."

Kady's eyes settled on the runes. "Lawgiver..."

Caimbeul accepted the glass of whiskey that Todd pushed toward him on returning to the table. "Do you want to press charges against Gorgarty?"

She glanced at Todd, who refused to indicate his feelings on the matter. Kady dropped her gaze. "No."

"Why not?" Caimbeul asked in a neutral tone.

Kady tossed her hair back. "With my reputation? No one would ever convict him."

"If you change your mind, the law says you must do this before sundown tomorrow."

"I know. I won't."

\* \* \* \*

Their home had finally emptied of concerned neighbors trying to help. Cooley had been tucked into bed with a mild sedative following a crying jag. Once the quiet of the night set in, Cooley had had a delayed reaction to what had happened to the myn he idolized. Kady had sat with him, telling him stories until the cub fell asleep. Something had happened to Kady, and Cahira had caught the haunted look that lay behind the mask the girl had put on while helping with the wounded and Cooley.

She sat at her kitchen table, staring into a cup of tea, her eyes distant and unfocused following Todd's account of what Gorgarty had done to Kady. An untouched plate of food sat on the table in front of her. She picked at it with her fork, moving the food around, yet not putting a single bite to her lips.

Todd sat across from her, his eyes filled with gentle concern. "You must eat, Cahira."

She shifted her head in a listless motion. "I can't chew. It feels like I'm swallowing rocks."

"You're just tired. It's been a hard day."

"No. It's more than that, Todd." She clenched her eyes shut and turned her head away as Todd proffered a slice of beef on a fork at her. A sob broke from her throat. "Gahds, the curse is killing Kynyr."

"He took his chances. The curse isn't killing him."

"Yes, it is. It is. Claw knows. He's threatened to have Kynyr Read."

Todd laid the fork down, went around the table, and held his wife. "Kynyr must have made a mistake somewhere. That's all. It could have happened to anyone."

"It nearly killed Branduff many times. Now it's after Kynyr. He should never have come here."

Todd propped his chin on her head. "I love you, Cahira. I love Kynyr as if he were my own. If I must place my life between Kynyr and Weems' Curse, I will."

"Then I'd lose you too."

"I'm one hundred and seven years old. I don't have a lot of years left. I can feel the age in my body."

"Todd..." Cahira turned into his embrace and wrapped her arms around his waist.

Todd smiled. "If I weren't so tired, I'd ravish you right here on the floor."

"Another time?"

"Remember how we used to make love in the deep grass by the river?"

"How could I not? That's how we got Trevor and I decided I had better marry you."

Todd chuckled. "I planned it that way."

"You what?"

"Confession time?"

Cahira pulled away from him. "I should think so! Trevor's nearly seventy years old."

A guilty smile, full of little boy naughtiness, came on Todd's lips. "I switched your herbs. I knew if I landed you one in the belly, you'd have to stop turning me down."

"Todd, you're incorrigible."

His smile turned into a grin. "Only when it comes to you. We've had a good marriage? Haven't we?"

She reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "Yes, Todd. We have. I have never once regretted it."

"And you'll take care of Kady?"

"I think what happened is partly my fault. If I hadn't been so hard on her, she probably would have screamed instead of submitting to him." Cahira's mouth tightened. "Todd, listen. If you must fight Gorgarty? Kill him."

"I will."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### KADY

Kady Wiggins woke with a flinch and sat up shivering in the fading clutches of a nightmare. She had dreamed that Gorgarty had come back, dragged her off to the Striped Dog and passed her around to be used by all of the males in the common room there. The males surrounding her kept chanting "You can't rape a slut."

Her shivering stopped as the images faded from her waking mind. The cot shifted under her as Kady drew her feet up and tucked them under her to sit cross-legged. Pulling at her simple white slip, which she had worn under her dress and then slept in, Kady stared at all the cabinets, chests, and shelves in momentary confusion as to where she was. It slowly returned to her that she had spent the night in one of the storerooms of Cahira's shop.

Sunlight from a high window made a patch of brightness in the center of the floor. The dress she had worn yesterday draped a chair at the edge of the light. Kady reached for it and froze, seeing the spatters of blood down the front from working with the wounded.

"Kynyr." The image of him being carried torn and bloody from the street flashed through her mind and banished all thoughts of her own suffering. Kady threw back the light coverlet and swung her feet over the side of the cot, spied her chest of clothing, and peeled the slip over her head.

Sifting through her folded dresses, Kady rejected each one that she picked out. They were more suited to waiting tables in the tavern and serving drinks than working in a healer's shop, and entirely too revealing in the cleavage department—so much so that Kady fully expected Cahira to complain about them. Her fingers brushed across a blue scarf and inspiration struck. Kady got out her sewing kit and, with a few quick tacking stitches secured the scarf into the top of the bodice of one of her dresses. Then she put it on and was satisfied that nothing objectionable showed. No one could accuse her of looking like a slut in that.

Her stomach and chest tightened and Kady fought down a sensation of panic. "I'm not a slut. I'm not."

Todd's words came back to her: *One love affair does not a slut make.* She remembered the silver that Todd had given her to purchase trousers and a shirt. Kady opened her pouch and counted out the coins in it. In addition to the silver, she had seven copper fivepence that she had been saving. If she bought two sets of pants and shirts, then she could rip the seams out of one set and use it as a pattern to turn all of her dresses into more pairs. If she was going to start a new life and put all the ugliness behind her as Todd had said, then clothes were a good beginning.

She walked out into the shop and found Cahira sitting at the table with a cup of tea. A teapot, a platter of hot scones, a tub of butter, and another of jam sat in the middle of the table.

"Sit, Kady. Have some tea and scones."

"You should have gotten me up. I could have fixed breakfast for you."

Cahira gave her a maternal smile. "You needed the rest. After what happened yesterday."

"I'm worried about Kynyr."

"I'm more worried about Ramsey. Kynyr and Finn are responding to Pandeena's treatments. Ramsey isn't."

"Poor Ramsey. He was always nice to me."

Cahira's lips tightened for an instant as she nodded. "Here, eat. Can you handle a team?"

"Yes."

"Good. Once you've eaten, you can drive over to the manor. The cubs have loaded all of Aisha's stuff that was salvageable into the wagon. Take Rory with you."

"Is there anything I can pick up for you while I'm out?"

"Lots of things. Todd cleared the second floor storage room so we can use it as an infirmary. The biggest problem is finding beds for it."

"I'll see what I can find. Maybe we can get people to donate since it would benefit the whole community."

"Well, see what you can do. But first, eat."

\* \* \* \*

Georgie Rogan came out of the barn when Kady drove into the yard with Rory beside her. The hostler offered her a hand down from the seat as she set the break. "Hello, Kady. What ya got there?"

"Everything we could salvage from the broken wagon."

Kady hesitated to put her hand in his, uncertain whether to trust him or not, memories of Gorgarty Burr making her cringe.

Rory jumped from the wagon and ran over to stand next to Georgie. "Give him yer hand, Kady! No one's gonna mess with you while I'm around."

Kady managed a whiff of a grin that vanished the instant it appeared.

"Ack, Kady, I'm sorry." Georgie clucked his tongue at her. "Heard about Gorgarty Burr. No one believes him. No one likes him. Let me help ya down."

Kady sucked a breath through her nostrils, a smile wavering across her lips as she accepted Georgie's hand. "Thank you."

Georgie held onto her hand after her feet touched the heavy packed earth, and that set her stomach to fluttering with a case of nerves. He led her up to the door and knocked on it.

Kissie answered. The blonde nibari had a kind smile for Kady that took the edge off the young bitch's initial nervousness.

"Kissie, this here is Kady Wiggins and she's just brought Aisha's salvage. Be a good one and take her in to talk to the Mistress."

Kady saw Rory nod at her. "Okay."

She had never been inside the manor before. The sheer size of it overwhelmed her and she had to struggle not to hunch her shoulders and lower her head, which would have revealed how intimidated she felt by it all. Kady grabbed



Rory's hand and clutched it, sneaking glances at the rich tapestries on the walls and the elegant chandeliers hanging overhead.

The immensity of the Great Hall stole Kady's breath and her steps faltered as Kissie showed her inside. Two rows of stone support columns ran along the south and north sides of the room. Clusters of comfortable chairs, sofas, and low tables in dark-stained wood broke the Great Hall into false alcoves. The sections of a large trestle table stood stacked along the south wall to be assembled for rare formal dinners. At the east end stood the deep hearth and to the left of the hearth were three looms, a spinning wheel, and several baskets of wool and yarn.

Two bitches in fine dresses sat at the looms, while a third kept the spinning wheel going with a steady hand.

"Hello, Kady. What brings you here?"

Kady jumped and nearly fell over. She had not noticed Robert Morcar sitting in the shadows. He wore chain mail that hung to his knees with the sides split to make movement easier, with a breast plate of a strange sapphire metal she had never seen before.

Rory stepped in front of her, bristling with a child's ire and protectiveness, laced with the arrogance of the street and a deeply-rooted self-myth of his own invincible resourcefulness. "We brought Mistress Aisha everything that wasn't broken."

The bitch at the spinning wheel rose and walked into the middle of the Great Hall, smiling at the cub's audacity. "Rory, Darmyk is playing in his treehouse. Why don't you join him there?"

"Todd told me to keep an eye on Kady so nothing bad happens to her."

"Go play, Rory," said Robert Morcar. "Kady is perfectly safe here. Erskine and I won't let anything happen to her. Go. Play."

Rory gulped and backed away from Morcar. "Yessir."

The cub turned and fled.

"Kady, come along. I want to talk to you a bit in private." Aisha picked a bell off the nearest table and rang it.

Kissie reappeared. "Yes, Mistress Aisha?"

"Please bring..." Aisha turned to Kady. "What would you like to drink? Sherry? Brandy? We have some very nice claret."

"Uhhmn. The claret."

"Kissie, two glasses and a bottle of claret. Bring them to the Rose Room. And some of those Eccles cakes you baked this morning."

The Rose Room was small—by the standards of the manor—decorated in deep shades of rose and mauve. A mural covered the south wall of lycans at a picnic in the middle of a rose garden the males in hybrid form and the females in human while true wolves romped around them. The wall hangings were all of pastoral scenes. Sofas and chairs formed half circles around three low tables, upholstered in matching rose brocades. A woven reed basket, containing knitting, occupied the corner of a sofa. Aisha settled on that sofa, moved her knitting to the floor, and adjusted her skirts.

"Sit where you're comfortable, Kady."

Kady chose a chair, smoothing her skirt. Although she wore her best dress, Kady felt shabby compared to Aisha.

Kissie arrived with a platter, placed it on the low table, and left.

Aisha poured claret for both of them. "I hope it's to your taste, Kady. I don't favor the stronger spirits that my husband prefers."

Kady sipped her wine and nodded. "It's very good."

"How is Kynyr ... and the others? When I heard about the Devil's Silver..."

"None of them have been fully conscious yet. Ramsey's the worst though. Cahira says he's..." Kady had a difficult time with some of Cahira's words and phrases. "She says he's not responding to treatment."

"It's hard when you lose the young ones, Kady." Aisha put an Eccles cake on a small plate and extended that to her.

Kady set her claret on the table and accepted the plate. She took a bite and the sweet, sugary treat made her smile. "That's good."

"Isbeth is an excellent baker. Her lying in time is approaching, so Domina will be taking over for a few weeks. Dommy is good, but not as good with the sweets as Isbeth."

Kady nodded, trying to look interested. Her father owned three nibari, but Kady had never felt entirely comfortable with them.

"Is there anything I can do to help? Cahira and I ... we've never gotten along, but I trust her more than I do Baroucha."

"Beds. Furniture is the biggest problem right now."

"How so?"

"We've turned the storeroom into an infirmary, but we've no beds yet. The furniture maker says he can't have more ready for at least a week."

Aisha sipped her claret with a considering look. "We have a lot of spare beds. Would Cahira accept them if I sent them to her?"

"I'm sure she would. She told me she would be grateful for any help she could get right now."

"How many?"

"Six for the infirmary. Singles, not doubles. It's easier to work on someone when you don't have to lean across."

"I will have them delivered before nightfall. Is there anything else? Something for yourself?"

"I'm sleeping on a cot."

"So, seven beds. One of them a nice big one?"

"I'd like that."

"Tell Cahira I want to help ... that I want to put the past behind us?"

Kady knew there had to be an ulterior motive, and a gesture of friendship from the Chieftain's wife was not something that should be refused. If Cahira disagreed, Kady resolved to enlist Todd in convincing her.

\* \* \* \*

Two huge wagons loaded down with goods, each drawn by four stocky ponies, pulled up in front of the Scarlet Angel Mage Supply. A hunch-backed old mon drove the lead wagon, her long white hair tied into a tail at her neck; while another

geezer drove the rear wagon. Both vehicles had four children perched precariously atop the stacks of chests and crates.

The crone sprang from the lead wagon as sprightly as a child, glanced both ways and darted into the shop. "Hey, Luciano, where's your dad?"

"Dyna!" Luciano came from behind the counter and hugged her. "Lemyari got him."

"Sorry to hear about that."

"Not as much as I was. He bit me three days later and informed me that spiritworkers taste bad. He hasn't been around since."

"Well, they do."

"You'd know about those things?"

Dynanna snickered. "I got those supplies you wanted."

Luciano shook his head, his expression turned unhappy. "Can't use them. I'm closing the store. Queen Tomyrilen routed the Sharani forces at Wolfbane Field. General Mardreth Dovane has retreated to Skeleton Creek to regroup."

"You gonna run?"

"No choice."

Dynanna lowered her head, and rubbed her forefinger under her nose. "I got something that will help, but I want it back."

She reached into her pocket and produced a small clear glass globe.

"Is that a carrying globe?" Luciano's eyes saucered as he accepted it.

"Yup, put the whole store in your pocket. Then head for Red Wolff. Yuwenghau are making a stand there. We're gonna protect the last descendant of Dawnhand."

"Oh, My Lady. Thank you. Where shall I meet you?"

"Wolffgard. I'll be there no later than the equinox. Open a store there and I'll find you."

"I'll leave tonight."

"Good mon. If the lycans contest your presence, just ask for Pandeena and tell her I sent you."

"Which name shall I give her?"

"Dyna. She knows all my faces."

Dynanna stalked toward the door.

"Wait, My Lady..."

She flicked her hair back as she turned to look at Luciano.  
"What?"

"Several things actually. You told me to gather gossip and I have. Padruig Caimbeul has left Running Horse. He's in Wolffgard. Todd Sinclair—for eighty years the sa'necari believed him slain at Kinsdale Wood—he's alive and in Wolffgard. He has a grandson, Kynyr Maguire, possibly the greatest swordsmen the lycans have produced in over two hundred years." Luciano's eyes narrowed. "So the Butchering Serpent's cowardly men shot him with poisoned arrows. They don't know yet if Maguire will survive."

Dynanna's features went still. "Sinclair, Caimbeul, and the last descendant of Dawnhand ... all in Wolffgard at the same time. Hmmn." She sucked her left cheek in and thought for a moment. "Can Lokynen be far behind?"

"The Battle-Master?"

"Yeah, that one. He was Todd's first mentor. Small world." A cheeky grin spread across the Trickster's face. "Looks like I got me a new bag of trouble to play with and I'm going to make good use of it. Funsies!"

She snapped her fingers and a tall staff appeared in her hands. She gave it to Luciano. "You're going to need this."

Luciano's eyes saucered. "But that's ... that's Sunrise."

"Yeah, I know. It has just been sitting in my hoard for the past five hundred years gathering dust. Take good care of it."

"I thought the Obsidian Dragon had it..."

Dynanna chuckled. "The dragon came down with a bad case of hives and while he was busy scratching his itch I stole half his hoard. Last I heard, the old bugger was still scratching. His wings are in tatters and he's got a bad case of nervous exhaustion."

Luciano burst out laughing and hugged the staff. "I'll take good care of it, My Lady."

"I bet you will. Be sure to tell any of the Faithful you encounter on the way to Wolffgard that I'll be there soon and I'm opening my armories."

Dynanna strode out to the wagons and gestured at the children riding on hers. "Bodi, I got a mission for you and Lilac."

Bodi jumped down and ran over to her. "A mission! I got a mission."

He paraded around her in small circles, grinning.

Lilac gathered her skirts, climbed carefully to the ground, and joined them. She patted her pouches and smiled at the jingling coins. "What's the mission?"

"Spies," Dynanna hissed. "And a delivery. I heard that a friend of yours is in Wolffgard. Todd Sinclair. He's gonna need the stuff in the orange chest."

"Funsies!" Lilac squealed.

"You gonna loan us a carry ball?" Bodi stopped parading and looked up at her.

"Can't. I loaned my spare to Luciano. You'll have to carry it."

Bodi wiggled his eyebrows. "It's heavy."

Dynanna nodded. "Pieface, you get them to Wolffgard. Take Sugar Maple along to help carry it. Once the delivery is made, I want you and Sugar Maple back on the wagons, pronto."

"Gotcha." Pieface snapped his fingers, his powers swirled around the four children in shades of red and rose. Then they all vanished.

\* \* \* \*

Kady settled into the chair by the bed, dipped a cloth into a basin of cool water, and bathed Kynyr's sweat-drenched face.

Kynyr moaned. His eyes opened, staring out into dimly lit room. "Promised Kady ... I..."

"I'm here." She continued to dip the cloth into the water, squeeze it out, and then stroke his face with it. "Kynyr, I'm here."

"Promised Kady ... I would..." He clenched his eyes shut; a grimace tightened his features as his body spasmed.

"Promised ... promised ... beat Cormic..."



She tilted and inclined her head, lips parted in concern.  
"Kynyr, look at me. I'm here. It's Kady."

"I found her ... Leeny."

"I'm not Leeny, I'm Kady. Please, Kynyr." Emotions rippled through Kady striking her heart like ripples in the stream—fear, desperation, and despair—making her voice tremble.  
"Please, Kynyr..."

"Leeny ... she's ... beautiful." His words broke off in another shuddering spasm.

"Who's Leeny?"

"His sister. Kathleen." Cahira had slipped into the room so quietly that Kady had not known she was there until she spoke. "Kynyr and Kathleen were very close as children. Even though she was older by two years, Kynyr was always fiercely protective of her. She was born with a cleft palate. It took me years to fix it."

While she spoke, Cahira filled dosing glasses with poppy milk, Holadil, and Pandeena's elixir called Idyn Gold. "Leeny couldn't say certain words for many years. One of them was her name. The letter K gave her a lot of trouble. She could not say 'brother' properly either. Brother became Brubs and she still calls him that. Kathleen became Leeny for the same reason. Lift him up, Kady, so I can try to get the medicines into him."

Kady moved from the chair to the side of the bed and cradled Kynyr, supporting his head.

In fits and starts, Cahira filled Kynyr's mouth with the medicine and stroked his throat to make him swallow. To

Kady, it seemed to take forever before Cahira finished and they eased him back down onto the bed.

Kady sucked in a trembling breath and a tear came to her eye.

Cahira noticed and squeezed Kady's shoulder. "The gods won't let him die, Kady. They know we need him. Todd's too old for another war. That's what we trained Kynyr for."

"He..." Kady swallowed. "He told me once ... that he wanted to be my champion. I laughed at him. I thought he was just having me on."

"Kynyr would never do that."

"I know that now. The night before he left for Hell's Widow, he rescued me from Cormic Parry and his friends. Kynyr promised to thrash Cormic as soon as he returned."

"Go to bed, Kady."

"I don't want to leave him."

"He'll sleep until morning. You need your rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

"But, Cahira..."

"No buts. Go to bed."

"Yes, mam."

"One last thing, Kady. Tomorrow Pandeena and I will be warding all the minds in the household. We're dealing with sa'necari and it never hurts to be cautious."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### FUNERAL

Heironim sat at his desk, drumming his fingers, his head propped on his other hand. His four remaining sa'necari lieutenants formed a half circle before the desk, sitting uneasily in their chairs. Hell's Widow was only half a day's ride from Red Wolf Valley. Dorjan and his units should have been back the next morning at the latest.

"Where are they? They should have been back two days ago."

Jondries, a spindleshanks of a mon, with a long, wispy beard on the tip of his pointed chin, shifted uneasily in his chair. His amaranthine eyes had just begun to lose their whites, pupils, and irises to the genetic alteration of the rites. "Could the bastard prince have taken a different way home?"

Heironim smashed his fist on the desk. "No. Not with a wagon. Something has happened to them. Gather seven myn and meet me at the lightning struck tree at the edge of town."

Once they had assembled, Heironim and his band set off at a good pace, not so fast that it would tire the horses, but steady enough that they would reach the site where Dorjan had been instructed to carry out his ambush while there was still enough light to see with.

Crows circling above a stand of elms near the bend in the road, drew them to a body that had bloated in the heat and

split the seams of its skin. Heironim rode close to it and extended his necromantic senses in a low level scan before dismounting. His eyes went distant, his body alert to all the sounds and psychic scents around him. The area was drenched in death and yet this was the only corpse he could sense.

Heironim walked up and knelt beside the corpse. Maggots swam in the liquefying flesh that soaked the body's livery with rot. "It's one of ours. Where are the rest?"

"Maybe the lycans carried them off?" Jondries suggested, his unguarded eyes glinting their true amaranthine colors.

"No." Heironim shook his head, rising to his feet. "They would have burned the bodies here ... in the middle of the road. Not taken them home to burn them."

As he walked into the middle of the road a bit of green glass caught his eye near an oak tree and he walked in that direction. He found three shattered bottles and one unbroken one with a Dragonsbreath label.

Jondries reached for the bottle.

"Don't touch it, back away."

His aide withdrew, stepping into his own footprints.

Heironim knelt and placed his hands in a clear spot to either side of the debris. His voice went hollow as he scanned it. "The wagon overturned. A lycan died. Three lay dying." He snapped out of his vision with a shriek. "Diviiiiiniity! Bellocar protect me! Wilderkin divinity. It slaughtered them. There was a broad spectrum Jump. That's why there's nothing here."

Jondries turned ashen. "Yuwenghau? Or one of the Nine?"

Heironim sucked in a deep breath to steady himself and scanned again. "Yuwenghau. An extremely powerful one. I must get word to Malthus."

"How?"

"I'll think of something."

\* \* \* \*

Malthus rolled over on his side and watched his wife slipping her arms into the sleeves of a black dress. "Why black? I don't like you in black. It makes you look pale."

"They're burying Eideard this afternoon. And I want to stop off and find out how Kynyr is doing before going on to the funeral."

"He was just a guardsmon, Merissa. There's no reason—"

She spun around on him, her eyes blazing as tears slid down her cheeks. "Eideard was my friend. I knew him for eight years. Show some compassion, Malthus."

"As you wish." He slid out of bed nude, still smelling of sex, and helped her lace her dress up. "I'll have the wagon hitched up and drive you there."

"I would appreciate it."

Malthus went to the closet and snatched a blue tunic and brown trousers out.

Merissa's eyes widened. "Wear something black, for the gods' sake. Show respect."

"I didn't know him well." Malthus threw the clothes on their bed and dug back into the closet, coming out with a black shirt, tunic, and pants. "Will this satisfy you?"

"What's wrong with you? Every time I open my mouth, you snap at me."

"You're exaggerating. If you don't wish me to stay, I'll leave."

Merissa's face twisted up. "Oh, Malthus, don't say that. I love you. I'm just ... upset. I don't mean to take it out on you."

He forced a smile and kissed her. "I am certain the past few days have been hard on you. The attack upon Kynyr and his companions has been hard on us all. You go on down and wait for me in the Great Hall. I'll get dressed and have the wagon readied."

\* \* \* \*

The shop sign said "closed," but black clad lycans were coming and going as Malthus drove up to the front. He set the break, tied the horses up, and walked around to Merissa. He lifted her down and they went inside.

All of the cabinets and shelves had been draped in black until nothing showed that it was a shop. A large table had been moved into the center and piled with food. As the bitches entered, they placed more food on the table that they had brought. The taste of grief was in the air and Malthus inhaled it like the bouquet of fine wine. His only regret was that it was Eideard's funeral and not Kynyr's. He intended to find out whatever he could while he was here and then head for Hell's Widow at his first opportunity to talk to Heironim. Something had gone wrong with the ambush and he needed

to find out just what it had been. The bastard prince should have been dead.

There were eight cubs in the crowd, all solemn and quiet, sticking close to their mothers. They all wore black traditional robes. Malthus recognized three of them: Cooley, Rory, and Hamish. That Sinclair cub was, supposedly, older than Rory, but he was closer to Hamish in height. Compared to the other cubs, Cooley was of exceptionally small stature and, comparing him to them, piqued Malthus' curiosity.

Cooley pulled at his robe, muttering, "I want my trousers back."

"Shh!" Rory gave him a scowl and an elbow in the ribs. "It's a funeral."

"I been to them before and I didn't have to wear this thing." He glanced around at the adults, all dressed as he was.

"You sound like a damned city wolf. Stop it."

"I *am* a city wolf."

Malthus stared at Cooley, walked over, and squatted in front of him. "You're a city wolf? I thought you were from Three Stones."

Cooley gulped, backed up, and fled for the stairs.

"What did you do to frighten him?" Merissa disengaged herself from a group of elderly bitches and put her hand on his arm.

"I don't know."

"Well, come here. Some of the aunties want to meet you. The dogs are having a drink in the upstairs parlor. There's going to be a wake for Eideard at the Difficult Horse after the

funeral. But it's dogs only. The bitches and cubs are coming back here."

Malthus endured the fluttering attention of the elderly bitches as long as he could stand it, and was about to disengage himself and head upstairs to the parlor, when a tiny blonde bitch made her way through the crowd and stopped in front of him.

"Merissa." She greeted his wife with a stiff nod.

A tentative smile touched Merissa's lips. "Cahira, this is my husband, Malthus Estrobian. Malthus, I would like you to meet Cahira Sinclair, Kynyr's grandmother."

"Pleased to meet you. Your grandson is a brave mon." Malthus took her hand, brought it to his lips, and attempted a discreet scan. A sting of power struck him across the face.

Cahira scowled at him and jerked her hand back. "That's not polite."

Merissa stared after her in shock. "Cahira is so odd."

"I'm going to go sit with the dogs."

Malthus went upstairs and glanced about. The loud talking made it easy to tell where the parlor lay and the smells from the kitchen established that it was next to the parlor. Therefore, the rooms where the wounded lay had to be to his left. Malthus walked past two doors and went into the third room.

His lips curled in malevolent pleasure: he had gotten lucky with his first try. Pale-faced and ill, Kynyr lay either sleeping or unconscious—Malthus could not tell from the doorway—with the sheet turned back to his waist because of the summer heat. The windows were open to allow a breeze to



cool the room. Malthus closed the door behind him and moved to the bedside. The hair had been shaved from Kynyr's chest and stomach, and the neat catgut stitches holding him together showed.

*Belly wound? Or something else?*

Malthus flicked the sheet back and gazed at the cross cut. *They opened him up to take his organs ... why isn't he dead?*

Three needles with half-moon heads protruded from Kynyr's left arm.

*Inoculation?*

Malthus drew one from Kynyr's arm and pocketed it before placing two fingers on his chest to Read him. The poison had made a mess of the bastard prince, as Malthus had known it would. The new blend was much stronger than what he had used on Nikko. It puzzled Malthus that Kynyr had not died within an hour of being shot. He expanded his search of Kynyr's bio-alchemy and sensed the traces of a countering agent that Malthus could not identify. He had believed that nothing less than the Sapphire Elixir of Idyn—which was nearly impossible to acquire—could have counteracted his new blend. Malthus decided to send the needle to his mother to see if she and her bio-chemists could identify what had been used on it.

It would be a simple matter to finish Kynyr off, a small thrust of power into his heart that would leave no residue, and no one would be the wiser. Malthus inserted a needle of darkest energy into Kynyr's body. The unconscious guardsmon shuddered but did not waken. Malthus increased

the strength of his intrusion gradually, feeling Kynyr's heartbeats turn irregular, struggling.

*Almost done. Just a little bit more.*

"What are you doing in here? Get away from him."

Malthus jerked his hand from Kynyr's chest, and turned to see Kady Wiggins standing in the doorway. "As you wish. We're old friends, you know."

"You certainly are not. You nearly came to blows in my Dad's tavern often enough."

Kady Wiggins wore a shapeless black shirt and pants that did little to conceal the finer points of her voluptuous body. A broad leather belt cinched her waist. Two long fighting knives hung from the belt, sheaths strapped to her thighs for an easy pull. Malthus wondered what she was playing at dressed like that. There was no possibility that anyone would assume her to be a threat, considering how often her legs had been forcibly opened. Malthus had heard various dogs bragging about it.

"You're Hereward's daughter—the slut."

Malthus stalked toward her, expecting her to flee. Instead, she stood her ground. His hand shot out. His fingers brushed her cheek and he lunged for her mind only to slam up against the strongest wards he had encountered in years. Malthus knew he could break them, but it would take hours of concentrated effort—hours he did not have right then.

*Perhaps I should turn Preece loose on her. He'd enjoy that.*

"Get out of here. The parlor is that way." Kady pointed down the hall with a preemptory gestured. "Go on."

"As you wish." Malthus headed for the parlor, having to work to keep his pace calm. If Cahira had set that ward, then she was stronger than any lycan mage he had yet encountered—and he had killed several in his laboratories. Baroucha might be right in insisting that Cahira was a threat that should be removed.

Eideard's open coffin sat in the center of the parlor, grave offerings spread across him. Malthus felt conspicuous as all eyes turned toward him. The furniture had been moved back along the walls where more than a dozen lycans spread themselves across the chairs and the floor, while others stood around or leaned against the walls. Six lycans stood lined up at the coffin; one by one they left their grave gifts in the coffin and bestowed the kiss of farewell on Eideard's cold face. Cooley sat on the lap of a large, red-haired lycan of late years. When the cub saw Malthus, he nestled deeper against Todd Sinclair.

"He's here," Cooley murmured, pressing his face into Todd's shoulder.

Malthus recognized some of the faces from having seen them drinking at the Difficult Horse, however, they were not wolves of his acquaintance, and he had no names to put with the faces. He could almost taste the suspicion in the room and knew that he needed to do something to turn matters around before suspicion turned to anger and they all attacked him simply for being the only non-lycan there.

He strode up to Todd, reached in his pocket and brought out two gold coins. "Merissa and I would like to contribute to the cost of the funeral and wake."

"Ayup. Sure you would." Todd's eyes narrowed as he tightened his arm around Cooley. "Your people killed him."

Malthus sucked in a breath as he saw several of the lycans sprout fur. "My people?"

"You're human, aren't you?"

"Well ... yes."

"You've made no secret your sire was sa'necari."

"Where are you going with this?" Malthus' necromantic senses reeled beneath the vibrations of rage filling the room. "What has my father got to do with this?"

"Then your people killed him. Eideard never had a chance. They shot him down in cold blood."

The mourners gathered around Todd and Malthus, growling. Malthus saw that some of them had their blades out. The two gold coins fell from Malthus' hand as he backed towards the door.

Cooley whimpered. Todd patted the cub on the back. "Quiet. The mutherin' Thomas is not going to bother you."

Todd threw the racial slur in Malthus' face without anger in his tone.

"I had nothing to do with it."

"Ayup. That's what you all say. Liars all."

Malthus knew that they would be on him at any moment. There were too many to fight. The lycans would rip him apart.

"What's going on here?" Caimbeul came through the door. He was the only one in the room that matched Todd Sinclair for size. The lawgiver's gaze swept the room, sized the situation up in a flash, and he stepped between Malthus and the others.

"He's a human," a lycan snarled. "Humans killed Eideard."  
Caimbeul fixed that one with a glance. "I know you, Ezra. You work at the mill."

Ezra gave a quick nod. "Yup."

"So you want to kill this mon because he's human? Atreius Ivanstern is downstairs, come to pay his respects. Are you going to kill Atreius because he's human?"

"What's Atreius got ta do with it?"

"My point exactly. What's Malthus done besides being born the wrong race?"

"But..."

Caimbeul shook his head at Ezra and then wagged his finger at the room. "You know the law. Malthus was working at the Sanctuary Refugee Camp when Eideard was attacked. He was helping our people. His wife is downstairs. You all know Merissa."

Todd cuddled Cooley and remained silent.

"Malthus has not broken our laws. He has as much right to live in our village as anyone else. Let him be." Caimbeul scanned the room. "If you still wish to kill him, then you'll have to go through me."

First one and then another returned to their places around the room. Caimbeul took Malthus by the arm and walked him out the door. "Go downstairs and stay with your wife. They're less likely to bother you with her at your side."

"My thanks."

"I don't need your thanks for doing my job, and I don't want them either. I don't like you, Malthus. But until you break our laws, there's nothing I can do to you. When you do,

I'll be there. Count on it. You're going to get more trouble than you can handle." Caimbeul turned and went back into the parlor.

\* \* \* \*

From the doorway of the shop, Kady watched them load Eideard's coffin into the back of a wagon and drape it with a black cloth. Todd drove with Cahira and Cooley on the seat beside him. It seemed as if the entire village had turned out to follow the coffin to the little cemetery behind the Willodarian Shrine. When the procession turned the corner onto Main Street and passed out of Kady's sight, she closed the door and locked it.

Kady went upstairs to the kitchen, checked the wood in the stove, and set the kettle on the fire. She gathered the plates and glasses from the parlor onto a wooden serving tray and carried them back into the kitchen where she settled them into a pan of water to soak. By then steam had begun to pour from the kettle's spout. She filled a ball with tea, placed it in a cup, and covered it with hot water.

Settling into a chair with her cup of tea, Kady sifted through the events of the day and remembered chasing Malthus out of Kynyr's room. Something strange had happened or been about to happen. The way he had stood there, bent over Kynyr with his fingers on the wounded mon's chest, bothered Kady. It had looked—somehow—predatory. Furthermore, she had sensed something indescribable that felt like a gathering of ice in her stomach and a tickle of chill along her arms. Kady had had feelings like that before, but

never known what to make of them. She resolved to discuss those sensations with Cahira.

Abruptly, Kady abandoned her tea and went to check on Kynyr, wanting to make certain that he was all right. She intended to talk to Todd about Malthus' odd behavior. Kady was just eighteen years old and had been waiting tables in her father's tavern since she was twelve. She had enjoyed the interaction with the young males who spent many a late afternoon there; learned to be wary; yet never realized just how much of their restraint toward her had come from her father's protection—until he withdrew it.

Then she had discovered the rotting underside of lycan society, the young wolves who did not care how they got their bone into a young bitch, so long as they did. Where once she had thought there was honor among her people, she began to see fear and that fear made her weak.

"Fear only fear." Kady muttered one of the proverbs that Todd was constantly shoving at her, and thrust her fear back. "It'll be an icy day in high summer before I let another of them part my legs."

Kady lit a lamp and went into Kynyr's room. His eyes were open, staring into the gathering darkness. Her heart skipped a beat. Kynyr was so pale and still that he looked dead. She put the lamp on the nightstand and brushed her fingers along his cheek, a lump forming in her throat.

Kynyr stirred at her touch, and tried to sit, only to fall back on the bed.

Relief flooded her. She wanted to touch him, hold him, kiss him, anything to reassure herself that her champion was

going to live. Kady pulled a chair up and settled into it, stroking his face in touches as light as feathers.

His eyes glistened and his cheeks were wet. His voice was harsh and raspy. "Kady?"

"Yeah, it's me." She squeezed his hand.

"I'm ... home?" His hand went to his chest, fingers curling into a fist as he ground them into his muscles over his heart. "I dreamed ... someone thrust a blade ... into my heart." Kynyr paused between words with gasps, sucking air in jerky pulls. "My chest ... hurts."

*Malthus. Malthus hurt him. I know he did. But how?* Kady's gaze swept over the labels of the bottles clustered on the night stand. "I'll get you something for it."

Kynyr's fingers drifted to the catgut stitches, an edge of horror entering his voice. "They opened me up."

"Hush. Nothing's missing, Kynyr. They didn't get that far." Her eyes softened with concern. Moving the bottles around, Kady located the Fire Poppy milk and poured a measure into the dosing glass as Cahira had shown her.

"How'd I ... get here?"

"Pandeena. She's a mage of some kind." She ran her fingers through the wealth of ginger hair spread across the pillow like a golden halo where the lamplight touched it, combing the sweat-drenched locks away from Kynyr's face.

"They killed my friends ... Finn ... he could have got away, but he came back for me. They shot him."

The grief in his voice, so thick and heavy, pounded the strings of her heart like a hammer. "He's alive, Kynyr. Finn's alive. So's Ramsey."



"Eideard?"

"They buried him today."

The tears worsened and a long, keening note shivered from Kynyr's throat so like the wild cousins that goose-pimples broke out on Kady's arms. She moved to sit on the edge of the bed, and cradled him like a child, his face pressed against her breasts. His arms went around her waist and he clung to her.

"It's my fault. It's my own damned fault."

"That's not what Todd says, Kynyr. You were outnumbered six to one."

"I keep seeing them fall, Kady." A frantic note entered Kynyr's voice. "I keep seeing them fall ... and there's nothing I can do. Nothing at all. I was in command. I should have ... gods help me."

"It's not your fault." Kady brought the glass of poppy milk to Kynyr's lips. "That's the pain talking. I can see it in your eyes. Drink this and you'll feel better."

Kynyr turned his head away, burying his face between her breasts. "What is it?"

"Fire poppy."

"I don't want it."

The right corner of Kady's mouth twisted in annoyance. "You're punishing yourself and that's wrong."

"It's my fault."

"I'm not going round and round with you about this, Kynyr. Either drink this or I'm going to smack you silly."

Kynyr lifted an eyebrow. "Now you sound like the Dreaded Horde."

"The what?"

"My sisters ... and Finn's ... the Dreaded Horde. Bossy bitches."

"Are you going to drink it? Or am I going to smack you?"  
She poised a threatening hand where he could see it.

"I drink it." He favored her with a wan smile.

Kady put the glass to his lips again and this time he drank. She disengaged his arms, gentle yet firm, and lowered him to the bed, then straightened the sheets around him. Kady's face came close to his and, impulsively, she kissed his lips in a brief chaste brush.

Kynyr tangled his fingers in her hair as he began to feel the drug. "You're beautiful."

"Don't be silly." Kady pulled away him. "Pandeena's beautiful. I'm not."

"I love you, Kady. I want you."

She felt his forehead. "You're either feverish or it's the poppy milk."

"Kiss me again. Please, Kady, kisssss..." His eyes closed as the drug pulled him under.

She checked his vital signs and tucked him in better. Then Kady kissed him on the forehead. "Silly male."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### A DAY OF CHANGES

Malthus rode north to keep his rendezvous with Egidius and finalize his plans for destroying another section of Claw's lands to satisfy his bargain with Brandrahoon. Eighty three years ago, Malthus' paternal ancestor, Lord Carneades Iagaris had destroyed the Lycan Rebellion of 997 and personally rited Claw Redhand's twin sons, Logan and Tarrant, as part of an elaborate execution in which more than a dozen lycan chieftains and their sons perished. Thirty years ago, the Sharani swept into Waejontor led by the Lionhawk of Danae and, aided by lycan treacheries, overran three-quarters of the realm over the space of roughly fifteen years. The surviving sa'necari nobility had been driven into the remotest reaches of the Eiralyskali Mountains.

Brandrahoon had promised Malthus the lands and titles of his father, Lord Feodras Iagaris, in exchange for destroying the Redhand family and subjugating Clan Red Wolf. Until his meeting with Queen Tomyrilen and Lord Brandrahoon, Malthus had never dreamed that what he felt was his due had any hope of becoming a reality. Now he could almost taste it.

The elimination of Shaurone's lycan allies now entered its final phases. The queen had agents insinuated in the villages and lands of each of the Nine Great Clans and four of the smaller ones. In every major city where lycans lived among the humans and sa'necari, the queen's forces under

Brandrahoon were quietly rounding them up, and moving them to detention centers located deep in the territories that had been reclaimed from their Sharani occupiers.

After riding for two hours, Malthus caught a flash of orange moving among the branches high above him. More and more of his watchers began to come out of hiding. Imps scampered through the brush and briars, through the trees on every side of him, leaping like wizened orange-skinned monkeys. The imp-warlord Gahni had worked with Malthus 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.

By the time he reached the caves, Gahni would have sent messengers on to Egidius' encampment about his approach, and Egidius would be waiting at the caves for him.

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.

He arrived at the caves, and dismounted. One cave, half-concealed by an overhang of thick moss and brush, had two stone tables in front of it: a bleeding table and a table for the tools of the rites. A twelve-year-old lycan cub lay shackled to the table on his belly. Malthus raised a speculative eyebrow as he ran his fingers over the still warm corpse; grasped the wealth of rufous hair now matted with blood and turned the

dead cub's head to view its face. That one had been a fine looking cub that would have brought a fair price at the slave markets. A twist of irritation curled through Malthus. He counted fifteen wounds in the cub's corpse and gritted his teeth: of all the sa'necari under his current command, only Egidius and Laetus practiced the esoteric form of mortgiefan called the Fifteen Piercings.

Egidius emerged from the cave with a bottle of wine, which he waved at Malthus. "It's a decent vintage for lycan homebrew. Come inside and have some."

"That cub was worth at least two hundred gold. Don't waste them." Malthus scowled at Egidius. "Furthermore, you were supposed to wait for me to make my picks from the newest batch of captives."

"I thought you were going to come sooner." Egidius placed his bottle on the bleeding table beside the corpse's neck, stuck his fingers into a large wound, and pulled them out coated with the thick goo of congealing blood. He sucked the blood off his fingers.

"I got away as soon as I could. I'm not as free now that I'm living in the manor." Malthus watched Egidius repeatedly sticking his fingers into the wounds and licking them off, growing more and more irritated by his friend's insouciance.

Egidius leered. "Enjoying your bitch now that you've married her?"

Malthus's stomach growled and he realized that he was hungry. He imitated Egidius and began snacking on the corpse's coagulating blood. The image of Merissa's nude body, legs opened wide to receive him, flashed through

Malthus' mind, and mellowed his mood. "As a matter of fact, I am. The chieftain wants a lycan heir so badly, that he has no problem when I keep her on her back all day with her legs spread."

Egidius shook his head, wiped his fingers on his pants leg, and then ran his hands through his hair. "I still don't understand why you'd want to marry one of them."

"You don't have to. It's my business, not yours. Anyway, once she's ridden my stick long enough to swell, I'll have more free time to come here." A wisp of fresh irritation wafted through Malthus. Until Claw's health failed enough to serve as a distraction, Malthus did not dare to use his gifts on Merissa, and as a result it appeared to be taking longer to quicken her womb than it had the others. If it did not happen soon, Malthus intended to write his mother and ask for her advice.

"And if the child is sa'necari? They'll know what you are then."

Malthus gave Egidius a long, languid smile. "I'll mask the genes."

Egidius lifted an eyebrow. "Can you do that?"

"You have no idea what I can do, Egidius," Malthus replied. "I have stolen several major legacies in the rites."

"Legacies! Which ones?"

Malthus waved a finger at Egidius. "You don't need to know that. Many legacies that are believed to have perished with King Baaltrystan when the palace collapsed didn't. They ended on my altar at Carrion Crevasse."

"Sometimes you frighten me."

Malthus laughed and clapped him on the back. "That's as it should be. Now, about the females. Have you let our soldiers enjoy them?"

"Some of them have been raped so often, they spend all the rest of the time curled into whimpering balls."

"Have any of them caught?" Malthus walked toward the cave, thirsty for blood as his fangs descended from their sheaths.

Egidius followed him. "A few."

"Good. Send those to my estate."

"What are you going to do with them?"

Malthus laughed again. "I'm going to do what Waejonan failed to. I intend to establish a breeding program to reduce the race to something akin to the nibari. I'll want a few males, but not many. And I want them all young like the one you rited. No adult males. They're too much trouble to break."

"The only way that we're going to fill your larder is to start taking villages. Shall I send word for Laetus to attack?"

"Yes. I want all the adult males killed. That includes striplings. The only male cubs I want are age seven and under. Beyond that, what you do with your share of the harvest is your business. Drain them for the bottles."

"Another thing, Mother says that the market for organs has increased. Especially for testes and hearts. Box up the testes, hearts, kidneys, and livers. There's a rumor that some of the diviners are interested in dried lycan spleens and willing to pay a fair price for them. So toss in a few and we'll see how they sell. Remember all of it has to come from un-

rited bodies. The rites destroy the bio-alchemical properties that make the organs valuable."

"I know that. How much of a cut am I getting from the profits?"

"Fifteen percent. Mother's taking half since she's doing the processing and distribution."

Malthus sauntered into the cave. It had been turned into a dwelling place long before Malthus and his comrades found it. Cabinets stood along one wall, and a table and chairs sat in the middle of the first chamber. Beyond a wasp-waisted connection, a second, larger chamber opened with beds and several chests in it.

He had thought of this as his brother's cave since finding confirmation here that Troyes was dead. Malthus had found bottles of Troyes' blood, his blades, and the family crest he had worn in the cabinets. Troyes, his father's legitimate son, had been the only member of Malthus' paternal family that he had even come close to liking. Isranon murdered him and drained his body for the bottles. Once he had matters well in hand, he would kill Darmyk, and send pieces of the boy to Isranon—let him weep for his son as Malthus had for his brother, Ros and Lyrris's father.

He took pen and paper from the cabinet and sat down at the table. "Meet me halfway between Wolffgard and here in two weeks. I need to get my concubines safely to my manor. I'll mask all the genetics at my soonest opportunity, so don't question when I send you a pregnant woman, just get her there. Don't question whether the child they're carrying



appears to be sa'necari or not, because you won't be able to tell."

"So they all bred true?" Egidius sat down opposite to him.

Malthus' eyes brightened with a smirk spreading across his face. "Indeed, yes. Four sa'necari children for me. There's another one coming, but she's in Hell's Widow. Heironim will be moving her to my estate in a few more weeks."

"I don't see how you can be so fertile." Egidius' eyed Malthus speculatively.

"Ask my mother. It's her doing." Then Malthus chuckled. "I have the fertility of a thirteen-year-old."

"Impressive. It's been four years since I was last able to make a child, and I'm seven years younger than you."

Malthus saw a flash of envy in Egidius' eyes. "Talk to my mother next time you see her. She might be able to help you, if you're not too far progressed ... if your cods aren't completely withered. However, I warn you, it will be expensive and rather uncomfortable at times."

"To be able to get more children—it would be worth it."

"Indeed." Malthus gave Egidius' hand a squeeze. "Now, back to business. Get Laetus moving, and wait for me to send you word, or come myself to arrange for the females to be moved."

"What about the chieftain? Are you still planning on leaving him until last?"

Malthus chuckled darkly. "He developed heart problems the day of the wedding."

Egidius grinned. "How convenient. You always go to the heart of the matter."

Malthus poked Egidius in the chest over his heart. "It's my favorite target. I have another target that is just as important. Longbranch. There's a family there that must be exterminated down to the smallest infant."

"Which one?"

"The Maguires ... and to be safe, the Sinclairs also."

"Why?"

"They're a bastard branch of the Redhands. Branduff Maguire is Tarrant Redhand's bastard son. He's a school teacher. Kill him first."

Egidius stroked his goatee. "Three Stones would have to be eliminated first. Longbranch is half a day's ride south of it. Laetus is over there now. I'll send word to him."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul sensed the undercurrents of trouble in Wolffgard without being able to put his finger upon it. Rumors of rapes and murders on the back roads leading into Wolffgard, but no bodies had been found and no complaints had been filed. The ambush of Kynyr had bothered him deeply, knowing as only a handful did, that Kynyr was—son of a bastard or not—the rightful prince of Red Wolf. The coincidence—of having all but one of the surviving people who had been close to Cahira Maguire Sinclair during the time that she had been pregnant by Tarrant Redhand—in Wolffgard at the same time stank of fate, or karma as the Creeyans called it. The only one who had not yet shown up was Sheradyn, Cahira's mentor. Sheradyn lived in Blue Rock Village to the southeast of Wolffgard with his much younger lover, Gillivray. Caimbeul

felt tempted to ride down to Blue Rock and talk to Sheradyn, but shelved it. An itch along his spine kept telling him that, sooner or later, Sheradyn would come to Wolffgard.

He had postponed checking out the refugee camp; because he wanted to avoid encountering Pandeena until he felt more prepared to deal with her—and with his own feelings concerning her. Except for the day of the funeral, people in the village had little to say about Malthus; although they were critical of his choice of companions. Kynyr Maguire figured more and more in Caimbeul's contemplations. According to Odhran, Kynyr had regained consciousness four nights ago.

His Training and experience as a lawgiver had driven his jealousy of Kynyr from his mind the moment that he learned of the ambush. Caimbeul's instincts kicked in and focused on Kynyr. There was bad blood between Kynyr and Malthus that seemed to center around Merissa. Although Malthus' alibi was iron clad, that did not mean he had had nothing to do with the ambush—or the riot. Two attempts had been made on Kynyr's life. Five people currently living in Wolffgard knew the truth about his ancestry. One of them had no reason to keep that secret and every reason to want to harm the Maguire family: Baroucha Seaver.

Caimbeul stepped into Cahira's shop, wondering how he might establish a connection between Baroucha and Malthus—assuming one existed. Nikko had done everything himself, and therefore Caimbeul found himself without servants, deputies, and other assistants. It would take time to set up and he had a feeling in his gut that he needed to know more about the people of Wolffgard before he recruited

anyone. Caimbeul did not yet know who to trust, who was, and who was not connected to Malthus.

Kady Wiggins sat at the table in the rear, totaling up a customer's purchases on a counting board. "Lawgiver, I'll be with you in just a moment."

"Is Todd around?"

"Third floor. The salle. Go on up."

Caimbeul headed for the door into the hallway when Rory, Hamish, and Cooley rushed in from the back. The heels on Cooley's new riding boots clicked smartly on the floor. The three cubs' eyes sparkled with mischief. Caimbeul had heard Rory described as the penultimate village sneak and an idea occurred to him. Cubs loved secrets and conspiracies. They played the Great Game with a verve and devotion seldom matched by their elders.

He crooked his finger at the cubs. "Rory."

"I'm not in trouble, am I?" Rory asked, following Caimbeul into the hallway.

Caimbeul took a ten penny piece from his pocket and waved it in Rory's face. "I hear you're a sneak and a good one."

"Yeah." Rory eyed that coin hungrily.

Hamish and Cooley stood in the doorway, watching in silence.

"I need a spy. In fact, I need several. How would you like to become my spymaster?"

"Ooooooh." A big grin lit Rory's mud splashed face. "Can my friends help?"

"Can they keep secrets?" Caimbeul whispered to him just loud enough to carry to Hamish and Cooley.

"Yes."

"You may have this to start. Come to the Lawgiver House after dinner and I'll tell you how to earn money. Agreed?"

Rory nodded.

"You mustn't tell any of the adults why you're coming. Tell them, I'm paying you to help around the place."

Rory held up his crossed fingers and made a circular motion in what cubs called the Moon's Promise.

"I'll see you then."

Caimbeul headed for the stairs at the end of the hallway that folded upward. He climbed to the second floor and glanced down the hall toward the bedrooms to his left, repressing an urge to speak with Kynyr first. Cahira's voice drifted from the kitchen, talking to someone that Caimbeul could not identify. He turned and climbed to the third floor. There he found a short hall with three doors. Opening the first door on his right, he stepped into the salle.

Half of the far end was covered in mats. Caimbeul had never practiced the Creeyan arts, but he recognized the movements as Todd worked through his forms with an axe in one hand and a broadsword in the other. Bare to the waist, massive scars showed on Todd's chest and mid-section. Few things could scar a lycan, but it looked as if Todd must have encountered most of them—and lived to speak of it.

Todd's eyes brushed Caimbeul and he continued without missing a beat. "Lawgiver."

Caimbeul sauntered over to the table and sat down. A bottle of whiskey and four glasses sat in the middle. Caimbeul picked up a glass, examined it with a critical eye, and wiped it out with his shirt sleeve. Satisfied, he poured himself a double measure.

"I want to talk to Kynyr. But first I want to talk to you."

Todd stepped off the mat, bowed to it, and returned his weapons to the rack near the door. "I've been expecting you."

"Last time I was here, Cahira explained her reasons to me. Under the circumstances, I decided not to argue."

"Ayup. I appreciate that." Todd settled into the chair opposite Caimbeul, poured himself a glass, and leaned back. "Say what you got to say."

"How many people know about Kynyr?"

"More than I'd like."

"That doesn't answer the question."

Todd's bushy red eyebrows knit. "Cahira, Pandeena, yourself, Baroucha, Sheradyn. Bran's family, obviously. Kynyr's his only son. Ulicia's pregnant again. Due in a few weeks. My daughter-in-law insists it's a boy. That'll make two of them."

"Your daughter-in-law?"

"Mary, Trevor's wife. Ulicia is Kynyr's mother."

"You've got a large family. Any chance one of them could have leaked it?"

"Nope. They all know about the curse."

Caimbeul exhaled heavily, rubbing his forefinger under his nose. "I don't believe in the curse. I think Alistar was hallucinating ... the pain put him out of his mind. I don't think

he could have cursed anyone with that spike in his belly. You used runed silver, didn't you?"

"Ayup. Nastiest runes Roarc O'Shea could charge."

"Roarc etched them too?"

"Ayup."

"That proves my point. Alistar Weems died in too much pain to have laid a curse."

"You're wrong, Padruig. You didn't hear him. I did."

Caimbeul downed his whiskey, poured a second double, and folded his arms. "That doesn't agree with what I remember of that night. You and Tarrant came back directly. I know. I followed you. I watched you put that spike in Weems' belly. I heard the way he screamed."

"Asshole. You should have said something."

"Why? Had I spoken up, people would have asked why I didn't stop you. Tarrant notwithstanding, what you did was outside the law."

"Then why the hell didn't you stop us?"

Caimbeul threw his head back and stared at the ceiling for several breaths before looking at Todd again. "Weems deserved it."

\* \* \* \*

Merissa sat watching the children playing in the garden, with her hands in her lap. Her gaze stole to the wedding arch. She knew that she should order it taken down, so that Malthus could make the rounds of the taverns and exercise his bragging rights. Merissa didn't want to tell him yet. Some part of her kept holding off. She had recognized the first tiny

changes in her body the moment they began, and knew from her previous pregnancy what it meant. Merissa had never expected to become pregnant so soon. She was not certain why she kept holding back.

"Merissa," Claw's voice came from behind her.

She swiveled on the bench. "Father."

"He spends a lot of time hunting, that husband of yours," Claw growled.

Malthus had gone hunting two days ago to provide meat for the sanctuary as he had been doing frequently since late last spring. Shalto, who worked at the sanctuary, had stopped by to inform Malthus of the need and off they went. Merissa always felt relieved when her husband left for a few days, because he kept her on her back with her legs open more often than not when he was home. Since the day of the wedding, his work for the sanctuary and his trips to Hell's Widow had become the only thing that gave her time to herself, time to be with Darmyk. Maybe that would change once he knew his efforts had proved fruitful.

"He still provides for the sanctuary, father," Merissa responded. "He feels responsible for them. He's a good mon."

"He should be here. He has other responsibilities," Claw grumbled.

Knowing what her father referred to, Merissa glanced at the arch and then stared at her hands. "Take the arch down, father."

Claw's face lit, and he pulled her into his arms for an awkward hug. "So he's done his job. I have another grandcub on its way."



She stirred uneasily. Ever since the letter from Nevin stating that Isranon had repudiated Darmyk and called her a slut, her father had been trying to be more comforting and affectionate with her, as if to fill the emotional gap in her life and relieve some of her pain. She hadn't told anyone that she still cried over that letter. "Yes, father."

"Shall I send for Baroucha?"

Merissa pushed away from him, shaking her head. "I don't like Baroucha." She shivered, remembering how hard Baroucha had pushed for her to abort Darmyk, and how the healer had threatened to poison Isranon. "I'd rather you sent for Sheradyn. He attended me while I carried Darmyk. I'm sure granny can spare him."

Claw kissed her forehead. "Whatever you wish. Now go in and tell your mother. I'll get that arch down, so your mon will know his efforts have been victorious."

Merissa gave a demure nod, and headed into the manor. She found Aisha at her loom, weaving a bright pattern into the cloth. Fianait settled her skirts into place as she returned to her loom. She needed to get out her old maternity clothes and see what shape they were in. Merissa had become depressed during the final months of carrying Darmyk, crying over the fact that she would probably never see his father again, and as a result wore mainly dark unflattering colors until a year after Darmyk's birth. Malthus would expect her to dress better than that while carrying his child. She would need to have their nibari start stitching for her.

Robert Morcar sat near the door, carving a toy soldier from a block of pine for Darmyk. The dark wolf watched her from

the corners of his eyes. Merissa felt suddenly conspicuous. There was always a guardsmon in the Great Hall with them, in the gardens with them, wherever they were there was a guardsmon, as if her father feared that the enemy would burst through the doors at any minute. The attack on Kynyr had only made matters worse. Searlait made a game of sneaking off to be alone in the mornings, and so far, no one had discovered where she went. Merissa suspected that Kynyr knew where she went, because he always vanished from the manor shortly after Searlait did. She wondered who—if anyone—was watching over her since Kynyr's wounding. Kynyr had always been so devoted to her family—maybe if her father had not kept pushing Kynyr at her ... She shook herself loose from those thoughts. She was married now and it was too late for such regrets.

Merissa drew a chair up so that she could sit behind her mother, and sucked in a fortifying breath. "Mother, I'm—I'm pregnant."

Aisha laid her shuttle down and pushed her seat back, studying her daughter. "You don't look happy."

Merissa looked away, wondering why it was so hard for her to meet the eyes of the people who loved her. "Malthus will be very happy. Father is."

"What about you?"

"I'm happy. Really, I am. It's just—for some reason I want to cry, and keep crying."

"That's normal," said Aunt Fianait. "You're young. You'll get over it."

Merissa, feeling strangely uneasy, bit back a retort as to what Fianait would know about bearing cubs—considering that Fianait had measured every dog wolf against her twin, Brock, found them lacking, and remained an old maid.

Aisha gave Fianait a silencing look, and turned to her daughter. "How long have you known?"

"Two weeks."

Aisha looked thoughtful. "Your husband is a potent male. That's good."

Going so long between children had been nice, Merissa thought. However, from the way that Malthus spoke to her, it sounded as if he intended to give her no time between pregnancies.

"At least this one will probably be lycan," said Searlait gently. "And that should please everyone, Merissa."

Merissa contemplated her hands, her fingers twined over her stomach. "Yes, it should." She turned to Morcar in an attempt to change the subject. "When will Kynyr, Finn, and Ramsey be back?"

Morcar stirred in his chair near the window. "Cahira says Kynyr can come home in a week or two, if he takes it easy. Finn ... a little bit longer than that. Ramsey? Well, Cahira's not certain. He's still pretty sick."

Merissa's expression turned pensive. "Devil's Silver is a hellish thing."

"Tell me about it," Morcar said with uncharacteristic bitterness. "I thought they were all going to die."

"Haven't you been going to see them?" Fianait glanced around the loom at her.

"Not since the funeral." A flush lit Merissa's cheeks as if in shame.

"Why not?"

Morcar set his whittling aside and leaned forward in his chair, sour speculation in his eyes as he waited for Merissa to answer Fianait's question.

"Malthus forbids it. He—he had a bit of trouble with Todd."

"What kind? Todd doesn't snap at throats without reason."

"Malthus refused to say." Merissa wrung her hands.

"If you'd like, I can ask Todd about it. I play checkers with Kynyr in the evenings."

Merissa responded with a tiny nod and then bolted from the room.

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul entered Kynyr's room quietly, started to speak, and fell silent staring at him. Kynyr lay dozing, nude, the sheet pulled over his good leg and a twisted corner covering his loins. Sunlight streaming through the open window, accompanied by a pleasant breeze, lit the angles of Kynyr's face and glistened on his hair. Caimbeul rubbed his eyes and looked again, disturbed by Kynyr's uncanny resemblance to Tarrant Redhand. No wonder Pandeena wanted the young wolf in her bed.

Closing the door without making a sound, Caimbeul went to the bed and sat down in the chair beside it. He winced at the neat rows of stitches that made a long cross on Kynyr's belly. No one had told him to expect this; only that Kynyr had been shot.

He sucked in a breath and said softly, "Kynyr?"

Kynyr Maguire opened his eyes, blinking to clear the sleep from them.

"I'm Padruig Caimbeul, the new lawgiver."

"Of Running Horse?" Kynyr pushed himself up into a sitting position. Caimbeul snagged a couple of pillows from the foot of the bed, shoved them to Kynyr's back, and helped him settle comfortably.

"The same."

"I've heard of you."

"Lot of folks have." Caimbeul shrugged. "I need to ask you some questions about what happened."

Kynyr looked uncertain. "The ambush?"

"And what happened in Hell's Widow leading up to it."

"I run errands for Aisha."

Caimbeul's eyes narrowed to slits and he shook his head. "Uh uh. A wagon load of groceries didn't bring the sa'necari down on you. What were you doing in Hell's Widow?"

"A private matter..."

"For the clan? Maybe concerning Cullen?"

Kynyr squirmed.

"I'm your lawgiver, damnit Kynyr. I can't investigate something if people start holding back on me. There have been two attempts made on your life ... and from the look of those stitches this last one nearly succeeded. Are there parts missing?"

Caimbeul snatched the sheet away from Kynyr and glanced at his genitals with a frown.

Kynyr flushed and snatched the sheet back, covering himself. The movement sent a grimace of pain across his features. "Nothing's missing."

"Hurting?"

"Yeah."

Caimbeul found the dosing glass and the poppy milk. He poured two fingers of the thick whitish liquid into the glass and extended it to Kynyr.

"Four fingers."

"No. Two should take the edge off. I don't want you dozing off before you've answered my questions."

Kynyr heaved a sigh and drank the drug. "You're right about Cullen. Claw sent me in to talk to a prostitute who was there when the Butchering Serpent killed Cullen."

"The Serpent?" Caimbeul leaned closer, took the glass from Kynyr's hand, and put it on the nightstand after pouring a single finger of the drug into the glass.

"You're going to let me hurt ... just to get your answers?"

"If you force me to." A weary edge crept into Caimbeul's voice.

"Todd..."

"Isn't going to cross me. I could drag him in on three charges of murder, put him to the question, and make it stick. There's no expiration on charges of murder."

The color faded from Kynyr's already pale face. "You can't..."

"Try me."

"What do you want to know?"

"Start from the beginning. How did you know about the prostitute?"

Kynyr gestured at a chest standing beneath a window wedged between a wardrobe and a table. "There's a small brown casket inside. Bring it to me."

Caimbeul fetched the casket and gave it to Kynyr. The guardsmon put the box on his good knee, touched the lock, and spoke a single word. Caimbeul's eyebrow lifted. "Mage locked?"

"Yes."

"What's in it?"

"Mostly ... my grandfather's letters to Gram. His diaries. Gram gave them to me. My ace in the hole if matters got so ugly that I needed to prove who I was." He shifted the papers around and brought out a single folded letter along with a ring. Kynyr gave those to Caimbeul.

"Proof that you're Tarrant's..."

"Grandson."

Caimbeul examined the ring. Two snakes intertwined, noses touching, wrought of white gold and kendaryl with glittering hematite eyes. "That's Cullen's."

"It came with the letter and his horse, Larkspur."

"He gave you his horse?"

"Willed her to me. I gave her to Cooley two days ago."

"Why?"

"Cooley's his son."

"You've been keeping that under wraps. Why?"

"Read the letter. Can I have that glass now? I feel like my leg's on fire."

Caimbeul passed the glass to Kynyr and unfolded the letter.

*Dear Kynyr Maguire.*

*Cullen trusted you. So I am trusting you. By now you must know, or at least suspect, that Cullen is dead. They forced me to watch him die. The sa'necari have returned to Hell's Widow. I am trusting you with our child and my secret so that you will understand why I do not dare go to the garrison with this. You know me as Silkie Faggini. I was born Silkanna Mircala de Waejonan. Get word to the garrison, but do not tell them how you know. And, I beg you. Take care of our child. Cooley is no longer safe in Hell's Widow.*

Sincerely,

*Silkie*

"Did you go to the garrison?"

"No. Claw says it's clan business and he doesn't want the Sharani Garrison sticking their noses into it."

"Sounds like Claw."

"Silkie knows the name of one of the sa'necari who killed Cullen."

"The Serpent?"

"His lieutenant. She's offered to give me the name if I can find a way to get her out of Hell's Widow." Kynyr told Caimbeul everything that had happened in Hell's Widow, everything that Silkie had told him, and everything that he suspected.

\* \* \* \*



Claw was breathing heavily by the time he wrestled one side of the arch from the ground. It twisted in his hands and he hesitated, knowing that it was considered bad luck if the arch broke being removed. A sharp pain lanced through his chest and he staggered back. The arch swayed and started to topple on one side. Claw darted forward, caught it, and then leaned his head against it fighting a wave of dizziness. The pain, dizziness, and shortness of breath had become more frequent since he first experienced it on Merissa's wedding day.

"Let us help you, Claw," said Belgair.

Claw glanced up and saw the captain of his guardsmyn and Odhran coming toward him. He straightened in an effort to mask his difficulty. The two younger myn reached him and took the arch from his hands.

"Where do you want it? The storage room?" Belgair asked.

"Yes." Claw felt grateful that they had not remarked on his momentary weakness. "Can you handle it without me?"

"Malthus got his job done fast." Odhran sounded appreciative as they carried the arch back to the manor.

"We'll have a true prince this time," said Belgair.

Claw did not answer. He loved his grandson, but the chieftain had known from the outset that his people would never allow Darmyk to inherit because he was born sa'necari. They would only accept a lycan as the next chieftain.

He left them to their work, and went inside to rest in his big chair in the Great Hall. His sisters and Aisha were gone, fussing over Merissa most likely, and he was alone. Claw stuffed his favorite pipe, a chunky long-stemmed pipe with a

large bowl, lit it with a lucifer, and settled back to smoke and rest. The dizziness lingered, and he felt as if he could not hold his eyes open, and was being propelled into sleep. Claw resisted that, managing to get a few more puffs on his pipe before it became apparent that he was losing his battle, and put the pipe aside.

*Rest. I just need to rest a bit.*

Pain lanced through the old wolf's chest and he blacked out, his head falling limp against the back of the chair.

\* \* \* \*

Kynyr settled into his pillows as Kady gathered the empty dinner dishes and glass from the bed table and sat them on a dresser. The feistiness, that had characterized her behavior in the tavern before Hereward had withdrawn his protection, had begun to return and he saw Todd's hand in that. When Kady had told him about Todd throwing Gorgarty out, her face had glowed. Kynyr wished that glow had been for him. Todd had renewed Kady's sense of security. Had he not been ambushed, Kynyr had intended to bust heads as soon as he returned from Hell's Widow and see that no one touched Kady against her will again.

She had sat in the chair, fussing at him and over him while he ate, making certain that he did not leave so much as a tiny bite in the bowl. Her flaxen hair bloused around her face like a halo and she dressed like a Battle-Clan apprentice, which led him to suspect that she had begun training with Todd.

"Would you like some pie, Kynyr? Strawberry pie? I baked it myself." She smiled at him with a fond eagerness to please that tickled Kynyr.

"I couldn't eat another bite. Maybe later?" He resisted an impulse to take her hand and kiss her fingers. A fragile wisp of memory hinted at a shared kiss and haunted the edges of his mind in a way that he could not quite trust.

"If you want we could play cards?"

"I just want to sleep, Kady. Thank you."

Kady left after dosing Kynyr for pain and he fell asleep, only to awaken in the middle of the night to the honeysuckle smell of magic in the room. Pandeena stood in the darkness, wearing a robe of some fabric—he could not identify it—that clung to her body so closely that he could make out the points of her nipples. The female musk of her arousal filled his nostrils with an erotic scent that went straight to his loins.

"Pan—Pandeena?"

"I want you, Kynyr." Pandeena purred, opening her robe, revealing her nude body. "I've wanted you for months."

Kynyr's lips parted and he inhaled sharply. He had fantasized in a casual way about having sex with her. All of his friends had also at one time or another—it was impossible not to: Pandeena was the most beautiful bitch in Wolfgard. However, the beating she had administered to Shalto and Oswyl had convinced them all that it was best to let her do the choosing, make the first move.

She dropped her robe and slithered between the sheets with him, running her finger lightly along his chest and belly, avoiding the stitches.

Her touch sent need shivering through him, raising the hair on his body like a kiss of lightning. He tangled his fingers in her golden hair, brought her head close to his, and parted her lips with his own. Kynyr's tongue darted into her mouth, questing and twining with hers.

Pandeena eased him onto his side while his hands cherished her breasts with tender attentions. She draped one leg across him, reached down to his cock bobbing against her clit, and guided him inside her.

Kynyr closed his eyes and sucked air with a low moan. The first twinges of pain threatened as he moved his pelvis to thrust deeper into her. Pandeena sensed it, slipping one hand beneath him and other over him to grasp and support his buttocks.

"Relax, sweetheart. I'll do the work."

The walls of her vagina tightened, sucking at his hardness as she wiggled her pelvis, sliding her female parts up and down him.

Kynyr's seed spilled into her in shuddering spurts. He pushed away from her and lay back on the bed, a glaze of pain in his eyes.

"You're hurting again."

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry. I didn't help matters, did I?"

Kynyr managed a little smile. "It was good."

"I love you, Kynyr." She brushed his sweat-drenched hair back.

"Pandeena, you're beautiful, but..."

"You don't love me?"

"Not that way."

"There's someone else?"

Kynyr's eyes went distant as he thought of Kady Wiggins.

"Maybe. I don't know yet."

"Can we be like the wild cousins for the time being?"

"I think so." His thoughts drifted to Kady again. After all she had been through; she did not need him chasing her.

"Yeah. I'd like that."

\* \* \* \*

Cahira sat at the kitchen table sipping tea and enjoying a hot, buttered scone fresh from the oven. The past week had been difficult, but thanks to Kady, not impossible. Kady was the first one up in the mornings and the last to go to bed at night. Every morning since Kady's arrival in her household, Cahira had awakened to the smell of baking bread. Kady made breakfast for Cooley, packed him a lunch, and sent him off to the Manor where the cub worked each morning for Georgie Rogan, Claw's head ostler. She also made first rounds of the three wounded, got the various medicines down them before Cahira woke. The six beds in the new infirmary were Kady's doing. The young bitch had gone directly to Aisha Redhand, with Rory in tow—at Todd's insistence, she never went anywhere alone—and persuaded Aisha to donate them. The aged lycan mage decided that Kady was the best thing that had happened to her household in a long time.

Her pleasant musings were interrupted by Kady who plunged into the kitchen with a worried look on her face.

"Cahira, come quick! Ramsey's forehead is hot as an oven. I've done everything I could think of and it's not working. Erskine's with him."

Cahira came to her feet fast, pushed past Kady, and ran for the infirmary with Kady close behind her.

Finn had the bed closest to the door and he sat up as they came inside. Kady saw that and veered to his side, shoved pillows to his back and headed for Ramsey.

Ramsey lay shivering and coated in cold sweat although his eyes were bright with fever and his face flushed. The whites of his eyes had a yellow cast that bothered Cahira even more than the rest of the symptoms.

Erskine sat beside the bed on the far side, gripping Ramsey's hand, squeezing and rubbing the back of it from time to time.

Cahira slipped into a chair, grasped Ramsey's clammy wrist, closed her eyes to concentrate and Read him. The color fled from her face, a wan, sad smile spread across her lips. "I'm sorry, Ramsey. I'm so sorry."

"How bad?" Ramsey's voice was hoarse and rasping. "Cahira ... how bad?"

She dropped her gaze and stared off at the edge of the bed, mastered her reticence and looked him in the eyes. "Gangrene. The internal kind. It's spread all through you."

Ramsey's eyes hooded until only a slit showed as he digested his death sentence. "How much ... time do I ... have?"

"A few days."

"I want ... talk to Kynyr."

"What about your family? Are they coming?"

Ramsey swallowed, and glanced at Erskine. "No."

"Do you want to see them?" Cahira asked in the kindest tone she had.

"I'd like to ... see Ma ... again."

Cahira pinned Erskine with a glance. "Who talked to them?"

"I did. Ramsey's asshole brother won't let them come."

"Erskine, you go right now and tell Aisha about Ramsey's condition and his family. Tell her that he wants to see his mother. If I know Aisha, she'll have them here before sundown."

Erskine looked discomfited. "Mind if I say you sent me to her?"

"Tell Aisha anything you like. Tell her to talk to me if she has a problem."

"Will do." Erskine squeezed Ramsey's shoulder. "I'll be back in a bit, brother."

Erskine strode from the infirmary and closed the door behind him.

Cahira turned to Kady next. "Four fingers of Pollendine as needed, but no more than once every two hours. Three fingers of Holadil increase to four times a day."

Kady filled the dosing glasses and helped Ramsey to sit long enough to drink them down. Then she lowered him to the bed.

Cahira rose and gestured for Kady to follow her out into the hall.

"Tell Todd he needs to sit with Ramsey, then take Rory and go to Claw. Ask him to release several of Ramsey's friends from duty to sit the death watch."

Kady nodded, blinking back tears, and left.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### WOES

A pall had settled over the household with the diagnosis of gangrene in Ramsey. At Todd's insistence, Kynyr was not told about it while they waited to see if Aisha managed to persuade Ramsey's mother to come visit him. Robert Morcar and Erskine Faraday arrived an hour after the shop opened for business, and went directly up to the infirmary to sit with Ramsey. All day long, Ramsey's friends among the guardsmyn came and went, never leaving him alone. Someone was always there in case he needed more pollendine for pain, or a shared remembrance for comfort.

Aisha must have set out immediately for Blue Rock, because the big carriage that Claw had given her for their last anniversary came rolling up to the front of Cahira's shop late in the afternoon. Cahira rose from her table when she saw it through the window.

The driver proved to be Georgie Rogan, whom Cahira had only met once. Georgie went around, opened the carriage door, and helped Aisha down. A grey haired bitch with a worn face, dressed in simple homespun robes climbed out after Aisha and they came into the shop together.

"Cahira Sinclair, I would like you meet Glenna Fitzgerald, Ramsey's mother."

"Nice to meet you." Glenna sounded bewildered and overwhelmed, uncertain of what to say. She stood wringing her hands nervously. Her eyes were puffy and red.

Cahira hugged her. "I'm so sorry about your son."

Glenna dissolved into tears. "Ramsey was such a good cub..."

"Let's go upstairs. He's been asking for you." Cahira put her arm around Glenna's shoulder and turned to Aisha. "I'll be right back. I think we should talk."

Aisha nodded. "I think so too."

Cahira took Glenna upstairs. The folding screen had been extended, blocking the view of Ramsey from the rest of the room. Finn slept quietly on his bed, a dose of poppy milk having put him under.

They stepped beyond the screen. Erskine and Morcar sat by the bed. Glenna let out a small worried noise and went to Ramsey's side.

Erskine's eyes widened briefly when he saw Glenna. He took hold of Robert's arm and edged him away from the bed. "Let's leave them alone."

Robert looked dubious and curious, but went with Erskine. "Who is she?"

"His mother."

Glenna kissed Ramsey's forehead, and his eyes fluttered open. "Ma?"

"I'm here and I'm not leaving." She bent over him and kissed his cheek.

Cahira withdrew from the room and headed down to the shop where Aisha waited for her. On returning to the front

room, she saw Aisha sitting at the table in the rear talking to Kady. She gestured for Aisha to come with her and they went into the back room and closed the door.

She indicated that Aisha should sit at the square table at the side, rather than the long table Cahira used for working, and grabbed a bottle of brandy from a cabinet along with glasses.

Aisha folded her hands together in front of her as Cahira settled into the opposite chair. "What was it you wished to talk about?"

"With all that's happening..." Cahira poured for both of them and handed Aisha a glass of brandy. "Well, I thought maybe we should put our differences aside."

"I never had a problem with you, Cahira. Not really. What I never understood was why you had a problem with me."

Cahira took a large swallow of brandy, produced a handkerchief from her pocket, and dabbed her mouth. "It's the Redhands..."

"You remember that day when you came to the manor with that babe in your arms?"

"I'll never forget it. I didn't want to go to you. Baroucha insisted."

"Baroucha." Aisha's lips gathered into a little knot of annoyance. "She told me the babe was Tarrant's and then you started blathering about sleeping with half the army."

"I must have seemed mad."

"As a hatter."

Cahira lowered her head, her cheeks coloring. "I was afraid you'd take Bran away from me."

"I would never do that."

"There's a curse on the Redhands."

Aisha exhaled heavily and considered her words for several breaths. "I know. I've always believed in it. Claw and I ... we used to have terrible fights over it. It's why I put off having another child so long."

"I can understand that."

"Tell me the truth, Cahira. Is your son, my grandson?"

Cahira flinched. "I always believed that ... so long as they did not claim the name, then the curse wouldn't touch them."

"Do you know the exact words that Alistar spoke?"

"No. Too many things happened ... and so swiftly. I blotted most of it out of my mind. It was that or go truly mad."

"And I can understand that." Aisha patted Cahira's hand.

"Please don't tell Claw."

"I'll not tell him, if you'll promise me something in exchange."

"What?"

"There's a line in the curse ... at least the way I first heard it ... about an exile. That must be Brock."

Cahira blinked. "But Claw rescinded the order of banishment on him. He's not an exile."

"That can be argued several ways, Cahira. Just promise me, if Brock comes home, you'll tell him."

"Why Brock?"

"Did you ever meet him?"

"No."

"He was twenty-three when Suleahan banished him. That was ninety years ago. Brock visited us one summer when

Merissa was twelve. The odd thing is, he still looked twenty-three."

"That's not possible."

"Isn't it? Brock was always odd. Supposedly, Brock and Fianait are twins. Fianait is blonde. Brock is the only Redhand ever born with jet black hair."

"Are you suggesting he's not a Redhand?"

"Not at all. Suleahan is stamped on Brock's face as plain as day. However, a few years ago, I heard of a bird that lives in the far west. It's called a cuckoo."

Cahira shook her head. "Never heard of it. What has this bird to do with Brock?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. You see, a cuckoo lays its eggs in the nests of other birds and those birds raise its young as their own."

A loud gasp escaped Cahira. "You're suggesting that Sorcha was not his mother?"

"Precisely. Now will you make me that promise?"

"You have my word."

"Good enough. Now, can I go up and see my great-grandson?"

Cahira rose and extended her hand to Aisha. "Yes."

"Is it all right if I tell him I know?"

"We'll tell him together."

\* \* \* \*

Morning came and with it the burning sensations in his leg that woke Kynyr from a sound sleep. Two weeks in bed had left Kynyr feeling restless and frustrated. Every time he had

tried to stand, the wounded leg had refused to support him and he ended up on the floor. The only things that made his circumstances the least bit bearable were Pandeena's secret midnight visits and Kady's daytime company. *And Aisha*, Kynyr amended his thought. The day that she and Cahira came up and told him that Aisha knew he was her great-grandson, they had all hugged and wept for an hour. Kynyr had not realized, until then, how deprived he had felt in keeping Cahira's edict of silence.

He rolled onto his side, grabbing his left leg as movement sent a rush of pain through it, and stretched his other hand toward the dosing glass and the bottle of poppy milk on the nightstand.

"I'll get it." Todd walked in, carrying a set of crutches, leaned them against the headboard of Kynyr's bed, and poured a measure of poppy milk into the dosing glass, which he then handed to Kynyr with a nod at the crutches. "Try those out."

Kynyr drank the poppy milk and scowled at the crutches. "I'm not getting around like a bloody cripple."

"You put weight on that leg before it's ready to take it and you *will* cripple yourself."

Pushing the glass onto the nightstand, Kynyr settled back on the bed with a sigh, eyeing the crutches. "You made them?"

"Ayup."

Kynyr's gaze drifted to the quilt that Kady had thrown over him last night when the first bite of autumn chill had become noticeable. It had slid down around his hips when he tried to

reach the dosing glass on the nightstand and lay in disheveled folds across his lap. He glanced at Todd's implacable expression, glanced at the crutches again, glanced at the quilt, and remembered how difficult it had always been to argue with Todd; which was why he did it so seldom. "Grab me a robe out of the closet."

A small grin of victory teased the corners of Todd's mouth as he fetched a brown robe and tossed it at Kynyr, who caught and shrugged into it.

Kynyr swung his legs over the side, got the crutches positioned beneath his armpits, and levered himself up.

Todd knelt in front of Kynyr, studied his legs, and gave him a nod. "Now put a little weight on it and tell me what it feels like."

Kynyr put his foot down, winced sharply, and shifted, holding his bad leg with the knee bent. "Shit."

"I expect so. Now put a bit of weight on it again and stop when the pain gets bad."

"I hate this." Kynyr eased his injured leg down.

Todd straightened. "That's enough. Let's take a walk."

"Can I see Finn?"

"I need to talk to you about something first. How about the kitchen?"

Kynyr maneuvered to the door. "When I thought he was dead...."

"Broke your heart? I felt the same about Tarrant. He was easy to love. I think everyone in Red Wolf loved Tarrant."

"Yeah." Kynyr concentrated on walking and Todd followed. "I haven't put a moon-offering on his grave in two weeks."

"The cubs took care of it."

"They didn't get caught?"

"If ever a pair of cubs were born sneaks, it's Rory and Hamish. They took Cooley along. He's learning." Todd stepped around Kynyr and opened the kitchen door for him.

"How's he doing?"

"We haven't told him yet, but he's a wealthy little wolf."

"He is?"

"I decided it was time to tell Claw who Cooley was in case the cub had an inheritance coming from his dad. Cullen had a surprising amount of gold set away for his retirement."

"Cullen was wealthy?"

"Not quite. However, Eideard left everything he had to Cooley also. And he had a King's ransom in jewelry on him when he died ... including Cullen's lost rings."

Eideard's words to Kynyr the morning they were getting ready to leave Hell's Widow flooded back into Kynyr's mind. Anger sent a flush across Kynyr's features.

"Gods damn it all to hell! Ellie." Kynyr dropped into a chair at the kitchen table and leaned his crutches against the chair beside him. "I told Eideard to stay away from her. Ten to one she's dead. Eideard killed her."

"Why?"

"Ellie betrayed Cullen. She drugged him. Cullen was taken without a fight." Kynyr launched into a description of what had happened to Cullen Blackwood, unable to repress the outpouring of emotionally charged words.

A loud sob made both myn turn. Kady stood in the doorway, pale and shaking, her knuckles in her mouth.



When Todd rose to go to her, Kady turned and fled. Kynyr reached for his crutches, but Todd shook his head. "You wait here. I'm going to get your gram."

Kynyr itched with restlessness waiting for Todd to return. His thoughts began straying to Finn and Ramsey. The kitchen seemed too quiet. He wondered where the cubs were, glanced at the window to judge the time, and decided that Cooley must have left for his duties with Georgie Rogan, and the Scott cubs had not arrived for work yet.

Each passing moment made Kynyr want to see Finn, to reassure himself with his own eyes that his spiritbrother was recovering from his wounds. It was one thing to be told so and another to see it with his own eyes. There were also things he wanted to ask Finn about their last night in Hell's Widow—the night that Eideard had stayed away until past midnight. He took his crutches under his arms and headed out, pausing at the door to see if there were any signs of Todd returning. Seeing that no one was in the hallway, Kynyr headed for the infirmary, and slipped inside, closing the door behind him.

Kynyr scanned the long room. Finn lay on the nearest bed with one of those 'pressed' books in his hands, reading. Cahira had begun importing them from Creeya and offering a few for sale in the shop. A folding screen had been extended beyond the next bed, and Kynyr suspected that Ramsey was on the other side, although why Cahira would want to isolate him from view like that sent a tremor of concern through Kynyr.

"Hey, Finn!" Kynyr leaned his crutches between the wall and the nightstand to hobble closer to Finn, using the furniture to spare his leg.

Finn closed the book, his eyes lit up when he saw Kynyr, and he laid the book on the nightstand.

"How're you doing, Finn?"

"Fine ... except when I eat. My belly's damned sore." Finn's mouth curved into a rueful grin.

Kynyr grabbed his spiritbrother, hugging him tight. "When I thought you were dead..."

His grin dissolved into a brittle smile and tears of relief came into Finn's eyes as his arms closed around Kynyr.

"Same here, brother."

Kynyr broke the embrace and settled into a chair beside the bed. "Damnit, Finn! You should have kept going. You shouldn't have gone back for me."

Finn tilted his head in a sidewise nod. "The Dreaded Horde would have skinned me if I hadn't."

"There's that."

"Death by hairbrush is not a pleasant thought."

"Agreed." Kynyr chuckled and then sobered abruptly, indicating the folding screen with his chin. "How's Ramsey?"

"Didn't they tell you?" Finn looked troubled.

"What?"

"He's got gangrene."

Kynyr felt his world tilt with grief, and he realized what Todd had wanted to tell him. He clenched his eyes shut, and his mouth thinned. "No, they didn't."

"I'm sorry."

Kynyr opened his eyes, and his expression had gone distant. "Has his family come to visit him?"

"Only his mother. Aisha had to go and get her, or Glenna would not have come. Erskine rode over to Blue Rock the day after Eideard's funeral and told them. From what I hear, Ramsey's brother is an unforgiving sort."

"That's a shame."

"Tell me about it. Erskine stops by most evenings and sits with him. Glenna's been here since last night."

Kynyr grabbed his crutches and limped across the infirmary to the extended screen. He hesitated for an instant, steeling himself to see what condition his friend Ramsey was in. Then he went around it.

Ramsey's face was flushed with fever and his breathing stertorous. His round cheeks had become sunken and the bones in his face stood out as if all the muscles beneath his skin had melted away. A chair sat close to the head of the bed. The nightstand beside it had a dosing glass and several bottles clustered in the center. An elderly bitch that Kynyr did not recognize sat on the far of the bed beside Erskine.

Kynyr walked over to the nightstand, shifted his crutches to free his hands, and picked up the purple one, reading the label: Pollendine, a narcotic pain reliever so strong and potentially addictive that healers usually reserved it for the dying. Kynyr's stomach clenched. He touched Ramsey's forehead and felt the intense heat burning his friend up from the inside.

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

As if there were some magic to Kynyr's touch and his voice, Ramsey's eyes fluttered open. "K-Kynyr ... I been waitin' for ... you." Ramsey shuddered, struggling for breath. "Get those ... assholes ... for me."

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

A smile as sweet as a summer morn touched Ramsey's lips. His eyes closed. His body stiffened in pain for an instant and then his features went slack. Kynyr dropped his crutches and clutched his friend to his chest, but was too late. A long howl of grief erupted from Kynyr's throat and shivered through the building as he held his dead friend. The keening cries of the bitch matched his own for grief as Erskine held her.

\* \* \* \*

"This had best be important, Cooley," said Todd. "Kynyr's waiting for me in the kitchen."

"It is. We need a clubhouse and it's urgent." Cooley sat on a chair in the salle, swinging his dangling feet back and forth while watching Todd's face for the smallest sign of reaction.

"A club house?" Todd finger-combed his hair to get the tangles out and then tied it back with a strip of leather. "Well, I'd have to think about it. Sounds city-fied to me."

"Darmyk Redhand's got a treehouse."

"That's Darmyk. The barn and the garden already take up a fair bit of space."

"Could we use a corner of the loft? Darmyk said we could use the treehouse, but Miz Softpaws don't want Toby and Gille going that far after dark."

"Doesn't want."

"Miz Softpaws doesn't want..."

"What's it for, really?"

Cooley gulped. He had told Rory convincing Todd to give them some space would not be easy; but he had promised to try and a promise was a promise. "A hideout ... we're going to hide and tell scary stories."

"You could do that in your room."

Cooley winced. "Kady'd be sticking her nose in all the time. The Dreaded Horde..."

A droll smile preceded a soft chuckle from Todd. Cooley frowned intently, trying to figure out what Todd found so amusing.

"I have no problems with it then." Todd ruffled Cooley's hair.

"Thanks." Cooley grinned and started to slide off the chair, when he stopped with a fresh frown. "They took the arch thing down."

"Arch thing?"

"At the manor. When I went down there to exercise Bucky, the thing was gone."

Todd's face lost all expression as he exhaled heavily.

Cooley walked around and hugged Todd. "Why'd they do that?"

Todd gave Cooley a long, considering look before answering. "It means that Merissa is pregnant."

"She can get rid of it, can't she? When my ma's whores caught one in the belly, a proper dose a tansy fixed it just fine."

Todd had just lifted the bottle of whiskey to pour himself a drink when Cooley spit those last words out. He made a choking sound and the bottle veered for an instant sending the amber liquid onto the table.

"You're spilling it." Cooley grabbed the bottle and pointed the top up.

"So I am." Todd's eyebrows veered toward his hairline.  
"Go play, Cooley."

Cooley had just slid off the chair when a wild keening erupted through the building. He turned frightened eyes on Todd. "What's that mean?"

"Ramsey is dead."

\* \* \* \*

The first changes made in the living spaces above the shop had included the infirmary two doors down from the kitchen and a bedroom for Kady on the opposite side of the guestroom from Kynyr. She curled into a tight ball, sobbing against her pillows, a stuffed toy bear clutched in her arms.

Cahira eased the door open and waited for Kady to notice her. When several moments had passed without any acknowledgement of her presence, Cahira asked softly, "Can I come in?"

Kady raised her teary eyes, but made no move to straighten. "Yes."

Cahira sat on the edge of the bed, stroking Kady's head. "I'm sorry you had to learn the details of his death that way. I know you loved Cullen."

Kady sucked in a deep breath, struggling to put on a brave face and failing. "Cullen didn't love me. It was strictly Wild Cousins for him. Sometimes ... sometimes I think it was that way for me too."

"And the rest of the time?"

"I thought I loved him."

"He seemed like such a distasteful little mon ... I won't pretend to understand the attraction. However, I do understand grief."

"He wasn't as bad as people thought he was. Cullen was funny ... and sweet. He told stories that made me laugh." Kady choked up again. "He didn't deserve to die like that."

"No one does." *Except Alistar Weems.*

"Don't be upset with me."

Cahira tilted her head, questions furrowing her brow. "For what?"

"My—my menses are late."

"I see." Cahira grasped Kady's wrist and extended her Reader's gift through Kady's body. A frown deepened on her face. "It's nearly a month old. Whose is it?"

"I don't know. It can't be Gorgarty's ... must be someone else's."

"Explain."

Kady sucked a shaky breath. "Just before Kynyr left for Hell's Widow, he drove off three myn who were raping me. Two of them had ... had already shot their wads." She choked

up. "The third ... he was ... just starting to ... poke me..." Kady swallowed back a sob. "...when Kynyr grabbed him."

"Do you know who they were?"

"I used to serve them drinks at the Difficult Horse." Kady's voice wavered. "It wasn't ... wasn't the first time. They'd been stalking me ... ambushing me ... acted like it was a game."

"Who are they?"

"They'll kill me if I tell." Kady scrunched up more, pulling away from Cahira.

Cahira sighed and crawled onto the bed, forcing Kady to either slide off the other side or stop retreating. The aged healer gathered Kady into her arms and held her as the young bitch wept, finally releasing all the pent up pain accumulated since her father discovered her affair with Cullen. "Kady, Todd and I will not let them hurt you. Just tell me their names. You trust Todd, don't you?"

Kady struggled to subdue her sobs and speak. She gave a small nod against Cahira's shoulder. "Yes."

"Tell me their names?"

"Kynyr knows them. Cormic Parry, the tanner's son. Keith and Donald Greenlea. Iollan Newell ... First time they did it, they beat me ... until I couldn't ... stand up." The words caught in Kady's throat and she had to force them out in increments.

"It's too late to go to the lawgiver. Legally such things must be reported before sunset of the second day."

"I know."



"Get the tansy off the shelf, Kady. It tastes nasty, so get yourself a piece of that honey candy to follow it with. You'll be rid of this abomination before morning."

Kady pulled herself together and headed for the door to go downstairs into the shop. A long howl of grief broke from down the hall. A stricken look came over her face and she halted with her hand on the door facing. "Kynyr..."

"Ramsey's dead," Cahira said quietly.

Kady ran all the way to the infirmary. The folding screen had been overturned. Kynyr sat on the bed, Ramsey clutched to his chest. He had shifted far into the hybrid form, his snout elongated, golden fur covering him. Kynyr's head was thrown back as he howled and keened. Finn stood next to him, looking dazed and helpless, his hand on Kynyr's shoulder. Kady immediately went to them. She brushed Finn aside with an admonitory finger pointed at his bed. Then she gently, yet firmly, separated Kynyr from Ramsey's corpse, drew Kynyr's arm across her shoulders. "Come along. Lean on me."

Kynyr allowed himself to be taken back to his room. They passed Cahira, Todd, and Cooley in the hallway. Cooley's eyes were large and his mouth trembled. Todd lifted the cub into his arms and carried him to the kitchen for cookies and comfort.

Once inside Kynyr's room, Kady threw back the covers and settled him on the bed as his hybrid form faded back to human. Kynyr seized her, dragging Kady onto the bed with him, and clung to her, desperate for comfort. She murmured soothing noises until his lips covered hers, putting a stop to it. He parted her lips and slipped his tongue inside her mouth.

Kady's loins tightened as their tongues danced and darted over each other. A hunger for joining her body to his came over her in a wave of intensity she had only felt with Cullen.

But when his hand went to her breast, Kady pushed away from him. "No. I'm not ready for this."

"Kady..." he reached for her again. "I need you, Kady. Please."

"No. Not now."

"Please, Kady. Comfort me..."

"Kynyr, I'm sorry ... I can't ... handle it."

She fled the room.

\* \* \* \*

Darmyk opened his window, climbed onto the sill and stood balanced there in his bare feet. Climbing came easier barefoot. He bounded onto the broad limb that pushed against the stones beneath his window, walking cautiously with his arms extended to both sides, and when he came close enough to his goal, his huge two-story treehouse, Darmyk leaped inside. Kenly lay curled on the bed there, gnawing on a leg bone from something he had caught the previous night. Darmyk had not yet learned to identify Kenly's kills so he never knew exactly what animal was being eaten. His cat did not need to go hunting, but Kenly liked to.

The cub settled next to his cat and leaned against him. His friends, Cooley and the Scott brothers, had not come by in over a week and he felt lonely. He missed Kynyr and Finn also. Since the ambush, which Darmyk had over heard the

adults talking about, the only playmates he had left were two that he no longer liked.

He heard shoes scrabbling against the bark of his tree, the creak of the ropes knotted to the deck of his treehouse, and the bumping of two small bodies against the solid trunk as the young invaders struggled with the shifting braided hemp ladder. That would be Ros and Lyrri outside. A flash of resentment and possessiveness sped through him.

"This is my treehouse, not theirs," muttered Darmyk.

Darmyk did not understand why the two girls could not climb as easily as he did. His mother always told him that it was because they were not born to a lycan mother, but Darmyk suspected it might be simply that they were girls. Going to the doorway, Darmyk stared down at them contending with the rope ladder. Ros had a determined look on her face that Darmyk suspected boded ill for him once she got inside. Lyrri seemed uncertain and half scared like always, glancing at the ground every time the ladder shifted.

"What do you want?" He wished he had thought to pull the ladder up when he first reached the treehouse, because the two girls never used his way of getting into it.

"To play with you," Ros said. Her damaged leg had a hard time with the rope, so she moved slowly. She bumped Lyrri's face with her foot and Lyrri yelped.

Darmyk snickered at Lyrri getting bumped, and then his lower lip thrust out beneath the upper one. He considered having Kenly prevent them from reaching the deck. "I don't want to play with you."

Ros gave him one of those smiles that melted the adults and irritated Darmyk. "I've thought of a new game."

Darmyk tilted his head, deliberating for an instant. He got so little attention since they and their uncle moved into the manor that he felt tempted to let them inside. "What kind?"

"I can't tell you until I get there," responded Ros with a touch of impatience, climbing another rung higher. "Is Kenly up there?"

"Yes." So they were going to bring up Kenly again. It used to be that they both liked playing with his cat, but lately Ros was always trying to get him to send Kenly away.

"Send him away, or I won't tell you about the new game."

Darmyk's lips tightened. It was just as he had suspected. "I don't want to."

Ros smiled again and her voice turned coaxing. "Yes, you do. Lyrri likes the new game."

Darmyk sighed, his hands tightening into fists. "I don't want to."

Ros' face transformed in fury, and the promise of violence in her eyes seemed to burn into Darmyk's core, frightening him. "I'll tell Uncle Malthus that you're being bad again."

His step-father's name squashed Darmyk's defiance. He had never been spanked before Malthus came, and he had always tried to be a good boy, yet it seemed like every time he turned around his step-father was smacking him over something. He backed away from the door. "Go hunt, Kenly," he ordered the cat.

Kenly made a spitting noise and sprang from the window.

Ros limped inside with a look of triumph on her face. Lyrri stepped around her so that Darmyk was suddenly standing between them. Darmyk had a very bad feeling about this, and started to call Kenly back, hoping that the cat had not yet gone beyond hearing him. Ros grabbed his arm, jerking him toward her and off balance. Lyrri shoved something into his mouth. He reached to dig it out, and Ros caught that arm also. Darmyk twisted, trying to get his arms loose as Lyrri shoved and Ros pulled, until they forced him backwards onto the straw bed. While Lyrri sat on him, Ros jerked his robe open. Her fangs came down.

Darmyk thrashed wildly, but could not free himself. He had not known that she had fangs.

Ros pinned his head to the side and sank her fangs into his neck. He writhed a moment, and then stilled as a deep languor stole over him in response to her sucking. Her tiny, immature fangs left hardly a mark when she pulled out of him.

Most female sa'necari got their fangs with their menses. Ros, however, was a prodigy; she had been born with fangs and more arcane power than many adults. She touched Darmyk's forehead and sent him to sleep with the same spell that her uncle sometimes used on her and Lyrri.

"Did you kill him?" asked Lyrri, who at six years old was a year younger than Ros. "Uncle Malthus wants to do that."

Ros wiped her mouth off on a black handkerchief, shoved it back into her pocket, and smirked at her sister in a know-it-all way. "No. And Darmyk won't remember either. Next time

we won't have to knock him down. He'll open his robe for me."

Lyrri stroked Darmyk's neck, her eyes glittering with fascination, and admiration for her older sister. "Can you teach me?"

Ros shrugged disdainfully. "What use would that be? You don't have enough power yet."

Lyrri glared at her sister. "You're not fair."

"I'm not fair? It isn't my fault you're a normie, and I'm not. You just have to wait."

Lyrri's expression darkened and she stalked to the ladder.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### VISITS

Malthus returned at dawn, having left two fresh killed deer at the camp, before riding onto the manor. As he rode past the garden, Malthus noticed that something had changed. At first it did not register, and then he realized the arch was gone and his heart leaped up in his chest.

He dismounted in the stableyard, throwing his reins to Georgie Rogan.

"Congratulations." Georgie bowed, nodded, smiled, and practically fell all over himself with happiness. "We got us a real heir this time."

Malthus beamed at him. "Thank you. It's a fine day."

Merissa sat in the great hall, sipping a soothing tea, and picking at buttered scones. She looked peaked and her color was a bit paler than usual. She rose when Malthus entered, reaching out to him.

"Darling, the arch is gone," Malthus said as he crossed the room.

"Are you happy?"

Malthus embraced her tightly and thoroughly kissed her, forgetting that Claw and Aisha were in the room. "Let's go upstairs, and I'll show you how happy I am."

Hours later, Malthus lay gazing at Merissa sleeping beside him. His fangs descended. Knowing that she carried his child, made him hungry to taste her just once, just a little. He

slipped the blade of his power into her sleeping mind, and placed a tiny compulsion there, not enough for anyone to notice, not enough to change her behavior—except in one way. He could now make her sleep at his command, and only he could wake her before the light of dawn shone in her eyes. Four hickeys marred the pale skin of her neck.

He placed his finger beside the largest, as his tongue slid over his needle like fangs. With the spot marked, Malthus gently sank his fangs into the center of the bruise, and sucked. She tasted delicious. He extended his awareness through her being, and found his child. No, children. Twins. Sa'necari. Both male. And over a month old.

A small wave of anger rippled through Malthus. Why had she not told him sooner? Lycans, like sa'necari, and other gifted races, usually knew within days. He laid his hand lightly upon her stomach, and reached his powers into her womb. With a small twist around the tiny embryos, Malthus cast a deception over them. The Readers would perceive both of them as lycan. That would please the old bastard Claw—at least long enough for his heart to give out.

\* \* \* \*

Claw returned from riding the fence with his myn. He always did his full share of the fence mending, herding, and other tasks. With the first scent of autumn in the air, a lot needed to be done. The herds had to be moved into the nearer pens and corrals. He was a lord of farmers and herders unlike the sa'necari lords who sat on their ass and expected



their people to do all of it for them. That day the work had taken more out of him than usual.

He dropped into his chair, fighting a wave of dizziness and exhaustion far beyond anything he could recall feeling before.

It was worse than the day he struggled with the arch, and far, far worse than Merissa's wedding day. It had developed with such suddenness that it worried Claw more than he allowed himself to admit. He took Baroucha's medicine from his pocket and swigged it like liquor. Only Morcar, who he always sent to pick up the medicine from Baroucha, knew that something was wrong with the chieftain.

He leaned back in his chair with his eyes closed.

Claw heard footsteps approaching, and recognized them, but felt too weary to open his eyes until forced to.

Soft, gentle hands touched his face. "Are you all right, Claw? You're deathly pale."

Claw made an annoyed smacking sound with his lips as he parted his lids. "I'm fine, Fianait. Just very tired."

Fianait kissed her brother's forehead. "I wish Brock would come home."

Claw closed his eyes again. "I do too."

"Are you happy about Merissa?"

"Yes. But I'm not entirely happy about her choice of husband."

"Malthus seems like such a nice fellow to me. He's been very helpful." Fianait put her lips to Claw's forehead and then drew back. "No fever. Why don't you go upstairs and have a nap?"

Claw opened one eye to glare balefully at his younger sister. "Stop fussing. I'll doze a bit in the chair."

Sleep came, a deeper sleep than he expected and when he woke, someone had tucked a blanket around him. Life with three pushy females was not all bad. He would refrain from asking whether it had been Aisha, Fianait, or Searlait.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus washed, changed into a fine set of clothes, and strode off into the village to exercise his bragging rights at the taverns. Played right, Merissa's pregnancy might help him regain some of the face he had lost the day of Eideard's funeral.

He went into the Difficult Horse, and spied Shalto and Oswyl sitting with two other members of their small gang called the Lycamornots, Preece and Yren. Although Shalto was nominally the leader, they all answered to Malthus, who had shown them how to take control of their lives and squeeze more out of it. Preece was a sturdy young wolf with skin burned to a nut brown by the hours he spent laboring in the sun, and the quietest one of them. Malthus liked scrawny Yren best. 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 feistiness—and he liked to hurt people. Malthus found it extremely easy to point Yren like a crossbow and trigger him off like a bolt to its target. He disliked Oswyl, although he never let it show. Oswyl got squeamish too easily. Sooner or later one of them would have to kill Oswyl.

Malthus sat down at their table, and cast his eye over the room. "Drinks for all, on me," he shouted. "My fine lady wears her apron high."

A roar of congratulations went up throughout the tavern, and old Hereward the tavern master shouted, "Nah, first one's on me. This one's our proper heir!"

Their words sent a shiver of delight over Malthus at his evident success at fitting in with the lycan community. Merissa's pregnancy appeared to have clinched his inclusion, as he had known it would.

Shalto leaned in and whispered low, "Now that you've cocked-up Merissa, what are you going to do about the others you've gotten full-in-the-belly?"

Malthus' gaze slithered around the tavern, scrupulously avoiding meeting Shalto's eyes. He spied Todd Sinclair sitting near the west wall with Kady Wiggins and Erskine Faraday. They did not join in the congratulating, but merely watched him with something indecipherable in their eyes. It spoiled the moment for Malthus. "We'll discuss that at the cottage. I'll meet you there later?"

"Sure."

Oswyl looked thoughtful. "I wonder if any of the others who are up the stick are carrying my seed?"

Preece propped his elbows on the table, and asked, "How many are blooming? We've had our sticks in all of them."

Malthus scowled at them. "Eleven. This isn't the time or place. You don't want to betray the camp, now do you? Baroucha would be handing out tansy before you could claim them."

The four youths sobered.

"We'll take this elsewhere," said Shalto.

Malthus allowed himself to be congratulated, and after a suitable time, he excused himself and walked to his old house at the far western edge of the camp with Shalto and Oswyl. He kept the cottage provisioned with liquor and other niceties, and it had become their meeting place since Malthus' arrival late last spring. Preece and Yren had gone to get the rest of the gang.

A large, rough-hewn table occupied the yard with tree rounds as chairs. Thickets of trees grew close to the cottage, and Malthus had refused to allow them to be logged because he preferred the thick curtain of privacy they provided him with. He had also chosen to build this cottage on the westernmost corner of the land belonging to the refugee camp.

"It's a pleasant night," Malthus said. "Why don't you sit under the stars while I fetch us all some tankards of mead?"

"Did you get it from Hereward?" asked Shalto eagerly.

"Absolutely." Malthus went in and took out three deliberately mismatched tankards, one a coppery color with a hunting scene in bas relief, the second was a goldish tone with a leaping stag, and the third bore a dragon wrapped around a tree. He had twelve more tankards in his cupboard and none of them matched. He turned the tap on a keg and filled each one, then sat them on the table.

His attention drifted to the tap. Sanguiners sometimes used spigots like those on nibari and others who were to be drained a bit at a time. Sometimes they went so far as to

implant them into a nibari's or prisoner's neck, chain them onto a draining rack, and take just enough at a time to make their more celebrated blends. A good sanguiner was worth his weight in gold.

Malthus wished he were back at his mansion discussing blends with his sanguiner. He missed those luxuries. He hadn't accepted an assignment of this length in several years. The sa'necari shook himself free of his musings, and sketched a spell on two of the tankards. He had not yet dared to take a male the way he had the females. The relative isolation of the camp compound had allowed him to restrict the contact the females here had with the village. Most lycans cared nothing about the humans and sa'necari here. Certainly no one would look close enough to investigate any changes in their behaviors. It was the changes that implanting sways, triggers, coercions, and outright compulsions wrought in myn's outward behavior that tended to alert others to sa'necari and vampiric tampering with a victim's mind.

So he used subtlety with Shalto and Oswyl, enhancing their suggestibility in his presence, relying on his charismatic talents to subvert the village's male youth. He had built a following without resorting to heavy-handed methods. Malthus offered them what they wanted: females, liquor, and a feeling of superiority over the rest of the villagers. Some of them he influenced, and others he owned through insinuations of power so subtle they did not realize he had touched them, and a few he held in his pockets for money and favors. Regardless of the methods, they all belonged to him. Shalto, Oswyl, Preece, Rheu, and Yren formed the core

of Malthus' gang, while the other eleven who worked at the Sanctuary spun like moons around their planets and all of them circled Malthus' star.

He was using a similar, but different, method to start his subversion of Claw's guardsmyn and family. Gorgarty Burr had been delighted to learn how accessible the 'sluts' at the camp were and he showed up at every opportunity.

Malthus emerged from the house and handed the tankards around.

Shalto sat with his elbows propped on the table, his expression more thoughtful than usual. He took a drink. "So you said eleven? That's seven more than you got full-in-the-belly."

Malthus smirked. "As much time as you and the others spend stabbing their tails, what did you expect? You're young, strong, and potent."

"Yeah, we are," said Oswyl. "But what if more than one of those high aprons is from the same wolf? That would get us in a lot of trouble."

Shalto shrugged. "It isn't just the Lycamornots using them either. We tried to keep it small this time, not like with Beth, but each of us has a couple of friends we let use those bitches in exchange for favors and such."

Malthus' small, viperous smile played across his features. He pulled at his long, thin mustaches and scratched around his oak leaf beard. "I already knew that, but I appreciate your admitting it. We'll discuss it when the others get here. I have an answer for everything. I don't wish to be caught any more than you do."

Shalto's expression turned grim. "Claw would eat your heart, if he knew you'd been cheating on Merissa like this."

"I know." Malthus gave a grim bark of laughter. "Where I come from it's considered a male's right to have as many mistresses as he wants. My father had seven. All at the same time."

Shalto grinned. "He must have kept his wick wet more often than not."

"Huh. Matter of fact, my friend, he did. And, like you, he was a strong and potent mon." Malthus did not add that most of the time his father had kept his cock shoved into dying bodies as he rited captives, rivals, and nibari. Lord Feodras Iagaris had had a powerful legacy created by generations of sons riting their fathers when the parent grew too old or became too injured to survive. Malthus had not waited for Feodras to grow old: he had rited his father out of hate.

Preece sauntered in with Nesswen at his heels. Nesswen, a shaggy young blond, had watery blue eyes, and an overbite. Malthus fetched mead for them and repeated his patterns with the spells. When he emerged with the tankards, he saw that Yren had arrived with Rheu and Torquil. Rheu was the smallest and youngest at fourteen, while Torquil was the largest member, a huge strapping smith's apprentice. They were all good with the long knives that rode at their hips, but only Torquil could claim a moderate expertise with swords and axes. They wore simple wool drawstring pants, and knee length robes that wrapped loosely around their upper bodies in a variation of the traditional lycan garb that allowed them to switch freely into their powerful hybrid forms.

Malthus had no intention of allowing them to know that he was sa'necari, and that every single female in the refugee camp had been made subject to his will, with his spells knotted into their minds. There were now sixty-one myn living here in the camp, twenty-one of them adult females. His taste did not run to true humans, so he had only slept with the five sa'necari and Clodagh.

"Some of them don't want to come outside anymore," Shalto said.

Oswyl nodded a quick agreement. "They don't want Pandeena and that new lawgiver to see their bellies."

"Sooner or later...." Preece let his gaze slide across every face. He had the jaded air of a stone-cold killer, which was why no one ever crossed him at the camp. Preece had made no secret, among his companions, that he had been the one who put a knife in Kynyr Maguire's back during last summer's riot simply because he had always wanted to kill a guardsmon. "They're going to get noticed."

"And then we're all in trouble," Torquil said.

"That's not right," Yren protested. "We shouldn't get into trouble over a bunch of sluts."

Malthus sucked his cheeks in with a sly glance to the side, his head lowered. "But that's exactly what will happen. Remember what Pandeena said. She's going to blame us for whatever happens with these women."

"Hsaaah," Shalto growled. "I didn't do anything to her and she busted me up."

"She's pretty," Torquil said. "But the only way we'd get a stick up her would be to tie her down."



"She's a vicious trolleymog," Oswyl muttered, staring into his tankard. He had not yet raised his head once.

"My point, Oswyl," Malthus said, his tone smooth, with a faint undercurrent of amusement. Then he straightened and met each eye in turn. "They'll Read the females, and then punish us all. The females will complain to make themselves look innocent. They'll tell on all of us."

"We can't let that happen," said Shalto.

Malthus took a long, considering drink from his tankard, and then sat it down with a thump for emphasis. "I have a solution. We need to move the pregnant ones to where they can't be found, along with their children. And I've found the perfect place for them."

"Where?" Shalto asked.

"My mother's manor."

"Your mother's got a manor?" Shalto asked in surprise.

"I thought all your family were dead," Torquil said.

Malthus turned to Torquil. "All my *sa'necari* family, all those on my father's side except my nieces, are dead. The human side of my family appears to have found safety in a distant valley. My *human* mother has agreed to take the pregnant ones and their children in. Once they're gone from here, we should all be safe from the lawgiver and the priest again."

"What about the other females?" Yren asked. "Sooner or later aren't they all going to get full in the belly and we'll have to do this all over again?"

"My mother is a bio-alchemist, when we deliver these to her, she'll give me some potions to sterilize the others."

Torquil whistled. "You think of everything."

"I would never have survived this long if I didn't," Malthus said. "I rode to Ocealay alone when I was your age, Torquil. I proved myself among the kandoyarin there."

"So we'll still get to wet our sticks," grinned Rheu.

"Wear masks to this meeting," Malthus told them. "My friends and I will be doing so also."

Oswyl finally raised his head from his tankard with a suspicious expression. "Masks? Why?"

"Safer that way," Malthus replied. "If no one sees your face, they can't say who you are. Animal masks. I have a lot to teach you. Next time I go hunting I'll meet with my mother's friend and set up the meeting."

\* \* \* \*

Unseen by all of them, one of the largest wolves currently in the village slunk away into the shadows. He had not been able to get close enough to catch more than fragments and had little idea what they were talking about beyond the suspicion that they might be sleeping with some of the women in the camp. He bolted across the forest, taking a roundabout path to Pandeena's apartment. He would have a look at some of these females tomorrow, maybe find an excuse for Pandeena and himself to go door to door and check on all of them.

Caimbeul's conversation with Kynyr a few days ago had convinced him that the Sanctuary was the best place to begin his investigation of Malthus in earnest. Everything else—the taverns and other gathering places—had failed to pan out. He

needed to explore other possibilities, and considering what had happened to Nikko, following Malthus on his hunting trips did not seem wise.

As he rounded the edge of the compound, Caimbeul saw several young lycans traveling stealthily over the grounds, moving from shadow to shadow until they drew near to various houses. He faded back to watch and listen.

They knocked at doors and were greeted by the females there.

"A friend told me you could see to my needs," one of the young males said.

"I'm available, but I have company coming," the female, a human, answered and let the young wolf inside, closing the door.

Caimbeul's ears perked forward and he laid his head on his paws as he heard those phrases repeated with little or no variation at every door that opened. This required further investigation. Pandeena would probably call him an old lecher again for thinking this, but he suspected the females were being used sexually. He dashed to another spot, closer to one of the houses and pressed himself against a row of rain barrels.

Some of the females saw three or four young males that night. This did not look good. Caimbeul withdrew cautiously and returned to the Lawgiver House. If he could connect Malthus to what was occurring at the camp ... or connect him to Baroucha, Caimbeul would have an excuse to arrest Malthus.

The principal barn at the manor contained over three hundred stalls just for the horses that were kept there as ready mounts and two hundred of them were continuously occupied by the mounts of Claw's guardsmyn. The huge building was wrought of the same blue and yellow veined stone as the manor, with a shingled roof and it sprawled across the western edge of the courtyard. Behind it to the north, lay six other barns, none of them nearly as large as that one. The interior was partitioned into four aisles; the tack was hung around the stalls to make saddling up in an emergency faster. The bales of hay and other necessities that made maintaining the stables easier were kept at the west and eastern sides of the building in a succession of storerooms.

Georgie Rogan, Claw's head hostler, had quickly discovered that there was not a horse born that Cooley could not ride. Even the meanest and worse-tempered of the war-trained mounts and the most skittish of Claw's racing stock gentled in response to Cooley. So Georgie had made exercising the horses the cub's main task.

Although no one said anything to outsiders, the myn who worked in the barns and stables had already begun to speculate about Cooley's parentage. Only one man in Claw's service had ever had that knack for horses, and that riding style: Cullen Blackwood.

Lunch time, as soon as the grooms and hostlers gathered, Georgie would open the storeroom where he kept the kegs of

mead that Claw allowed them in their rations each month, and tankards were passed out.

Georgie sat on a crate and leaned his back to a wall as Elwiss Taylor began describing, with relish, a tavern wench's reaction when he flashed his bone at her. They had all heard it before. Elwiss' accounts of his sexual exploits were mostly lies and exaggerations and they all knew it.

"Just because you're a big dog, don't mean you got more'n two fingers worth of cock."

All eyes turned and they saw Cooley standing nearby with the reins of Kynyr's Bucky in his small hands.

They all laughed at him and Elwiss glared. "What would a little mouse of a cub know about those things? Get off before I teach you manners."

Elwiss' tone of voice rankled Cooley, and despite the frequent admonitions from Todd and Kynyr, Cooley spit back before stopping to think. "My ma ran a whorehouse. I ought ta know."

"Tell me about your mother," said a new voice.

Cooley looked over his shoulder, and swallowed: Malthus stood staring at him.

Georgie Rogan saw Cooley turn pale and start shaking. He had no idea what it was about Malthus that frightened Cooley, and he did not care; Georgie started to warn Malthus off when he saw how Bucky had laid his ears back, and held a hind leg poised to kick. He lowered his head and exchanged a discreet glance with his buddies.

"I think ya oughtta back up nice and easy, Malthus."

"Stay out of it, Georgie." Malthus sneered at the hostler.

Georgie shrugged and thumbed at Bucky. "I will. He won't."

Malthus' gaze followed the direction of Georgie's pointing thumb and had just enough time to throw himself sideways as Bucky let fly with his hooves. He hit the ground, rolled and got to his feet, brushing bits of hay and dirt from his tunic.

The grooms burst out laughing.

Cooley threw himself onto Bucky's back. Before Cooley could get straight in the saddle, or get a decent grip on the reins, Bucky took the bit between his teeth and sprang to the side, gathering speed with every stride, until he was racing along at a full gallop. The horse's pace was nowhere near as fast as Larkspur or Glorygirl's, yet the warhorse thundered along as if Bucky could sense Cooley's need to be away from Malthus. The horse did not slow down until they reached the edge of the village. Bucky kept the bit in his teeth, resisting all of Cooley's attempts to turn him about until the horse came to a stop in front of Cahira's shop.

"Old son of a toad..." Cooley giggled, patting Bucky's neck.

\* \* \* \*

Preece Malloy sweated in the sun, coated in dirt and grime as his shovel bit into the ground. Two lines of White Fire had made the task of digging Ramsey Fitzgerald's grave less onerous. As his shovel threw the dirt from the grave, Shalto and Oswyl moved it to a large pile to the side of the grave. All three of them were high. Preece listened to his companions laughing and cracking jokes with an edge of irritation. Those two did not know how to ride the drug. The zealously guarded

pound of White Fire had become Preece's best bribe when he wanted help with something. In this case, the grave Pandeena had ordered Preece to dig.

He glanced at the measuring stick leaning in a corner of the grave. Two more feet to go before he was off the hook.

"Hey, Preece! The beer is here!" Nesswen settled his wheelbarrow near the dirt pile. A hogshead of beer rested in the wheelbarrow.

Preece flung his shovel down, grasped the edge of the grave, and heaved himself out, landing on his stomach. He pushed off the ground and got his feet under him, brushing his hands on his pants legs.

The entire work crew for the camp lounged around the cemetery with eager faces. Counting Preece, there were fifteen wolves; of which, Preece was the oldest.

Yren put a crate of tankards beside the wheelbarrow, grabbed a tankard, and claimed the first drink.

Preece eyed the beer, shook his head, and pulled a small leather pouch from his pocket. In one compartment was a square of metal polished to the brightness of a mirror and his little silvery tube. The other compartment held a quantity of White Fire. He laid out lines and the others gathered around him.

"You gonna share, Preece?" Nesswen blinked his watery blue eyes, a hopeful smile displaying his big front teeth and overbite.

Preece slid his gaze across the young wolves encircling him. "Maybe." He passed the tube to Nesswen. "You brought the beer."

Nesswen accepted the tube with a triumphant grin and snorted a line. He returned the tube to Preece as pleasure suffused his face and heightened the color in his cheeks.

Yren stepped closer, his head tilted and considering. "I brought the tankards. Don't that count?"

"Sure does." Preece let Yren do a line of White Fire.

"What about the rest of us?" A lean wolf edged between Yren and Nesswen.

"The grave's only half dug..."

Soon he had more help than he needed. Preece put the drugs away and sauntered over to a broad oak, where he settled cross-legged with his back to the trunk. He closed his eyes and allowed his mind to wander, fantasizing that it was Maguire getting dumped into that pit, rather than Ramsey.

\* \* \* \*

Malthus waited until the household slept. Then he crept along the hallway to Darmyk's room. Yesterday he had forbidden the child to sleep with his cat. Kenly made Malthus uneasy, despite its being only half grown. An adult maned hunting cat could weigh over three hundred pounds—a formidable opponent.

With Kynyr out of his reach for the time being, Malthus decided to make his first moves against the son of the man who had killed his brother. Isranon would pay in grief for killing Troyes when Malthus sent him the pieces of his mutilated offspring.

The little boy slept with his arm around a stuffed cat similar to his beloved Kenly, but smaller. The full moon



filtered its light between the trees growing close to the window and cast a silver glow on Darmyk's face. Malthus opened the child's sleep shirt, pausing twice when Darmyk stirred in reaction to the tickling touch of his stepfather's fingers. Malthus smiled broadly and his fangs descended. He bent to sink them into Darmyk's neck.

The sound of splintering glass caused Malthus' head to jerk up. Kenly bounded across the bed and straddled Darmyk, hissing at Malthus.

The cat must have been inside Darmyk's treehouse that Claw had built in the huge chestnut tree just outside Darmyk's window. Although Darmyk would not be three years old until mid-winter, his physical coordination was that of a six or seven year old human, so the treehouse had been an appropriate gift from his doting grandfather. However, facing off against Kenly, who had just used the treehouse to access Darmyk's bedroom, made Malthus wish it had never been built.

Malthus retreated. Since he had brought no weapons, the only way to fight the cat would be with magic and that would reveal him as sa'necari.

Noises came from the hallway. The door opened behind him and Claw came in with a lamp, followed by Aisha and Merissa.

"What is going on?" Claw demanded, casting an accusatory glance at Malthus.

"I heard the glass break," Malthus told them. "So I came to see and the cat threatened to attack me."

"Then the cat has better sense than some people," said Claw in his crustiest tone, throwing a glance at Merissa. "If he wants to stay with the cub that bad, then I say he stays with the cub."

"I don't think that is wise...." Malthus said.

"I don't care what you think," Claw cut him off. "It's my house and my grandcub."

Malthus shrugged. "As you say, it's your house. I will not object again."

*Damn the old wolf. I'll reach the boy yet.*

Perhaps, it was time for Claw to die. Malthus considered his choices. He could quicken the process that he was already using. Or he could resort to a few poisons his mother had developed that were too subtle and unfamiliar for the Readers to detect. And then, there was always a viper in his bed. The weather was still warm enough for one of his mother's pets—now housed in the cave—to find its way inside without anyone questioning how it got there.

By the time that Malthus made his decision, Merissa had fallen asleep, curled on her side. He walked through the great hall alone at midnight. He went to the table beside Claw's chair where the little pipe rack and tobacco jar sat in the middle. One by one he renewed his spells on Claw's pipes. He smiled as he worked, sketching the spell on the bowl, watching it melt into the pipe and vanish from view. Each time that Claw smoked these pipes, another strand of the death magics would be drawn inside the old asshole's chest until it accumulated into enough to kill him. Malthus wondered if he was being too subtle. It had been nearly two

months since the wedding, and he had seen little evidence of the effectiveness of his handiwork. If he did not see more soon, Malthus would increase the strength of his spells.

Claw had sent for a new healer, Sheradyn Kelly. Once Sheradyn got there, Malthus doubted that he would be able to get any more of the subtle poison into Claw's medicine. Baroucha was becoming expendable; however, her shop was useful. He would write his mother about finding the old crone an apprentice ... a pretty one; one who could easily compete with Cahira for business.

Claw kept a second small rack of pipes on his desk in his study. Malthus headed back upstairs to treat those pipes also.

He imagined what Claw would look like writhing on the floor, and smiled. They were bringing in the best healer in the valley to attend to Merissa's pregnancy, but Sheradyn would not be able to cure Claw's heart problems once they became obvious. No one would short of a master lifemage.

\* \* \* \*

Claw sat down on the side of his bed, breathing heavily. His chest hurt with a feeling of pressure in the center. Every time he allowed himself to become too angry, the pain started. It worried him, but he had not spoken to Aisha about it. Sheradyn would be arriving tomorrow. If it kept up, then he would speak to Sheradyn about it. He would find it easier to talk to a male healer, than another pushy female. Claw had spoken to Baroucha only once about it and then never gone back; sending Morcar to pick up the medicine she had blended for it.

Now the medicine seemed to be less and less effective, and Claw was both afraid of what Sheradyn would tell him, and dismissive of it. He knew that he was getting old. He and Aisha should not have waited so long to have Merissa. If it worsened, he would try again to find his brother Brock in Creeya. Brock had last visited when Merissa was twelve, and told Claw that should he have need of him to write to the Grand Master; that the Grand Master could find anyone in the realm. Their father, Suleahan Redhand had exiled Brock because of a family scandal. The first thing that Claw had done upon becoming chieftain ninety years ago had been to rescind that order of banishment; however, Brock had only come home once and refused to stay.

Malthus' behavior toward Darmyk's cat irritated him. Resentment flared. Claw had been Darmyk's surrogate father for three years, and now he had been displaced by Malthus. He had wanted Merissa to marry eventually, but had never really considered how that would affect his relationship with his grandcub. Malthus felt like an intruder to Claw whenever they disagreed about Darmyk.

Claw pulled off his boots, set them to the side of the bed, shrugged out of his robe and tossed it on the floor. He paused for breath, wondering how so little exertion could set off another round of discomfort. Yanking the string on his trousers, Claw shoved out of his pants and small clothes. He threw the blankets back and slid between the cool sheets, wishing Aisha had got here first and warmed them.

Aisha came in and disrobed. Claw ran his eyes over her and forgot his troubles. Despite the white hair, she was still a

fine looking bitch, and he always looked at her with the eye of memory.

"You shouldn't fuss so with Malthus." Aisha settled next to him and put her head on his shoulder as she stroked his hairy chest. "It upsets Merissa. The mon is only trying to be a good father as he sees it."

"I don't like him," Claw grumbled, digging his hand into the muscles of his left arm in an attempt to relieve some of the pain. "Something about the mon just doesn't ring true."

"You're judging him by his race, Claw. I know you'd've liked it better if Merissa had married one of her own kind, but love is love."

"Kiss me, old bitch, and I'll show you love."

"Stop snarling and I will."

\* \* \* \*

Caimbeul stood before the full-length mirror in the Lawgiver's House that had been given to him. He rubbed his hand over his stubbly chin. Not even Pandeena knew about this freakish talent of his that he had inherited from his fireborn granddam. Eirian and her lycan husband, Clachmund, had been unable to have children because their genetics were too far apart. So they went to Ishla's temple for the potions that would allow them to produce a child of their joining. However, such potions generally contained an arcane mutagen, and odd talents cropped up now and again in their children and grandchildren.

The lawgiver had one of those—actually he had a handful of them, but he only intended to use one tonight.

Studying himself more closely in the mirror, Caimbeul stroked his face with his forefingers. His broad, squared-jawed face thinned. The stubbly beard vanished. His grizzled hair turned a light golden brown and hung to his waist. He gained height and youth. He could not completely lose the breadth of his shoulders, but his body was now narrow hippered with a nice waist. He looked less like a bear, and more like a fireborn. But he would still smell lycan. Caimbeul went to his closet. Nevin had left a lot behind and some of it would fit this form.

He chose through things that were nice, but with nothing that might have identified them as having belonged to Nevin—such as the formal blue robe with the red wolves embroidered on it, although he would have loved to have worn it. That lawgiver had had many fine things, but then villages liked to see their leaders—lawgivers, priests, and chieftains—in fine clothing, so most of it had probably been solstice gifts. Caimbeul pondered on why Nevin had left so much behind so willingly. But he knew the rumors that Nevin had been in love with Isranon, and love made myn do strange things.

Then his thoughts strayed to Pandeena. *Love—I know its strangeness well.*

Once clothed in a black silken robe, Caimbeul placed a handful of seed crystals in his pocket. It would not do for him to get one of the females pregnant if his suspicions were correct. Pandeena would be unhappy with him for what he was about to do, but he had to test his hunch. He would go to at least three of the women tonight, a sa'necari, a human,

and the only lycan, Clodagh. Finally, he belted his knives on. These were not the ones he had carried when his son was alive—these blades had never taken a life. They were the ones that Pandeena had insisted upon buying him after the incident with the Waejontori patrol.

He found his way back to the compound, and stood for a moment, studying the houses, from the shade of an oak cluster. He heard someone approach him from the side.

"Have you come for some?" the young male whispered.

"Indeed." Caimbeul put a sneer in his voice. "I didn't expect to find a place like this among my country cousins, although I frequented them often enough in the cities."

Caimbeul turned and faced him. He tried to remember where he had seen this one before, to place his name, but it wouldn't come.

"You're new here, aren't you?"

"I just rode in yesterday. I'm most recently from Cherdon'datar. Since news of the rebellion got out, a lot of us are drifting back. I was talking to a friend at Hereward's ... and he said to come here."

The younger male muffled a laugh with his hand. "Yes, this is the place. Just be discreet, we don't want the priest or that stuffy lawgiver catching us."

Caimbeul smiled. "No, we wouldn't want them spoiling a bit of fun. I've never known a lawgiver or a priest who didn't have a prude's tail up their ass."

"What's your name?"

"Patton."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Shalto. What flavor cock-niche do you favor? We have human, lycan, and sa'necari."

"Well, Shalto, I'm a mon who likes them all, partial to whatever I can stick mine into. I'm a well-traveled mon. What do you suggest?"

"The sa'necari. We've got five of them, lovely holes they have and very cooperative."

"Don't they bite?"

"Nah. They're corded. They don't bite unless you're into that stuff. I know some that are, but I'm not."

"So which house do you recommend I try first?"

Shalto pointed at Kandaishree's home. "That one. She's the best. And she sucks and swallows too."

"Sounds like my kind of bitch. Have a drink with me tomorrow so I can give you a proper thanks?"

"Certainly. Meet me at the Difficult Horse around noon."

*That I will, Shalto. That I will.* Caimbeul went to Kandaishree's door and knocked.

"Who is it?" Kandaishree asked.

"A friend told me you could see to my needs," Caimbeul replied.

Kandaishree opened the door and stepped back. She wore a lycan style robe and immediately started opening it. The sa'necari had fine, delicate features, dark-skin, and long black hair.

Caimbeul noted that she appeared to be nearly four months pregnant. She looked tired and worn.

"Do you want to do it here, or in the bedroom?" Kandaishree asked him.



"I like it in bed."

"You're a new one," Kandaishee remarked as she led him to her bedroom and stretched out to wait for him with her legs opened.

"I only arrived in Wolffgard today."

"Is there a position you prefer?"

"What ever is comfortable for you with that belly. When's it due?"

"Late winter."

Caimbeul climbed onto the bed with her. He stroked her body for a long time, turned her on her side, and took her from the back when his fingers told him she was ready. As he moved inside her, enjoying the way she moaned with sensuous pleasure, Caimbeul discreetly slid his Readers gift through her in a low level scan too gentle to be noticed. Someone had been in her mind, but if he went deeply enough to find out more, she would become aware of his presence. Not even sex would mask that intrusion.

He expanded slightly, focusing on the child, as the approach of orgasm threatened to drive all thought from his mind. Caimbeul found traces of psychic scarring in her womb and surrounding the child. The pregnancy originated from a violent rape. Revulsion washed through him and he nearly lost his erection. He withdrew his awareness from Kandaishee's body, forgot everything but the way her warm, wet sheath clutched at his cock and exploded inside her.

Caimbeul rolled onto his back and stared up at the ceiling. His hand idly stroked her.

A knock came at the front door. Kandaishée sat up. "You have to leave now."

She followed him to the door without bothering to put her clothes on. He caught the glint of tears in her eyes as the door opened. She let in a young wolf that could not have been more than fifteen. The youth immediately put his hand between her legs as if Caimbeul was not even there.

"Let your fangs down," the youth ordered her. "You know how I like it."

The old wolf slipped past them and out the door.

He stood in the darkness, with his fists tightening and relaxing only to tighten again. Part of him said that he should not care what happened to a sa'necari—sa'necari had murdered his son. Yet something about the weary helplessness of Kandaishée touched him. Caimbeul pushed the thoughts away. He had come here to investigate, not lose himself in pity.

He considered which way to go next, watching the youths and a few older wolves sneaking through the compound, most of them pretending not to see each other. Caimbeul headed for the main longhouse.

His chest constricted, wondering if Clodagh was part of this, certainly Shalto had said there was a lycan slut, but what if there were a lycan living here that Caimbeul did not know about? Did he give the words or not?

Clodagh answered his knock in the nude. Her young face had lines of exhaustion that Caimbeul had missed the day he met her. Either that, or she had been roughly handled for a

few days. Her blue eyes held the haunted ghosts of nightmares past and present lurking in their depths.

"On the floor or in the bed?" Clodagh asked without waiting for him to speak, weary resignation underlined her words.

Had her mind been touched also, like Kandaishee's? Kandaishee's could have been old damage from an encounter with one of her own kind before reaching here, but Clodagh? No, that made no sense. "Bed."

"You're new," she said, leading the way and pointing at her bed. "How do you want me, on my back or on my knees?"

Caimbeul shrugged, and slipped out of his robe. "On your back will be fine."

He felt dirtier with Clodagh than he had with Kandaishee. She lay back and he straddled her on his knees. Her nose wrinkled and she sniffed his erection. "You've already been with one of us?"

"Is there some rule that says I can't have more than one in a night?"

Clodagh shook her head. "You can have as many as you like."

He straightened out on top of her, his heavy body pushing her deep into the rushes filling her mattress.

Clodagh whimpered and turned her face to the side to breathe. "Stick it in and get it over with."

Caimbeul smelled the reek of despair clinging to her, and he sat back on his haunches. He fumbled in the pocket of his robe and took out a flat circular, and highly polished crystal.

"What's that?"

"You've never seen one before?"

"No," Clodagh said, watching him closer.

"It's a seed crystal. It absorbs and stores the fertile parts of my seed so that I cannot get you pregnant. They're fairly common in mage communities, and cities with them."

"I can't believe you're one of them. You're too considerate."

"Them?"

"The wolves that run this compound by night. Now please get it over with."

She spread her legs and parted the lips of her womanhood with her fingers. Caimbeul fitted the crystal inside her, gently, yet firmly against the mouth of her cervix while working the bump of her clit with his huge thumb.

"Just stick it in," Clodagh moaned unhappily. "Don't play with me."

Caimbeul had never met a slut as distressed to be on her back as Clodagh. Pandeena had always been right when she called him a lecher—yet he had never felt filthier in his life than when he once more stretched out on top of Clodagh, and pushed his sword into her sheath. Clodagh's vagina was small and tight and barely able to take him in. He moved slowly and cautiously inside her, worried that he might tear her. He humped without lifting his weight from her so that as much of his body was touching hers at all times as possible. His Readers gift spread through her delicately to match his thrusts. He found her pregnancy. She appeared to be about two months along. It had to have happened around the time that the previous lawgiver vanished. The same psychic

scarring was present in her womb. This was another child of a violent rape. He found something odd, however, about the genetics: they were blurred. He had no way to tell if the fetus was lycan or not.

His milk spilled into her, and he rolled off, preparing to break the link, as he drew the crystal from her body.

Clodagh's eyes widened. "It's you! It's you. You've finally come for me." Then she doubled up, clutching at her head. "Get out of here, Padruig."

Caimbeul fled, snatching up his robe, and walked across the yard in the direction of a human's sheeling. When he reached it and lifted his hand to knock, it hit him: he had not told Clodagh his name.

He repeated his actions with the human, Ethne, and found that her child was lycan. He wondered how many more of the women were pregnant as he walked wearily home, feeling every bit the old lecher that Pandeena so readily accused him of being. They had to do something without tipping their hands off to Malthus.

When he returned home, Caimbeul found the lights on in the Lawgiver House and went in cautiously, wearing his proper form. Pandeena sat on his sofa, drinking his whiskey and staring into the flames of the fireplace.

"What's wrong, Pandeena?"

She lifted her face to his and he saw a distant flame in her gaze. "The wedding arch has been taken down. The myn at the taverns are all toasting and celebrating Malthus' potency." Her shoulders slumped. "I knew ... I knew ... I knew this was

going to happen. I knew it. But I never dreamed it would be so soon."

"This complicates matters." Caimbeul had wanted to tell her about his discovery, but now he held back. "You're still certain that he's the Serpent? A sa'necari of his years should not have been able to...." Caimbeul searched for a proper word, not wanting to offend Pandeena, and still feeling dirty from what he had done. "A sa'necari who was clearly approaching forty, should be sterile, or nearly so."

"It confounds me," Pandeena said. "Where have you been so late?"

"Investigating a few things."

"What?"

"I'm not ready to talk about them. Can you get me a list of the houses and sheelings on the compound? And the names of all the residents and those who work there?"

"Why?"

Caimbeul shook his head. "Just get them for me."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### ANOTHER FUNERAL

Cooley moved the crate close to Larkspur and stood on it to brush her down. He spent hours with her every day since Kynyr told him the horse was his. She was stabled now in the small barn in the yard behind Cahira's shop.

Being with Larkspur comforted Cooley in ways that nothing else could since his father's death. A few days ago some of his father's friends had brought two chests filled with Cullen's personal belongings to Cooley. A small circle of grown-ups now knew that he was Cullen's son and they were looking out for him.

The swelling from the foal she carried had not yet become noticeable. Cooley wrapped his arms around her neck, hugging her. "I love you, Larkspur. You're the best horse in the whole world."

Rory slipped into the barn and leaned over the stall door. "Did you take it?"

Cooley stepped down from the crate and moved it to a safe corner, before letting himself out of the stall. "Yeah. Caimbeul got the list. What's he looking for anyway?"

Rory glanced around, making a show of checking to see that they were alone. "Malthus. That's my guess. I didn't like the way he looked at you."

"He scares me ... following me around ... asking questions. Bucky tried to kick him yesterday."

"Yup. He's scary all right."

Cooley's face screwed up and a rush of tears emerged from his eyes. "I'm afraid to go back."

"To the manor?"

"Um hmm."

"Talk to Todd. You don't have to go back. He won't make you."

"He'll think I'm acting like a baby."

"Nah, he won't. You just talk to him. Promise?"

"Okay."

"They making you go to the funeral?"

"No. It's my turn to watch the shop."

"Okay. It's time for me to change clothes so I can walk behind the wagon."

\* \* \* \*

Todd drove the wagon bearing Ramsey's coffin that led the funeral procession with Glenna Fitzgerald riding on the seat beside him crying on Cahira's shoulder. Aisha's big carriage came next. Kynyr and Kady rode with Aisha and her family. Claw came next, mounted on a proud-cut gelding, leading sixty guardsmyn. The rest of the village followed, mostly on foot, but with some driving wagons and others on horseback.

More and more people joined the procession as it wended its way through the village. The loss of a guardsmon always affected the community deeply and everyone that could do so turned out to pay their last respects to Ramsey Fitzgerald.

Beyond the Willodarian Shrine, Sanctuary was silent. The women who lived there with their children huddled in their



homes and did not come out. Preece Malloy and half a dozen of the young wolves who worked at the camp loitered beneath the trees across from the shrine, making no move to join the crowds.

The carriage parked in front of the shrine. Georgie Rogan jumped down from the driver's seat and came around to open the door. The bitches left the carriage by the left door while Finn emerged first from the right. He stepped down and moved to the side. Kynyr handed his crutches to Robert Morcar. Odhran and Lon extended their hands and helped Kynyr to the ground, yet the young guardsmon still managed to put too much weight on his wounded leg and nearly fell. Odhran steadied him with a hand on Kynyr's arms. Then Robert returned Kynyr's crutches.

Kady came around to Kynyr's side. "You okay?"

"Yeah." Kynyr's smile sagged around the edges. "I'm fine."

Claw's guardsmyn held the crowds back, maintaining a corridor for them to walk along. Kynyr moved the slowest and so he came last in the line, except for those who insisted upon staying with him: Robert Morcar and Kady. He walked as well as he could, trying not to wince or grimace each time he put his wounded leg down wrong. Kynyr grimly refused to give into his injuries. Pride kept him moving.

Pandeena stood at the head of the grave beside Caimbeul. To their left stood Glenna Fitzgerald, sobbing, with Erskine's arm around her shoulders. Pandeena began the formal prayers for the dead, casting a handful of flowers and fragrant herbs into the grave, and finally a libation of mead. She gestured to the guardsmyn standing beside the coffin and

they lowered it into the ground. Erskine scooped up a handful of dirt and placed it in Glenna's hands. She addressed Ramsey's spirit, wishing him peace in the next life, and cast the dirt over the coffin. Erskine threw the next handful of dirt. Then he and Glenna moved to stand beside Pandeena.

One by one, people passed and cast the dirt over the coffin. Kady went before Kynyr and turned to help him once her small handful of soil had gone into the grave. He shook his head, balanced on his good leg, and cast his contribution over Ramsey's coffin.

Those who had made their offerings clustered in small groups. Kynyr got his crutches settled comfortably and moved away from the grave. The funeral service concluded with Glenna planting a tree in the soil covering Ramsey's coffin. Tradition decreed that if the tree flourished, then Ramsey's spirit had found rest. If the tree died, then the priest would say more prayers and plant warding herbs such as rue and garlic over the grave.

Kynyr looked around for Kady. When he failed to spot her, he turned to Robert Morcar. "Did you see where Kady went?"

Morcar thrust his chin at a stand of trees along the edge of the cemetery. "Looked like she wanted a private spot to cry. Losing Cullen ... and now two funerals this close together ... both of them friends of hers."

"Yeah. I'll go find her."

\* \* \* \*

Kady fought back her tears. She had never had many real friends; her father had discouraged her from forming bonds

with the wolves that frequented his tavern. When Hereward withdrew his protection, Kady had swiftly discovered who her true friends were. Ramsey, Eideard, Robert, Erskine, and especially, Kynyr were the only ones who stood by her after her liaison with Cullen became known. Shame suffused Kady as she remembered Cullen and warred with grief for dominance in her heart. She wondered if, perhaps, she really was a slut. Certainly she had felt physically aroused as she flirted with the customers. Over the past year, the urge to mate had grown to an intolerable level, and only Cullen had been bold enough to risk her father's ire by initiating her into the pleasures of sex.

Shame burned hotter within Kady, becoming a cauldron of emotion stirred by a stick of guilt. Hereward had vehemently rejected the old custom of the wild cousins. Kady had defied him by having an intense affair with Cullen Blackwood. Her grief was as much for herself as for her slain protector. She glanced around at the grieving people, and a fresh surge of guilt made her want to be alone, to flee from the crowds.

Todd had forbidden her to go anywhere alone; demon guilt and shame made her want to run and run ... to get away ... to find a safe place to cry where no one would make assumptions about her tears.

Kady fled into a thicket of elms at the far side of the cemetery that were further shielded from view by an old growth of briars and a wealth of sweet pepper bushes. In the concealment of the trees and bushes, she dropped to her knees with a sob and buried her face in her hands.

"Hello, Kady."

Her head jerked up and she stared at Preece lounging against an elm tree. "Leave me alone."

"I got something for you, slut."

Preece was on her before she could gather her wits. Her brief training with Todd disappeared in a rush of terror, as Preece forced her onto her back and pinioned her wrists in one hand. "No, Preece. Please. No."

She writhed and struggled to get her hands free.

"I told you, Kady. I have something for you. It's long and hard and fits nicely into your flesh hole."

"I hate you."

Preece sneered. "Kynyr wants you. I saw it in his eyes. But you're mine, Kady."

"Never. I'll never be yours."

"I'm going to own you." He unbuckled her knife belt and threw it in the bushes. Then Preece shoved his hand down her pants and fingered her clit. "I've enough gold to pay whatever bride price your da wants."

Kady snarled, spit in his face, and shifted into her hybrid form faster than she had ever believed possible. "Let go of me!"

"I'm going to marry you ... just so Kynyr can't have you."

"I'll go to the priest, damn you. I'd rather be a nun than marry you."

"If I can't have you, I'll kill you."

"Go to hell."

"Kady?" Kynyr's voice came from the far side of the copse.

Preece clamped a hand over Kady's mouth. "Call out and I'll kill him."

Kady ceased struggling, yet could not suppress a whimper as Preece yanked her pants down. *Kynyr. Go away, Kynyr. You're not well. You can't fight him.*

\* \* \* \*

Negotiating the crowds on his crutches proved more of a challenge than Kynyr had expected. By the time that he reached the trees, his leg had begun to throb and ache. He looked around for her. The thick copse of elm trees had a cluster of old growth briars along one side and a spill of sweet pepper bushes beyond that.

"Kady?" He frowned and called out again. "Kady?"

A muffled whimper drew his attention to the sweet pepper bushes. Kynyr rounded the bushes as quietly as he could manage on the crutches. He saw Preece lying on top of Kady with her wrists pinioned above her head. His lips peeled back from his teeth.

"Get off her!"

"Kynyr, no! He'll kill you." Kady shrieked.

Preece rolled off Kady, scrambled backwards, and got his feet under him. He reached for the knives at his side. "Bloody cripple wants to fight?"

Kynyr lifted himself up on his crutches, swinging his body forward as his good leg snapped out and caught Preece in the chest hard enough to stagger him.

Freed, Kady's fear gave way to rage. She tackled Preece's calves and took him to the ground.

Preece grabbed her hair, pulling her head back. Kady pounded her fist into his groin like a hammer, and he screamed.

Kynyr came down too hard on his bad leg. It buckled. He caught himself with the left crutch, barely managing to keep his feet as pain shot through his injured leg. Shrugging off the pain, the young guardsmon drove the right crutch into Preece's stomach.

Gasping for breath, Preece rolled and dislodged Kady. She hit him in the face before he could get clear of her.

Preece scrambled away from them. "Fucking ... slut."

"Malloy!" Kynyr started after him. "You so much as say her name ... I'll kill you."

Preece fled.

Victory lent color to Kady's cheeks as she got to her feet and hugged Kynyr, kissing him. "He said he'd kill you if I called out."

A bemused smile lit Kynyr's face. "He can try."

"Oh, Kynyr!" She kissed him again. "You're impossible."

"We make a good team, Kady."

"Yeah."

"Will you go to the faire with me?"

Kady stepped back. "If you keep your hands off my tits..."

Kynyr shrugged, his smile yielding to a naughty boy look. "I promise to try."

Kady laughed.

\* \* \* \*

The day had been more tiring of the spirit than of the body. Todd sat with a bottle of whiskey in front of him and a glass half-filled. His tremendous lycan capacity for hard liquor barely felt two doubles. "Will the tree flourish, Pandeena?"

Pandeena stared at her hands clasped together on the table. "Are you asking for the truth or for comfort?"

Todd glanced at Cahira nursing a glass of brandy before he answered. "The truth."

"I doubt it. Have you looked at Cullen and Eideard's trees? They're barely hanging on. The only thing that has kept them alive is that someone has been feeding them tears."

Cahira stirred with a loud inhalation. "Cooley."

"I thought so." Pandeena nodded.

"Kynyr spoke of Ramsey and Eideard so often in his letters home that I felt I knew them long before I met them."

Todd leaned over and hugged his wife. "They were good myn."

The three fell silent for a time. Cahira refilled her glass and pinned Pandeena with a glance. "What would make the trees flourish?"

Pandeena's expression darkened. "Vengeance."

A pounding at the front door ended their conversation. Todd went to the door and opened it. "We're closed," he said before taking a good look at the tall mon standing on the board walk.

"And I'll whip your ass." She threw back her hood and grinned at him.

"Maevra!" Todd hugged her. "It's been too long."

"Hasn't it though?" Maevra de Groot had a droll smile and a crisp voice. "Come out and give the children a hand, Todd."  
"Sure."

Todd stepped onto the boardwalk and spotted the four children standing with an enormous brown chest in the shadows of the street. Maevra followed him. They each grabbed a handle and heaved. The chest was heavy and awkward, but with a minimum of effort, Todd and Maevra managed to get it into the middle of the shop floor.

The children—two boys and two girls—trailed in after them and, when the lamplight revealed their faces, Todd received a pleasant surprise. He had not seen them in close to eighty years, yet they had not changed a bit.

One little boy, his flame-colored hair more orange than red, wore a leather jacket and cap that had flaps over the ears. His head sported a strange pair of eyeglasses, the lenses set in leather straps. "Hi, Todd! We only got a minute."

"Pie? Bodi? Lilac? Sugar? What are you doing here?"

He seized the nearest boy, a little fellow with strawberry blond hair, an upside down triangle of a smile, and big blue eyes. "Bodi!"

Todd swung the little boy around, making him laugh; hugged Lilac who was patting her pouches to hear the coins jingle in a nervous manner; politely bowed and kissed the hand of the oldest girl who had long marmalade hair and dreamy eyes that seemed to look on many planes of existence at the once. Then he shook hands with Pie and thumped his glasses. "What have you brought?"



"Presents," said Pieface. "Dyna heard your grandson got shot. She can't get here before mid-autumn so she sent us with them. We gotta go back now. See ya later."

Pieface's magic swirled through the room in rainbow colors and the four children vanished.

Todd's eyebrows shot to his hairline.

Maevra laughed. "Beware of gremlins bearing gifts."

Pandeena rose from the table. "Uhm, Todd. Cahira. There's something you need to know. Dyna is far more than she seems."

"I can tell that." Todd ran his hand through his hair.

Maevra cleared her throat to get their attention as she unshouldered a back pack. "Before you get distracted with the contents, can we take care of my business first? I need to be back in Creeya by morning."

"Certainly." Cahira fetched a glass from the cabinet and gestured at Maevra. "Brandy or whiskey?"

"Brandy, if you don't mind." Maevra placed her pack on the table, opened it, and took out several books. "The Guild has lent the dwarves a hand replicating the books in that library they unearthed. They can't bring the books out because once the fresh air hits them they disintegrate." She shoved the books across the table to Cahira and accepted a glass of brandy. "The language appears to be ancient Engla-Yurpan. But a lot of the words have us baffled. Since you're one of the best intuitive translators, Patriarch Mikkal wants you give it a try."

"This is going to cost you a lot." Cahira opened the first book.

"And what doesn't?" Maevra took a sip of brandy. "What's this about your grandson being shot?"

"I'll tell it." Todd joined them at the table.

Maevra's expression became more and more serious and reflective as Todd told her all that had happened. "Did you save the arrowheads?"

"Ayup."

"Can I take some of them back with me? I'm certain that the Patriarch will be willing to set our toxins experts to work on an antidote."

"I appreciate that, Maevra." Cahira closed the book, reached across the table, and squeezed Maevra's hand.

Pandeena eyed Maevra from where she sat on the floor, contemplating the chest. She straightened and joined them at the table. "You're Guild?"

"Courier. I don't do fieldwork; if you're looking for an assassin." Maevra's tone gained an edge and she sized Pandeena up.

"I want to send a message to Grand Master Ceejorn and High Patriarch Mikkal."

"Say it and I'll decide whether I want to carry it or not."

"The Butchering Serpent is in Hell's Widow ... or possibly, Wolffgard itself."

Fire and steel flashed in Maevra's eyes. "You're sure of that?"

"Yes. The Trickster must think so too ... otherwise why open her armory to Todd Sinclair?"

"The Trickster?" Todd's eyebrows knitted as he lifted his glass to his lips. "That chest is from *her*?"

"You didn't know?" Pandeena shifted in her chair to direct her gaze at him. "The Trickster rescued you after the ambush at Kinsdale Wood."

Todd half-choked on a swallow of whiskey and spewed part of it back into his glass. "Dyna is ... Dynanna?"

"That little bit of magic you witnessed earlier? Those four 'children' are her paladins. They aren't children. Well, they are, but they aren't. I can't explain it any better than that."

Maevra burst out laughing at Todd's discomfiture. "Well, I'm convinced. I'll take your message to the Grand Master and the Patriarch. Now, I need to get on my way. I rather imagine that the Ceejorn and Mikkal will be sending presents and help as soon as they hear about the Serpent."

As soon as Maevra departed, they went to investigate the contents of the chest.

"The Trickster..." Cahira's hands hovered over the chest, trembling with trepidation. "The trouble she has gotten people into and out of is both legion and legend."

"Be careful with whatever is in there. Half the time she doesn't bother to figure out what things do before she starts handing them out." Pandeena grabbed the lid and pulled it open. "But let's see what's in it anyway."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### THE LESSONS OF TODD

Todd went looking for Kynyr. His grandson had not been the same since Ramsey's death. He found him in the salle, stretched out on the mat on his back. Todd watched in silence as Kynyr, his face twisted into a mask of anger and determination, raised the damaged leg again and again and again.

"Kynyr..."

"Let me be!"

Todd's mouth tightened for an instant, and then he slipped off his shoes and bowed to the mat. "That's enough."

"No, it isn't."

Todd knelt beside Kynyr and grabbed his leg as it rose, stopping it. "Take your pants off and let me examine your leg before you do anything else."

Kynyr glared at Todd. "I'm going to walk without those fucking crutches."

"Let me see your leg and I'll get you a cane."

Kynyr heaved a sigh and let his leg drop to the mat. He untied the drawstring on his pants and slipped out of them.

Todd ran his gaze along the puckered scars on Kynyr's calf and thigh. The wounds from the arrows, which had not been poisoned, had closed and healed without leaving a mark; the ones that had been poisoned, however, had left ugly scars that would never go away. Seeing no signs of infection or

irritation, Todd grasped Kynyr's leg and began kneading the muscles. "Tell me if it hurts."

Kynyr winced. "It's tender."

"How tender?"

"I can handle it."

"Lay back and let me work with it."

Kynyr obeyed.

Todd tested the flexibility of Kynyr's leg, lifting and bending, watching Kynyr's face for signs of pain. "At least you haven't made anything worse."

It seemed as if it were the longest hour of Kynyr's life as his grandfather worked on and with his leg, manipulating the muscles, stretching them, and kneading them. They pursued Kynyr's goal of wholeness together, testing the limits of Kynyr's damaged leg. When it became clear to Todd that the pain had become too great, he called a halt to it and fetched the cane as he had promised.

Todd laid the cane across Kynyr's lap. "How's that?"

Kynyr's eyes widened as he fingered the curved head of a gryphon wrought in kendaryl topping a hard rock maple cane. "Where did you get this?"

"The last time that Maeva de Groot brought some books for your Gram to translate was two weeks after the ambush. Three days ago she brought this along with some things your Gram had ordered. It's a gift from the Mikkal High Patriarch of Hadjys. He said to give it to you when you were ready for it. I guess that's now."

"It's beautiful."

"Oh, it's more than that. Grasp the stick and give the top a twist."

Kynyr frowned a question. Todd gave a nod. Kynyr twisted the top and it came free. He stared at the slender sword blade that emerged from the hard rock maple. "You're right."

"Use it well. I'll expect you up here at dawn and again an hour after dinner."

For answer, Kynyr laid the sword cane aside and hugged his grandfather.

\* \* \* \*

Kady sat on the dresser stool in front of the mirror, brushing her long flaxen hair and eyeing her reflection thoughtfully. The tansy had cleared more from Kady's body than just the abomination that had been growing in her womb since the first time that Cormic Parry and his two friends, Keith and Donald Greenlea, raped her. Kady felt clean for the first time in weeks. She had tried to stay strong, be strong, but underneath it all—she realized now—she had been terrified and despairing, ready to surrender all sense of herself. The knowledge of how close she had come to breaking when Gorgarty assaulted her in Cahira's backroom haunted her.

"Get yourself together; we're going for a drink at the Difficult Horse."

The brush paused in Kady's hand and hovered near her ear as she glanced at her door, which she had not heard open.

Todd leaned against the doorway.

"Is Cahira coming?" Kady laid the brush down.

"No. Just us."

She sucked in a breath and clasped her hands together in her lap to mask her shaking. A rush of fear that Kady thought she had gotten past swept her up as she remembered Gorgarty's words to her: *had Todd inside you yet? No. Todd isn't like that. He isn't. He can't be.* "I'll have to change clothes. I can't go like this."

She waved her hands at her sloppy shirt and trousers.

Todd shook his head at her. "That's exactly what you should wear. Belt on those knives I gave you."

Kady started braiding her hair, letting the sides blouse a bit in the way she usually wore it.

Todd crossed the room and caught her hands. "Not like that."

Kady froze as Todd undid her braid, grabbed the brush, and slicked her hair down into a severe look. He braided it and then folded it up into a knot at the base of her neck, which he tied with a thong of black leather. She shivered. "What are you doing?"

"Taking the softness out of your look."

"We're not going just for a drink?"

"We're Bearding the Bear."

"What's that?"

"Follow my lead and you'll understand."

*It's a lesson.* Kady felt dizzy with relief. There was nothing ominous in his insistence on them going alone. She retrieved her blades from the weapons rack that Todd had built her on the wall beside her bed and buckled them on, settling the

knives comfortably at her hips and strapping the end of the sheaths to her thighs.

Todd squeezed her shoulder. "Remember, Kady. Hot rage gets you killed. Cold rage gets them killed. Never lose your temper. Learn to *use* your temper."

"I'll try."

\* \* \* \*

Hereward stopped in mid-sentence as Todd and Kady came into the tavern. He blinked and then stared at his daughter before walking over to the table. "Kady..."

Kady stiffened and averted her eyes. Her father had not spoken to her since she moved in with Cahira and Todd. Always before, Kady had had at least two companions and sometimes as many as four. She knew the gossip, having gotten it from Rory who was always accurate. People were saying that she had seduced Gorgarty and was now sleeping with Todd.

"Address me, not her," Todd interrupted Hereward. "As her *guurmondru*, I will order for both of us."

The archaic word stopped Hereward in his tracks. "Of course, Master Sinclair."

"Mead for both my student and myself."

A loud laugh drew Kady's attention to the table where six young wolves sat drinking: Cormic Parry, the Greenlea brothers—Keith and Donald—Iollan Newell, and two others that she failed to recognize, which meant they must be new to Wolffgard.



Cormic nudged Donald. "Looks like the slut has found a new cock to slip in her hole."

Donald laughed, thrusting his middle finger underhanded at Kady suggestively.

Kady glared, snarling under her breath.

"Ignore them." Todd tapped Kady's arm to get her attention. "Talk is cheap. If one approaches you, remember what knees and elbows are for."

Kady lowered her head and became very interested in the tankard of mead her father placed in front of her. Hereward appeared to be struggling to ignore her to the same degree that she was trying to ignore him.

Hereward turned to Todd. "Bringing her here like this ... just the two of you ... there's going to be trouble."

Todd took a swallow from his tankard, his expression unreadable as he told Hereward in a voice that was far too quiet, "Keep your club behind the bar."

"You're looking for trouble."

"Only if it finds us."

"My daughter..."

Todd crossed his arms on the table and leaned into Hereward's face. "She isn't yours any more. She's mine."

Kady hissed low. "You let them rape me ... told me to get used to it."

Todd touched her arm and Kady went silent.

Hereward Wiggins retreated to his bar, looking as if a demon was chewing his tail.

"They're watching us," Todd whispered.

Kady started to look, but Todd again tapped her arm.

"Pick a spot on the wall, Kady. Focus on that and then let your vision open all the way to the corners like I taught you."

She obeyed. "Oh, the guy that laughed. That's Cormic Parry and his buddies ... they..." She blinked, for sitting in a darkened corner were Erskine Faraday and Robert Morcar. On the opposite side of the room sat Odhran and Lon Angelsey. "You set this up."

"Ayup. You may not have noticed, but Cormic and his friends have been following you around for a week."

"What?" Kady faltered. "What do you mean?"

"Rory saw them. Give me a big laugh, Kady ... as if I've told you a joke."

Kady threw her head back and laughed. At first it sounded forced. However, after a moment, it rose from her diaphragm full and free.

Cormic glanced at his buddies. Donald snickered. The six rose together and sauntered over to Kady's table. "What's with the old geezer? You got a taste for gray cock or something?"

Donald grinned and his buddies laughed.

Todd said nothing, nor did Kady.

"Hey, I'm talking to you, slut." Cormic growled deep in his throat. "You want a real wolf, come out back and I'll cram it in good this time."

Still, Todd and Kady ignored him.

"I said, come out back. My bone is throbbing for you." Cormic yanked Kady from the chair and several things happened at once.

Kady stomped his instep, brought her knee hard into his groin, and slammed her palm up under his chin hard enough to knock his head back. Her adversary hit the ground and curled up, clutching his balls and cursing between sobbing breaths.

Morcar and Erskine charged across the common room just as Todd stepped between Kady and the mon's buddies. "Kick him, Kady."

Kady kicked Cormic in the head and stomach in quick succession. When his hands came up, one to fend her off and the other to push himself out of her way, Kady stomped his hand, breaking his fingers. "Asshole! You fucking asshole."

Cormic screamed.

"I hate you." Kady brought her foot down hard in his groin.

Todd parried a punch from Keith open-handed, snapped his hand back in a fist, and slammed it into Keith's chest over the heart. Keith's eyes bugged in shock. He made a choking noise and dropped to lie unmoving at Todd's feet.

"Next?" Todd demanded in a bland tone, glancing about. Of the other four, two had fled and the remaining two lay moaning on the floor with Erskine and Robert standing over them grinning. Most of the patrons had formed a circle to see what happened.

"What's going on here?" Caimbeul strode into the common room.

At the arrival of the lawgiver, people retreated to their tables.

Todd gathered Kady into his arms. "They attacked us."

Caimbeul knelt and touched Cormic's neck, then raised his eyes to Todd. "He's dead." He went to Keith. "This one too."

The room went silent until Kady burst into tears. Todd patted her back, and looked over her shoulder at Caimbeul. "If you don't mind, Lawgiver, I'll take her home. You know where to find us."

Hereward followed them outside and put his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

Kady came loose from Todd's sheltering arms and spit at her father. "Don't touch me. I hate you!"

Hereward sucked in a breath. "You killed him."

Kady stared into the disturbed face of her father, seeing the mix of revulsion and confusion. All those months that he had cast her to the dogs ... and yet she suddenly could not face him. Triumph and shame warred within her at his glance. He had let Cormic rape her; seen it happening and walked off without a backward glance, and yet could look at her like that. She retreated from both myn, shivering. "I-I didn't mean to kill him."

Todd followed her, his voice calm. "Yes, you did. Deep down inside yourself, you did. There's no shame in it, Kady."

She covered her face with her hands and backed further away. "I kept kicking him. I couldn't stop kicking him ... and he stopped moving ... and I kept kicking him." An edge of hysteria crept into her voice.

"You're evil," Hereward snarled at her. "You've lost all sense."

The word 'evil' struck as deep as knife into Kady's bosom. For an instant she wanted to fall to her knees and beg her

father to forgive her. Anger rose suddenly, burning away the cobwebs of shame. She straightened and held out her hand to Todd. "You're right. I wanted to kill Cormic. He raped me three times, Da. You let him. He got me pregnant. I took tansy ... It's your fault, Da. When you withdrew your protection, they started pulling me down every time they caught me." A haunted look gave distance to her gaze, and her voice sounded hollow. "Cormic, Keith, Donald, and Gorgarty. They all raped me. But no one's ever going to touch me again. No one."

Todd took Kady's hand and drew her into the protective circle of his arm. He pinned Hereward with a glance as sharp as a mounting pin through a butterfly. "She's my daughter now, Hereward ... and you'll treat her as such."

"No." Hereward reached for Kady again, but Todd gave him a firm push that backed him up several steps. "What have you done to my daughter?"

"She's mine ... and I'm proud of her. Kady Wiggins no longer exists. Kady Sinclair has replaced her. Treat her as anything less and I'll thrash you within an inch of your life, Hereward. Understand me?"

"Yes." Hereward nodded. "I understand."

Todd turned and walked away with Kady in the circle of his arm.

\* \* \* \*

The room exploded into conversation as soon as Todd and Kady left. Hereward stumbled in looking as if he had been pole-axed, staggered to the bar, and snatched a bottle of

whiskey from behind the counter. He poured himself a double in a dirty glass without thinking, gulped it down, and wiped his mouth off on his sleeve.

"What started this?" Caimbeul scratched the stubble on his chin and toed Cormic's corpse.

The tavern went so quiet that a brush of a feather would have sounded loud. Caimbeul searched the faces. "Well?"

"My daughter." Hereward said without turning. "They were going to drag her out back."

"What did you do about it?"

"Nothing. I stayed behind the bar." Hereward turned and rested his elbow on the smooth walnut heartwood with another double whiskey in his shaking hands.

Caimbeul saw Hereward's wife and his youngest daughter standing in the door to the kitchen. His wife had a hard expression, but the daughter had tears in her eyes. He wondered where the other two daughters were. "So, you were just going to let them rape your daughter?"

Hereward flinched, lowered his head, and refused to answer.

"Wasn't no rape about it!" Donald Greenlea protested from the floor where he cradled his younger brother's dead body. "Kady's a slut. We only been giving her what she wanted."

Caimbeul pulled at his lower lip, scratched under his nose, and turned a suddenly stern eye on Donald. "I'd say two dead bodies is a rather strong no, wouldn't you?"

"Ya can't rape a slut."

"That's bullshit. When a bitch says no ... it's no. Taking her against her wishes—regardless of her alleged reputation—is still rape. When you attack someone, you take your chances."

"We didn't attack her." Iollan rubbed the side of his face, wincing when he touched the edge of his blackening eye where Erskine had hit him.

Erskine shook his head. "Cormic, Keith, Donald, Iollan, and two others had been throwing insults and sexual suggestions at Kady and Todd from the moment they walked in. Then Cormic tried to pull Kady out of the chair."

Caimbeul listened and then reached into his pouch, taking out four strands of spellcord and strips of leather. He handed the cord to Erskine. "Bind them. Donald Greenlea. Iollan Newell. You're both under arrest for attempted rape. Lon, Odhran. I'd like you to help Erskine here escort them to the Lawgiver House and lock them in separate cells. When they are secured, get a wagon to move the corpses to the basement of the Lawgiver House." Caimbeul scanned the room for someone else he considered trustworthy and his gaze lit on Ezra. "Fetch Her Holiness Pandeena. Tell her I want her to act as coroner."

Iollan and Donald were jerked to their feet. They thrashed and cursed, but Erskine and his companions secured them with a minimum of rough handling. As they vanished out the door, Caimbeul turned to the one guardsmon remaining: Robert Morcar, who looked badly shaken.

"Todd killed Keith with a single blow," Morcar muttered. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah. He was famous for that when we were young."  
Caimbeul let his gaze drift to the ceiling for an instant.

"Hereward, pour me a double."

"Who is he?" Hereward demanded as he rounded the bar to get the lawgiver a clean glass.

Caimbeul settled into a chair and propped his feet on the one beside him. "Todd Sinclair studied the arts of the Fae, the Guild, the Creeyans, and the Sharani." As Caimbeul named each fighting style, the room went another degree quieter.

"As well as his own people. Todd drove the spike through Alistar Weems' belly." Caimbeul accepted the glass of whiskey that Hereward poured for him and snagged the bottle out of the tavern master's hands. "He was Tarrant Redhand's mentor."

"That Sinclair's dead," protested someone at the back of the room that Caimbeul could not set name to.

Caimbeul knocked the double back and refilled his glass. "No. He was left for dead ... badly wounded ... by rights he probably should have died. But Todd's always been a stubborn sort." Caimbeul drained his glass a second time and refilled it. "Mess with him, and he'll teach you your manners—assuming you survive the lesson."

\* \* \* \*

That night, Kady Wiggins celebrated becoming Kady Sinclair by cutting her hair off. She sat before her dresser mirror, hacking at her long flaxen locks with a pair of sewing scissors. "If I'm going to be a warrior, I might as well look like one."



"Let me help you." Cahira crossed the room and took the scissors from Kady. "How short do you want it?"

"Short enough they can't grab hold of it."

Cahira fingered the shortest lengths that Kady had cut. "A Gormondi cut would look terrible."

"I don't care what it looks like."

"Well, I do. You're pretty, Kady."

"I don't want to look pretty." Kady growled a curse under her breath.

Cahira gave a tiny nod with a trace of bemusement on her lips. "Well, would you be satisfied with two inches all over?"

"I guess so, Cahira."

"You can continue calling me Cahira, if that's what you're comfortable with. Or you can call me Gram like Kynyr. Pandeena has already expressed her willingness to transfer your parentage to us."

Kady's lips trembled as if she could not decide whether to smile or cry. She swiveled in her seat and hugged Cahira. "Gram."

THE END

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