

CHAPTER 1

He could feel the dead, compressed into thick, rich soil on the hillside.

The black earth, moistening in the heavy rain.

Tangled thickets of spiny dead leaves and nuggets of stony earth were home to slow moving worms. And beneath the soil, hard rock. Broken and riven where the water wound its way into the deep. Crawling insects, the living masses that move unseen beneath the ground. And the compressed dead.

Lives had finished here. Yesterday. Over the years. Centuries had passed and witnessed the twilight of the living and the slide into emptiness. He could see their lives as shadows amongst the trees, feel their cries. Anguish in the face of the remorseless passage of time.

The swaying trees were sturdy monuments to gradual growth. Their dead skin glistening in the stormy night. Vines, brown and lifeless hung twisted amongst new growth. The cycle would continue and he would feel the birth and the end of all things.

The reins of his horse hung limp in his soft white palms. The horse was still, patient. Obedient. Its stiff white hair drenched with the cool rain-water. Steam rising from its nostrils. He could hear its breath, below the heaviness of the storm and amongst the scuffling, muffled rustling of the life amongst the trees.

The Horseman waited.

His hood hung deep over the shadow of his taut face. The robes were white. Unnaturally smooth in texture and pure in colour. The rain coursed in bloody rivulets along the rumples in the cloak and

hood. Oval, black eyes stared down the hill from beneath the hood. Unblinking. Seeking the path.

Every movement, every slow or sudden path by the falling leaves and the scuttling creatures in the grass flowed into his gaze. And his attention was drawn inexorably to the five humans as they entered the town below.

Alisha felt her boots slide in the mud beneath her arrogant stride. Her thick leather trousers were layered in drying mud and the fresh wetness splashed across the creases.

She snarled at the rain and kicked earth towards the wooden houses to her right.

“I hate the rain.”

Trantis laughed harshly. “Then you’re in the wrong place.”

“Yeah, whatever.” Alisha hiked her trousers up over her non-existent hips again and pulled her swords back around to hang from her sides.

Trantis was a hulking, badly-dressed thug with a long leather coat that twisted between his thick legs. Unkempt, tangled hair hung drenched over his wide shoulders. He hated the rain too. But then, he hated everything.

The five of them strode down the centre of the dirty cheap village, ignoring the pale worried faces that hung back in the darkness of the windows in the cheap dirty wooden houses.

They owned themselves and owed no-one. Their swords and knives were sharp not because they’re new but because they kept them sharp. Old and in constant use. They didn’t wear armour. Their clothes were all leather; black, brown it didn’t matter because over the years the colours had worn out, replaced with ingrained mud and blood, oil and saliva.

Sometimes they hacked off a few inches from their hair. They never brushed it – except Alisha. But then she had to, otherwise the

others really would forget she was a woman. Although the constant jokes about her sex was reminder enough.

Alisha narrowed her eyes against the rain and peered at the tavern, brightly lit in the darkness ahead of them. OK, so they weren't the most fun bunch in this place, but at least she got to kick arse once in a while.

Diego glanced along the line. At his men. And Alisha. He smiled a little and stomped on towards the tavern. They were good men and trusted him, as they fuckin' should. But tonight was to be a night off from all the training, all the practise killing, all the running. Beers. And stories, maybe from their past, maybe from the new life they were forging ruthlessly in this piss-hole of a town.

He was a tall, lean figure. Poised and confident. He'd caught some sun once too - his skin tanned, his face arrogant. He liked smiling. And walked with the anger of a killer.

Alisha glanced down the line at her boss. Diego was smiling to himself again and that was always a good sign. The training had actually gone pretty well this week and they were due some time off. A bit of bonding and sexist banter. She shrugged. She was proud that she could take any one of them. Probably not two. Maybe not Mawk. Dano was a piece-of-piss if provoked. Trantis was a slow dickhead. Diego wasn't a front-man. He had good instincts but wasn't fast enough to get out of the way. He knew when to do it right - but he needed the rest of the gang to finish the job. She'd finish him real quick if it came to it.

Mawk. He was a cool motherfucker. Cool, he was ice and practically mute. And he understood her. Understood them all. Far to fuckin' well. Never let on what he was thinking but always knew where everybody was and what they were gonna do. She'd never caught him out. Not yet.

But face to face. Against her swords. She'd have a good chance but would be worried about taking too long. He'd catch her out over the distance.

Trantis wrenched the tavern door open and the noise of shouting, clatter of mugs and scraping of chairs burst out from the packed crowd inside. Trantis inclined his head into the building, holding the door open for the rest of them.

Dano exchanged glances with Alisha. Trantis is such a twat, she thought. Always thinking he can gain favour with Diego by sucking up to him when all he's done is expect us to march into the tavern like a line of militaria. One by fuckin' one. That is *never* the way we do things. When will he *ever* remember that.

She slapped Trantis across the stomach as she strode into the tavern, glaring at him. Dano followed close behind, breaking into her personal space and spitting on the ground by Trantis' feet. Alisha stopped and turned to stare into Dano's face. He was handsome, but never knew when to back the fuck off.

"Get me a drink, Dano."

Dano smiled smoothly and winked, heading straight for the bar. Alisha pulled off her gauntlets and headed for the table in the centre of the room, right in front of the bar. The table was full, groaning under the weight of a crowd of heavy labourers and their sloppy beers. The laughing men didn't notice her until she reached the nearest youngster and bent down, putting her sullen lips against his ear.

"Hi."

The young man jumped, his jowls wobbling and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Wha'?" he grunted looking stupidly up into the smiling beauty of Alisha's face.

The recognition flickered slowly into life within his stupid eyes and Alisha's smile broadened.

"Bye," she said quietly, as the group all lumbered up from the table and backed away, their gaze fixed on her hands. Hands that lay casually on the well-worn hilts of her swords.

Dano slammed an over-full jug down on the table without even noticing the men leaving the table. He only had eyes for Alisha as she absentmindedly brushed a chair with her dirty gloves and sat with coiled elegance.

Trantis frowned and scratched at his beard. The others were in the tavern. Dano had already got the drinks in and he really should be joining them, but something held him there, holding the door open, foolishly standing there with his mouth open. Staring into the night. Staring up at the hillside.

The Horseman shifted on the back of his pale horse. The horse stepped forward out of the shadows of the trees. One step into the quivering moonlight. Across the distance of the street, from the gloom of the trees, their gaze met.

Tonight Trantis would die. The Horseman breathed slowly and gently stroked the hairs on the back of his horse's wide neck. Tonight the paths of this man would wind their way into the forest and his treachery would lead to the dampness of the grass and falling leaves. His life would end. And his anger would evaporate into the stillness of death. As time passed, his flesh would bloat and melt. The bones crumbling into the air. And into the earth would this man's existence go.

Trantis couldn't quite make it out. Was there someone there, on the hillside. In the rain. It was a pale shape beneath the trees. Sometimes the moon appeared and sometimes the rain clouds billowed across the moon. That paleness could be shadow and light. Or a man on a white horse. Who wears white in this fuckin' place?

His stomach rumbled. Fuck he was hungry. And without a second look Trantis entered the tavern, letting the door slam shut behind him.

Diego leaned back in his chair and looked over the tavern. Regulars in the corners. They'd arrived early, before opening time. By the

window were the soldiers. Again. The lieutenant was a keen one. Not good, but keen. It was the gamblers he worried about. A little. They sometimes got feisty and fights that broke out near the bar interrupted their drinking. He'd warned them once. If they knocked over just one more beer, even Trantis' beer, then that would be it. He smiled, he knew where they lived and it would give him great pleasure in trying to work out how they could take out all eight of the bastards without waking a single whore. It was a bit crowded in that part of town.

Otherwise the customers were pretty good. Not much danger of trouble with armed sheep by the window. Stupid sheep. Armed and stupid sheep.

Dano and Alisha smiled at each other, they'd seen Diego eyeing the soldiers again. Every time they came in here they could tell he was itching to take them. But that wasn't the plan. It wasn't time. It wasn't the right place. But soon and the ache inside them both put them on edge.

"God, I can't wait," whispered Alisha to Dano. Diego glanced at her sharply and she smiled prettily back at him.

"Fuck yeah," muttered Dano scratching his elbow. Alisha grinned, that was where his blades were concealed and he didn't realise he'd started to make it a habit.

"Hey, " said Alisha hitting Trantis on the shoulder. "You're quiet tonight. What'ya thinking?"

"He don't have no thoughts, man," grinned Dano ruffling Trantis hair and looking in disgust at the crap in his hand afterwards.

"Fuck you Dano." Trantis shifted his bulk and grabbed at his beer, sloshing it down his throat. Diego looked hard at his man. Discipline was not Trantis' strength.

The door burst open.

The Horseman stood in the doorway, the rain slashing onto the flagstones at his feet. His white robes flickered in the storm and one pale hand pressed gently against the flapping door, holding it open.

Slowly he looked across the room as the conversation died and one by one faces turned to look towards the door.

His face was hidden in the shadow of his hood. But each drinker noted that no weapon hung at his side and turned back to things of more interest.

There was menace in this room. The Horseman closed his eyes briefly. He felt sick in their presence. Sadness and pain shuddered through his veins but he held his hand gently against the soft knots of wood in the door, feeling the cold rain splash against his skin, flicking against the fair hairs on his wrist. The wood of the door was still. Innocent.

He opened his eyes. There was no-one here. Every one of these breathing living humans, as they poured poison into their heavy stomachs, had a grip on fear. Each one had anger and sickness. They all deserved to die.

There was no-one here, but somewhere. Somewhere in this town he could sense the possibilities stretching into an uncertain future. She could be saved.

It was a woman. She was close.

Dano snorted. "I just knew white was in this year."

Alisha just shook her head in astonishment. Diego laughed and punched Dano. "I thought you said Alisha wore white, under all that black crap she's got on now!"

"Hey!" said Alisha angrily, spitting into Dano's face. "That was supposed to be between me and you." She grinned broadly as Dano wiped off the saliva from the side of his nose.

Trantis pushed his head back and bellowed with laughter. "He got you good man. Not so cool now man!"

Mawk nodded slowly and raised his glass. "Here's for a night to remember." Diego thoughtfully leaned forward and pressed his glass against Mawk's staring into his calm eyes.

Alisha and Dano quickly smashed their glasses against the others and downed their pints, the rough beer flooding their stomachs.

“Goddamn!” said Alisha, crashing her glass on the table. Dano belched and stood up.

“Another?” he asked her.

Diego sipped his beer and said quietly, “No.”

Dano sat down quietly, his hands suddenly held out to his sides. His eyes flickered across the room as the Horseman glided over to the bar. Alisha looked once into Diego’s eyes as he watched the Horseman go over and stand next to a huge man at the bar. She raised an eyebrow. The dick at the bar was Magrott, a complete psycho. Nobody bothered Magrott. He just drank at the bar and then fucked off when the place closed.

Diego shook his head in wonderment, smiling at Alisha. Mawk hadn’t moved, his hands cupping his beer glass. But he also didn’t take his eyes of the Horseman.

It would not end well. The Horseman placed two hands on the edge of the bar. The barman stopped telling his joke and stepped over towards the Horseman who said nothing. Annoyed, the barman leant forward over the bar and peered up under the hood, trying to see into the darkness.

“Hey, Fuck. Are you gonna buy something or are you just gonna stand there looking pretty?”

Pleasure and politeness were far from this man’s lips. He sees the world within this drinking establishment and looks no further. The Horseman slowly raised his head to look directly into the pale rheumy eyes of the serving man. As their eyes met, the barman stopped breathing, his chest held by a sudden realisation that time would hold still and that life would change. Completely.

“I am looking for a place to stay.” The Horseman’s voice was pleasant, soft and pure. The words spoken as if rehearsed. Unnaturally smooth and modulated. They seemed to pass between his full lips and directly into the depths of the barman’s heart.

The barman heard his own reply as an echo in front of his eyes as he said without thinking, "Do you see a bed anywhere around here."

The Horseman's eyes were black. The edges pulled in towards the nose in a delicate oval. It was a small nose, elegant and innocent. The whites of the eyes showed no veins and the darkness at their centre pooled deep at the end of all things. His skin was white. Smooth as purest china.

The Horseman placed a finger on the rim of the huge man's glass beside him.

"I will have this," he said innocently.

Magrott shook his head at the distant buzzing sound of the crowded tavern. Some cunt was touching his glass, and that white robe gave him a headache. He'd just been minding his own business at the bar, having a bit of a drink. He looked down at his hands, hands that gripped the edge of the bar and took his hulking weight. Slowly he pushed himself upright and focused on the white fuzz next to him.

The barman slammed another beer down in front of the Horseman, shrugged and turned away, flicking a red stained towel over his arched shoulder.

Magrott blinked a couple of times and stared bemused as the Horseman slid the drink across to stand next to his own.

"Uh?" Magrott grunted and wiped his lanky hair away from his sweaty forehead.

"Well?" said the Horseman, placing both hands calmly face down on the bar and leaning forward watching the back of the retreating barman intently. The barman stopped, hypnotised by the row of barrels in front of him. Entranced he turned back.

"There's a place," the barman flicked his swarthy hands vaguely towards the door. "Turn out of here and right, then left. Rat's Inn. OK?"

The black eyes blinked. Ringed in the glowing white hood. The barman could sense the growing anger of Magrott, hulking over the whiteness that seemed to slither towards the barman, drawing his being into its cloying embrace. There was a slight smile on those small, full lips. He felt a drip of sweat wriggle down his spinal cord and suddenly coughed from the parched dryness of his throat.

“Is that for me?” said Magrott, irritably.

Dano leaned forward over-theatrically. “So, can you believe the shit that we’re gonna pull, guys?”

Alisha draped a warm arm around his neck and placed her hollow cheek against his warm skin.

“Mmmm,” she purred, a satisfied glitter in her slitted eyes.

Diego nodded, pleased.

“The boss knows what he’s doing. OK, we don’t like him, but he’s got it all planned out.”

“All the others have worked out OK, Dano.” Alisha patted him on the cheek. “You’ve just gotta believe in us.”

Dano frowned at her, scratching at his elbow as Diego chuckled. “We’re gonna get some practice, don’t you worry Dano.”

“Hey,” snapped Dano. “I’m not worried,” and he shifted in his chair to watch the Horseman at the bar.

The Horseman placed a restraining hand on the huge man’s arm. “Drink disturbs the mind.”

Magrott pushed the Horseman’s hand away and backed away a step. “What the fuck do you mean by that?” he exclaimed, spittle flying into the air and dripping down from his quivering lower lip.

The Horseman held up both hands peacefully, the sleeves falling away from his slender wrists. His head inclined downwards slightly, watching the anger before him through slitted eyes.

The emotions streamed in from the chaotic noise of the bar and the distress of the past that tightened around the frantic beating heart of this thug. Magrott's fists were bunched at his sides, the knuckles white so that each black hair curled like a worm on dying meat. The breath thundered at the back of his throat and his eyes pulled wide open, the pupils expanding to drink in his new enemy.

The fists would fly forwards, together, to slam inwards and crush the Horseman's face. Knuckles cracking against his cheek bones, pushing inwards to shatter the bone and spray blood back over Magrott's dirty brown leather. It would take one unsteady step, but the flailing fists would take anything in their path. And if they missed, then the massive forearms would send the Horseman's frail form flying into the nearest table of drinkers.

As Magrott shifted his weight onto his left foot, his right foot raised off the sticky wooden floor, the strands of caught hair pulling between the two surfaces. The Horseman's hand whipped out to the bar and his body followed in a scything swing that flicked his frame upside down and around as Magrott's leg continued its ascent and his eyes flickered at the blur of movement attacking from his side.

The Horseman's left foot slashed brutally downwards from above the bar and crashed through the back of Magrott's head. The speed took away the back of Magrott's scalp in a ball of mangled hair, skin and bones. Meshed with blood.

The corpse collapsed to the floor and the Horseman stood on the edge of the bar, his pure robes whipping forward from the energy of his assault.

The first one to be released. Forever become infinite emptiness.

The other humans were silent. Their conversations halted by him. All their perception filled with his pale white form, hanging above the edge of the bar like a virgin vulture. As his robes settled around his slim bones and the hood fell in soft folds over his face, the watchful crowd exchanged glances. It was time to leave.

He could see their paths, weaving their way in the crowded mass of personal fear; running away from another neutral tragedy that left them emotionless. They had assessed the situation and their minds were already carrying them far away from personal danger. He could sense an emptiness where the caring, love and compassion gaped, a blackness of soullessness. He wanted to reach out and grasp the blackness and crush it in fragile hands.

Diego stood, twisting on his leather heel, without looking back. Quickly he headed for the back of the tavern knowing that the rest would make their exit too.

Trantis scowled across the room at the Horseman and deliberately slammed his thick shoulder against a desperate yokel who was struggling for the door. The tavern was suddenly filled with movement as most headed for the door, some for the windows, others for the back door.

Alisha could feel the tension in her cheekbones and stiffness in her shoulders. Irritably she thrust through the crowd towards the back door and glanced back at the bar. That dickhead could unsettle the whole fuckin' town; already the soldiers were loading their bows.

She jumped slightly at a hand on her shoulder. Dano shook his head slightly as he followed close behind her.

“Cool, man,” he hissed.

There were twelve of them. And the leader. They notched arrows to short-bows with uniform drilled precision, their watchful eyes only for the Horseman. It was inevitable that the violence would start. If he used death, then death would face him. If he showed compassion then death would tear at his back. The darkness could only be faced with his light.

The soldiers had no heart. They knew nothing except the release of death.

He flowed back behind the bar. Out of sight.

The arrows clattered into the barrels and glasses above the bar. Some fell to the floor around the crouching barman who glared at the Horseman, his mediocre life of boredom disrupted.

The Horseman could feel the grain of the wood as it curls and swirls along the floorboards and catches the gaps, then across to the dust and the heaviness of the bar. A solid wooden square-framed bar with knife-marked and burnt surfaces, resting on a floor sticky with years of alcohol. His fingers tore underneath, catching the edge of the bar and wrenching the splinters apart. Lifting the bar up from the floor.

The cracking wood shattered the murmuring bustle of the tavern as the last few spectators pressed through the exits and tumbled out through the windows. The soldiers stepped backwards, blinking.

The Horseman raised the bar above his head, his white robes sparkling with shards of wood, the darkness beneath his hood hiding a thin smile. The movement is as natural as the violence of a hurricane that carries the wood into the air, flashing across the tavern to crash into the scattering soldiers. The corner caught one man across his shoulder, shattering the bone, dislocating his arm and carrying on through his neck sending a stream of red down the length of the spinning wood.

Another soldier, fallen to the ground, felt the weight of wood fall onto his outstretched arm, his fingers pressing momentarily against the surface, before his fingernails popped and the knuckles sprayed apart, shredding his arm.

The Horseman let his arms fall slowly to his sides as the screams of dying men filled the dust-filled air, as each cry streamed into silence. Their lives flickered and ended, as their eyes dimmed and their futures were erased. Not one would be missed.

CHAPTER 2

Trantis gasped for breath, his feet slamming and sliding on the slippery grass, arms flailing and grasping at clumps of ground.

The hill was steep, seemed almost vertical and the top was distant against the gloomy sky. Looking back, Trantis could see the lights wavering through the sheets of rain; glimmers of humanity in the village below. He had left the group far behind, quickly escaping into the shadows and making for the forest on the hillside. He was late.

Sweat mingled salty with the fresh splatters of rain, running down his grubby cheeks and washing through his beard. With every stumbling step he brushed angrily at the tangles of hair that flicked into his eyes and peered up into the watery sky. Was there movement in the shadows above?

The thick wooden shaft of his flail bashed hard against his hip and he nervously checked every time, in case it slipped from his belt. Sometimes he wondered whether it would all be worth his while. But the Lord had been convincing. There was something in the eyes that had carried the message deep into Trantis' being; that there would be no treachery in the deal. He'd made the suggestion and the snooty fucker twisted the whole damn situation.

Now he was the fuckin' servant. Running and scurrying at the Lord's every order. Like a bloody messenger with a brain the size of a rat. But he'd got the item. And that made Trantis smile with a certain satisfaction, because the gang never had any respect really. Never thought him capable of anything except making the wrong move at the wrong time and always forgetting their bloody plans. Hey, I know

how to smack a damn soldier over the head, I don't need to memorise every stone in the castle, Diego.

But he had the map. Most of it was right. He couldn't remember it all but he was pretty sure most of it was right. Enough for his end of the deal at least. And anyway, how the fuck did the gang expect to make a go of it anyway.

He was deep in the dark of the trees. Surrounded by gnarled trunks and suddenly silent, soft pine needle ground. The distant noise of the rain was the only sound above his rasping breath. There was nothing moving in the shadows. It was the wind.

Trantis let his chest heave for a few more seconds, his eyes flicking from one misshapen clump of foliage to another, trying to penetrate the gloom and distinguish the leaves from watching eyes, or glimmering weapons. Nothing. He was alone.

"You are late."

The voice came from the shadows by his right shoulder. He managed to restrain his reaction to a mild shudder, hands clenched viciously at his side.

"I was delayed," he snapped into the darkness of the forest, refusing to look around.

"Is anyone from the group suspicious?" The voice was softer, smoother with the hint of a whisper in the stillness of the trees. Trantis turned, shifting his vast weight from one foot to another, feeling every awkward muscle twinge at the movement. Blending with the darkness the man was dressed in the rich silk robes of his Lord. Black clothes in the shadows, hiding everything except the slightest flash of white teeth.

"No," Trantis spat, getting annoyed. "A stranger made a dramatic entrance." Actually that white motherfucker just trashed a bar, killed a perfectly harmless guy and moved with the deadliness of a snake. Snake's eyes too that seemed to hang in his memory, tightening around his chest. Trantis wanted to grab the stranger by the

shoulders and shake him until he hung dead in his hands. But the eyes made his mouth dry and his breath shorten.

Assanagara stared hard at Trantis' face. This man has no spine, he thought frustratedly, how can we rely on him for information. He's lucky if he can remember his name after a night of drinking in that tavern. He thinks that his size and bad temper are enough to scare his enemies, enough to protect him. He's too weak. Perhaps he should die tonight.

"Does he have anything to do with the plan?" Assanagara asked sharply.

Trantis took out the small roll of parchment to disguise his nervousness, his knuckles whitening with the pressure of hiding his shaking hands. Handing it over should have been a triumph, but this bastard was making him irritable.

"No," Trantis snarled, stepping towards Assanagara and pulling his shoulders back to broaden his chest, face pulled into a threatening clump. "I've covered everything in this." He handed the parchment to Assanagara, watching as Assanagara slipped the paper into the darkness of his clothing.

"If anything should be missing..." said Assanagara quietly and he held a finger to his lips, shaking his head reprovingly and gliding backwards into the shadows, merging with the darkness.

Trantis stepped forwards and slammed a fist against a branch in front of him. Motherfucker, he thought grabbing the branch in both hands and bending it towards breaking point. With a cry he snapped it in half and threw the end away sharply. He wanted to scream, to run, to grab that bastard by the ears and twist his head off.

Assanagara raised his finger, white in the darkness. Further into the forest he could hear the helpless snarls of their informant as he crashed around in the bushes. Easily frustrated, with no patience or willpower, thought Assanagara, a typical human.

Out of the night a large bat flew, fluttered and landed on his finger. It bit him, playfully. Assanagara attached the parchment to the bat's leg and watched it fly back into the night. He bent his head forward and tasted the blood. It was cold. He needed warm blood.

He could feel the hunger resonate throughout his body. He couldn't remember real hunger. He was sure that it used to start in the stomach: an emptiness that made the flesh fold over the shrunken stomach and saliva slip from the roof of the mouth. Then he would have eaten food, and the hunger would disappear from the mouth, and the stomach would become warmer and the body lethargic.

Now sharpness flowed through his veins and his eyes bruised from the hunger. The hunger made his face tighten and his hands bend into claws and his teeth extend ready to tear into human flesh. He preferred the arm. To close his mouth firmly around the muscles of the forearm and drive his canines deep into the soft flesh, piercing the skin, the first rush of blood warming his lips. And his tongue flicking towards the wash of liquid and sucking suddenly, filling his mouth and swallowing, satisfying, feeding.

There was no awareness of a heart. His heart was still. Sometimes he wondered whether it was still there. What would he find if he opened his chest? It wouldn't hurt. Pain was more an itch that drew his attention but no more than a mild irritation. He could rip open his chest, pull out his heart and see for himself. It wouldn't be beating. His skin was dead but he wasn't decaying. It didn't even smell dead, just the slight perfume of something herbal. But if he opened his chest he would have to wait months for it to heal back. He'd have to walk around with it flapping around, perhaps losing bits of his insides, dropping out and slopping around on the floor. Too messy. Might trip over something.

Assanagara shrugged. Interesting. He'd think about it. Some other time. There was no real hurry. He looked around at the trees. There was nothing much alive near here. Somehow the creatures of

nature knew he was here and went as quickly as they could in another direction. I wonder how they know? Assanagara smiled. Lord Stowgan wasn't expecting him back any time soon and there wasn't really anything else important for him to do.

When you live forever the urgency in life tends to pass you by.

Assanagara laughed into the stillness of the forest and with a grin of self-depreciation thought that it also made you laugh on your own a lot. Perhaps the animals could smell his dead but non-decaying flesh. Perhaps he should kill Trantis.

They would be on the other side of the valley, thought Trantis. Practising. Again and again and again. And fucking again. I can't believe I'm in a hurry to get back to those arseholes. Maybe a beer or two would take the edge off. Maybe then Alisha wouldn't piss me off so much.

But there wasn't time to stop off at the tavern. It was probably still shut after that bloke in white had messed it up. What a fuck. He'd nearly fucked everything up, interfering cunt.

Trantis slapped a branch aside angrily and they never ever say thank you. He'd done what they'd asked, handed the map over and they hadn't even said fuckin' thank you. He stopped suddenly, breathing hard. The side of his long curly hair was stuck against his stubbled cheek and he wiped it away from his eyes with shaking hands. It was so fuckin' dark and he couldn't hear a thing, apart from the constant shuffle of leaves above him. And the wind.

The assassin dropped silently to the pine-needle ground. His feet bounced gently on its softness and his knees shivered briefly, adjusting his angle and weight. He stared straight ahead, sensing the target had stopped moving. There were many tree trunks, stark, dark, thrusting up between him and his target. But he could make out some movement, the flap of a cloak or jacket. The twist of the target's head.

The assassin was dressed in soft black clothing, built up in short muffled layers giving him a rough, jagged shape. Streaks of brown and black with a mask and skin blackened around the eyes. In his hands, oiled disks, a circle of blades held between thumb and forefinger. He was motionless, the edges of his clothing matching the ruffling of the wind in the trees. Black on black.

His eyes were thin slits, his face tilted down; not even letting the whites of his eyes give him away. He was close. Maybe fifty yards. Not close enough to throw. Not yet.

He would wait for the others to close in.

Trantis grunted and started walking again. Striding with confidence straight between the thicker trees. Quietly, under his breath he began to whistle aimlessly. Let's face it. If any dickhead had followed him then his friends would have taken them out. Just like that. He had some pretty tough friends, not to be messed with. Even Alisha would find it hard to survive more than a few seconds. Stupid bitch. To think she could take anyone. Being beautiful doesn't stop anything. Especially not when something wants to take a bite out of your beautiful neck.

He grinned and licked his lips. He wouldn't mind taking a bite out of her, any part of her. He reckoned her skin would be so smooth under all that dirty leather. So clean. Smelling of desire.

The two assassins slammed against the tree trunks breathing quickly. One held two slim oiled swords. The other, two iron bars linked by a chain. The one with the iron bars nodded at the other and slipped around the tree into the darkness.

Another black clothed figure was almost invisible against the bushes. Only his head showed between the branches, narrowed eyes watching as the target stumbled past, whistling.

The assassin let a branch of foliage fall back, covering his face. His hands held an iron claw in the palm, the spikes sharp and well worn with use. Old cracked leather straps clasped the striking metal tight to his palm. His elbows were bent loosely so that his hands hung downwards like the jaws of a preying mantis.

He didn't react when someone gripped his shoulder from behind. The other assassin leaned forward, pressing his lips against the others ear. "Now."

He waited, sensing his partner leave him and head off at an angle. Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Go.

Assanagara stopped walking, his eyes widening. Flickers of redness moved away between the stillness of the trees. Life fleeing him. The paleness of the leaves, soft purple waving in the breeze. The tree trunks dark green, motionless. He sniffed. Fur and fear on the wind. Insects beneath the ground, the dampness of pine and grass and leaves. Dying wood and crushed earth. Oil.

He spun.

Iron bars swished violently through the air, spinning towards his head. Instinctively he flicked his arm up, his hand wrapping around the oiled iron. Sliding. No grip.

His body twisted, feet spinning on the needles, cloak spraying across his attacker. Human. Dressed in black. Covered in grass and earth. Smelling of the forest. Dangerous.

Assanagara smiled. Food.

Another. Blades slashing at waist height. Fast. Not as fast as him. He released his weight, letting the air rise beneath him, wind rattling through his clothes as he flew upwards and over his assailant. He pulled hard on the iron bar. Roughly jerking downwards and around to disarm.

The assassin rolled over backwards, dragged into the air, his feet slamming against the side of a tree, pushing himself higher into the air. Turning with the iron bars and following Assanagara's movement and pushing off with a flex of the thigh muscles. Driving his knee hard into Assanagara's face, crashing across cheek and nose, tearing out two teeth and snapping the nostril bone. No blood.

Assanagara pulled back, pushing off in mid-air to take the blow away from his neck. He didn't want to continue the rest of the fight with a broken neck. He wouldn't be able to see the fear in these humans' eyes as he tore their arms out.

With graceful ease he kicked out, landing a blow in the middle of the other assassin's chest. The assassin on the ground with the swords. The kick sent the assassin spinning uncontrollably into the air, flying twenty yards, crashing through bushes and branches, arms spread out.

Softly Assanagara let himself sink to the ground as his cloak settled around him, the strangling of the night. His hungry gaze followed the arc of his food and his unconscious smile faded as the assassin in the air sprung against the force of the flight against a tree and dropped in a neat roll to the ground, stood and strolled towards him.

He could hear the whirl of iron behind him, the cracking of death on the floor as the assassin stepped towards him. Assanagara's hands were cracked into killing claws, his mouth tight open with long canines glistening with saliva. It was anger and excitement that flooded his mouth and made him want to scream into the night. And tear the heart out while it was still beating and attached by the myriad veins that gradually pluck from the body with the snap of slender pipes. Spraying warm, delicious wet blood. Blood from them. He didn't care now whether he tasted it or just saw it flying out as their dying heart beat its last.

The assassin strolled on, the swords jabbed sideways, upwards then criss-crossing in a complicated pattern. Then started to run, hard.

Assanagara started running too. Easy, fast. The unearthly strength powered down his thighs sending his body flashing across the ground, his cloak whipped back horizontally. Then the legs were snapped together.

The iron bars wrapped tightly around his ankles, one bar crashing upwards and snapping against his knee, shattering the knee-cap. The chain biting hard into his skin, opening the white dead flesh, his foot twisting beneath him, ligaments shredding.

As his body jack-knifed forwards, his arms spreading outwards, the assassin drove a sword down at the back of his head as Assanagara's hands flicked up in defence. Tricked into raising his arms the second blade slipped beneath his elbows, driving hard towards the unprotected throat.

He grabbed at the sword. The oily blade beneath his palm, sliding quickly. Angrily he allowed the edge to tear into his hands. With one quick thrust he could take it away and drive his nails deep into this human's eyes. He could see the faded red of heat from beneath the mask. The extra hot areas around the eyes and the gash of the mouth. Lower down was the fluttering of the white-hot heart, just behind the swords.

Everything went white – in an overwhelming flash where entire darkness was flooded with a complete whiteness stabbing into his eyes, sending a searing pain bursting across his face, and deep into his skull. To nothing.

The flood of fire released from the tip of the sword, a deluge of rolling flame that enveloped the top of Assanagara's head, blinded him long enough for the blade to drive deep into his skull. The top of his skull burst open and crackled black and burnt as his slumping corpse dropped to the ground and a cloud of ashen smoke filled the trees.

Trantis skidded on the soft ground, one foot slipping, losing his balance and grasping at the branches to his side.

He stared into the night at the flicker of red in the distance. Fire. Which could mean....shit.

He looked down at his chest. A circle of blades protruded from above the heart. He began to reach for them as his strength fell away from him. The pain that flooded from the centre of the blades was chased closely by a dullness, a weakness and a gentleness. His hand never reached further than his waist.

He stumbled forward as another assassin stepped up behind him and slammed his palm into the back of his head. The iron claws bit deep into his skull, the curved shape trapping the blades in the bone. The assassin casually jerked upwards ripping the back of Trantis' head open with a squelch of soft blood.

With a twist he released his claw and grabbed the body under the armpits. Lowering the corpse silently to the ground. His partner stepped out of the darkness and reached down to wrench the circle of blades out of the body, wiping the metal on the dead man's clothes. Quickly he ran through the pockets and belt, efficiently searching the folds of clothing and the inside of the boots, gloves and tunic.

Blank parchment was thrown to the ground, along with a quill, ink bottle, coins, a roll of string, crumpled cloth wrapped around a whetstone. The assassin shrugged. "Nothing."

The other assassin picked up the rubbish.

CHAPTER 3

The Inn had never been looked after. Centuries had passed and every owner had lived, worked and passed on without looking at the walls, roof or doors. From the outside the windows were thickly coated in slime, the mould that lines the cracks of wood and ivy, brown and dying. The diamond panes of glass were often empty, surrounded by crumbling lead and framed by rotten ledges and eaves. The entrance had steps that creaked, cracked and collapsed. Planks sticking up at angles where they had broken. The door never closed. It stuck a few inches open, the bottom jammed against the swollen steps.

As the Horseman rode slowly up to the entrance, the sign swayed gently, grating against the rusty pole. The painting had faded to an invisible greyness. A few drops of rain splashed on the mud as the Horseman dismounted, resting his palm briefly on the neck of his horse.

He could feel the warmth transfer quickly to his skin and the slow rise and fall of the throat. The breath of life spreading and falling, the veins carrying its peace from hoof to nostril. He turned and looked up at the roof and its gaping holes. Clouds rushed over the roof, across the skies behind him, glowing in the moonlight. There was a candle flickering in the depths of the Inn, reflecting on the inside of the windows.

He climbed the steps.

The Inn was full of darkness. Shadows crawling up the walls around the nestling circle of candles on a dining table. A short bar of ancient oak received no light and the Inn-keeper was almost invisible in his chair behind it – asleep. The shape of the five women at the

dining table was splashed up on the cracked wall in the candlelight and shifted as the flame moved.

One woman sat upright, with her back to the entrance. Her elegant neck stiff. She didn't look around. The other four were maids, dressed in smart white blouses, frills on the sleeves and over the shoulders with deep black aprons of subtle crumpled black velvet. They stared down at the table, their places empty of plates or cups, their eyes expressionless, wide and mournful. They had a stillness that was relaxed but impatient as if waiting for something.

The lady had her hair tightly curled up in a complicated shape at the back of her head. A few loose strands were designed to fall smoothly out of the back and loop over her shoulder. The hair was black, soft and each individual strand gleamed with a radiance of its own. Where the hair fell, it drew elegant lines across the whiteness of her skin. Writing scrawls of passion across her enticing flesh.

The ungainly chair on which she sat was overflowing with wave after wave of crushed velvet, satin and silk in an expensive splash of dark hues. Blood red darkened to purple with black netting and streaks of deep blue. Her hands lay folded in her lap, small in repose and clasped together as if formed from the marble of a gracious statue.

The angle of her head seemed to give her a poise and beauty beyond her form. Tilted slightly downwards, it set her eyes at a level that would tempt the hearts of men; for once she looked up, her wide innocence would drag them down with the flush of love.

The rush of wind and spattering of rain on the wooden floor did not stir the occupants of the Inn, as if they were painted in a tableau of elegance. Or actors at the beginning of a play. As the Horseman glided across the floor to the bar. The old man didn't move.

Although the maids remained in their positions and their eyes faced resolutely downwards, their lips trembled and their attention moved from the focus on the table to watch the movement from the corners of their eyes. He is here, they thought, It is time for Mistress

to begin. And their excitement washed over them, an engulfing wash of pleasure.

“What the fuck?” the old man jerked upright in his chair, disturbed by the Horseman’s silent presence. His endless dreams had become overshadowed by a growing entity that had devoured his peace and swamped his desire with fear.

“A room please,” said the Horseman leaning forward so that the old man fell into his gaze. The old man opened his mouth a few times but his croaking throat could make no reply. There was something in this man’s eyes that crept up on his loneliest fears and unsettled his pleasure. Perhaps it was time to leave this place, he thought. His back twitched and he could feel his age thicken in his bones. Suddenly he sensed the pain in his breathing, the shallowness of his lungs and aching in his knees. The skin on his cheeks felt tight where once it had been warm with the flush of youthful exuberant life.

Then he saw past the stranger’s shoulder – Serina’s table. Saw the back of her neck and the maids still staring down. A stab of fear caused a metallic taste to flood his mouth and his eyes to narrow.

“We don’t just take in anyone, you know,” he croaked.

The Horseman smiled. The lips smiled in the peace of compassion and the eyes wrinkled with warmth; but darkness at the centre of those eyes drew the old man in and spoke to him of the end of all things.

The Horseman placed a few coins on the bar with a quiet click.

“I know,” he said still smiling and he glanced over at the dining table. The candles’ flames dropped quickly and then returned to an even brighter strength. She was here.

He had held his feelings as he entered the Inn. Held them preciously in a soft grasp, surrounding them with hands of fragility. The truth had been small and delicate. That there was one within his reach was an incredible gift and it would require all his skill and patience to let the flower of hope grow. Now he was within its presence he was humbled by ambition and danger. So slender was hope in the face of this brutality and hunger. With his hands he could

form the deepest of silences but in his words he could fashion a protective web that would enfold her in life.

It was the beginning of the journey and in his heart was the small first step that he had seen when he first arrived. If he could unravel the path and take her hand-in-hand then the brightness at the end of the journey would embrace them both. But to find it is to risk everything.

“May I join you, madam?” the Horseman said quietly as he stood at the side of the table. The old man was fumbling with a woollen bag, trying to slide the coins in with his dirty fingers. The maids didn’t look up.

“Please. Be our guest,” Serina smiled up at the Horseman, a gracious, welcoming smile. She was beautiful. The Horseman smiled back and watched as one of the maids vacated her chair for him. The maid kept her gaze downwards, her face sullen.

Serina had the face of an angel. Her china-smooth skin painted from the art of ecstasy and her eyes wide with a child’s innocence. Every element of her face was delicately placed to balance the darkness of her hair and eyes. Her lips had the subtlety of a flower in spring and when she spoke, the lightness of her warmed the Horseman’s skin.

She was a fragile whiteness trapped in a cloak of dark colours. An angel in dark clothing.

The Horseman let his money pouch fall open on the wooden table-top with a clatter as the coins spilled out, burnished gold for the hunger of the old man. The Inn-keeper stumbled to his feet, leaning on the side of the bar as he focused on the coins. The stranger must be hungry, must need some food and some drink because he has probably travelled for a long time, been on a long journey. Although he doesn’t look as though he’s travelled far in those clothes. Who wears white anyway?

The old man shuffled quickly towards his kitchen, letting the door slam behind him.

“Please. Would you have some wine. It is really rather good.” Serina slid her wine glass across the table with her small curved hand. The Horseman glanced down at her fingers, the short white nails and unworked skin.

He could see those hands as they lightly traced a path down his naked chest, tracing the form of his body, memorising every contour for times when they are apart. A lover. Or something else. Those hands appeared innocent, tender, womanly and capable only of pleasing a man or caring for a child. The history of those fingers sprayed out in ever-increasing lines of past stories and dreams. Following each line would see the future of every moment that had occurred, every choice and every possibility. It is the reason for these choices that define the person. It was his choices that had sent the lines of each dream colliding into a central core that spun in the fiery moment. A moment that coalesced into a strand that then sprayed out again on his path. And hers.

And every word added another strand. Creating another moment that changed the future. With the gentlest of touches he reached out and grasped that fiery moment to hold the core to his heart.

“Most generous. Thank you.” The Horseman took the glass delicately between finger and thumb and had the tinniest sip. The deep red wine slipped from one side of the cloudy glass to the other, the edges dark blotches of sediment. He looked up from the wine to the lady’s deep red lips.

“My name is Serina. I cannot imagine why you should be here?” Her question cut through the futures with the efficiency of experience. It was her fear that held her down, preventing her from exposing herself to her past and her reality.

“It is not the most welcoming of places. You are the first friendly person I have met,” he said, grinning.

“I have always found that good manners can bring peace where there is turmoil. However I have to apologise, I will soon be departing for the night. I cannot accompany you during your meal.”

The Horseman inclined his head graciously.

"Please, please. Don't worry. I would not wish to..." he paused and blinked in her steady gaze. "...delay your sleep. But surely a woman as beautiful and refined as yourself should not be ..." he waved at the surroundings, "...here."

Serina looked down at her hands. "I am waiting for someone," she said sadly.

"Someone important?" the Horseman said, casually leaning forward slightly.

"You are important now, my new friend," Serina said warmly, looking up at the Horseman with a sudden rush of emotion.

"Thank you, Serina," said the Horseman, savouring the name and letting its nuances send a resonance through his desire.

Serina suddenly grasped the Horseman's hand tightly. Their first touch brought the moment into stark clarity.

"Be careful here, until I see you again. Good bye." She broke his gaze and stood up abruptly, sending the chair backwards with a scrape of wood on wood.

The maids stood at the same time and followed as she headed for the stairs, bathed in shadow at the back of the room. A darkness that absorbed her into its impenetrable embrace. The Horseman watched the movement in the shadows, her white face and the whiteness of her maids' uniform.

Lord Stowgan's hands curled, claws of a predator, twisting over and scratching into the back of the old and dusty chair. His back was bowed, not from age or tiredness but from the ancient patience of an animal's tension before springing to tear at its prey. Long and flowing, his cloak was ruffled and old on the surface. Black velvet with centuries of dust worn into the silken fibres.

His head hung, the eyes closed as if his empty gaze penetrated the floor beneath him. Frothy eyebrows framed a long angular face, pressed into a mask of peace and curiosity and suffocated by a heavy

hood that crumpled around the dead skin like wettened earth crumbling into a grave.

The eyes opened, instantly drinking in the musty contents of the tower room and closing again, as if in the depths of meditation. There was no breath from the thick parted lips, nor heat from the parchment face. The stillness emanated from within the core of his being, blending his form with the sparse and disintegrating furnishings of the tower.

Without disturbing the dust, layered thick on the black sticky floor, he glided over to the open window. His eyes flicked open again, sightless and motionless, staring into the distant night beyond the waving branches. Lightly his cloak rustled in his passage and motes of dust glimmered in a few glimpses of moonlight from the window as if only the air noticed his passing. There had been a disturbance tonight; the order of things had become unbalanced.

Lord Stowgan pressed gently against the cold rock wall and leaned out of the window further into the night. The light breeze swept in by the minute differential between the freezing outside and the deathly cold of the tower. It passed over his skin, brushing over the hairs of his eyebrows and moving amongst the line of the hair on his head. A gentle fearful invasion.

The trees beyond his home moved in the same wind, their empty branches silver and mottled in the moonlight. The clouds passed overhead, directly for the town that lay in the valley. There would be rain tonight in the valley. Just as there was death. The natural order of things. The things that came and the things that went. In the cycle of life and death. The cycle that continued beneath him, and tumbled to his tune.

One day all this will be yours. What a cliché. Lord Stowgan smiled to himself. The best that can be said is; if you take it, then it is yours. And then others will take it. If they can.

The years built up at the bottom of his mind like the bricks of a keep. Each one a tiny pyre to death and destruction but ultimately leading to growth and continuance. The bricks melded into a wall

that surrounded his existence; propping up his prejudices, his likes, his hates and a utter confidence in his future. He would never end.

He had seen this view before. When the trees descended into half-death and shed their greenery. They discarded their life as a snake its skin and sank into a torpor of slight existence where tiny increments of growth and sustenance held them for the spring. He had shed his greenery a long time ago. Perhaps a century. Perhaps thousands of years. When change is as small as the increase of bark on the thinnest of trees, then the years build into an endless tower of controlled aggression. These humans prefer the joys of the moment to the gentle massage of decades. Which is why it is so easy to appeal to their pleasures.

I wonder what they can possibly find in the over-excited drinking of alcohol. Ten or fifteen mugs of that bitter, foul ale and the poison is concentrated enough in their blood to disable their ability to stand. Yet they swallow with the desperation of the damned. So that they don't feel, perhaps. If only they could experience *my* life, they would soon realise what it is like not to feel. I have so many memories I cannot discern the past from the present. Certainly nothing worth remembering anyway. I live in one continuous moment with an endless future before me. Not a particularly interesting prospect. No animal desires, sexual pleasures or desire to hoard, eat or laugh. I remember myself as a distant character in a bizarre play, a historic figure capable of such things. And since then nothing, but endless contemplation.

Even the hunger for blood gets uninteresting after a while. Especially when it tastes better in twitching running people. Always slapping at you with metal objects and screaming and running. Why don't they just kneel and give in to the inevitable. They are all so stupid. Perhaps if they surrendered they wouldn't have that terrified expression that looked so amusing. Especially the eyes that widened in terror, swallowing his vision as he drove his mouth into their neck. Assanagara prefers drawing from the arm. He'd tried it once, a young

girl asleep in her room, perhaps reminding him of the desire he'd had when alive, the desperate urge to procreate, the feel of the feminine standing close, touching.

He could remember the clothes folded neatly on a chair under the window. The window through which he'd arrived, dissembled and deformed as scattered mist. Senses diffused and reality distorted by the transformation as he flowed to the bottom of her bed and rose in full form. Tall; overhanging the bed, a shadow in darkness. She had woken then, her eyes snapping open in the waking moment of sleep and nightmare. He had sprung onto the bars at the bottom of her bed, crouching obscenely above the white sheets. His eyes wide and enticing. Black pools within the pale stillness of his face.

One look and he had connected. Tearing into her dreams, desires, holding her still, holding her beating heart. His hand clenched hard around existence, preventing her from moving, crushing her lungs with paralysis. Her eyes became dry, unblinking, her lips parted with gasping breath. As long as he held her gaze she remained motionless and he crawled onto the sheets, a lost lover come home.

He had felt powerful that night. His body hammered with the pulse of blood recently consumed. Every sense heightened; hearing the rustle of sheets and creak of the metal bed, the rattle of a chain outside the window. This was unnecessary, a greedy consumption for pleasure. And he had slammed the ridge of his hand around her throat with the strength of that pleasure and sent her crashing into the wall, a soft thud of delicate living tissue. Scraping her up against the wall, the rough splinters catching the thinness of her dress, her arms hanging helplessly at her sides as his gaze entrapped her. And as the door flew open with the desperate anger of her human father, Lord Stowgan had driven his teeth into the soft upper arm, breaking the skin and grinding into the bone.

As the warm redness washed over his lips and splattered over the sheets, the human collided with him and fell back onto the floor from the impact. He gnashed at her arm, turning rinds of flesh into a mesh of torn skin and sucking out the liquid with hedonistic sounds. His

eyes had fallen, his attention distracted and he had carelessly dropped his concentration so that the girl was flung into her nightmare. Screaming at the end of her world she thrashed at the wall and at his arms and shoulders. Flakes of dead scraped skin flew from his arms and saliva flickered from her mouth before he casually slapped her across the cheek, breaking her neck.

He couldn't remember what he did with her father. Probably killed him. Maybe not. Perhaps the mother and sisters and brothers. He had been very excited that night.

And now Assanagara was dead.

Was that the grumblings of anger? Could he sense the beginnings of an emotion washing up from the depths of this impassive ocean? It had been a long time since one of his own had been removed. Assanagara was close to him. A kindred soul that appreciated the truth of their futures. They had talked much about what they faced, and those conversations had been pleasurable. Interesting and tortured, following the whims of two old men. Companions in the night, thought Lord Stowgan. What a romantic notion that vaguely reminds me of prostitutes.

And I saw him die. Felt it within my bones. My skin hurt from the flames, I felt the swords and iron bars and the grass beneath his feet and his mouth open in the wind of the air as he flew. I saw the attackers as they raced and fought with skill, anger and discipline. Energy and excitement that Assanagara didn't meet. He was lazy, indolent, arrogant, confident. There was no fear or desire. Assanagara wanted no conquest but purely the pleasure of killing and it was the desire of a feeding animal, not an honest fighter. He deserved to fail.

And presumably he was not to be the only one. Assanagara was the first. A casualty of war. The beginning. Lord Stowgan swung away from the window and glided quickly towards the long mahogany table. His fingers were clenched and the sudden consciousness caused him to raise a fist and stare at it in genuine surprise. Events

were unfolding that had a chance of interesting him. Something more than simply sucking out the life from this town.

A bat glided in through the window and smoothly grew, a blackness that spread into the form of Masinforl who knelt before Lord Stowgan, his cowed head bowed and his hands neatly held behind his cloaked back.

Lord Stowgan clicked his fingers and turned as Masinforl silently rose to his feet.

“They plan very well, my lord.”

Lord Stowgan could feel the backs of his hands tense in eagerness to turn into fists once more. But he wouldn’t show such emotion in front of a messenger.

“As well they should...” said Lord Stowgan holding out his hand. Masinforl placed a parchment in the open hand with the delicacy of a maiden holding a flower.

“...it is not a thing to be taken lightly. To crawl into my castle as the plague.” Lord Stowgan glared into Masinforl’s startled eyes, pushing ahead, forcing his mind forwards through Masinforl’s eyes and into the darkness behind the frightened expression, crushing his will downwards, trapping the messenger’s soul against the depths of his existence.

“Worm their way from stair to turret. And face me with their dog-heads held high. Pathetic puppets that have climbed their own strings.”

With a flourish, Lord Stowgan flicked open the parchment and read the document with a sweeping gaze as Masinforl backed away slightly. Since his beginning he had never seen Lord Stowgan act like this. This fury was worrying and unpredicted. Something had unsettled Lord Stowgan, and surely it couldn’t be the planned attack? So many men had come against them and every time Lord Stowgan had planned a defence, predicted the attack and carried on his life as if nothing had happened. These humans offered little to change this. But the emotions radiated from Lord Stowgan, swamping him.

“So they have prepared for what exactly?” said Lord Stowgan looking up at Masinforl and then back at the parchment. “Ah, I see. The schemes of peasants, lacking in refinery, artistry and the unfortunate matter of secrecy.”

Lord Stowgan crushed the parchment and let it drop onto the floor.

“You know these people. Tell me what they intend. Most of this document is absolute rubbish. Whoever wrote this is a complete idiot. Give me every detail.”

Masinforl had a small face. A young face. He had been taken when only a young man, in his late teens. When returning late at night after drinking with his fashionable friends, from expensive bottles of imported wine. It was pouring with rain, in thick sheets that slapped his unfeeling face and filled his eyes. There was no moon or light in the clouded darkness and the shadows that curled around his shadow and danced at the edge of his sight, followed him without difficulty.

As he reached the corner of a crossroads, between rows of sullen silent houses, his foot descended deep into a hole wetting it to the ankle. He stopped and swayed, arrested by the fascination of coldness that seeped up his leg. As the arm slipped around his neck and the grip tightened he was still staring at the untidy ground until his chin was raised up by the cool smooth flesh of his assailant.

The arm pressed so tightly that his breath was stopped, and his mouth flapped open like a fish, his tongue gradually extending, tasting the rain-water. Slowly, out of the darkness and the red haze of his faint, a second darkness materialised into a cloaked figure that floated with a purity of motion, ghost-like in its eloquence. Until the white face closed to his and those deep dark eyes were inches from his eyes and the teeth slammed into his throat.

The death was pain. At first the slash of agony was the burning of boiling water against his neck, the sudden scratching of teeth on bone.

CHAPTER 4

Alisha peered around the thickness of the tree. At the top of the hill, she was a black silhouette growing from the darkened bark, dressed from head to toe in layered folds of soft black. At her feet, the others crouched, talking quietly.

“Two guards, beneath the tower,” she said quietly. “Piece of piss.”

Diego looked up, his eyes slight white glimmers within the black charcoal over his face and the black woollen mask.

“Are they lit? Keep it professional Alisha.”

“Yeah, they’re lit. Two torches on brackets above their heads.”

Diego held her gaze for a few seconds. “Good. Nothing has changed.”

Dano slowly slid a slug like gloved finger along the oily surface of his circle of blades. Calmly he took out a small pouch and unwound the rough string tie, unwinding it round and round until the thick black contents could be seen. As if parting the moist folds of a woman, he slid a finger into the slime, slid it around and around and drew it out again glistening.

It took broad strokes to spread the slime over the shining blades and he rubbed it in with the palm of his hand until the surface was rough and dark; invisible in the night.

“When you’re ready Dano,” said Diego patiently, watching with amusement as Dano completed his pre-action ritual. Tonight was important. He would get to see if they could do it. If they had what it takes. He had worked with many crews both here and in his past, but

none had this potential. Trantis and his friend had been taken out without a single mistake, quickly. Easily.

They had the balance that he craved beyond all things; every one of them would cover for the deficiencies of the others and they were fucking good fun too. There wasn't a single evening that didn't end uproariously. Dano was a pain in the arse but was perfect for when they had to unwind.

Only now his insecurities were showing. Twitchy. Always nervous before combat. Such a showy bastard most of the time, but when it came to the real thing it was Alisha and Mawk that took things cool. And it was that flirty, clowning son-of-a-bitch that began to fall to pieces.

Mawk pressed Diego on the arm, attracting his gaze. The soft penetrative eyes pressed against his panic as Mawk leaned forward so that his slow warm breath washed against Diego's cheek.

"Each has their own way to channel their strength," said Mawk simply.

Diego frowned trying to switch his concentration to Mawk.

Mawk smiled slightly. "When it comes to the time, we will all perform as you desire."

Dano's eyes slithered away from his blades and flickered across Diego's worried expression. With a quick flourish he smoothed the caking on his weapons and flung one into the air, catching it as he rose to a crouch and slid over towards Alisha.

He wrapped a casual arm around her shoulder, pressing his lips against her ear, that was plastered with straggles of hair.

"Always a pleasure Miss Alisha." He looked down at the castle beneath them. "I believe it is time to dance, man." Her shoulders were stiff beneath his palm and she shuddered slightly when he touched her. The side of her flattened cheeks fluttered with tension and her eyes slid quickly from side to side at every movement before her. There: the guard shifted on his feet and the torches flickered in

the slight wind (north-easterly with irregular strength) and his longsword scraped against the wall behind him in its scabbard and his partner glanced across from his post on the other side of the gate.

The guards were relaxed but attentive. The best kind that guards can be and the worst for tonight. Despite carefully timing their attack for the end of the shift, these men were professional soldiers with a tight commander and their watchfulness was disciplined to be constant.

“On my count.” Alisha heard Diego say under the wind. The rain had died down and left only a cool wetness on the long grass and a damp smell on the wind. Even the moon was opened by gaps in the rolling clouds, grey, black and luminous white that shifted and crept towards the horizon as enemies of the light.

“Three, two, one, now.”

The assassins each muttered something quietly: words that grabbed at the air around them and twisted against their flesh, burning for a brief moment underneath the cold metal of the ring on their fingers. Immediately giving them a lightness that lifted their stomachs, threatening nausea and felt as though their heads were expanding into the world around them. Each of them floated into the air, a few inches from the soft wet earth, their padded soles brushing against the long grass and disturbing droplets of rain-water that collected on the bottom of their soft shoes.

Diego glanced up at the clouds; they only had a few minutes to time their movement because they would need to use this flight throughout tonight’s assault. That cloud was wide and black, which meant it was thick and should last. And from their angle, with the hill behind them, it would be almost impossible for the guards to see them until it was too late. Good enough.

“Go,” snapped Diego, as he hurtled into the air and swooped down towards the castle, flashing over the castle walls without glancing behind him. The instant the words left his lips the other assassins swept upwards, keeping precise pace with him, but without

a sideways glance. They knew the speed, the angle, the direction and the affects of the slight wind down to the last detail.

Alisha lips were pulled back in an unconscious snarl. All her mind now on the two small black dots that enlarged before her. The dots overshadowed by the flickering stone walls, crowded with cracks of ivy and glimmering windows, the castle wall hurtling away beneath them as the sandy courtyard loomed up towards their angled flight. As yet unnoticed, the guards looking straight across the courtyard as the ground rippled in newly revealed moonlight, shafted and split by breaks in the cloud with the distant castle wall deep in shadow.

There were seconds remaining. At this angle and at this speed – only seconds before they would smash into the guards. Without having to think, Alisha's gloved left hand found her sword hilt. Her fingers running briefly down the ribbed leather to take hold of the grip and pull the sword free, feeling the vicious tug from the rush of their descent and holding the point firmly ahead as she immediately found her aim and snapped the word that wrapped around the long steel and rushed to the tip, exploding outwards in a burst of fiery water that washed forwards, faster than their descent and flooded the entrance to the keep, covering the guards and smashing back out in a cloud of death.

The black smoke smacked against them with the boiling heat of hell; as they let the wash bring them upwards and around to the keep's walls, rising above the smoke that billowed out over the courtyard, hiding the shouting, the footsteps and the alarm.

Two more guards raced across the courtyard, their heavy rutted boots smacking their footsteps in the sullen wool of the smoke in dull thuds. Each held a long spear, a halberd facing forward into the direction of their charge, but from moment to moment their shoulders would collide as the sand was flung from their feet behind their running. And out of the smoke suddenly appeared the blackened shape of a burning friend, hands flapping in front of him

as scalded unsighted eyes failed to show his path and the two dodged around him ignoring his wild screams and his burning back. In towards the keep gates they tore as the gates grated open and a phalanx of shields and halberds thrust outwards and the smoke wallowed inwards with coughing and swearing and one of the guards stumbled, his foot catching beneath the ash covered shape of another of his friends. Dead.

Diego swooped up, momentarily hanging in front of the third storey window, and in the brief moment his iron bars swirled from the side of his arm, the arc taking out the glass in front him and smashing through the central bar and the side bars and he continued upwards far enough that his feet were slightly above Mawk who crashed feet first through the shattered window and rolled smoothly on the soft carpet and came to a halt with his shoulder pressed hard against the craggy stone next to a door. Alisha landed shortly behind him and strolled across the room, a broad grin on her face and her sword slung casually over her shoulder.

Dano was right behind her, landing silently on the thick carpet and stepping neatly sideways to allow Diego through the window as Dano leaned out and scanned the courtyard, swathed in smoke with shadowy figures fanning out across the expanse as the smoke dissipated.

The sergeant stepped out of the gate, blinking quickly as the hot smoke irritated his eyes. He left his hand on the hilt of his sheathed sword, his experienced face moulded into a calm air of concern. Beneath his well-armoured chest, his heart pounded with fear from a number of directions. Two men down, presumed dead; the gate breached but without an insertion so far and he'd posted a fence of guards across *that* entrance. Meanwhile he had over ten guards sweeping the courtyard but in this smoke visibility was virtually nothing and they couldn't hear his orders nor raise the alarm easily as the smoke was dulling the sound. Death was close and that was a good enough reason to be afraid, but worse would be the reaction from Captain Mirgon who had specific ideas about how a situation

like this should be dealt with and wouldn't be happy with any deviation, however successful.

He kicked the body of one of his men. 3 a.m. Must be Gulmanner. Or Shoranor. Both good, alert individuals. Both dead.

Mawk tapped the end of the tiny bottle, allowing the oil to slide quickly around the mechanics of the door handle. His ear was pressed against the wood, but it was thick oak and iron-clad too so he probably wouldn't hear anything but the loudest presence. He turned the handle slightly and then back again smoothly twice; enough to ease the opening. He raised his other hand in a fist. Dano turned his shoulder slightly in a crouch before the door, his right arm raised above his head, the thickly covered circle of blades held between thumb and forefinger. He could feel the blades rise and fall with each breath he took. Quickly he modulated his breathing, taking sudden deep gasps, increasing the oxygen just before...

...Mawk flicked the door open pressing his knee against the heavy oak so that he pushed it rapidly and smoothly open. Just the slightest of creaks from the hinges and rushing of wood over heavy carpet as the open door revealed two guards standing on either side of another door opposite. Both looking down the corridor towards the stairs and from the sudden noise turning to stare in astonishment at the opening door, their hands flying to their hilts as Dano released his arm downwards in an urgent swipe that whistled slightly as his loose sleeves whipped in the movement and the circle of blades was flung and Mawk burst outwards in a fast low run.

The blades were a blur of movement out of the corner of the guard's eye as he half drew his sword and stepped forward sensing his colleague slumping backwards, the blades deep in his forehead and a sudden flood of blood cascading down his forehead, flowing around the bridge of his nose and washing into his mouth and pouring down from his lips as he gurgled, the blood down his throat and the corridor tilted, becoming hazy and dim.

In front of him, the remaining guard saw a black clad shape hurtling towards him and a leg shooting out, the foot slamming into his throat as another black shape loomed behind the first and an iron bar swirled above and whistled into his face. A crack of pain that cut viciously across his face, from the cheek across the nose and crushing his right eye, going blind as blood splattered out from the empty eye-socket and another foot crashed against his chest sending him flying painlessly through the wooden door behind him as paralysis flooded down from his face to his chest and his legs collapsed beneath him.

Alisha was first through the broken door, running towards the stairwell that lead only upwards and rushing to a large window where she slammed her fist hard against the handle cracking the wood and sending the window flying open, shards of glass spinning into the night sky. She had one foot on the window ledge as Diego strolled past her, iron bars swirling and headed up the stairs and Dano arrived behind her with Mawk backing up into the doorway, watching the end of the corridor carefully.

The noise they'd made should attract some attention from the guards upstairs. If they're not asleep on the job.

Pushing off hard Alisha leaped into the air and felt the air stream over her face as she looked up towards the arrow slit that was her destination. The darkened shape of Dano crowded past her, close but not too close. Typical, she thought, even now he's breaking my space. She hovered outside the arrow slit, adjusting her position slightly and raising the point of her sword, her eyes glinting with excitement. After the rush of their entrance, the adrenaline swirled inside her bringing her a sudden flood of information and awareness of the swirling air that whipped at her hair that crept out from beneath her mask and rippled the cloth around her breasts. The arrow slit was overwhelmed by tangled ivy, green and deadened black that had pulled out the cement from between stones and left a rough dirt surface. Inside, the stairs were unlit and so high up, the surroundings were obscenely peaceful with distant calls of night-birds and the rustle of leaves along the keep's walls.

Diego crouched half-way up the stairs, one iron bar held in each hand, the central chain taut, his shoulder pressed against the wall, his head tilted to one side to gain as much warning as possible. There: the sound of quick boots as the first soldier rounded the curling stairs and jabbed instinctively at the vague shadow in front of him.

Diego released the bar in a swing that shattered the soldier's blade and rebounded off the stone steps, flicking into his waiting hand as his right leg swept upwards and crashed hard against the elbow that was shuddering from the force of the blow from his bar. The elbow broke. Time to go.

Diego leaped backwards, his legs rolling over his head as he somersaulted backwards and down and round, his feet pushing off against the wall and he landed bow-legged, pushing off again immediately in another roll, letting the smoothed edges of the stairs crack into the muscles in his shoulders as the burst of flame licked at the central pillar of the stairs and an explosive boom rocked the stone walls deafening him.

Alisha stopped her backwards flight, her swords pointing back at arrow slit in the wall, her heart pounding, her lips parted and her breath slipping in and out quickly. She blinked rapidly and withheld the desire to scream in delight. Direct hit. Every single motha-fuckin' one of them gone in one blindin' burst of fuckin' revealing light. A revelation for the unfaithful. She grinned. Die in hope motherfuckers.

Lord Herneti stared for the hundredth time at his bedroom door. A sudden silence had fallen on the keep and after the last explosion, which he could feel beneath his naked feet, there had been nothing but the mournful night-wind. He wrapped his silk dressing-gown tighter around his paunch and glanced at the bedroom door again. He wasn't sure who would come through that door. From the shouts it was apparent that the last of his guards were needed to defend the

stairs, but if that explosion was close (and it sounded as if it was right outside the bloody door) then perhaps there were no guards left. In which case there was little left, but – perhaps money. If they wanted his money then they would take that too. He could use that knife. On the table by his bed. But he didn't know how.

He wished his wife were here. For the last few moments. Just to feel her warmth.

The agony in the back of his neck spread quickly. A rushing pain that overwhelmed his head and made his legs weak with helplessness and made him peer at the door as it burst open and he raised a hand to feel the metal protruding from the back of his neck. A circle of blades coated in something thick, soft and wet.

Diego caught the man by the throat as his body collapsed and his eyes swivelled up, to stare sightlessly at the ceiling and his back arched loosely, the knees folding lifeless and the dressing gown gaping open around the bulging white stomach and its burst of black hair. Diego looked closely into the dead eyes and glanced at the arrow slit where Dano's grin was pressed against the stone as he tried to see his victim.

Mawk crept up behind Diego and gently took the corpse from his grip and lowered it to the floor, removing the circle of blades with a swift tug. The blood mingled with the black coating and dripped occasionally on the floor.

“Good,” said Mawk. “Exact placement.”

Diego stood over the corpse staring at the face without seeing it. In his mind he could see only one thing. A dead Lord Stowgan.

CHAPTER 5

The laughter was long and slightly annoying. Masinforl folded his arms and watched his Lord with a slight frown. Perhaps he had been mistaken. Perhaps there was nothing concerning Lord Stowgan after all, but even this jollity was disturbing. Too long and drawn out and far too emotional. If Lord Stowgan thought that this would make him relax about the upcoming attack then it couldn't be further from the truth. Until now he hadn't been worried. A bunch of idiots armed with swords trying to attack *them*. Admittedly they were well-rehearsed but they also revealed a complete underestimation of what they were facing. A typical example of human arrogance despite plenty of evidence to warn them.

The hand that gripped his face with the sharpness of a vulture's claws lifted him into the air as those eyes bore into his frame and invaded his senses, spreading a feeling of panic and widening his eyes as the Lord's presence surrounded the feeling of pain from his face that would normally be a slight irritant but now spread to the sides of his arms and over his stomach and churned within his dead blood.

"Your arrogance will kill you as surely as Assanagara was destroyed. Fool."

Lord Stowgan flung Masinforl violently against a wall and turned his back as Masinforl rose slowly, his cloak pulling up around him, gathering dust and hair from the unclean floor. Masinforl's hands spread out before him, anger shuddering throughout his frame, the fingers curled into claws and his long teeth expanding over his lips.

“That’s better,” hissed Lord Stowgan without looking round. “You must feel the emotions that they feel, sense the past that eludes us, take hold of the desires that drive us. We are not dead, not creatures of emotionless existence without past or future. There is a reason to continue, a force to use and obstacles to face. This,” Lord Stowgan swirled round, his cloak flicking out behind him and washing over the walls and over the window-ledge. “Is a time of change and disturbance. Not from these insignificant fools that believe they can sneak into and force past my faithful, as if that challenge was something to simply take on like the sharpening of a sword or the throwing of a knife. Something within the skills they have or the abilities they possess. A simple. Day’s. Work.”

“Then what,” started Masinforl, stopping as Lord Stowgan held up a hand. Masinforl closed his mouth, facing his Lord’s challenging gaze, his anger gathering in a bitter pain at the roots of his long teeth.

“I do not know,” snarled Lord Stowgan slamming a hand down on the table and sending a threaded crack across its surface, a premonition of the breaking present.

“You sense something?” questioned Masinforl.

“Of course I sense something, idiot,” snapped Lord Stowgan gliding over to the window restlessly. He didn’t complete the thought. He had already revealed enough to Masinforl; that there were limits to his knowledge, to his abilities. More importantly that he was worried and any show of weakness would undoubtedly be exploited to the extent that this idiot was probably already wondering whether this was the beginning of an opportunity for freedom. If he, Lord Stowgan, should perhaps die then this idiot would be free to live his own life without having to take orders from anybody.

“Perhaps I should look into it for you,” said Masinforl politely. He knew the answer would be no, he knew that it would show him to be willing and would press, just for further proof that Lord Stowgan was out of his depth in something.

What irritated Masinforl further was that he felt nothing, knew nothing and was completely ignorant of the source of Stowgan’s

concern. It had something to do with this gang of humans, but not specifically to do with them.

“Thank you, but no Masinforl.” Lord Stowgan spoke slowly, the emotion draining from his voice. “There are issues that I need to address before we move on this one. I’m sure you understand...” he looked sharply at Masinforl who nodded. “...that there are certain things that I have to deal with personally before I come to you. And also certain things that must not go out from within these four walls.”

“Of course Lord Stowgan,” said Masinforl politely.

“Good. Continue your monitoring of this group, Diego and company, making sure they are not aware of your interest. Report everything you sense back to me, letting me know of the exact urgency of any information you receive. Let’s keep this close to our chests and make sure the situation is perfectly under control. Do you understand?”

“Yes. Don’t worry. I will be extremely careful. I don’t see any problems with this myself. We will certainly have no difficulties dealing with it. In fact, if I may suggest, I think I am perfectly capable of handling the situation. I don’t think that it is important enough for you, Lord.”

“Mmm?” murmured Lord Stowgan staring out into the night.

“I’ll handle it, don’t worry,” repeated Masinforl as he gradually faded into mist.

Lord Stowgan watched thoughtfully as Masinforl became nothing. His fingers tapped irregularly on the table-top, occasionally tracing the new crack across its dirty surface. He hated losing control in front of his people. It was bad for morale and showed weakness. But he was enjoying himself for the first time in centuries. Somewhere out in the darkness of the night was a challenge. He could taste it on his dry lifeless tongue. As if light was shining on his future, he could feel the power flowing through his veins and energising his face, lifting his lips into a happy smile that opened his sharp teeth to the cold night air.

This one he would deal with himself.

Moonlight came through the gap in the heavy curtains and fell first on the black oak of a table, shining on its lacquered surface, absorbed by the impenetrable darkness of the knots in the wood. The deep purple of the drapes, with their heavy cloth furred by ageing threads, was fringed in the halo of the moon and the light crossed the floor to fall on curled, tangled and undulating white sheets. The mattress curved over the side of the bed and flailed out into the outstretched arms of pale naked feminine form. The nails were black and shone in the pearl light. Their mouths slack and lips parted with grinning teeth, clean and white. Long black shining hair sprayed a fountain of washing dark and cut the whiteness of the sheets, seeming to curl and grip with living tension.

The silk covers hung and rippled in expensive waves over smooth white skin. Short and gaping over exposed breasts, nipples showing at the side of the black and hiked up around young thighs the curl of pubic hair matting as black as the silk, with legs pulled up or crossed or flung outwards. Arms interlocking and curled around shoulders or gracing long necks. Fingers relaxed and motionless, sometimes holding an arm or curved over a breast.

Serina lay half on the mattress with one leg spread over the side of the bed and a foot resting on the thick carpet, the toes parting the shag, occasionally gripping the long hairs. One of her arms curved around the shoulders of a maid, her fingertips pressing lightly on the soft muscle of the maid's shoulder.

Slow gentle breath pulsed in the room with the occasional sigh of dreams filtering into the hot heavy air. Serina opened her eyes. The maid next to her had her face only inches from hers. She opened her eyes at exactly the same time.

Across the floor and over the side of the bed, each maid rose with Serina. And began to pack.

There was no moonlight in this room. It was a small room with a small bed and a single chair that could not be sat on without the legs falling apart. The curtain was tattered, torn and not wide enough to completely cover the window, which was so darkened by ancient dirt that the room was lightless.

The sheet had holes and a frayed-cut side that hung with funereal death over the side of the tiny bed. The Horseman lay on the sheet, his legs straight, the feet neatly together and the arms folded meditatively over his chest. Which was motionless. No breath or movement. The eyes were resting closed, the taut face still, the lips closed.

He opened his eyes. And turned his face towards the door.

Serina glided down past the damp peeling walls, over the crazy angled stairs and rotting wood. The maids followed her, their hands full of belongings, their heads down, mouths disapproving.

Serina paused outside the Horseman's door and looked at its monotonous awkward wood. She closed her eyes once and blew a kiss. The maids looked up with featureless eyes.

The Horseman smiled and closed his eyes, content.

The sound cut through the graveyard street with a crack of dying wood on wood. The sudden scraping of the door as it was forced open, the bottom edge shuddering across the bent floorboards, sent a small brown bird flapping nervously into the air above the trees. Trees gaunt and empty hovering over the Inn, with the grey light casting indistinct shadows of the skeletal grotesque, wavering in the morning wind and dropping their brown curled and drained leaves onto the dried mud.

Outside, the two horses, tall and long haired moved restlessly, their hooves scraping in the mud and their breath billowing in misty clouds that quickly vanished. The coach creaked ominously, leaning tiredly to one side, the door flapping open with a grinding aching sound as the maids slid over the mud, their feet moving in unconscious rhythm, their bodies upright and effortless above their silent progress. Eyes straight ahead. Unseeing.

Serina stepped onto the porch and surveyed the street quietly as the maids climbed into the coach and onto the bench on either side of the muddy brown oil-skinned driver. The coach creaked and swayed, the curtains falling out of the doorway and fluttering in the wind.

Decisively she strode over to one of the trees and sharply ran a nail across its bark, shedding a splint of wood that she wrapped her fingers around and took out a yellowing sheet of parchment that rolled up from age. She stabbed the top of the parchment with the wood, burying the stake into the tree. Another shard was driven into the base of the parchment and she looked up at the Horseman's window with an intense glare. With a swirl of dress layers she turned and climbed into the coach, tugging her long trail into the carriage and slamming the door behind her.

The coach jerked with the sudden movement of the horses as the ropes snapped taut with the strain and the wheels began to turn, clattering across stones and rolling the carriage back and forth at the explosive crack of the driver's whip.

Minutes later only the wind disturbed the stillness and quiet of the street as a small brown bird fluttered back to the tree and settled with quick jerking head movements, surveying the emptiness.

The shadows were less distinct in the small room. Through the grimy dirt on the windows it was clear the day had arrived. In the stuffiness of the room the darkness shuddered and pushed outwards, seeking exit, relief from the heaviness. The walls pressed and the low ceiling

hung despairing over the relaxed body of the Horseman as he opened his eyes.

She had gone. The distance that now separated them was a pull on his desire. As if the length could be reeled in like the line of a fisherman's hook, holding them in spirit to each other. He could smell her skin and the lightness of her hair. In his mind's eye he could see her eyes turn to look into his and his world opened up to her awareness. That slight tug at the side of her mouth as she spoke, barely withholding a smile of delight, amusement or shy attraction. With the dream in his eyes he could reach out and stroke the soft hairs on the side of her neck.

Swiftly he rolled off the bed and stood, soundlessly. The white robes falling around him, a cloak of cold, emotionless snow. His long cheeks tight, eyes narrow and the dark iris wide filling the whites with a deep darkness. His hand stroked the air in a circle, the fingers hanging loosely as if in death until they brushed the collapsing wood of the window and he pushed, the window smacking open and harsh daylight bursting into the room, flooding the tightness with shadows that wrenched into shape as the window stopped moving.

He stepped forward once and stared down at the wheel tracks broken into the dried mud.

He could feel the journey spanning out in a spray of passage from the Inn. Across the street, up towards the hill and round into the distance. Those wheels would have taken his Serina far across the fields and villages but they would meet in the distance of the future. He had found her and dragged their lives together, forcing the future into his hands and allowing him the opportunity to bring more than just death to this people. A tear fell from his eye, streaking down the whiteness of his face. Of love. He had hope.

The Horseman turned away from the window and the wheel marks, walking unhurriedly towards the door, his feet folding gently across the floor boards with a whisper of his robes washing across the uneven wood. He reached backwards as his saddle-bags crossed the

room and landed in his hand, the door swinging open before he reached it and passed through without a backwards glance.

The stairs were in complete darkness. The hopeless day trapped outside by the darkness of the Inn. The Horseman paused and looked down into the foyer, each shadow casting a trail of indistinct evidence that chairs and tables were empty of life. There was a glimmer of light from the crack of the door across the room, but each corner was empty, no-one behind the chairs or table and the desk in the foyer was deserted too.

The door clicked quietly behind him, the door handle turning back itself. The Horseman held hardly any attention on its closing and drew his presence back across the room. In his stomach there welled the feelings of despair, a sickness that broiled the acid and brought sweat to his palms. Here he was; in this place. He had taken himself here, known the consequences and prepared himself for the inescapable result of his arrival. Nevertheless his mind thrust against the desire to leave, to avoid the crushing of life beneath his curved hands.

At the centre of his illness was an image of death. He had to face the expression of the dying, feel their blood warm and alive and then begin to turn cold, drawing out the lifeblood, the energy and the hope of each one of them. He would strangle them, squeezing their throats until the breath was stopped and the eyeballs bulged, the pupils widening and the rolling lifelessness, the arms hanging loosely as the dead-man's noose. Legs collapsing and bowels emptying, the last deluge of murder.

His stomach cramped and nausea rushed to sharpness at the back of his throat, saliva bursting across the back of his tongue and his arms tensed, his fingers twitching. The energy flickered across the skin of his body, the hotness rushing to the muscles in his shoulders and expanding into a whiteness before his body. With one swift rush he could channel his emotions forward and downwards cutting easily through the rotting wood of the banister, shattering the stairs, pulling apart the walls of the hellish abode.

The innkeeper. His life a slugs trail of laziness and ineptitude, of selfishness and inequity, of rudeness and ignorance, intolerance and sin. Never a kind word on his lips, nor a caring desire or a helpful action in those gnarled hands. If he came to your call it was through fear. The only language that truly passed beyond his internal world and awoke his awareness of other people's demands.

The Horseman glided down the stairs, anger flickering at the back of his eyes. This place had not been cleaned in centuries, owner after owner content to charge and spend but not work. Cockroaches spilled into the shadows as ants crawled in rivers over the discarded food and sticky wine. Caught hairs and slaps of skin shed during violence in the past plastered the floors and walls – years of neglect and hatred.

“What? Whassat?” The innkeeper stumbled through the door, blearily awakened from his sleep by some unknown signal. A voice deep in his bones that disturbed his rest and propelled him urgently into the foyer. A feeling that clasped his heart and pounded it with dread.

“It's you,” snarled the old man staggering to the desk and leaning forward, breathing quickly. His scrawny neck and whitened chest hairs poked out from the ragged cloth he wore at night.

“Good morning sir. I hope you slept well,” said the Horseman politely.

The innkeeper spat on the bar and rubbed at the wood with his sleeve clasped in his withered hand without thinking.

“Wa's wrong with the food last night. Not good enough for ya?”

The Horseman sighed. “You were paid. It was no loss for you.”

“Doesn't like the food, next it'll be the room.” The old man turned to head back to the kitchen.

“I wish to retain the room,” said the Horseman quietly, a hint of velvet strength beneath the politeness.

“Yeah?” said the innkeeper, stopping.

The Horseman dropped some more coins on the bar, one landing on its edge and spinning briefly before swinging around and rolling to a halt. The innkeeper shrugged and pushed through the door.

There was some warmth in the sun. As the morning lengthened its gaze and the shadows were chased from the night, the dead leaves whirled in tiny pools and danced and chased across the streets. The Horseman stopped under the eaves, the porch's darkness striking at an angle across his white robes, his face half cut white-black. His light robe tugged at his ankles, the fresh damp morning air lifting up at the hem and brushing his shins with tenderness.

Across the street walked two labourers, their leather aprons rumpled from a night rolled onto a chair, and spades encrusted with yesterday's dirt slung over their shoulders. Their long, unshaven facial hair gristly with specks of breakfast and their eyes half closed with early morning sleepiness. High up in an opposing house a window shot open and a dust cloth swept briefly along its edge as a young-old face was briefly lit by the low sun and disappeared into the darkness of the room beyond.

The wind rattled at the parchment stabbed into the side of the tree as the Horseman gazed watchfully from the porch. Its paper was cracked, a tear at the top right corner. The writing was curved and feminine but written in haste, with emotion and feeling restrained but entrenched in the tension of the hand. The shards of wood punctured the paper and the tree behind it with fury. He could taste Serina's strength behind the blows, could see the sparks of passion coalescing around the jagged ends and the trail of passage from the tree to the wheel marks.

"WANTED: the Killers of Trantis. REWARD is available from Lord Hernetic."

From that distance no man could read the parchment. Those restful eyes were wide and unfocused, taking perhaps the ends of the street or the morning sun. Too far to see the writing but he could see the ragged movement of her hand, and the cool warmth of fingers

tracing the quill, pressing up against the spongy tip of her tongue, those red painted lips closing in a hard tight line and that beautiful face pulled into concentration and anger. The chair overflowing with her darkened skirts and her loose hair crawling over her neck and shoulders. Behind her the maids. A distant presence, closing over the shoulder aware and watchful seeing her movement and sensing her emotions.

The Horseman released a long relaxed breath and strolled over to his horse. The maids were an uncomfortable problem. He had felt no connection, nor acceptance from them. They were close to Serina and she trusted them and held a friendship with them. But their mistrust and dislike was palpable, enriching the air of the night before with an electric tension that tugged at the connection he had with Serina. It was a tugging at the back of his mind, breaking his concentration and disturbing his pursuit.

They had nothing within them. Purely a sense of being comfortable here, of having a place to stay and a person to look after. Protective and demanding, overseeing and aiding. They didn't keep her company with idle chatter or friendly gossip, rarely uttering a word but a silent communication held them in a bond that was there in front of him but beyond his touch. If he could grasp the line and pull to tear it from their grasping hands, yanking it away from their presence then Serina would be free to hold him in her arms. To kiss.

Unless he had misread her.

He knew that the evening had not travelled as far as he wished. Their communication was slight and unspoken. Feelings had been exchanged but the depth of her reaction was indistinct. A swirl of passion covered any truth in her words or smiling eyes. And beyond that she had other thoughts, other concerns that overshadowed the momentary relationship. He had known few woman like her.

She was hard where many women were soft. Her touch, her bearing and determination was hard. She moved with anger and looked out from those beautiful eyes with despair. Her strongest

sense was of passion; emotion and desire. But she had lost the thing with which to be passionate, lost any bearing on her destination. She was also dangerous.

He had no doubt that given the circumstances those hands were capable of obeying whatever dangerous command she were to give. Living a life of passion without remorse. Leading to a future of emptiness. Unless another future could be wrought from the passions of her heart.

He spun onto the back of his horse and began to ride down the street, back towards the tavern. The choice would be hers.

CHAPTER 6

The barman stared at another piece of broken glass. He moved the bristles of the broom closer. And stopped again. Leaning forward on its wood he felt the broom press down and collapse the bristles that edged towards the glass. He sighed. He had at least another three hours of this shit. He glanced up. Those fuckers were still here and if they would just fuck off then he could get this done in no time.

Alisha glanced up and frowned at the barman. Mother fucker looks at us *one* more time and I'm gonna smack him through the fucking wall.

Dano turned from Mawk and saw Alisha watching the barman, a scowl on her face. Nice, he thought, she's still got the orgasm of the kill. Just another, go on just another one. He smiled inwardly, after offing even just one poor bastard she just couldn't get enough. These feelings would run for at least another day. If only she wanted to fuck as often. Or fuck him as often.

The back door was flung open and Mource stepped into the doorway.

Tall, long dark robes and sleepy eyes. Every hair was neatly cut, short on the top of his head and close across his face. The hands held loosely together across his tight stomach, the eyes seemingly looking down at the floor as the sunlight spread around his shoulders and cast his face into deep darkness of eye sockets and sallow cheeks.

Diego stood quickly, pushing his chair loudly backwards and smiling awkwardly. Alisha blinked, her hands gripping the pommel of her swords tightly. He should fucking knock, she thought, otherwise I'm gonna take his fucking head off one of these days.

Dano yawned and glanced at Mawk who stared back at him, his face impassive.

“Boss,” Diego said trying to sound casual, as Mource strode across the room, his boots knocking on the floorboards. The barman swiftly headed over to the bar, accidentally banging the broom against the bar and glancing nervously back as Mource took the chair offered to him by Diego.

Mource leaned back in his chair, those sleepy eyes holding Diego’s gaze as Diego sat back down, misjudging the distance and landing suddenly in his chair and his face twitching from the tension in his jaw. Diego looked pleased, thought Mource. His eyes bright with success. That tanned face determined and confident, although he displayed a pleasing amount of nervousness now that Mource had arrived.

Diego’s iron bars were hidden in the folds of the long leather coat. Good. Mawk looked composed, a valuable addition to the group. Good under fire, so Diego had told him. Alisha, lovely as ever, looking flushed and sexy under that untidy and dirty hair. Mmmm, very nice. Dano, well, that confidence was just a little bit irritating but he looked excited too. Things had progressed well.

Mource clapped his hands together and rubbed them, feeling the warmth from the friction spread to his wrists. He smiled without warmth.

“Good job. Lord Hernetic down. All things going as planned. I’m pleased. You should be pleased,” he paused and looked at each one in turn. “We now have a second night’s entertainment to follow. Not any more difficult. Just more rewarding,” he smiled again, coldly, his eyes remaining lifeless.

Alisha was bored already. They all knew what was next, knew how it was to be done, knew when and why. But this dick would have to go through the usual crap just to prove that there was some point in turning up, some point to his existence, his involvement in this that Diego was perfectly capable of running. And she hated the way Diego became an uncoordinated teenager in Mource’s presence. He

was normally such a reliable hunk. Not the most intelligent but she liked the way he looked after them. He even knew how to shut Dano up.

The shutters were half open, the only light in the tavern. Outside the occasional villager wandered past and some birds darkened the slit for a brief moment. Then she noticed the horse. And the Horseman.

Mource continued. "The castles are designed in a very similar way, which is why we ran the last rehearsal on Lord Hernetic's place. With each of your contributions the plan, that Diego helped formulate, is applicable for both Lord Hernetic and..." Alisha interrupted quickly, casually. "Guys. It's the virgin."

She nodded at the window and looked back innocently at Mource. With a flick of a long-fingered hand, Mource waved at the shutters which flew open and crashed back against the walls as the Horseman rode slowly past the tavern without looking around.

"Why do you call him that? And who is he?" said Mource demandingly.

Alisha smiled. What an idiot.

Diego cleared his throat. "I think Alisha means that this...person...is wearing white, like a virgin."

"Yes?" said Mource ignoring the answer.

Dano grinned at Diego's discomfort. "He's just some new guy, sir," Mource's eyes swivelled and travelled slowly from Dano's leather tunic stomach, up to the rounded chest and the hollowed throat, grizzled chin and sharp arrogant face.

"And?" said Mource dismissively.

"Well," said Alisha loudly. "He just arrived last night and trashed this place. Why do you think this tavern's fucked?" Mource shrugged as Alisha continued. "Killed ten soldiers, injured two. Picked the fuckin' bar up and threw it at them."

"All by himself?" asked Mource interested.

Diego nodded. "He doesn't seem to be attached to anyone. Not wearing that white shit anyway."

Dano laughed. "Only reason we take him seriously now is 'cuz he fucked this place up."

Alisha smiled viciously. "I don't take him seriously now. He's dressed like a girl."

"Better than being dressed like a man," grinned Dano slapping Alisha on the shoulder. "Or looking like a man."

Alisha twisted slightly in her chair and whipped her fist back and then across Dano's face, catching him firmly on the chin with a whip-crack that sent him swaying away to the side, his hand wrapping around the chair for balance. He mockingly shook his head as if shaking off the effects of the hit and spat on the table.

"See," said Alisha. "At least I hit like a man."

"Wouldn't be much use to me if you didn't," said Mource quietly, waving his hand to close the shutter again.

"I don't work for you," snarled Alisha, her blood still pounding, her legs quivering from aggression.

"Together then," said Mource, a smile on his lips. "We work together and we wouldn't if you weren't the warrior that you are."

"Ever the diplomat," muttered Alisha, squeezing her legs together and folding her arms.

"You gotta control your temper, girl," said Dano, with an irritating needling tone.

"Enough," said Diego quietly as Alisha flung herself backwards and stood, the chair whipped back and over and over across the floor. She whirled round, her leather coat twisting around her legs. One step and she stood facing the wall, her breath coming quickly, her arms still folded. She could feel the heat pressing against her mind. Her eyes focused on the chair fallen on the ground. She wanted to kick out at it and smash it against the wall, to feel her foot crash through the flimsy wood and send it shattered in splinters across the

wall. She wanted to bring her fist above her shoulder and back down with all her strength and smash the chair beneath her.

She remembered the men. Edging cautiously down the stairwell, then the first cry as Diego must have attacked and she brought her tip up angled with her face turned, looking down the blade, eyes narrowed, staring through the gap and then the short word that tore at the metal, pressed at the tip and exploded in an orgasm of fire, burning hot and bright, spreading outwards, thrusting inwards through the arrow slit and highlighting the soldiers caught surprised and mouths gaping as the fire wrapped twisted arms around them and their clothes flashed white.

Screams of the dying. She heard the pleasure in their cries the rapture and the passion in the climax of death.

She spun, her fingers pulling smoothly at the bow in the folds of her coat, clasping at the bow and the strings and the stiff feathers of the arrow and letting the force of her tug extend the bow into the air, dropping her fingers down, sliding to the centre of the string as her coat whipped round and cracked in the air and the arrow was flicked up by the grasp of her calloused fingers and the bow rising just enough without really needing to aim and the arrow released with a twang of hardened gut-string and the short whistle before the thud as the metal penetrated the barman's chest, shafting between the rib bones, sliding into the soft sponge of the heart in a gout of blood.

The barman staggered once. Hit the wall behind him. Reached up automatically for the wood in his chest. Felt the warm stickiness in the cloth. His mouth fell open for the silent cry and he slid down the wall as a weight pressed down on the slack shoulders.

There was a muffled clang as his shoulder landed on a metal flagon.

Dano checked the angle of the bow, as her hands caressed the string. Her head tilted in the ease of practice. Shoulders relaxed and the face soft with release. He must get her to teach him more. His blades had such a short range and she so knew what she was doing.

Alisha sighed and slid the bow back into her pocket. For now she had a peaceful warmth filling her, satisfaction in the sudden movement, the draw, the release and the sudden ending of that fucker's life. She was good. That was smooth. Now *that* is what I call a kill, thought Alisha.

She patted her coat smooth over her hips and stepped slowly back to her chair, suddenly aware of the group with their eyes on her. She deliberately flicked her hair back, letting the light in her eyes shine across her face with the pleasure of her sex. Not only did she have their respect for her skill, a feeling that reassured her and filled her with arrogance, but she also commanded their passion and desire. She was a woman, they were men and they all had twitchy dicks that made them do and say things they wouldn't have done if she were a man. Like now. She'd get away with it, because briefly they would feel that hardness growing and a tug at the back of their throat and the desire to leap from the chairs and pull her to the ground.

Which was why her leather tunic was slightly looser and open at the neck. Not showing cleavage but certainly showing enough of the soft bones at her throat that lead to the soft swelling that the leather pulled tightly across. She saw all of them glance automatically down and across at both her breasts as she sat down and deliberately sighed using the back of her throat to produce a husky sensual warmth to shiver down the back of their spines and into their hips.

Mawk hated it. Here was a woman he respected in their work, who knew what she was doing but otherwise was completely uncontrolled and constantly doing idiotic things that undermined their purpose. She'd just shot a fucking barman for fuck's sake. For no better reason than she had an uncontrollable anger. And here he was staring at her tits as if he wanted to do anything other than strangle the bitch. Sure she had a nice body, firm and athletic with some shape to the breasts and a face you could cum in, but he certainly didn't find her attractive. Just fucking irritating. She was embarrassing and would definitely fuck things up if he didn't keep an eye on her.

Dano pressed a hand nervously over the back of Alisha's hand. "Cool, man. That was real smooth shooting," he cocked a grin at her, feeling his teeth too tight against his lips, his eyes burnt with desire.

Diego snorted and shook his head, staring at the floor as Mawk watched Alisha intensely. Gradually the room came back into focus for Alisha, the table stretched out before her and Dano's dirty hand warm over the back of her hand. Mource was watching them all, as he always did. With no visible reaction. Not that she could give a fuck. She hadn't done it to impress *him*.

Mource swallowed as Alisha's gaze challenged his. Beneath the smouldering exterior his anger flickered and snaked around his desire. Perhaps he should take her. One night when the others were asleep, or after their plan had been fulfilled and excitement coursed through all of them. Perhaps they would all take her. *That* would be a challenge. But an exciting one never-the-less. She would be no walk-over, and one of them, hopefully Dano would die in the process. However that succulent flesh would be worth it. He could imagine it. See it in writhing images. And screams.

He looked at Diego, staring at the floor. Ever the piece of wood. Any feelings he had (and he must have them for that piece of woman) were buried beneath a pathetic professionalism, something that made this man so important to leading this chaotic crowd. He could never share his thoughts on this. Diego would defend her. Probably.

Given the right medicine and the correct persuasions even he could be turned into a rapist. Fuck she was hot.

"Alisha," said Mource quietly, a hiss of snake-like venom. "That is the last person to die at your hands without my..." he coughed, "Suggestion. Advice, whatever." He waved a hand negligently at the corpse.

"Sure," shrugged Alisha grabbing at a glass of water with shaking hands.

CHAPTER 7

The gates hung vacantly open. Heavy iron, rusting and green-black with scraps of cloth torn on the rough metal. The stone ivy-twisted walls wrapped around the castle and bedded into the hills on the valley's side. Beyond the gates the keep rose, tall and wreathed in greying smoke that swirled up from the sparks of dying flames.

Their bodies lay at the entrance. One with the legs wrapped together and an arm stretched out, the fingers beckoning towards the entrance for help, to be saved from burning death. Blackened skin, burnt clothes, melted metal, empty eye sockets. The other was rolled into a ball, the head covered by a stinking arm, the nails gone. Dropping from the sky, vultures cawed and landed, picking at the cooked meat. One vulture stood in the entrance, full and watchful. Its head bobbing from side to side as the Horseman arrived at the gateway.

He stopped. Looking slowly from one side of the sandy courtyard to the other. He noted the desperate footprints, the corpses, the burnt gates, the shattered window and the smoke faint in the sky above the keep, exiting from another window unseen from this angle.

The sand felt hot in his mind. The day's heat was shimmering at the edges of the courtyard. He could see the soot-dust rise as the vultures tore. Ahead was the keep. Surrounded by a brief interlude of death. The path lead from the skies, from the night sky, of last night. Descending rapidly, the wind tearing at their clothes and their attention on only one thing, to kill those two guards. Which they did with flame. A painful, relatively slow death. That created smoke,

confusion and cover for a higher assault through the broken window. Obvious but effective. So they were flying.

And there, the two guards. And further inside more burnt meat. Lives that had paced outside this keep and followed their commands as respectable soldiers. Soldiers that were trained to fight, to stab, to chop at human flesh. Soldiers that under any other name were murderers. Men that had driven their knives into the back of innocents, had ridden their horses over small children and set fire to homes. Until now.

The Horseman rode slowly into the courtyard, hooves catching the sand in small flurries, vultures screeching and flying up into the air in a circling swarm. Beneath him the firm settled life that breathed with regular peace; the horse's content beneath a gentle master. In the air, insects buzzed from location to location and birds fed innocently on the flesh of humans.

This was a casual murder. An assault of force and determination that had coursed through the castle in a brief flurry of violence, removing life and destroying without remorse with the sole purpose of...if not entertainment then certainly rehearsal.

Such casual murder.

The Horseman slid off the side of his horse and knelt at the side of one soldier, pulling apart the tunic with a swift rip and examining the body beneath. No weapons.

There was a rush of air and flapping of robes as the Horseman leaped up to the third storey window, landing on the window ledge and stepping quietly inside. More devastation, with the open door showing bloody corpses and a shattered doorframe. Corpses with a blade mark in the forehead and a blow across the face removing the eye. The Horseman passed over the bodies and up the blackened stairs.

Lieutenant Drover reigned in his horse and stared across the courtyard. One horse. Who the fuck?

The soldiers behind him stopped and held their restless horses still, armour clanked and swords slapped against leather thighs. Eyes on the Lieutenant.

Drover watched the horse for a moment. It wasn't tethered. *That* was well trained. Well it was unlikely to be anything to do with last night's failure but the men were itching for retribution. It would be good for them all to see some action and take a piece of revenge, no matter who it was in that keep.

He looked over the troops. Hungry eyes looked back, their hands restlessly shifting to the pommels of their swords. With a quick hand motion he pushed his horse forward and entered the courtyard with a sudden loud clatter of hooves. He stopped centrally as the soldiers lined up either side of him. Drover raised a fist and then two fingers. Bows.

The soldiers drew their bows and trained them on the entrance.

"Lamanar, Derivak..." he reeled off another eight names and leaped off his horse, drawing his sword. Each name was a soldier that had been there last night. Each one ached from the failure, the sudden loss of their charge Lord Hernetik and the verbal blows of Captain Mirgon. They were also hand-to-hand experts and it looked like whoever was here was taking an interest in the contents of the keep (which had long been looted by Captain Mirgon and his men).

The sand crackled under his boots and he could hear the rustle of reigns behind him, the creaking of harnesses and saddles. The inner gate pulled open with a slight moan and he motioned for Lamanar to go through first.

The Horseman paused at the arrow slit and ran a finger along its burnt edge. The black dust stained his finger, black on white. The paths were centring on the keep. Many. Intent on passage to crush him. They moved restlessly with the scurrying of ants. Slowly with the caution of the coward. Afraid with the fear of murderers. His eyes turned back down the stairs, seeing through the stone, feeling through the stone the intent gaze of the Lieutenant, of Lamanar, of Derivak as they climbed the stairs. Swords. Armour. Business.

Pleasure. The Horseman glided up the stairs towards Lord Hernetic's bedroom.

Lieutenant Drover stumbled in the darkness on the stairs, his foot slipping on the edge of the step. With caution he stepped over another body. This one he had personally removed the money and jewellery. In fact he probably had a few coins in his pouch right now. He smiled.

The Horseman turned Lord Hernetic over with the care of a gardener handling petals of a dying rose. Blades to the neck, from behind and the Horseman glided over to the arrow slit and looked out at the smiling face of Dano. Dano as he tried to get a view of his corpse, of his success and Diego striding over to the dying Lord and squeezing him by the throat with satisfaction. Mawk first to the body and taking out the blades as Diego let him go.

The Horseman rose, staring unseeing at the floor, stained in dark, red blood. The room was wide. Luxuriously decorated. Cold. Empty. Sunlight did filter through the arrow slit. But the centre of the room was unlit. His robes were white but grey in the darkness. His face pale but black in the shadows. His hands loose but tight underneath.

They would arrive. Soon.

Below him on the floor another death. Another ending. Another life finished. No more laughter. Or pleasure. No more sadness. No more passion, dreams or journeys towards the path that leads to nowhere. Just meat. Cold, pallid, dressed in fine clothing but loose and empty where before warmth animated the flesh and those eyes saw what the mind wanted to see.

A knife on the table. Unused. Death had been faced with despair.

The Horseman turned to face the door, his robes falling softly around his spread legs. The cloth brushing his arms, his sides, his legs. The hood heavy across his brow, pressing down on his head. The darkness from the cloth pushing down over his eyes to hide the future.

The door was open. Inviting.

He raised his hands.

The skin was soft, the fingers elegant. Ready.

Rushing towards him, their lives crowding into his immediate present, expanding shortly into the future with the briefness of an explosive breath that extinguishes a candle or the cupped hand that clasps an insect and crushes downwards with light, simple brutality.

The end of all things.

The air shattered with the crack of angry cloth that splits sideways as his legs spread into a low crouch, the feet cutting harshly across the carpet, ripping up the cloth and tearing at the surface of the wood beneath. The hands outstretched, the fingers pointing sharply, tips facing the door as the Horseman's head exploded.

From the left side of the rounded face, burst outwards in thick grey shining metal. Spikes of one foot in length, rounded spikes with a sharpness narrowed to a point of long spines. Tipped. The whole side of the face a curve of metal. Spikes protruding to the side. Ranged around the side of the face in a spray. Covering the face except the eye. White. Pure whiteness with the central blackness eaten up and swallowed by a blinding white that burns with the fury of a furnace.

Both eyes burning white. All paths feeding into the fiery whiteness, consumed and dying with the faintness of nothing.

The whiteness of the end of time.

The soldiers ran into the seemingly empty room, their swords held outwards, their eyes flicking from corner to corner. A faintness of smell, perhaps the acid of a dead fire hung as a pall in the room as the soldiers spread out and the Lieutenant strolled into the room, his sword dragging casually along the floor, the tip jumping at the edge of the carpet and parting it like water.

Out of the air, from the ceiling. Dropping fast. Landing smoothly. Whiteness flooding out, spraying in a circle as the eyes held the Lieutenant's briefly and the sudden crash of a foot crushing his chest,

collapsing the ribs, breaking, sharding the edges cracking and piercing their sharpness backwards into soft underside, the softness of heart and lung. As the air whistled past and his body was flung back down the stairs.

Behind him, two soldiers felt the presence, sensed the smell of burning, heard the scream and crunching of breaking bones and turned, their swords slashing around, their heads turning as whiteness from the corner of their eyes flashed past and round in a sweeping kick that crashed against one head, the heel hitting the metal of the helmet, and concaving the helmet in a pit that crushed down into the skull and split the bone, the edges cracking and collapsing inwards and closing again splitting the brain. Feeling nothing.

The second now faced away, but turning and the sword sweeping backwards instinctively but the heel crashed into the neck and past and upwards pushing the disc, the bone disc, forwards briefly, nerves smashing upwards, the head flicking backwards, severing, snapping, ending.

The whiteness fell down relaxed, sweeping together joined and loosely hanging before the rushing four soldiers, their swords jabbing forwards as his hands raised, open palms held outwards, metal striking the palms, hands spreading outwards catching metal that shatters, pieces flying into the air. And the whiteness is already moving over the horrified frozen faces, spinning into the air over their backs and landing soundlessly behind them, his arm flinging outwards loose and relaxed and empty until the end when on the release a curved blade with a white feather attached to the end spun outwards and around, a thin chain holding it in the centre of a curving brush across the room and across one throat and another throat as blood begins to seep and another throat as the soldiers gurgle and clutch and fall.

The four soldiers turned, their hands dropping their swords and going for knives at the belts and turning into the spinning blade and the circling chain and the death at their throats.

The group at the back of the room held still, their breath held still. Their swords trembling. The four stagger forward and drop over their colleagues. Twitch. And die.

The blade is back in the hand of the Horseman.

They drop their swords.

“Tell me. Where is the body of Trantis?” said the Horseman, his voice cutting through the harsh breath of the soldiers. His back to them.

Ganak stepped forward slightly, blinking rapidly.

“It’s in the forest. Sir,” he paused and stared at the Horseman’s back. “East of the village.”

The whiteness spun, turning and releasing. The blade whirling round and round biting the chain into Ganak’s throat stretching tight and the Horseman pulled his hand down slightly, tensing the chain.

“Show me.”

The chicken tasted warm and fatty. Oil dripped down Alisha’s chin as she dug into the chicken’s body and tore out another piece of breast. It smelled slightly salty and perhaps garlic. It was fresh. Diego had killed it shortly before she cooked it. The barman was beginning to smell. He had pissed himself as he died.

Perhaps worse.

Alisha chewed, feeling the warmth infuse her belly. She washed it down with some more water. Swilling the old liquid around her teeth, pulling at a piece of meat between her teeth. And some feather. She hadn’t plucked it very well.

Dano and Diego were leaning back against the shutters talking quietly while Mource stood at the doorway looking out down the street. At the peaceful village as life went on. Mawk sat opposite her,

occasionally sending an unfriendly glance her way. Guess he didn't like me taking the barman down, thought Alisha unconcerned. Mawk's mouth moved slightly.

How many years? Suddenly Alisha felt her age rush up and swamp her with tiredness. The chicken tasted dry. She stopped chewing and glared up at the shutters. It was too dark in here. Always lying around in the dark. Practicing in the dark, walking in the dark, running in the dark.

She'd lost count of the number of bruises, scratches, twisted muscles she'd got from fucking running in the dark.

Her arm ached. Every burst of fire from the sword sent a sharp jab of pain down the metal and the impact jarred her elbow. Now her arm ached. Her shoulders ached too. Must have been that fucking vampire. He'd hit her good. Fuck, but when he went down. Skull flying all over the grass. He hadn't expected that. No way his arse was gonna survive that amount of fire at such close range. He'd been eyeing up her neck, she knew it. He'd wanted a taste of *her* blood, fucking dead mother fucker.

"I hate this place," she spat, grabbing the large kitchen knife and slamming it deep into the wood of the table. The redness boiled at the back of her mind and seized her hands, trembling them with anger. Sweat peeked out of the pores on her hands, she suddenly felt hot in the leather and the thickness of the tavern air. She couldn't breathe in here.

Mource turned and eyed her body from the doorway. Luscious. With her face turned slightly away from him, the eyes cast downwards and the eye lashes fluttering. Just the curve of the face, pulled taut with anger.

"You are supposed to hate it, Alisha," said Mource sinuously. There were a few things that he could use on her. Draw her to his flame. Perhaps a drink of something. She wouldn't be easy. Her willpower was so high and her temperament so unconditioned. He could sense the tension in the room, the way all the men were

arrayed around her. Like animals stalking their prey, angled to attack, murmuring to the reflections of the future as they prepared for war.

“This fuckin’...” she waved a hand vaguely. “Stuff is supposed to make me feel better.”

“It will,” assured Mource smiling and closing the door. He understood what she meant. Sometimes the present moment would dissipate and leave just a hollowness of the future. There really was nothing ahead; just more of the same.

“Hey Alisha,” said Diego. “You had fun last night huh?”

Alisha shrugged and pulled disinterestedly at the knife in the table.

“I suppose,” she muttered yanking hard and pulling the knife free.

“She always likes a bit of action at night,” giggled Dano rubbing his hands together.

“Yeah, clever. You dick,” snapped Alisha glaring at him, the knife held in her fingers.

Dano tutted and waved his hand at her and her knife.

“I don’t think we need any of that between us,” said Diego calmly without looking up as Mource folded his arms, the robes hitching up slightly, his head tilting downwards watchfully.

“Notice you never get any, Dano,” smiled Alisha dangerously.

“Yeah well, can’t be for want of trying. But you’re a frigid bitch you are,” Dano held her gaze a smile playing on his lips.

“Never noticed you trying,” said Alisha playfully. “You gotta try harder.”

“You shouldn’t play so hard to get, bitch,” said Dano still smiling. “With your face you ain’t gonna get no other offers.”

“An’ if I took your offer what would I get? Chicken dick.”

Dano shrugged and looked down at his chicken leg. “I’ve never had any complaints.”

“Fuck,” swore Alisha leaping to her feet and striding over to the bar. “That’s what men always say.”

Every man jumped when she moved, their hands instinctively clapping down on their weapons. Except Mource who simply watched with sleepy eyes.

Now she had an audience. Centre of attention; pacing up and down in front of the bar, the centre point of the room, her leather tunic creaking, boots cracking and spraying clumps of drying mud with each heavy tread, her hair flicking as she whirled at the end of each march.

“What’s that supposed to fuckin’ mean, Dano?” she licked her lips and smiled dangerously. “No complaints. You mean no complaints from any girl that mattered an’ if they complained they were useless right?”

Dano shrugged, slightly embarrassed but feigning disinterest.

“Oh, I can feel it coming off of all of you. You want it. Want me. Well fuck, come and get it motha fuckas and I’ll take you down one by one,” Alisha drew her swords violently, trembling, eyes shivering.

Diego took one step forward, his hand raised in appeasement, a worried frown on his face.

“Take it easy, ‘Lisha. I know you’re nervous, excited, full of adrenalin from last night. But you’ve got to show a little more professional restraint, you know?”

Alisha spat on the floor, swinging her swords onto her shoulders.

“Yeah, sure Deygo. Take it easy, you’re just a woman, having that time of the month. Yeah yeah yeah. I know what you’re all thinking, motha fuckas but I don’t care!” she yelled. “This place is full of shit. You’re full of shit. It means nothing. I’m telling you – nothing!”

The room seemed to spin around Alisha, the shards of sunlight slashing through the shadowy darkness and the hulking figures of her friends, their concerned faces surrounding darkened eyes that loomed with threat. Their fingers itched, aching to rush to their

weapons, to take her, to draw blood and spread her across the walls or spread her legs across the floor.

Her palms washed with sweat and without realising it, she lowered her swords in an aggressive posture, her head lowered, flashes of dark hair across her tight, white face. Eyes wide, pupils wide in the darkness. This room seemed to become her everything, her all. It pressed in on her tight leather clothes, the rubbing dirtiness of her underwear and aching muscles. There was no air in here, no breeze it was so still. The only sounds seemed to be the deep angry breathing of these men as they closed in on her and some footsteps outside. Approaching? To come here; to attack?

A bead of sweat slipped out from under the shoulders of her tunic and began a prickling journey down her spine.

There was no escape.

"There's a wing here if anyone would like it?" asked Mawk, holding up a grubby piece of chicken.

Dano spat on the floor. "Na, I'm full man."

"You can have it," said Diego holding Alisha's gaze.

"Hey, I'm still hungry," snapped Alisha.

"But you don't like chicken wings," said Mawk, calmly.

"True," said Alisha quietly as she relaxed into Diego's eyes.

"When everyone's quite finished. We have work to discuss," said Mource impatiently.

Mawk turned in his chair and looked quietly up at Alisha.

"There are times when you have to simply consider that in your hand you have a chicken wing. And that can be enough."

Alisha grinned. "That's deep man. Real smart."

Dano grinned, tension released from his shoulders and he looked up from the floor. "Piece of chicken's important. You gotta consider the chicken."

Mawk nodded a couple of times as Alisha sheathed her swords, came over and slumped in the chair opposite him.

“You have certain...” he paused. “Pleasures that you enjoy and these are what gives us our reality. Take what you can, while you can, otherwise you will wither and die, a dying twig on a healthy oak.”

“An’ you’re the healthy oak,” said Alisha shaking her head in amusement.

“Of course. We’re the oak,” smiled Mawk turning back to the chicken wing and the next bite he was about to take.

“Well, I *love* being part of a healthy fuckin’ tree,” Alisha said laughing. “But forever? Forget it.”

“You’re right,” said Mawk shrugging. “Nothing can last forever.”

“Make it last one more time,” said Mource with stillness in his voice as he pulled a chair around and sat, a little away from the group.

“And then what?” muttered Alisha, scrabbling around in the chicken looking for more meat. “After that, just go travelling. See the fuckin’ rest of this piss-hole? Join some other fuckin’ gang of losers. I’m going fuckin’ insane in this place.”

“Of course you are,” said Mource, smiling.

CHAPTER 8

The hawk hung in the wind, high above the village. Its wings curved in a sickle of aggression, its head the arrow ready to descend in a trail of terror for its prey. Black against the greying sky, beneath clouds that build up against the top of the hillside and roll across the village with warning of thunder to come. Rain had fallen and left a slight trace of water on the tall grass as it swayed in the wind. Each droplet darkly shimmering and falling when the grass fluttered too quickly for its clammy grasp and pooled in the soft muddy earth, where dying and dead leaves curled around thick clumps of gorse and thistle.

Against the unlit greenery of the hillside the white figure climbed smoothly, bowed slightly against the steepness. Trailing relaxed over his shoulder, the thin chain ended and wrapped around the neck of the bored soldier as he stumbled after the ever-moving Horseman. Sometimes the soldier's hands twitched as he eyed the Horseman's back but the whiteness imprinted on the back of his skull and against the white screen plastered across his imagination he could see the blood flying across the castle floor with a soft splattering sound that accompanied the gurgling dying gasps of his colleagues.

The blade slapped against his chest, hanging from the metal thread that brushed against his neck. Fuck.

This creature that stalked ahead of him moved with a lightness, floated against his eyes seemingly watching him without facing him. Those arms hanging relaxed but he had seen them move. Whirling at the edges of speed, an invisible movement that covered the space with a cloak of whiteness and ended in death. He watched the clumps

of grass flatten and spring up before he stepped over them. The edges of the white robes brushed the grass, undulating hypnotically with no sign of the feet moving underneath them.

It never slipped. Never stumbled. Never paused or looked around or took a breath. The face had returned to normal, if this fucking thing can be called normal, and the hood was over the head, hiding the eyes. The eyes that had once met his gaze and shown him his life. And his death.

It was the fleetest of glances in the room surrounded by corpses and dying men and bleeding wounds. With the ragged breathing of his colleagues drumming against his existence as the chain tightened around his throat, heralding death. The white creature had turned and walked out of the room and he had followed. With one glance as the metal spikes around the skull were sucked into the taut face and the eyes flowed into normality. The blinding white blinking out and being replaced by a blackness of pupils so deep that in the briefest gaze the soldier's soul was swept up from his chest and cut adrift, to leave him breathless and faint.

He had not awoken until the hillside. The journey a vague dream. Only those eyes boring into him, the blackness in the white seeming to hold his gaze long after they were riding away along the valley. He could feel the pain that he had. The longing and the failure. And the pain that he had given. Every scream echoed in his ears, the wide open surprise of the girl, the gasping desperation of the big long haired man. They had no name but each one had died as he rammed a sword into their throat or thrust a knife in their neck. He had punched one young fucker so hard and so often that the face was a mass of blood and had softened to the pulp of a mashed pear.

There had been no sound when he had died. He had deserved it. Stealing from him, cheating at cards. The anger simmered beneath the wide open surface of pain. That bastard had laughed in his face, challenged him, taunted him and died. And he deserved it. But the sickness flooded throughout his body, echoing in his knuckles the

slamming shudder of each blow and filling his stomach with bile. Every blow made his body wretch, sending a spark of pain to his finger-tips and the overwhelming sickness cloaked his mind with the blackness in the white, boring into his past.

The Horseman paused for the first time and his head swept round, ignoring the soldier and gazing down at the village beneath them.

The hawk twisted in the air and sliced sideways, looking for another rising current.

The group were leaving the tavern together.

The Horseman took a slow, long breath and opened his awareness past the shadowy insignificance of the killer standing behind him (who was bent over with the weight of his past rising as flames that licked at the souls of murderers) and pressed down the hillside, over the coarse waving grass to the rambling, tumbling village houses and the path that tore through the centre of the village; the path of the group. They strolled with the insolence of unchallenged teenage bullies. Swagged with the indifference of moral-less thugs. Heading towards violence.

Their path was wide and broke everything before them. In their hands they held the source of their destruction, the seeds of their violence and the cause of their punishment. Blood was spilled and death smelled on their hands, its shadow trailing them, peering over their shoulders and wrapping cold arms in friendly entreaty. The long shadowy fingers tangling in their sleeves and jolting their determination and guiding their motivations with desires of madness, anger and passion. Control was lost in a sea of selfishness, knives to the soul of the lost. These were lifeless, senseless beings that could only realise the anger that flooded past them in streams of futures and control their happiness through the pain of loss. Sucking on the life of others.

The soldier shuddered as those eyes looked past him into the village. The creature was intent on someone else, but the feelings that swamped him reminded him that this would not distract the beast

from attending to him soon. There may still be a chance. If the thing's attention was distracted by the corpse in the forest.

The Horseman looked back up the hill to the forest lining the hillside. The still, silent trees. His path would join all those that were to be punished, soon enough.

The forest wrapped its brown needles around their faces and welcomed them with mournful silence. The soldier's stumbling, tired steps now a padding irregular rhythm, his hands waving vaguely in the direction of the flapping branches as they brushed his skin. The whiteness passed in front of him, in and out of the stiff tree trunks, the thin gold chain flashing in the darkness and looping down and up to avoid being caught on the trees as if it had a life of its own.

No life stirred amongst the branches or scuttled across the thick forest floor. The Horseman had stepped into the stream of the dead man's passage. Following the path to the end. The man, Trantis, had walked here. Alive, angry, put upon and frightened of his own temper. Aggressive but slightly comfortable with his new-found friends. Friends that he was intent on betraying. What had he been offered? What could possibly improve his life enough to merit the fear, the bone-stricken fear that shuddered through his vast frame and weakened every step.

Trantis was a large man. Each step a stride that crushed through bushes close to the ground and kicked past tumbled logs. Here the man had slapped aside a branch so hard it had snapped, the old brown edges cracked with a freshness and the green centre evidence of renewal; new growth within the branch. Here the man had ducked beneath a heavy branch and misjudged the height and scuffed the top of his messy, dirty hair against the bark and left a tousled tangle of hair snapped up within the rough bark, a memorial to the dead man's passage.

The soldier nearly wretched, his stomach heaving, sweat springing to his cheeks and his tongue swilling with knotty saliva. The creature had stopped and was staring intently into the darkness

of the trees. There didn't appear to be any difference between this part of the forest and any other they had passed by, but the creature had stopped here and the feelings of fury rolled back from the whiteness and slammed into his stomach rising through to his thundering heart.

Past and present collided into the empty present as the Horseman stood where Assanagara had met Trantis the night before. Their emanations swamped him with cascading emotions; fear, anger and overriding authority. Crushing arrogance and disdain that swallowed up and spat out the helpless lug that was Trantis. In his impotence he had smashed at one of the branches ahead and sent the remains flying across the forest floor. Assanagara had been amused, watching from within the shadows, a few feet away in the darkness. A predator eyeing his prey. An animal.

The Horseman could feel it rising within him. It wasn't hatred, it was deeper than that, more insidious, less judgemental. It was an instinct born of his nature, an emotion that he distrusted and imprisoned deep down beneath his awareness. Assanagara was no-longer here, no-longer walking within the innocence of nature, to take as he pleased, to eat as he pleased. His head had been removed by a gout of flame, further away, deeper into the forest in an assault from two of them. Alisha and Diego.

But Assanagara's presence wavered in the Horseman's mind, looming out of death to shiver through his soul. The emotion that rose within him caused his hands to rise, their fingers curved and placid, ready to strike. His eyes flashed, the whiteness briefly flooding the dark pupils. He released a long slow breath, letting the emotions wash away into emptiness. Clearing his thoughts. He must learn to control these emotions. That was why he was here.

The soldier was no-longer necessary. He could follow the path. The body would lie at the end of the journey. But the soldier provided a convenient excuse, a useful cover to hide his abilities from those watching. He would be led to the body and the soldier would decide his own fate.

It had started to rain again. Alisha stared up into the boring grey sky with disgust. Rain splattered against her cheeks forcing her to blink, running into her eyes and filling her eyelashes with coldness. She blinked rapidly and pulled her hood up with an angry tug. This fucking place will turn to mud in seconds and once again we'll head into the forest tonight and wallow around like pigs, our clothes getting wetter, our boots getting wetter and muddier. Practising, practising. What's the fucking point? We know how each of us fights too well now to learn anything much. Fuck, I hate this place. Alisha kicked out at the mud, sending a spray across the street. Dano danced sideways and sent her a mocking glance. Emotional bitch.

Diego slung an arm around Alisha, pressing his broad shoulder up against her breast. She scowled at him as he smiled warmly.

"Not long. Mource doesn't intend to leave it much longer. Maybe tonight. Soon anyway."

Alisha shrugged and turned her face away from him staring blankly at the houses as they walked on.

"How d'ya think we'll do it, man?" muttered Dano quietly to Mawk, staring intently as if trying to see through Mawk's hood. Mawk didn't look up but continued to walk smoothly over the mud.

"I've prepared detailed plans. There's a ball held at the castle," said Mource, watching Dano thoughtfully. Dano jerked slightly and looked around coolly. "We'll use that," continued Mource holding Dano's gaze.

"Cool," said Dano positively. "That'll keep the guards occupied."

"That's the idea," said Mource, nodding slowly.

Alisha grinned, images of long flowing expensive ball gowns and glittering masks springing immediately to mind. She could wear a dress. Long and tight to show her well-kept figure, maybe show a bit of cleavage. Black, probably with a black lace blouse over the top and leggings underneath so that she could fight later. With a gold chain hanging just inches above her breasts. Drawing attention to her

healthy skin, opening up her beautiful neck to the advances of her prey. She would enjoy that, definitely.

Trouble was she hadn't worn a dress for, fuck years maybe. Well nearly a year anyway. That meant high heels too. You can't fight in high heels, she'd have to fight bare-foot or carry a spare pair. Or get fucking Dano to carry a spare pair, lazy mother fucker. Could she walk in high heels? Would she need to practise, how embarrassing. Her balance was generally pretty good. But you needed a particular walk, a sway of the hips and your arse is sticking out, you've gotta keep your back straight otherwise you look ridiculous. Shit, this was gonna be a nightmare.

She could go flat.

"Do we get to dress up?" she asked, slightly worried, but keeping a lightness in her voice, an enthusiasm that she wasn't convinced about.

Diego laughed uncontrollably, shaking Alisha by the shoulders. Do we get to dress up, he repeated under his breath, choking with laughter.

Dano felt his heels digging deep into the newly formed mud. His palm pressed against the blades against his elbows. They were both there. Ready. His eyes flickered across the street. Nobody came close to them. He could see the crowds at the ball. Invitations clutched in eager hands. Cheeks flushed with sexual anticipation. Soft skin pressed against soft hands. Clothes brushing against the floor, long cloaks, masks, long dresses that were raised for dancing. Long legs flashing beneath the skirts and tight corsets overflowing with encumbered breasts. Young virgin skin ruddy with the exertion of the dance.

And drink flowing easily for youthful innocence. Laughter and emotions running high with passion. Eyelashes fluttering, eyes flashing with desire. Shoulders pressing back to thrust young breasts in his face. His mouth watered already at the thought. When was the ball? He'd heard about it but couldn't remember. Not long, he thought. This would be fun.

“Do we get to fuck with the guests?” said Dano excitedly, his tongue flicking across his lips, a slight spark in his eyes.

Mource sighed and looked across at the flushed face. “We remove Lord Stowgan. He is our target.”

Dano didn’t really hear him but nodded nevertheless. “Yeah yeah. Maybe afterwards then...” Fuck he felt horny. He glanced across at Alisha, who looked nice today. Her face was half hidden in the hood and she walked distractedly, with her habitual flicker of her eyes as she scanned the street, her hands creeping to the hilt of her sword every time a shadow crept into the darkness at the edges of the group’s passage.

He could see her long eye-lashes speckled with water, hair plastered erotically down her face, her lips full and parted, her mood thoughtful. Thinking about fucking dresses no doubt.

“Detailed fuckin’ plans,” he muttered glancing angrily at Mource. The ball sounded like a laugh. And they hadn’t had a laugh for a long time. Blood flowing to music. Excellent.

He stood over the body. One lifeless hand curved under the pine needles, clutching them as they spilled like lost blood over the forest floor. The eyes stared unblinking into the branches of the trees, unaware as a single pine-needle fell, twirling in the stillness and dropped onto his chest. There were holes in the front of his jacket.

The Horseman stood statuesque, a curve of white, memorial to the death of Trantis; a tombstone. His emotions stirred briefly but he forced them back, letting the stillness of the moment wash through his bones and cleanse his anger. Trantis had died quickly. His head was wrenched back in agony and a hand clutched the holes in the front of his jacket. It had come at him from the front at first. Death in the form of curved blades, flying through the air, slamming into his chest, penetrating his heart, opening up his blood to the air. Then his head had been opened from behind. Dano and Mawk.

From the Horseman's position he felt as though he were a tower, built strong and high over the skewed body. He was looking down from thousands of feet. Looking down on nothing. Dead pine needles, brown from age, crushed from feet, carpeting the floor until they are ground to dust. And a dirty leather jacket, dirty leather trousers. A torn cloak. A still chest and emotionless face. Hands stretched out in one last reach. Eyes that had allowed a window on the world were empty panels of glass without an owner. The heels had pressed deep through the carpet of needles and dug up the earth and scattered grubs of dirt in a scuffling death rattle. The clothes had been searched. They had been looking for something.

The Horseman lowered himself into a crouch over the body and pulled apart the jacket. Holes piercing the skin, ploughing through the veins and ligaments, thrusting into the heart. The blood was dry. The body beginning to smell in the dampness of the trees. The Horseman reached with feminine hands and rolled the head to one side; where the skull hung open and shattered skull dripped from tangled bloody hair. The brain encrusted with blood. He shouldn't have looked. He had seen the death, met the crossing of paths and felt the end. He didn't need to see the torn flesh. This time he couldn't help the release as redness flashed across his eyes and the black pupils were swamped in whiteness and the soldier stumbled forward, his fists tight, his legs nervous, his eyes wide and holding the present in urgent clarity as he swing his fists for freedom.

He reached briefly forward, still a few feet away but close enough to smell the lightness of the white creature, to feel the warmth emanating from the smooth silky robes. Just one quick blow to the head, a few quick steps while his attention was on the corpse. A chance.

The Horseman rose in front of him, his shoulders widening, his robes washing backwards in a torrent of anger. The hands jerking forward calmly, the head lowering, the hood falling deeply over the burning face. The chain tightened and the blade flipped quickly, driving deep into the soldier's throat, the edge sharpening through the skin, slicing away at the softness and jagging through bone and

jamming deep into the throat against a wash of blood and through the other side until the point jammed out from the back of the soldier's neck.

The burning fire rammed through his neck and he felt the warmth washing out down his neck and between his tunic and his skin, covering his chest with warm stickiness. His stumbling step ended with a jerk as the chain tightened and his fist wandered through empty space and he dropped to his knees, fingers groping for the knife in his boot. His vision was fading, the noise roaring in his ears told of his death. The weakness of his body threatening his next movements with helplessness as he touched the top of his knife and the whiteness spun before him, an arm reaching out in a blur as the hand smashed gently against his cheek and the blow rocked him over the side, spinning his head over towards the ground, his feet flashing into the air, the trees spinning above him, below him. The ground bumping up gently, its softness warmly inviting him to land in its arms and relax those taut fingers and close those weary eyes.

The blade burst free in a fountain of redness and flew into the Horseman's grasp with the ease of a hawk landing on its curved claws. The Horseman waited as the soldier's breath vanished into silence and the hands stopped twitching. The gash in the throat a testament to his fury. Unnecessary.

It would not help him to see clearly, to see further or sense the end more easily. There was no benefit but for the guidance of his actions, for the determination of his choice. Without this emotion would he become an empty vessel for madness?

There were two dead here. One from the predictable forces of his own destiny. From the hands of his friends and the designs of his enemies. As natural as a mouse in the jaws of a hawk. The other from the blade of the Horseman.

I saw his future. I knew his end. As we climbed the hill together our bodies were joined as two lives in harmony. The effort from the climb a song to the muscles that work within both our bodies. Our

hearts beat to the same rhythm. Both our hands could feel the pale coolness of the grass, the coarse roughness and the slight wetness. It was a cool afternoon. Greying for rain. And within the trees, where the air was still and nature silent, one life ended. And I ended it. I could see my hands. On the ride in the valley I could see my hands ending his life. His hands reaching out to end mine. The difference? Mine was unnecessary.

But to leave them. To watch them move around with an emptiness, a heaviness in their hearts where there should be joy. Can I punish them for sadness?

He was walking death. In his hands he had held a sword, a knife, a stone. And murdered, killed, fought and died. But he had sat at the table, chewing on old bread and laughing at dirty jokes. In his mind he had received pleasure and given pain. To leave this creature is to allow the pain to spread, the nausea to overtake the body, to infect the world with a sickness that spreads with its insidious self. For every death, comes the revenge or the fear; it spreads the power and enforces the will of the takers.

But it isn't only the delivery of death. It is the will of the taker. That every word should pull in those around this dead man's pleasure and allow him to take, never give; to want and never to create. Alive, he had been a tree of branches, each one spreading out across the village and drawing in a future of disease. Following each one was a sickness that was born of the hallowed soul, tortured by a path that had always headed into darkness. The Horseman had followed the soldier's paths, seen the future and every one had ended in pain.

Every single one? The Horseman looked around him, at the trees, each one standing sadly watching him as prickles of tears smarted at the corners of his eyes. Did I follow every path, see every possibility? Did I really know this man.

There was no doubt. The firmness of the quality in his mind was the cold steel of a sword, the unforgiving blade of certainty. This man was death. And I followed every path. And there was one, two, many

paths that led to freedom. I released this poor man from his uncomfortable past. He would stumble home after a night at the tavern, under the watchful eye of the Lieutenant, reeking of alcohol and deviate, go another route to end up at the whores' house. To sleep in the warm bed of a woman for the price of silver. Sara. She was getting old, late twenties, her skin firming with the experience of pain and weariness. Her future was set, her past an uncomfortable memory. To live here, to stay in this room when it rains or the stars shine. With a man who pays or in the empty coldness of a deserted bed. And then Ganak, the soldier, would arrive; drunk. He would need help up the stairs and she would take only the money she asked for because these men, these soldiers of Hermetic's, would cut her if she stole from them.

A sad smile stole across the thick small lips of the Horseman. It was not the traditional beginning of a romance. The whore and the soldier. But regular visits would end in the blossoming of passion and then love. And his mood would be tempered by hints of kindness that underlay the cruelty beneath Sara's hardened anger.

The blade vanished from the Horseman's hand. His arms hung loosely at his side as he looked down one last time at the body of Trantis at his feet. His white robe touched with an angel's hand the broken leather across his stomach.

That path was a softer, gentler path that would mould a better person out of both the cruel whore and the violent soldier. But swords would still cut and anger would still strike. Her children would still suffer blows and blood would still be spilled by knife, by sword. There was no space for anyone else in their lives. Their relationship would be sprung from mutual desire and insecurity. It would end in old-age and bitterness. But together they would die, content. Happy?

The Horseman turned away from Trantis, from Ganak and glided away into the trees. Perhaps they could be happy. But the fingers of pain would strike out at those that surrounded them. Deserving

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perhaps. But it was the outpouring of pain that was punished, not the merits of the recipients. For them there was no forgiveness. For them every path was the end. And he would deliver the path.

CHAPTER 9

Mource settled back into his high-backed chair and looked sleepily over the faces of his group. The heat from the fireplace crackled over the backs of his hands, folded comfortably into his lap, his legs relaxed, crossed. He was an excellent judge of character. A precise planner and a powerful man. These soldiers were experts in the field of violence. Childish in their ways but experienced beyond their years, born in the fires of war; at knife point.

He could see each of them, their experience and personality, abilities and talents in a shimmering form before him. A glow of information surrounding the casual predatory stance of each of them. He actually liked them. All of them. They weren't exactly picked, he didn't take some kind of census or follow a procedure to recruit them, but over time they had come together as the group he needed in order to take the next step in this forsaken village.

He had started with some careful application of power that pressed down on their will and opened their minds to carefully placed words, hypnotic words that encouraged and released them into his care. From that short time, everything he said they followed, every word they listened to carefully, absorbed and obeyed. But the power had been discarded eventually by each of them, as he knew it would be. They all were strong willed, people with determination, not easily swayed which again is what he needed. It made recruiting them harder but more worthwhile in the end.

After a while they liked him, not because he forced them to, but because they came to understand his intentions, his abilities and the opportunity he provided for them to become involved in something

more interesting than random violence. Of course, fear helped. They didn't know everything about him, but they understood enough to know that stepping out of line would be a bad idea. He wasn't sure that he could take all of them, but grouping together to take him out was only the cost of crossing them as a group; not something they would simply take up for fun. Because it wouldn't be fun. He would at least ensure that Diego, Dano and perhaps Alisha were torn apart or at least severely injured before they got to him. Anyway, in an emergency he could be out of here before they could draw their weapons, he just had to be alive to their intentions and keep an eye on them from time to time when they were unaware of his attention.

And he did watch them. From within this room, when they were out drinking or practising and he would draw out the crystal inside that drawer over there, and place it carefully on the sleek mahogany table on the green felt cloth. It glittered in the firelight and inside was the misty elegance of the glass impurities where the globe had been distorted. But with a forceful blow from his will the mist would clear and his hands would pass over the glass as he could create the image within his mind of Diego or Alisha and see the elements swirl together and provide him with exactly what he wanted to know, exactly what he wanted to hear.

They never had a bad word for him. Well not exactly. Dano hated him to some extent. Feared him of course. He was almost uncontrollable when in a certain mood. Diego knew what to say. But Dano had a childish fury against any authority and knew how to wind up anyone that tried to control him. What a mouth on him. Mource was surprised he hadn't tried to jump Alisha at least once in the months they had been together. He watched delightfully at the initial flirting and hoped desperately that they would get together, preferably somewhere quiet for long bouts of lovemaking. Not a thing. Alisha obviously had some reluctance to accept any man between her thighs and Dano, although pretty useful with women, didn't have the sensitivity to crack this particular nut.

I wonder what it is that Dano has with these women? It wasn't something that could be cooked up in a pan of ingredients. There was

an undeniable charisma about this man that made Mource slightly uncomfortable. The angle of Dano's cheekbones, the dark eyes and dark looks were moody and selfish. But when he turned his attention on someone it was almost a privilege. Arrogance, thought Mource. The cracking of arrogance, a dream for every young woman, especially in the presence of a truly dangerous man. And Dano had perfected an image of such danger. He didn't boast too much, left the image to the imagination of his conquests.

Anyway, Dano and his women had provided many nights of entertainment for Mource, watching through the misty crystal. Touching himself.

Alisha yawned and stretched her legs slightly apart, her hands reaching, quivering for the fire. She was bored. She pulled out a sword and twisted it in the firelight, watching the flames ripple along the blade, the heat smearing the metal, white and orange, red and yellows twining together. She kicked her heels together and tucked her feet underneath the leather chair. The leather was pinned down by rows of neat studs. Each one tucking in with creases that flowed inwards to the shining head of the metal stud. She picked at one of the studs with her nail, tapping the point of her sword against the carpet. Mource was watching her.

Sometimes his attention made her feel stronger, more alive. His power cloaked the group with its strength and when his attention was channelled into her body she felt empowered, stronger than them all. Sometimes she thought that he could be watching from a distance, when they were climbing the sides of the valley and she looked back and picked out the subtle contours of his house, the peaked roof and chimney and the cloudy smoke. From this room perhaps, he was watching. She knew what he could do, but wasn't sure whether he could see from that distance, whether he would want to. But those sleepy eyes bored into her now and she wondered whether when it was late at night and she lay curled away from the others under a blanket and the night air lay cold on her cheek; as her hands pressed

between her legs, whether he could see, perhaps strip away the blanket and the trousers slit open at the crease and see her fingers stroking within herself.

Slouching in the chair, she shivered and pressed her legs together. That fantasy would have to wait for tonight. Although she could feel the wetness moistening between her lips, soft and warm. She crossed her legs and looked innocently up into Mource's casual eyes, flickering in the shadows of the fire. With a studied yawn she stretched, her back arching, her shoulders pressing backwards so that her breasts thrust forwards under the thick leather. There was nothing to see, but Mource's eyes slipped downwards to her chest nevertheless.

Diego sighed, watching the gaze of Mource and the antics of Alisha. Nervous excitement prickled at the back of his eyes, his neck ached from the tension. They were here to discuss the intended attack, not lounge around flirting with each other. Alisha was such a show-off sometimes. Just teasing them all and never allowing any of them in. Well, that's her right, but the others could at least show some restraint and not fall for such a charade.

Mawk breathed easily and refocused. The lights from the rousing fire blazed across his eyes, brightening his vision with a blur of image-memory. His fingers were relaxed, his arms loose. The muscles against his groin relaxed and his face limp, eyes half open. He wouldn't need to concentrate until Mource began to speak. And then all the detail would imprint in his mind, formed into smooth lines of information ready to be recalled without the slightest effort. Now let me see, thought Mawk, looking from the fire to the chairs. One, Alisha, sword in hand. First threat. But from a distance I would have to neutralise Mource. He looks relaxed too, relaxed beyond readiness so a simple strike to the side with the edge of his palm against the elbow; Alisha's elbow. The sword would drop but she would have another very quickly, probably at the same time as Dano's would grasp his blades.

Mource was the danger. Given time. So don't give him time. The fire was the key. After the strike to the elbow he could easily sweep

his legs across the fire, his toes digging into the criss-crossed wood and kick the flaming logs into the air, blocking the view, distracting Mource, perhaps catching him in the face enough to remove him from the fray and give him time to deal with the others.

Alisha next. Too dangerous even one-handed. So continue the kick, pulling the knee high up against the chest and bringing out the toe into the curve of her throat. Not an immediate knock-out so I would need some distance, perhaps a spring over the backs of the chairs once Alisha was struck. That would prevent accurate aiming of Dano, and Diego would by now be armed too. Interesting.

He never tired of it. Over and over in his mind, seeing the moves, the punches the kicks the weapons. Very enjoyable. Passes the time. But there was nothing like the real thing. The excitement of the movement, the air rushing through his clothes as he sped forward, chasing the kill. His eyes turned, relaxed and surveyed Alisha as she stretched. A long tight body. Full of promise. The biggest threat and the best fighting partner. She loved those swords. So, another idea. Take away the swords. One on one. His advantage.

Alisha smiled at Mawk, seeing the movement in his eyes, the restlessness on his face. She could sense it in all of them. The readiness. With Trantis taken from the equation there was a little lightness in the group. This was a fucking exciting group of kick-arse hard men. Probably they are *hard* men. If only they were, in the slightest bit, her type. So boring. Not a single ounce of romance or etiquette within them. No smoothness or expertise. Too clumsy and eager. She knew what it would be like. Short.

“Are we sure that the traitor communicated our plans to Lord Stowgan successfully?” Mource said suddenly.

Fuck, where does he puke this stuff up from, thought Dano. Communicated. Fucking communicated. The dick-arse communicated and then we fucking communicated his arse and Mawk tore his fucking head off.

“We gave him time to have his chat,” said Diego confidently, remembering the stillness of the forest and the flying figure of the vampire as he hurtled over their heads and sent Alisha into the side of the tree. Now *that* was a dangerous creature. But with a bit of thought they had taken him with only a few bruises to show. But this time there would be more of them, much more. So they’d have to be direct. Fast and direct otherwise they wouldn’t last very long. Mource must be relying on the top dog being the force that held those things together. Without Stowgan there should be enough in-fighting for them to escape. Doesn’t seem like much of a plan to me.

“And you waited for him to separate from his contact?”

Mource’s voice cut through the Alisha’s fantasies and she shifted irritably in her chair. He was so fucking particular it made her want to slit his fucking throat.

Dano snapped. “Of course, we did exactly as you wanted.”

Mawk pulled out the parchment and ink bottle and quill and let them fall onto the table next to him.

“We didn’t know he could write.”

Dano laughed and looked across approvingly at Mawk’s expressionless face. Trantis had been a pain in the arse. Big, heavy and stupid. Loud. Loud of mouth and loud even when walking. Always in the way, always doing the wrong thing, always alerting the wrong people or hitting one of them by accident. Dano had nearly taken the fucking idiot’s face off when he’d caught Dano on the shoulder during practice. And now he was growing flowers. Fuck-wit.

Mource smiled toothily at Mawk and reach forward to take up the parchment. He fingered it thoughtfully. The paper could tell him much. Later. That evening he would search its memory and find out exactly what Trantis had given those freaks. He had been perfect for them. Stupid greedy and perfect for what he needed. A little encouragement, a little isolation from the friendship of the group and withdrawal of privileges and reward. Then the presence of known enemies and the opportunity and the seed of the idea in this thick-head’s skull. Given the time he needed alone with those freaks and he

had been the soft target they had wanted. Stowgan had found out enough. Rumours perhaps, paying attention to their practice, their conversation or their actions. He didn't know for sure, but he knew that Stowgan was watching as he watched all the village.

But he wasn't watching here. This study was well protected. Lined with the right ingredients and imbued with the correct protection. A blankness on the slate of this village that undoubtedly raised the interest of the Lord in the first place. Mource couldn't hide his intentions but he could disguise them and misdirect them. There was only one target. Only one to die on the night. Mource was ready to take over, to wrestle control from the weaklings that knelt at the knees of the overpowering Stowgan. Soon.

His fingers gently stroked backwards against the grain of the table, the long dead nails jumping slightly over the rough wood. The wood was older than him. Its grain the lifeblood of the wood, the skin of the tree. A dead tree. Now shaped into a long rectangular shape for the use of holding cups and pieces of paper. Again stripped from trees, he wasn't sure how but they definitely were born of trees. Flattened perhaps, but torn from the flesh beneath the bark and squashed as humans were crushed beneath his firm palm that now rested calmly on the tabletop, feeling the grain run beneath his dead skin.

Their voices droned on at the edge of his attention; matters of importance, items of urgency. He really should be listening, but as usual his attention wandered as the words wrapped around the periphery and coalesced ready for him to pour over in the moment that the voices raised and directed a question to him personally.

The room was small. Damp stonework curved over their heads with arches around them steeped in shadow. Deep beneath the ground there was no light, nor need for light with their eyes glowing slightly red in the deep darkness and each figure at the table looming in a pattern of criss-crossed veins that pulsed with recently taken

blood. The table was a cool dark colour and the cups warm orange, laden with blood. Metal cups engrained with intricate ridges and carvings of rape. Their fingers curved lovingly around the long stems balancing the heavy metal, ensuring that the warm contents did not swill over the side.

Against the wall was the body. Still alive. Thin metal was wrapped around and around the wrists holding the body up against the wall, the metal twisted around nails in the wall, the ankles snagged by wire, the head lolling against the chest, short hair tangled with cooling sweat. Tight cords were tied around the forearms holding in the blood from the veins open at the wrists.

They weren't thirsty. The hunger was deep and unsettling but dormant. Rather, the blood provided an enjoyable distraction for the mouth. Something to do with the hands while they talked. A pleasant flavour, a familiar taste that went unnoticed and unappreciated. That made them lick their lips in anticipation of the night ahead of them. Of their forage into the houses around the valley. As natural to them as not breathing.

The four leaning over the table stopped talking and looked towards Lord Stowgan expectantly. He took his time as usual. Raising his head up slowly, the hood falling away from the face, and the long teeth with the thin vein of colour pulling open.

"Has Masinforl anything further to report on this?" repeated one of the four leaning forward aggressively towards Stowgan.

Stowgan leaned backwards, neutralising the other's gesture. He called this 'The Council', giving each of the other four a position of importance, a position of power. But nothing was allowed to happen that he hadn't allowed. Their power was illusionary, but kept them quiet. Relatively quiet. As ever a restlessness forced him to be constantly alert. They naturally detested his thrall.

"Masinforl is continuing to observe this group on a constant basis with a view to reporting on their intentions. Which as you know," said Stowgan quietly. "Is not in line with this Council. They could be considered a grave threat to the security of this Council

which therefore necessitates their instant removal,” Stowgan waited momentarily, expecting the predictable interruption.

Forain leaned forward again. “Then why are we waiting? I’m sure the reason will become apparent to all of us but at the moment I feel that I personally am in the dark as to why we should allow such a problem to continue to exist at the present moment in time.”

“I understand your feelings with regard to this matter Forain,” said Stowgan patiently. “However you have to trust that I have the best intentions for this Council at heart and that the continued survival of this group is important for the moment.”

Palaran nodded thoughtfully, the deep red veins moving slowly up and down in the dark. “Of course we know that you have your reasons. But I think that it is reasonable for Forain to have some interest in the whys and wherefores of your decision. It does after all affect all of us,” there was a murmur of approval from the other council members.

Forain leant back in his chair and tapped a finger briefly against the table, echoing within the stone chamber.

“It is really more to do with the appropriate actions that we should take in the light of your decision. My people need to know how they should react in these circumstances. At the end of the day we have to face these people and we don’t want to do the wrong thing.”

Stowgan nodded in appreciation. He had let them loose. It was an inevitable decision once he had taken them. He could withhold their freedom, prevent them from acting of their own volition, holding their minds within his will, bending his will on their thoughts on their dreams on their desires. Pushing them and pulling them in every moment of their lives. Or he could set them free. For this. This pathetic whining. They were so weak. Full of words rather than deeds. If they wished to truly challenge his authority then it was a bit pointless around this table. Unless, surprise surprise they were to

jump him here and now, racing around the table to tear his head from his neck. They're not going to get anywhere otherwise. Pathetic.

"How many with you now Forain," asked Stowgan casually.

"Two, three hundred," said Forain, pleased.

"I have slightly more," said Palaran with emphasis.

Stowgan snorted and took a sip of the blood. "That is probably equal to the entire population of the village, once all of your people are taken into account."

"Yes," said Forain irritably. "But a well planned assault could threaten each one of us if the defences were breached."

"I am not talking about defence," said Stowgan, drawing them in ready to strike. "I am talking about logistics. Each one of us requires a certain amount of," he coughed. "Sustenance. And that requires a certain number of people in the immediate area. Without that population your people will begin to become restless and resent your authority. An unhappy organisation is an inefficient one."

Forain folded his arms, staring hard at the red glowing eyes that pierced into his gaze.

"I don't want to see every single instruction...," continued Stowgan in explanation. "Every decision that I make undermined because the workers are hungry."

"But what does this have to do with the Mource situation?" asked Forain, annoyed.

"It's simple, Forain," answered Stowgan. "Mource is a fly in the ointment. He can cause us problems, but probably these problems will be completely isolated and applicable to only those within the Council, not something to worry the majority of our people. In the meantime we have to deal with the diminishing resources at our disposal. Really Forain, we can't afford to continue taking on new recruits until we have extended to another area that can sustain such expansion."

"And if Mource should take out one of us?" said Forain, exasperated.

"Then that would show how unprepared you are. I will not tolerate such incompetence within this organisation."

"But surely," interrupted Palaran. "If Mource were to be dealt with now, this would prevent problems in the future."

"No," said Stowgan simply. "If Mource were to be dealt with now, then others would take his place. We will always have these kind of issues, that is the nature of our organisation and the jealousies of the competition. Mource provides a useful outlet for the collective frustration of the village. He is the figurehead, the representative of rebellious ideas and will draw others of a like-mind to him without our needing to identify them ourselves."

"I see," said Palaran. "Mource ensures that all the other people concentrate on what he does, what he wants. This reduces infighting, encourages one particular direction of which we are aware. This stability, as long we monitor it carefully, ensures that the population remains relatively controlled."

"Mmm," murmured Forain. "This is an obvious strategy which is appropriate as long as this Mource doesn't overstep his mark and cause us problems."

"As I have already pointed out," said Stowgan, a studied irritability rising in his tone. "We are not doing things right if such a person causes us any serious problems. The advantage of leaving him be, far outweighs any problems he can cause our organisation."

"You are obviously not worried," said a third council member.

"No," emphasised Stowgan with a smile.

"Then perhaps we can move onto other issues," said Palaran stepping into the gap.

"Of course," said Stowgan, repeating his authority.

"The new arrival," said Forain. "He arrived last night. On horseback. Alone."

"So I understand," said Stowgan absorbing the pale expressions of those around the table in the slight ghostly light that formed their

figures in his mind's eye. Through the darkness his vision pierced and formed images from the fabric of the space between them. He sensed rather than saw their bodies and these senses coalesced into indistinct forms that told him enough. It was the stranger that centred in his attention and sent his inhibitions flying in the face of excitement. Something had stirred in the village and violence had preceded it.

"What do we know about him?" asked Palaran, annoying Stowgan with his persistent manoeuvring.

"One of our contacts has reported on his arrival at the local tavern," started Stowgan, intending to outline only the sketchiest detail. "Trouble began with a drunk called Magrott and the fight ended quickly with the death of the drunk."

"How did it end?" enquired the fourth council member interested.

Stowgan nodded, an interesting question. The fight had been more a sudden attack, from the information he had received. Nothing unusual in that, as Magrott was not the most capable of men. Killing him had been a little unnecessary, drawing a fair deal of attention in such a small village. Apparently a *lot* of the attention from the local soldiers who had also suffered from an example of extreme strength. Perhaps unnaturally enhanced, but nothing too special. And then he had gone to stay at the Rat's Inn. And slept that night quite peacefully. The facts quite simple, but beneath it an unsettling sense of power and violence. Stowgan's sensitivity to the complex scheme of emotions and desires within the village had been disturbed like the delicate threads of a spider web. Some of those threads had been viciously cut without reason or cause, direction or intention. Just pure....what? Stowgan was a little confused, the situation murky and unresolved. He wanted to change that.

"From the reports," continued Stowgan slowly. "The newcomer broke open Magrott's skull with a kick and then faced off the soldiers by throwing furniture at them. Heavy furniture."

"Has he been involved in anything since?" asked Forain, quizzically.

"Not that I am aware of," replied Stowgan, lying.

There had been a lot of involvement since, but not an area of concern for the council. He was sure that Forain and probably Palaran were aware of the follow-up at Hernetic's place. That after Mource's men had taken out Hernetic, the newcomer had arrived and been involved in another short fray. Something that he was sure would be brought up after the meeting, in person, by each council member that knew, one at a time.

"Is there anything special about him that should concern this Council?" asked Palaran, looking quickly at Forain.

Stowgan noticed the glance. So they had already discussed it. Good.

"No," answered Stowgan, this time telling as much of the truth as he knew. "He appears to be adept at combat, but apart from his physical abilities he doesn't appear to have much to concern this Council. I suggest that each of us uses a certain number of our people to keep an eye on him with a view to establishing the amount of concern this Council should have over his future actions. Apart from that, the elements involved appear to be relatively innocent; a footnote to these proceedings."

Forain relaxed and looked down at the veins running along his fingers. They were weakening in the darkness as the blood ran cool. Not that he minded. Those animal feelings of hunger and thirst were an irritant that he kept under close control, not wanting his attention to be drawn to meaningless acts of self-preservation. No, it was the words at this council that held his attention and Palaran had already spoken to him about this matter. Interesting that Stowgan wished to keep it between the three of them. That meant it *was* important. But how important. Information on this man was sketchy. No-one knew where he came from, or even the general direction of his arrival. His accent and clothing were unusual, not distinctive to a known region.

Undoubtedly from a distant location as yet undetermined. His attitude was unclear. His speech hadn't revealed much of his intentions. The stay at the Inn uneventful.

Forain had been tempted to take him and attend to it personally, and quickly. But the stranger's actions had intrigued him, for reasons that he couldn't establish. He sensed something of interest and it would be fascinating to hear Stowgan's reaction to the stories. Stowgan's moves had been subtle and cautious, so he had acted similarly, not wanting to overstep the mark or reveal his hand. However his patience was already close to ending. It was only one man and he had more important things to attend to. In fact, the ball was soon now. Tonight. Everything was in place but he wanted to impress. It had the stamp of his authority and under his orders there was to be no mistake.

Palaran watched Forain relax and Stowgan reach the end of the meeting, beginning to close the proceedings. So it was important. His instincts told him that this was so. I wonder how important, and whether I can use him? It was time for Stowgan to make a mistake and for him to capitalise. Perhaps this man was the catalyst. It had taken centuries of patience.

All those years. Palaran shuddered, the crawling abyss of the endless past trailing behind with the weight of a heavy chain. When nothing changes, when the future is endless murmurs of the past; then life becomes a shade, an insignificant flutter of uselessness. It made him feel tired. Aching behind his eyes, rumbling in his stomach with the hunger of unsatisfied yearning. If he was honest with himself, then he would admit that it wasn't patience but helplessness. He had continued because he must. He had no choice.

He looked at the monster at the end of the table. Curved over the table, a vulture of men. Wings of cloth and teeth of bone. An enduring presence at the back of his mind, reminding him of his helplessness. A darkness that shifted and turned, changing form and presence and always insisting on obedience. He had no anger left. Years had passed since an element of emotion other than a desperate

mournful desire for escape. It was a flimsy hope, always out of reach, distant and a slight light of the future.

The depression settled like a cloud, resting on his shoulder and murmuring in his ear; platitudes of pointlessness.

“The council is adjourned,” said Stowgan rising silently to his feet, his robes spreading out around him, his hood flattening slightly as he raised his head. The others quickly stood and began to file out of the chamber. Stowgan turned and made a slow passage to the door at the back, the one that lead up the stair directly to his chamber. Given a suitable amount of time, the other two would arrive at his room curious as to why the newcomer was of any interest at all. And he would settle their interest with boredom. A particular curiosity based on a personal fascination of meaningless proportions. A personal plaything. A project with which to involve him in the few moments that split time between endlessness.

They would understand.

CHAPTER 10

Assanagara's body reeked of smoke and charred mould. As the rain splattered across the silk robes and ran along the lifeless fingers the Horseman knelt and held the hand up in the air. Two marks; bite marks.

The Horseman shuddered. So close to such a path. Even the ending of the path shattered him with the fury of its existence. So many years that crowded into centuries. And this creature had consumed so many. Taken so many.

It felt like a hammer blow bludgeoning him into the grass, pressing him down on his knees so that his face fell, the hood covering him, hiding him from the night. The past rushing into him, one after another. Blood, so much blood. A river that stretched far into the distance, extending on and on with horrific smoothness. Spraying redness across the virgin air, splattering over spotless stone and innocent flesh. Blood on his fingers, blood in his mouth. He thrust his head backwards, mouth falling open in a silent scream hands spreading outwards in a cross of penitence. Back arching with imagined agony.

Driving through his heart, tearing away his sight, filling his nose with the stench of pain. Each and every single victim a crowd in his sight. On and on. An infinity of madness.

Gasping, he lowered his head and arms. Breathing quickly now, mouth parted, eyes wide with suffering. This past had driven viciously through the lives of so many. It was an endlessness that added another shard of sadness. This was a death worthwhile. Calming now, the rivers of the past swept by him in an emotionless

torrent. One path and another combining and swirling. Here there was a victim whose path was swamped with blood too. And another, torturing his family with hate. And here a crushed flower, a beauty stamped into the ground. Hills, valleys, rooms of fear. Doors flying open and screams rending the air as friends were taken and lovers ravished for their blood. Corpses thrown from high windows and horses pounding the desperate mud, their riders staring back at the flying shadow at the chasing horror. And the jaws closing, grasping the neck and the hands gripping the shoulders and lifting them into the air. And life being drawn from the open wounds, pouring out into emptiness. Filling the gaps with warmth that would turn to freezing nothing. And the horror marched on.

Stop.

Each breath leant a coolness to the lips and the teeth. A little through the nose and more between the lips. Dry from the emotions. The eyes blinking, controlled, deliberate. Trees surrounding him. A soft floor of pine needles. The needles fell between his fingers when he lifted them. Landing amongst the millions of other needles, disappearing from recognition. The body was burnt, the face unrecognisable. The path was ended.

He stood.

The air rested, cool on his face. A tear fell, slipped down his cheek, dropped onto his robes.

He turned.

And beckoned into the darkness.

“You look nervous man,” said Dano slyly as Diego shifted again in his chair; the iron bars were sticking into the side of his stomach.

Diego shrugged, his eyes on the flames.

Alisha bit her lower lip, staring into the fire thoughtfully, the sword bouncing on her knee, the rustling of her leather a delicate accompaniment to the crackling flames.

Mawk pressed firmly down on the carpet with his heels, strengthening the muscles in his legs, from this position he could roll forward or push backwards spinning over the back of the chair.

Mource tapped the tip of a quill against an ink bottle, eyes shifting from person to person. Conversation was faltering. Patience was wearing thin. Soon it would be time to begin.

The branches burst apart, needles spraying across the waving white robes. His hood fell back as he raised his face. Metal skewing outwards, twirling into shape, pointed solid spikes protruding from the side of his skull. Eyes moulding over, blazing open, white.

Out of the branches the poised curved arrow of thick muscle, heaving flanks and the horse's head snorting, eyes wide in excitement, its ears pulled back and the long wiry hair rammed backwards in the forward rush as the hooves slammed into the needle floor, throwing back herds of mud that rattled against the dead tree trunks. The horse shuddered on its rear legs, raised up tall and majestic, front hooves angled in supplication to disturbed nature.

The Horseman flowed upwards and sideways, legs crossing over the horse's back and arms reaching out to rest gently on the sides of the thick neck. The stiff hair wrapped around his long fingers, white with surfaces of grey wrapping over elegance.

The front hooves thundered down and a ripple of force ran along the muscles of the horse's back. It turned its head back the way it had come, back towards the village. The Horseman turned with it, following its angry gaze, looking into the shadows, feeling the darkness close around his calm. He leaned forward and breathed lightly on the side of the horse's head.

"Peace rest our souls dear one. Let us remember them in their end."

The horse whined and shook its head snorting.

The Horseman snarled into the night and the horse started, bursting forwards into the trees.

“Enter,” Lord Stowgan raised his head, the cowl falling away from a slightly irritated expression. Now the games would have to begin.

Forain glided through the doorway as the heavy oak panelling closed behind him with a solid click.

Stowgan didn’t rise to acknowledge his presence, simply waving his genteel hand in the general direction of his underling. Forain settled relaxed in the chair, pulling his robes across the arms of the chair and patting them down his front. His Lord was sitting behind the desk, a preternatural vision that reminded him of many centuries ago. When he had to work for a living. There was no paper on the desk, no ink or quill. Only dust.

Stowgan looked over at the conceited fool before him. It was too easy. Every word and gesture was a tapestry that had been woven over so long a time that it was a subconscious gesture as natural as moving. He could coordinate this idiot’s thoughts and desires as a conductor would wave his stick, torturing musicians with the inevitability of repetition. This music had been played before and the notes were worn into the fabric of the dusty air.

“Forain,” Stowgan said with menace, allowing another silence to drop over their shoulders, aching deep within his underling’s mind with a sinister presence.

Forain stared out of the window, only the greying sky, the black underbelly of the swollen clouds ripe for exposure could be seen rushing past the stonework frame of the window.

“Who is this newcomer?” said Forain neutrally.

“Gentlemen,” Mource began, his eyes lighting up with a fervour. “And Alisha. Please let us begin.”

Diego looked straight into his eyes and smiled.

The streets were deserted in the torrent. Rain that slashed sideways in the wind that raced down the centre of the clumsy houses.

It was darkening to night already. So short a day.

The white horse raced between the houses, only a gentle slapping of its hooves and the crackling of the Horseman's robes in the air-current.

"His arrival has caused a minor disturbance and he doesn't appear likely to form an alliance with Mource. However his talents are of interest to me. I think that it would be of amusement to create a situation where he were to become a problem for Mource," Lord Stowgan smiled threateningly. "Rather than for us."

"Lord Stowgan will be expecting an airborne assault via the upper reaches of the tower," continued Mource carefully.

They were leaning forward now, eyes eager as teenagers listening to the latest crime; eyes still, mouths slightly open as they concentrated on every word that he used. He loved this feeling, reeling them in with the modulations and mood of his command. There was no real need to keep the plan from them until this point, but it increased the anticipation and underlined his control over them.

He could see Alisha's chest raising and falling quickly, her lips glistening, dark eyes watchful as Dano's knee twitched regularly and he rubbed his rough hands together gleefully. Diego and Mawk were still; attentive. He glanced down at Mawk's feet; yes, they were dug into the pile of the carpet. A sign that he was prepared to spring; a sign that he was focused. And Diego, tongue protruding slightly, his shoulders slumped forward. Not the brightest.

Mind you, he had already outlined the plan for Diego.

The rain poured against his forehead, cool harbinger of natural life silenced. The clouds were racing against him, racing forwards and crowding together on the ominous horizon. The rhythmic undulation of the muscles beneath him brought him up and over ever step that pounded against the light hooves and folded mud.

Water running in rivulets into his eye sockets and down the side of his cheek stolen of life by the chill. Chipping against the metal spikes and forming pools on the rounded metal on the side of his face. He tasted the liquid, cold and too small to taste of anything but slight wetness. His mouth was dry, the emotions pouring away with the rain, landing in pools to mark his journey.

The rushing air in his ears drowned the sound of his horse, drowned the sound of the rain and the thunder and the slapping sign of the shop that they past. It was too cold for feeling. He was knelt down, face only inches from the heaving neck. Torrents of air would whip up the horse hair against his chin. He could smell its peace.

It would run. Race to the end of the journey and then stop, only to turn and continue wherever he would wish. Its path was straight, simple and innocent. Where it faced, it continued. It was a life that flowed with the grass and the rain into a pool of subtle existence. And carried him towards blood.

Now he had a direction. He was flowing along with the path, carried on the back of innocence to collide in violence. Ahead many paths entwined, shuddered and slipped apart. He held them in his grasp and his eyes saw their truth.

Forain stood up and bowed warmly.

“Lord Stowgan,” he announced with gratitude. “It was illuminating to hear your thoughts on this matter. And now if you will excuse me, I have to attend to the preparations for tonight’s ball.”

As the door closed on the platitudes, Stowgan rose and glided over to his window – his view over the hillside and the trees below and the distant grass, the individual stems merging together and forming an indistinct colour like the brief flickering of individual lives colliding together to the motions of his fingers. All he had to do is watch.

The building swept into view, a low hanging peaked roof, glittering window revealing the light within. The end of the journey: only a few hundred yards crossed within seconds by the galloping hooves and the Horseman closed his eyes and the horse arched backwards, hooves clashing together and skidding slightly before reaching up to the clouded stars and stroking the air with gentle hooves and soft breath.

Mource could see the smoke, the flames spreading briefly in an ecstatic explosion and dark black soot spreading fast across the ballroom. Elegant reds and mauves covered in dirty grey, coughing and spluttering of the elite. Fire and confusion, screaming and anger. The decoy.

“According to our practice and the plans communicated to the traitor, Trantis,” explained Mource with relish. “They will all be expecting an attack aimed first at the lower reaches of the tower.”

Alisha grinned. She saw flames too, remembering the bright whiteness as the flames flashed in the crowded dark tower and the soldiers staggering, shocked and engulfed, clothes burning, eyes melting.

“However,” continued Mource. “Although Stowgan does not attend these functions, he will undoubtedly leave a decoy in the tower and attend the ball tonight.”

“Tonight,” repeated Alisha smiling even more broadly. She wanted to leap into the air and punch with delight.

“With Stowgan amongst the guests and the expected fire and confusion within the ballroom, he will be fully expecting a modicum of safety while his guards reduce our strength before we discover our mistake.”

Dano smacked his fist into the palm of his hand with a satisfying crack. This was evil.

“It is a simple ploy and with the slightest of machinations we have succeeded in creating certain expectations,” Mource smiled at Diego and Alisha, noting the glittering cruelty in her eyes. “Under the cover of the smoke and fire, against which many of the guests will already be neutralised, we will isolate Lord Stowgan with a direct strike. All of us. Security will be relatively tight, but with them expecting an airborne assault it shouldn’t be too difficult to gain entry. I have a little something prepared to ensure we can mingle with the guests unnoticed. That way we can pin-point our target and on the signal, strike with maximum effectiveness.”

She was going to wear a dress. She sensed it, knew it. How fuckin’ excellent is that. No idea what shit Mource has got prepared to get us in, but dresses would definitely be involved. Excellent.

“It’s not that complicated,” said Dano arrogantly, leaning back and looking up at the ceiling. He could already see the collapsing body of Stowgan, blades protruding from his back.

“Indeed. We have to keep it simple. Too many factors can change the environment on the night. That’s why you have been rehearsing together so often. I need to you react to the slightest problem with maximum effectiveness.”

“Hey,” growled Dano with a leer. “I am Maximum Effectiveness all over man.”

“Maximum Strength bullshit fuckwit,” snarled Alisha playfully, slapping her sword over and over against her bouncing thigh.

“And once the target is down?” said Mawk coolly. His eyes flickered to the excited faces of his companions. They didn’t want

complicated. If let loose they would happily rush into the crowd right now and just start fighting.

“Once the target is down,” said Mource seriously. “We exit as quickly as possible. Alisha will create cover while Diego takes the rear and we get out to get airborne as quickly as we can.”

Dano interrupted eagerly. “Diego’s so good at taking the rear I can hardly sit down, you know!”

They ignored him.

“Given the death of their leader,” continued Mource. “The organisation will fall apart as those left fight to take the pieces. We’ll have a few to mop up later but the infighting will drain their resources considerably and their experience of leadership is hugely limiting. They shouldn’t present any particular problem to us.”

Alisha sighed erotically, crossing her legs and fingers over the hilt of her sword, looking down its length. Now was the time to get going. The real deal. This time everything they had been working for was about to happen. Death on a massive scale. Excellent.

Mource looked at each face in turn, flickering in the orange firelight, eyes turned to imagination and wonderment. Not much of a plan, but convincing enough that they all seemed to believe that it would be easy. With the number and talent at his disposal it was the only acceptable attempt, unless he were to shelve the issue and deal with Stowgan at a later date. It was worth a chance taken.

Mawk closed his eyes slowly. How ridiculous. To attack such a high profile target when surrounded by friends and protectors, and he wouldn’t even be particularly vulnerable. It was a slender hope that Stowgan believed an idiot like Trantis. And all it bought them was a moment’s surprise. They’d have to make it count. Maybe seconds would be all they had. However, to have all five of them arrayed for a simultaneous attack on a single surprised target. It could work. And it was better than anything else on the horizon.

Diego was simply smiling. Feelings of distant happiness warming his cheeks. It would be fun.

If he reached out he could crush them in his angled fingers. But the anger was absent and his vision unwavering from the distraction of emotion. They could talk, could fight; but their end was as predictable as the slow disintegration of an apple as it became grey with floury mould, blackened and turned to ash.

Lord Stowgan's face reflected in the emptiness of his gaze as he stared into the fire, a paleness outlined by a dark hood and the shimmering present, the distant room brought clear by flickering flames. Arrayed as game-pieces on a board without players. Sat in those chairs discussing affairs of state with pathetic misunderstanding. And the cool, calm voice of Mource distracting them from the inevitable truth of their disastrous efforts. It was so small and light in its strength that it became almost annoying. These discussions the quiet buzzing of a small fly, an insect without a substantial body and the flimsiest of wings, fluttering helpless in the current of greater things.

Lord Stowgan almost turned away from the events unfolding before his tired eyes. But he had waited patiently for this moment and patience was a skill that he possessed in abundance.

Alisha stood and stretched, leaving her sword leaning nonchalantly against the dark leather chair. Her head tilted, the hair falling to the side. Her face screwed in a yawn.

Mource crouched in his chair, Mawk relaxed, Diego entranced by the fire. Dano glanced up at Alisha. At her breasts.

The flames shuddered.

The air was heavy in the airless room. The windows were shut, clasped closed with iron-backed shutters and featureless drapes. Sparks floated into the room, shadows spreading skeletal from the backs of the chairs and the exposed heads of the occupants.

The door was ironclad. Heavy wood. Iron strips hammered studded into the wood. Locked. The carpet frayed where the wood ran as the door was opened and shut over the years.

A chandelier in the ceiling. Unlit. Unlit candles on the table and on the walls. A bureau. Some money on its surface, glinting in the sparklight.

Alisha sat down and picked up her sword.

The door exploded inwards, the white explosion briefly blazing across the exposed heads sending harsh shadows even across the soft orange of the fire that burst into black torrential smoke curving over the ceiling of the room sending it into immediate darkness.

Wind plucked at the smoke, sucking it out through the shattered opening. The shutters burst outwards, ash and wood was flung from the fireplace and smashed against bodies and heads. The furniture skidded across the carpet and tumbled against the walls, the coins rattling out over the window ledge and the candles rolling into the edges of the walls.

Lord Stowgan laughed. The sound echoed in the deserted chamber.

Mawk was already pressed with his back to the wall, claws in hand, legs bent slightly, head pressed against the wood, eyes trying to pierce the darkness. He could only see two bright burning dots in the tumbling darkness.

Alisha stood her ground, back leant against the fury, arms shaking to hold her swords high, her head bent to see a target. But in the doorway she could only make out a pair of eyes, white without pupils.

Diego staggered to his feet, pressed against the wall. Iron bars hanging limply between his hands, his head shaking from the blow.

Dano scowled, his back to the wall next to Mawk. In this wind his fucking blades were useless. Until the target stepped out he would wait.

Mource was protected. Now the energies gathered and cloaked him with security against this intrusion. Who had dared to interrupt, to destroy his home? His chin trembled with anger.

As suddenly as its arrival the room settled to a hollow calm, only the howling wind outside and the crashing of thunder announced the disturbance in the nature of things. The Horseman stood a simple whiteness in the doorway, robes ruffled but pure, eyes watching with a blazing intensity.

Behind the blazing eyes the Horseman settled into a peaceful imbuelement of authority and intention. The room was his.

Each scattered spark and twirling scrap tilted and turned on its path through the air. Holding still before his gaze. Chairs on their edges and wood in the midst of scarring. Sparks about to blink into nothing and swords raised ready to strike.

The flames paused in the licking and the carpet held still from the ruffling of those that stood, crouched and stumbled across its surface as their clothes ceased their rippling and eyes their blinking. Held still in the moment of time between now and the next moment of the present. And each had its path known to the fabric between one person and the next.

Tying them in a dance, pinning the arms together in the crook of an elbow that captured their minds and their thoughts as a pan catches the transparent water of a gold specked river. And together the paths raced, pulling into a central core held with the love of a mother cradling her son and the stroking calm of the Horseman's fingers curved and held still before him.

He could release them in this moment and watch them transfer through the motions, legs and arms swaying to the ancient rhythm that determines their desires, paces their life with the hypnotic whirr of an insect's wings. But he held them still, casting his net wide and drawing each path in, a central spoke of realisation.

Mawk. The most dangerous. So close, so intent. Ready to step forward, his raised arm slashing from left to right. Or the wrist swept backwards, following another path downwards to tear at his face. The legs as well, another path, spinning in an awkward dance that would sweep him away helpless in the onslaught. One.

Two. Dano's blades spinning, reaching outwards for his flesh, to tear and render in pieces. Blood the sup of metal hunger.

Fire. Three. Alisha's swords the distance thunder, the danger that would engulf his path, its overpowering swathe a warning of pain.

Four. Mource. Complex weaves, spinning entities of futures unborn. A word, a gesture. A sign and signal. Each path an extra complexity spinning outwards and sucking every other path into its sway so that a storm of intricate patterns weaved outwards and formed a column of danger pressing in towards his peace.

Five. Diego. A slower path, a hesitant beginning waiting, watching, then the signal or the word a precipice for violence.

Five paths turning, twisting straightening and arrowing to his heart. The brightest. A matter of timing. Of choice. But the brightest deflated the others and removed the threat.

The Horseman waited.

"Impressive entrance."

Mource spoke. The words forming slowly, angling downwards and throbbing through the air, catching their paths and dragging them down, relaxing tense muscles, drawing breath into empty lungs.

"Mource," the Horseman replied. The name was a resonance of the pain that formed within the beast that was the man. He knew how to hate.

"Killed by friends," the Horseman sent the words flirting into the air, attracting the sudden surprise and attention of the group, brushing aside their paths, breaking their momentum, destroying their control.

“Were you his friend too,” Mource had caught the path, naturally turning the words he received into a violent gesture, a joke for the appreciation of his audience; designed to intimidate and neutralise the Horseman’s intentions.

“I have no friends here,” said the Horseman. The truth thundered against his breast. Loneliness was a force that he would bear for his honour.

His path split, shattered across the understanding of the group. Loneliness but also meaning. They were not friends of his. And if not friends then enemies they could only be.

“There is a narrow line between friends and enemies,” Mource, again his instincts good, drawing on the meaning quickly, intelligently, arrogantly.

“Did Trantis cross the line?”

Diego scowled, a momentous path that rolled helplessly onwards from the depths of his emotions. “We have got to do him,” he said to Mource.

Dano started to move, twirling the blades in his fingers. A blur of possibilities, an accident that could flash outwards at any moment.

“What do you want?” Mource asked, intrigued.

“I am just visiting,” replied the Horseman, emotionlessly.

“There are no spectators here, only victims,” said Mource.

“You are all victims of your own weakness,” the Horseman sent the jolts of awareness spinning from his open palms, the paths flashing outwards in moments of joy and disdain. The meaning was lost in the collision as the entities continued oblivious to all around them, consumed by their own fascination of death, pain and pleasure. The path was simply soaked up and discarded, raw lifeless matter that fell to the floor of life to be trod on by iron clad boots of desire.

“Hey,” snarled Alisha, the path slamming forwards, swords spinning, slashing drawing blood. “Who are you calling weak. Let’s do him.”

But Mource had absorbed a little, let the flow change, instinct letting him flow downwards, exploring. Sensitive. Aggressive. “And what do you suffer from, friend.”

“Your pain,” the words simple. Stark. Misunderstood and ignored. The Horseman stood in the helpless flow, seeing only the end. He could choose to change, to misdirect but the flow was overpowering, a rolling momentum that carried all with it beyond the entire strength of all things.

There. The choice. The ending for the moment. Mource faded from the room leaving only these words. “We will talk more of pain another time.”

The complexity vanished. The lines faded, distorted and separated. The others in the group watching, innocent of the future and moving on their own, legs forward, arms backwards, heads to the side. Away.

The Horseman turned and left the room.

The spiral headed on into the darkness to close together another time.

“Fuck.”

Alisha turned away from the empty doorway and stared at Mawk. The heaviness in the room had vanished. The storm outside and the guttering fire left shadows and darkness where before only threat had filled the air.

“Mmm,” murmured Mawk standing up away from the wall and peering cautiously around the edge of the doorway. He felt a bit foolish.

“Nothing?” Diego said helplessly, absently spinning the iron bar in a grating circle that narrowly missed an upturned chair.

Alisha snorted and stepped back against the fireplace, leaning her aching shoulders against the stonework. “Fuck,” she repeated quietly.

“Nothing,” announced Mawk unnecessarily. There was an inevitable emptiness outside. Rain and empty streets.

Dano stood staring into space, the blades lifeless in his hands.

“Where’d he go?” Diego asked pointlessly, catching the chair with his iron bar and starting, looking down at his weapon, blinking furiously, looking back up at the calm face of Mawk.

Mawk shrugged.

“I had him man. Right in front of me,” said Dano, frustrated, nervous, bewildered.

“Hey, we all had him, man,” said Alisha with a confidence she didn’t feel and a complete lack of authority in her faltering voice.

“How’d he get here?” said Diego looking down as he struggled to get his weapon into his coat.

“For fuck’s sake Deygo man,” said Dano. “Through the fucking front door, where do you think he fucking came from. We haven’t got a fucking clue and...” he trailed off as his emotions resounded in the silence of the room.

Mawk shrugged again.

Alisha lowered herself against the wall and suddenly stopped, looking backwards in surprise. She had nearly sat on the fire.

“Where’d Mource go?” asked Diego quietly.

They all ignored him.

Mawk stared back out onto the street. Closed doors but shadowy doorways. Looming clouds with little natural light and dark streets meant there were plenty of hiding places for somebody that wasn’t wearing white. Were there others? Did he have black clothes under that white robe?

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Dano suddenly let go. A blade licking the air and springing into the wooden doorframe, shuddering briefly with the impact. Splinters fell on the carpet.

Mawk looked round.

Dano shrugged, laughed with a childish cackle and sauntered over to the door. "I had that fucker, I'm telling you."

CHAPTER 11

The tavern was untidily busy.

Bodies pressed hard arms against aching chests as labourers forced their way to the bar and created a space with sudden violence. A slopping beer, crashed down clumsily on the bar and slid briefly in the general direction of a customer, followed by a palm thrust roughly under the nose expecting a coin and quickly.

A table tilted as a man too large for the space available knocked and pushed, the drinks spilling, flooding the table with a thin sheen of putrid yellow. Yells, and howls of laughter as arms pushed out and the guilty man nearly fell over.

Alisha let the door fall closed behind her and eyed up the bar. Busy. It hadn't taken long for them to replace the bastard, she thought with delight.

Looks; short glances and brows furrowed and heads turned quickly back. Good, she didn't need the attention.

Flustered and with a thirst, Alisha strode towards the bar, expecting the gap to open as it did and scowling down at the floor at the feet that scurried away from her path. Her shoulder slammed angrily through a blind-sided back, sending the beer slopping onto the man's front and a snarl of anger, the face turning, the eyes registering too slowly for the insult.

"What the fuck, I'm gonna kill the motha fucker..." the man stopped speaking, his mouth closing quickly, his eyes squinting in its fatness, a slimy sweaty face.

Alisha leaned forward deliciously and took hold of the man's clothes. She jerked her wrist around, twisting the cloth and lifting slightly so that the fabric creaked. The man coughed. She put her face into his face, spitting deliberately as she spoke.

"Not today. I am not," she said, enunciating every word with an exotic growl. "In. The. Mood."

She heard laughter from a more distant table. She had expected it. The comment barely discernable but her senses were startlingly precise and the fuel still burned through her veins as her battle-state remained in a heightened sense of violence. Someone had mentioned her time of the month.

She lowered her head. Perfect. She reached down and grabbed the man's knife. Unbalanced, an ill-kept blade but serving the purpose over the short range. A quick twist of the shoulder, releasing the man's clothes and bringing the arm swiftly downwards, letting the knife fly from her steady fingers, sensing its flight and the air whistling around the rusty metal, straight and true. Into the forehead of that idiotic grin. Dead.

She sighed gently and smiled. Not looking at her victim. Not looking at the gaping on-lookers or listening to the sudden hush, but turning towards the bar and shouldering the helpless man away so that he swayed momentarily.

"Drink," she said, matter-of-factly.

The barman looked at her with a glint in the eye, trying not to smile. Fear and amusement. He thought he would get away with it because he had what she wanted. She'd take out any mother-fucker that annoyed her even the fucking slightest.

The drink was foul.

She pushed it back. "Go to the back and get me the wine. Not rubbish."

It was a bit of a wait. But she was beginning to relax. Conversation started again and laughter started again. She wasn't sure whether anyone had carried the body out, whether she would be tripping over it when she left the tavern drunk, or whether it was still

lying there, dripping over the floor, sad eyes following the scuffling of the feet around it.

Anyone else wanting some? She looked around. Eyes quickly passed downwards. This time no jokes.

Mawk padded through the undergrowth, pushing the branches apart with gentle hands. His claws clasped hotly to his palms and he could feel the fear pressing down on the back of his head. Was there someone behind him?

Again he glanced around and quickly forward into the darkness. More grass and further another clump of bushes. Not much cover. Hoof marks in the soil. Heavy, moving at speed. Mawk glanced behind again. The village twinkled beneath him, a light moving further away in a street, someone holding a lantern. Was there a shadow following that figure, was he, or she about to be attacked?

The hillside was quiet, the forest above him a solid line that threatened arrows or galloping enemy. The grass was long too. It shielded him, but it would shield anything and in the wind it was difficult to tell movement from the natural rustle of the wind.

He stared intently at the bush. Clear, he thought. And pressing downwards he half-crouched half-ran across the grass to dive within the shadows of the bush.

The tree shuddered again to the delving blade. Dano trudged over the pine needles and stood looking at it. About half an inch. The bark was easily severed, like human skin.

The blades were thin and would wear quickly if he practised too long. But if he didn't then his aim would slacken. Dano shrugged and pulled at the blade, wiggling it slightly out of the bark. Twenty paces this time. He started to count.

Glancing into the shadows brought memories of that night. The night when they chased down Trantis. That had been closer than this, to make sure. To angle the flight accurately for the blade and the turning oscillation to match the curve of the rib-cage. He needed to slice the blade, allowing the edge to slide beneath the rib and catch the heart beneath. He couldn't count on an exact strike with the tip, it could hit the rib on either side. More likely miss than hit.

At twenty paces a slice would create a wild arc. Hardly worth the effort. He could go for the side-swing. Like spinning stones across the surface of water. Hard to get power, nothing like the descent from shoulder height, rather than a fling from across the chest. Apart from which aiming was notoriously difficult from that body position.

OK. What if he had to.

Dano turned and stood with his shoulder towards the tree. His target tree. His head twisted and faced the target, eyes narrowed, breath lowering, smoother, deeper. He raised his hand slowly until it was level across his chest. It was quite a few days since he had tried this position and it was just about, yes here, that it felt right. OK. And release.

Thud.

He trudged back over to the tree. A bit too far to the right. He'd put as much power as the stance allowed but overshot with the release. Just as he had last time. Damn.

The alcohol stripped away at her tongue and burned down the back of her throat. She swallowed and slammed the glass on the bar. There was distance between her on both sides.

Not too many. Not this night. She was alone and the hairs on her neck stood taut, her shoulder blades prickling and she turned suddenly, staring across the room with slightly bleary eyes.

"Yeah, and the wood was too soft, I'm telling you mate," the thin yellowing man laughed and patted his friend on the shoulder.

“It took fuckin’ ages to carry all of it though. Fuckin’ *waste* o’time.”

The woman next to her had her arms around a young one. Alisha couldn’t see the face but the shoulders were wide enough. For that age that wasn’t too bad.

She turned back to the bar. Her glass had already been filled. Good man, she thought looking slowly along the bar, where was he? Oh. There.

The barman was talking, laughing with a long haired fucker at the end of the bar. She sipped at the glass. Strong stuff. The glass had a faint dirtiness to it despite the barman spending a few minutes of intent polishing on her behalf. Fuck she liked her power.

“Excuse me.”

The voice was strong, low and firm. Slightly hesitant. Sounded as though the chest was deep enough. She turned. Nice. He was tall, roughly shaven with light brown hair cut short. Old horse-leather clothes, a rider probably. Passing through. Delivering for one of the Lords further on in the valley.

She smiled. I wonder if he can see the snake in my smile, she thought gleefully as he pressed closer in the packed tavern. “Can I buy you a drink?” he asked loudly, pressing his slight lips against her ear. I hope it’s not *too* dirty, she thought, distracted and glancing at the discolouration in her glass.

He didn’t wait for an answer and leaned forward, intent on getting the barman’s attention. So eager to please. How nice in this day and age. Alisha leaned sideways, pressing her shoulder against his, letting him feel the muscle beneath the leather. He didn’t notice anything more than her close presence, and the strength of her bearing, the fearful glances and space that she mysteriously inhabited.

“Another for the lady,” he yelled as the barman approached. He looked a bit mystified as the barman grinned back with amusement rather than friendliness but went to the bottle nevertheless.

“Name’s Argun,” he said loudly with a welcoming smile.

“Alisha,” she replied smiling back, holding his gaze and sensing his strength. Was he good enough? Rubbish name though.

Unintentionally she flicked her hair back and fluttered her eyes briefly as the wine arrived. Argun noticed and closed in, leaning around to create a little privacy in the hubbub. His leg slipped into the space between them, grazing her knee for a moment. She felt the hot contact and deliberately turned her head away for a moment, looking at the opening of the door as another body stumbled in. Argun was hot. Perhaps she would after all.

“I haven’t travelled this way before,” he began nearly kissing her ear. “This place is packed; looks like people know how to have fun around here.”

Alisha waited for just the right moment and looked back, transferring her attention – a beacon of privilege shining across the face of this suitor. She had him fucking hook, line and sinker, just had to decide where to take it. Would he be any good in bed?

Without an answer he looked over at the barman, searching for more inspiration.

“What is that stuff. Looks like a special drink for a special lady. You must have a way with the barman over there.”

Alisha shook her head, laughing. Fuck, this idiot was terrible, if he’s as bad as this in bed then this *was* a waste of time.

“I just boiled the last one alive, that’s all,” she said gaily, chucking another gulp of wine between her glistening lips. Argun stared at her lips and swallowed. She was beautiful and that wine was strong. If she had much more it would be an easy take.

“Sorry,” he leaned forward again, putting his face into her space, a glancing brush of cheek against cheek. “What was that again?”

Alisha grabbed him by the chin and leaned against his ear, pressing her breast against his forearm, the arm that was crooked, the hand now hanging between them only inches from her other breast. Argun felt the softness crumple against his arm and looked downwards. Shit, his hand was inches away from her other tit.

"I killed the last one," she said gleefully.

His hand froze, about to cup the leather mound. A slight paleness washed across his tanned stubble and his eyes searched hers as he joked.

"You're not serious, right?"

Failed. Alisha stood back slightly, opening the space and brushing distractedly at her tunic.

"You mean you really killed him?" asked Argun, sensing the moment slipping away. "It's a joke isn't it. You're trying to take the piss out of a stranger."

"What?" Alisha looked up and stared uncomprehending at him for the briefest, harshest moment. Then, she finished her wine.

"I've just seen a friend of mine," she said placing a hand on his shoulder as she moved away. "I'll be back. Don't go anywhere," she smiled warmly back at him and moved swiftly into the hubbub.

The cool air tugged at the back of his neck. He was crouched, arms spread, fingers dug into the damp earth, feet curved and taut. Mawk swallowed, his lips were dry, rough and his mouth wouldn't moisten. His throat ached from the tension.

With deliberate slowness he closed his eyes and drew in a long breath, savouring the knife-edge tang of the night air. His nostrils flared from the chill and he could feel the bustling wind wash across his cheeks.

He blinked a couple of times and turned his head to scan the hillside. Still nothing. The long grass tips scattered from the

sweeping wind and a smattering of rain sprayed into his face. Soundlessly his lips moved, he was practically invisible against the shadow, a curved weapon nestled against the ground. Unless something crawled, slunk through the grass then he had full visibility with his back protected by the thickness of the bush.

For a moment back there, his mind had been blank. For one intake of breath, he had been unable to think, to strategise, to see a way forward. Blazed across his thoughts, the white blur crawled into his imagining, staining his mind and trapping his intentions to scabble helplessly, paralyzed.

Even now, alone on the hillside he could see only the whiteness, burnt into his sight. He knew nothing about it. How did it move? What did it think? Was it following orders or operating on its own?

At the bar, he had been curious, fascinated to see the movements and purity of purpose. Each blow and manoeuvre a flowing melody of violent action. Relaxed, confident, it had decided and acted in a torrential instant. Whirling through men, broken wood and weaponry as a force of nature. Is that what it was?

Mawk absent-mindedly looked down at his hands, his wrists white from the pressure, his shoulders beginning to stiffen and ache.

Another look down the hill. The houses black and quiet, the occasional glimmer of light the only sign of life. Nothing moved. As if all things had paused, to think, to wonder. The village holding counsel with itself as it considered a new threat, a new splinter in the rotten flesh.

Mawk settled back on his haunches and spread his fingers and then relaxed.

Many many years had passed since he last felt fear.

The tingling beneath his skin, the burning in his blood and the coldness of his neck made him feel fragile, sensing the thinness of his flesh and how easily it tore beneath the onslaught of serrated metal. How precious was his blood. The blood that thundered through his heart and pulsated in his forehead. He needed that blood to survive. Without it there was only darkness.

Three years ago. A sword had passed across his stomach, his backwards jump was too slow, the angry thin man too fast. The sword-tip pierced his skin, a sudden fire, the heat spreading across his belly and warm thickness seeping down his flesh. The thin man had died screaming, his left eye socket ripped open, the eye-ball a sodden mush of blood and yellow gore as Mawk's palm swept across the out-stretched throat and opened the arteries.

It had all been over in seconds. No-one left. His companions at the time, Rade and Nirtar were already standing breathlessly over their corpses, Rade scuffing a shoe in the pool of blood spreading across the splintered wooden floorboards.

Nirtar had watched him with a wry grin on his face as Mawk pressed a hand to his belly and looked at the blood, slightly puzzled.

"No-one is perfect," Rade said with a smirk, kicking his corpse.

Rade had died three days later, an arrow in the back of his neck.

Slow crawling time that ate through life and sucked up all hope of perfection. To keep working, practising, planning, perfecting every move and intention. Motion by motion, inch by inch. Everything controlled, precise. Pointless.

Mawk's left hand shuddered with sudden anger, quickly reined in and trapped in the instance of its birth. He scowled, lips rearing in an animalistic snarl. All these years.

When cleaning out his father's stable, carrying the buckets of water between the fetid mud piles and broken spade handles, he had just one thought. That it would all come to nothing. That all the effort, work and time would come to nothing. Would leave him as helpless and hopeless as he felt now. Still he had tried. Put in the time to learn, develop the skills that made him an expert, allowed him to make a living and gain notoriety. Men feared him.

When he sat in a bar, drink left untouched on the table before him, bodies pressed together around him, women pushing between the chattering men, serving drinks. All eyes on him. Quiet whispering

of death and deeds. At times he had believed there was something more. Something more than the cloying sadness that crept under his skin and slowed his breath.

The darkness descended into his senses, pulling his soul towards the crushed grass beneath the wavering bush. His shoulders sagged and his head sank, eyes sightless, fingers unfeeling. There was only control. Concentration on every muscle, working his way up from his toes to his head.

Shifting his balance on his feet, feeling the branch crushed into the earth, pressing against his soles, pushing his toes up slightly. A potential obstacle to the perfect launch, it would weaken the spring in his legs, lower the velocity and endanger his balance. He shifted. Flat. Better.

His knees were locked, tense. He relaxed their muscles. Twitching his thigh-muscles and rocking back onto his toes, lowering onto his hands again. He pushed his shoulders back, feeling the stress wash away, his neck soften. He was breathing more easily now, controlled, his lungs rising and falling as if asleep.

With a swift step he moved at a loping crouch down the hill, back towards the village. Time to hunt.

The jagged stone pressed against her spine, scraping against the leather, catching on her straps. The air was silent, the village sleeping around the two of them, only the husky exhalation of their breath punctuated the stillness.

Alisha grabbed a handful of the man's slippery hair and pulled his head back, playfully biting at his neck in between kisses. He grunted, placed both hands against her shoulders and slammed her hard back against the wall, bending down and biting at her neck in return.

This was a moment for breathless motion, not words. Uncaring celebration of the body and a helpless slide into passion. Alisha was

burning inside, her heart rattling, her lungs swollen without air. Their lips locked and she grunted. She couldn't breathe.

She thrust off the wall with her legs, sending the man staggering back, creating enough space between them to launch a strike across his chin. His head flashed sideways and he gasped, eyes wide. Alisha strode forward, grabbed him by the throat, caught his hips against a knee and threw him expertly to the ground.

"Wha...?" he cried, winded by the fall as Alisha dropped on top of him, knees wide, mouth falling onto his. She pinned his arms to the ground as he scrabbled momentarily. Men. Always have to be in control.

Either she'd get it from him or she'd slit his fucking throat. And if she got it from him it would be *her* way. Fucking fuck. She pulled out a knife, his eyes narrowed, he knew her reputation on the street. Now he knew something about her in bed.

Alisha shuddered, the knife flickered in reflecting light. She grinned. A weapon to penetrate the skin of man and draw out life. There was a symmetry here that appealed to her. The sharp thrust of pain, the warm unnatural pleasure of liquids that flowed from excitement. The flash of sensation that in one explosion filled her being.

With a quick swipe she cut open his tunic, scraping him slightly and drawing a wisp of blood. Without thinking she cleaned the blade on his tunic and bent down to trace her lips along the cut. Slightly salty sweat from fear and the sharper taste of blood. He was hard as wood.

She held up the knife, smeared and scarred trying to catch the light of the nearest window. She glanced up, no-one was there. Just candlelight shining out, a glimmer against the hooded blackness. He was undoing her top. Eager to access her breasts. The edge wasn't fine, dulled with mindless picking at splinters on tabletops. She rarely used it to kill. Good balance though. With a fair range, given enough back-swing. She exclaimed and felt a snap of pleasure whip

through her stomach and up her arms. His hands had scrambled down her trousers and slid over the wetness. She wanted to be filled, to attach that connection between heated things and move as if separated from herself, an onlooker at a strange play.

The cumbersome fingers had found her entrance and were moving carelessly around, searching for something. She wouldn't be filled. The void stretched downwards with an infinite capacity for emptiness. She could eat, drink, could kiss and joke, laugh and kill but it was always asking for more. More pleasure, more desire, a longing that spread from birth into her future, asking for more.

She let him push her legs together and wrench her trousers down far enough to take her. Inside her it was hot, moving, a creature sliding across soggy mud searching for food, insects perhaps. Greying grubs that crawl between bones and yellowing flesh. The maggots that live on the dead. She'd heard that if you're wounded then you can't do worse than place some of those crawling things on your bloody cut. Cleans it right up. That's what they'd said. What did they want? Those small wriggling insects, scrabbling around on dead or dying things. Surely they were too small to want. They *got* what they want.

She twisted her hips with a sharp push and felt him shiver and release. He obviously didn't understand.

The knife went in almost to the other side. His mouth falling open in comical surprise. At least he had some pleasure first. Her right hand was covered in blood, dripping onto the lifeless stone, all the way up her wrist. There were speckles on her face.

She pulled off him, trying to ignore the sharp excitement, buried beneath the distaste of another empty human. She rolled over and lay back, her skin sitting in the warm pool, all that was left of his life. So untidy. Dirt everywhere, blood, dark patches all over her leather, on her skin. Under her nails. Her hair got in her eyes but she couldn't brush it back without getting it dirty too.

The distant pulsing need between her legs faded away as she stared at the man on the ground. I wonder what his name was?

Mawk stepped out of the shadows.

“Another one?” he said, glancing at the body.

Alisha shrugged and kicked at a limp arm as she buckled up her belt and hefted the swords around her hips.

“You look...different,” said Alisha, looking hard into his eyes.

Mawk froze, and looked away, down at the body.

“It was different this time, wasn’t it?” she said quietly, reaching down and wrenching the knife out with distaste. There was no answer from her motionless friend.

“Sometimes,” she continued, pulling a ruffle of cloth together in her tunic and wiping the knife down. “I look ahead and I can’t see anything. Just....nothing.”

Mawk glided over to the body and knelt beside the head, gently pressing at the folds around the wound.

“This took a lot of your strength,” he said quietly.

“I was angry,” she muttered.

“Why?”

Alisha let out a long breath, staring at her knife.

“He couldn’t give me what I wanted,” snapped Alisha. “And it’s none of your fuckin’ business anyway.”

She strode off down the alleyway without looking back.

Mawk looked at the blood on his fingers. Then at the man’s glistening crotch, the fluid of animals intertwined and cooling as the man went from desire to nothing. The anger she had shown came from nothing. How many times had such an approach ended in this. The wasteful ending of a potential giver of pleasure. A child wringing the neck of a pet. Mawk wanted her too. To grab her tightly and ruffle her hair, to comfort and protect her. Only to be roughly flung aside and knifed through the neck.

CHAPTER 12

Crouched in the centre of the village, the crumbling church sits morbid, sullen, its tendrils of darkness spreading thin and expanding outwards from the black centre. Rising on the waves of shadow, chanting floats on the air made still by the heaviness of the grey stone.

The sound of song, murdered in its tortured notes, a melody to melancholy that stifles dreams. Stuttering from the dimly lit stained-glassed windows and scuttering out between the cracks of the mouldy doors. Hanging softly on the clouded air and carried deep down into the village, a subtle undercurrent of tone that steadily oscillates, a background hiss to the humdrum.

Lovers, clasped warmly to each other in torn blankets and tattered sheets, turn in discomfort and shift uneasily in dreams that are overshadowed by song. A servant pauses, looks up from the boots on the ground, looking towards the hill and the hunched shape of the spire-less church. Chanting on the seas of despair.

The ground that surrounds the church is barren, cracked, hardened, with only moss and scratched grass scrabbling for room to grow. Sparse, spindly trees strike upwards into the night air; thin, lean and leafless. Fluttering in between the sagging branches, moths fly aimlessly, confused and hopeless. There are no insects on the ground, the dry dust left undisturbed.

Diego pushed the ancient iron gate open and stood aside for Mource to enter. The low stone wall that surrounds the church is simply a stamp of authority and demarcation, having no real purpose. Mource strode confidently towards the sullen building,

looking neither left nor right, fully expecting Diego to scutter after him and catch up before stopping at the door and waiting for Diego to open it in deference.

The door leant downwards, its jagged wood dragging across stone that was worn deep by use. The grating sound shattered the uncomfortable silence of the outside air and released the muffled chanting from within the bowels of the church. Diego glanced at Mource and gave him a sheepish smile, gesturing politely for Mource to enter.

With a look of disdain, Mource brushed past and walked up the aisle. Diego looked back across the dusty ground and the tiny line of the wall. Outside. He hated this place.

Line after sagging line of pews lined either side of the aisle that lead up to an altar covered in a pristine deep blue cloth. Cut across from side to side the darkness of the dimly lit candlelight sweeps up and down over the half-seen worshippers, crouched clutching their hands together, heads drooped in supplication and fear. At the back of the church, behind the simple stone block of an altar, the stalls deep in blackness and the monks in brown robes and hoods. Chanting.

There was no hope here. The depressed shuffle of cheap feet and unhappy sleeves of worshippers clutching at the words and indications, signs and images captured in books and papers of significance. Bowed from the weight of their own thoughts, misery trapped between the furrowed brows of laziness, impure intention and slack jawed weakness. Murmuring lips that form syllables and follow the sound of others with repetition borne of ritual, habit and the eternal search for peace within daily routine.

Mource and Diego inclined their heads to the altar briefly and at the blackened painting hanging in dominance above it, and slid into a pew. Pressing their palms together and bowing their heads in prayer. Minds blank, a white sheet empty of words and devoid of meaning.

Creeping out of the charred picture frame, a hunched dark robed figure, scolding the darkness, looming over the worshippers. A painting with life and death in it.

The chanting rose in pitch slightly, moving away from the low dirge and climbing notes to the impure grating of a tenor voice, unsettling and distant.

“We have a problem,” said Diego, placing a hand on Mource’s hand.

Mource turned his head slightly to look at Diego with a blank look, his hands still clasped in prayer.

“Do not waste time worrying. Solve your problems,” Mource hissed and turned away, closing his eyes.

In this place, time could stand still.

The softly falling words fell from their musical heights and danced gentle rain on Mource’s shoulders, easing the pain, releasing his life to the softness of peace. With his palms together he could feel the energy coursing between them, crackling with power that channelled his emotions, thoughts and pressed his anger into a pure form. With one smooth motion he could stand and open those palms, releasing his thoughts, children to his violence, erupting viciously, pack-dogs on the hunt, scavenging and running amok in the open air of the nave, scattering the monks from their inane pursuits, blasting apart the human flesh into the fury of molten hot flames, licking and consuming, turning cloth to black dust.

This place was the home of his desire. It crept beneath his intentions and supported him, creating arches and columns of strength to his purpose. The vaulting ceiling of his desire stretched further and longer, comforted by the feelings bubbling beneath the cold stone underneath his feet. Between his palms he held the desire, captured as the soft pressing of sweat and dry grains of his skin.

“No man, I’m serious,” Diego said, raising his voice slightly.

“I am always serious, Diego,” said Mource without opening his eyes.

“Not my name,” said Diego, his eyes widening. He looked quickly around but no-one appeared to be paying attention to them. In quiet dark corners, others whispered between themselves. Their conversation one of a secret flurry, unrevealed. Unnoticed.

“Not in here,” he said trying to see into the back of the church, at the stalls and the monks and the power here.

“They know your name, fool,” said Mource sitting back in the pew, shaking his head and blinking slightly as his eyes adjusted.

Diego sat back with him and glared at Mource’s profile, his hand curling into a fist.

“It’s the virgin...” he said.

Alisha turned the sword in the torchlight, watching the whiteness flow down its length and move like water from side to side.

The forest around them watched intently, trees in a burnt circle, stumps of half-destroyed wood and a torch plunged into the soft pine-needles, flickering light that shows only darkness. Pumpkins on spikes at one end with Alisha and Dano sat on stumps at the other. Nervously scraping at the metal edges with whetstones. Alisha her swords, Dano his blades.

Alisha pushed the whetstone slowly one more time, watching the dust rise and specks of stone flicker in the air before falling from view to the ground.

“Dano. You worried about the virgin?”

Dano grunted and stood up, holding the circle of blades up to the light, examining the cutting edges. If you twisted them a certain way then the light was cut in half and shimmered along its edge. Twist it downwards and he could encircle Alisha’s head between the metal. Squinting he could almost see the edge press against her white skin.

“Hey man. You think the man in white is gonna get in the way? He knows we did Trantis,” Alisha looked up irritably.

“Yeah-yeah-yeah,” said Dano turning slowly, watching his blades, leaning his arm over, changing the angle. “Hang on.”

He brought his arm down with a jerk and a flick of the wrist, releasing the blades but feeling the metal hiss over his thumb. Poor release.

A pumpkin burst into a flurry of flesh and the blade spun into the trees.

“Fuck,” Dano kicked at a tree stump and angrily stomped off to look for his blades.

Alisha could hear his cursing from within the trees. Otherwise there was nothing. The forest silent. Occasionally a distant crack, as if all by itself the wooded hills would move, shift and groan from their lengthy motionless stance.

She stood up and stretched, enjoying the cracking of her back and the strain of her back muscles, arching her legs to look up at the grey night clouds. With an absentminded sweep of her sword she strolled over to a pumpkin and carefully traced its outline with her sword-tip. Round with ridges. A stalk, chopped off and frayed. The occasional pockmark and chip in the crusty flesh.

She stepped back and placed the tip directly at the core of the pumpkin. Here was an object, unfeeling. Innocent. With one lunge she could pierce its absent heart and all that would be left is a hole, a slit that allows you to place an eye to it and see right through.

Dano came back muttering to himself.

Alisha could feel him as he walked by, the air changing, moving. The quiet softening of the needles and crackling of dried pine. The creaking of leather and a faint hint of a perfume. Maybe he doesn't wash but he does try to hide it. A living being, with lifeblood moving in her periphery, soft flesh like the pumpkin. Vulnerable. Short-lived.

One thrust and he too would have nothing but a hole through his heart. You couldn't see through it, blood would well up and hide the gap, other things would crowd it and fill the hole. Would make the withdrawal problematic. Slower.

And he would end.

No more stupid fucking jokes. No more manly strutting and making passes, flirting even without realising it, using his physicality to press on her, touch her innocently, pervertedly. Longingly.

“He gets in the way, we take him. Then...” Dano said as he raised the blades to the light again. “No problem.”

Alisha stepped back, one step, resting her heel on the ground, transferring her weight backwards and twisting her hips, raising her sword across her body and flicking her head round, her body following swiftly, spinning on the spot. Her sword trailed an arc, a simple beautiful pattern of pleasure that sliced through the top of the pumpkin and sent it spinning onto the ground.

“Look Alisha,” Dano said, grinning. “He couldn’t touch Lord Stowgan right? ‘n’ if we can’t take the virgin...” Dano spat on the ground and flung the blades perfectly and deeply into another pumpkin. “Then we can’t take Stowgan and might as well go home.”

“We can’t go home,” snapped Alisha.

Dano shrugged. “Whatever.”

“The virgin,” said Mource his face curled up in annoyance. “Who’s the virgin. What are you going on about now Diego?”

Diego flinched at the raised voice and glanced at the stalls. This village belonged to Lord Stowgan and this church was *his* place. Mource was reckless and took a perverse delight in coming here to openly mock Stowgan’s authority. Not a sensible move, it achieved nothing except to make Diego uncomfortable.

Mource rolled his eyes. This uncouth barbarian had the finesse, intelligence and manners of an ass.

“The guy that bust our party. The fucker in white that blew your door down. The one that made you run,” Diego leaned towards Mource angrily and held his gaze.

Mource counted silently to himself. One. Two. Three. Moments each that could deal death. It would only take a moment. A thought of an instant to bring up the anger, create the whirlwind of hate to sweep this idiot against the wall and crush his bones.

But he was right.

He had run.

Had made a tactical retreat. You cannot face an enemy as powerful as this...thing...without knowing more. Without finding out its weaknesses, its strengths, the weapons that it uses or the places that can hurt it. Somehow his home, his sanctuary that had protected him from even the Lord himself had been breached with the childish simplicity of a schoolyard bully sweeping children aside with a shove of an aimless fist.

There were powers stretched taut across the doorways of his home, defences that he had set in place with meticulous planning and ambitious ease. To walk the hallways and corridors of his house was to tread on the darkness of hate itself and to escape the clutches was the miracle of a madman. Impossible.

Somehow, someone had helped him. Lord Stowgan had made another move in haste. Revealed his cards too easily in this long game of chance. Hopelessly and needlessly, without purpose or success for surely he had intended to end Mource, to take his life as he had so many others. But he had moved with crassness and disastrous results, failing in even threatening for a moment the future plans or life of Mource.

Nevertheless. The whiteness pressed down on his hate, suffocating his purpose, threatening his plans. Making sickness well up in his stomach and bring acid to his taste.

“Oh. Him,” said Mource.

Diego shifted uneasily on the pew and glared towards the monks. Fuckers. He’d get his crew in here and clean the fucking place completely.

“What do we know about him?” Mource asked with false calm, his breath sticking to his throat.

“He’s staying at the Rat’s Inn,” said Diego, relaxing on familiar ground. “Arrived last night. Well, first we saw him anyhow.”

Mource frowned slightly. “Isn’t that where Serina is staying. The Rat’s Inn?”

Diego’s pulse started to race. “Shit. Yeah it is. Is that a problem?”

Mource smiled coldly. “You thought we had a problem.”

“No. I meant, we had a problem with him,” Diego paused, confused. “Not Serina. I mean. He’s...”

Mource leant forward, interrupting. “Yes. He can destroy doors. That’s why I ran away. Very scary. You need to concentrate on the important facts. The important details of our situation.”

Mource slapped the pew for emphasis.

“If you react to every moron that stands in front of you with a raised fist you’ll never fight the right battles. If thevirgin, yes? Knows anything about our assault, and is staying at the Rat’s Inn, with Serina. Then...” he paused dramatically. “We have a problem.”

Diego watched Mource’s face for a moment, looking for a clue.

“So we have a problem,” Diego said, half questioning.

“No!” snapped Mource leaning back and clasping his hands together. “We don’t have a problem. Diego, are you a small timid girl? He doesn’t know anything about the attack. He suspects we killed Trantis.”

“Oh,” said Diego, sagging.

“He suspects,” Mource continued, arrogantly. “He knows nothing. He certainly does not know details of the plan. The plan Diego,” he shook his head. “Only you know anything at present. You and I. Not even Dano. Alisha. No-one. Just us.”

Mource reached into his robes and pulled out four scrolls, bound in a red ribbon and sealed in wax.

“These the scrolls?” asked Diego, slightly overwhelmed.

Mource smiled, amused but said nothing, watching intently as Diego slid the scrolls into his long coat.

“Well...” said Alisha, watching Dano as he flicked his blades into the air and caught them neatly between his thumb and forefinger. “If he turns up, I’ll kick his arse, no hesitation.”

Dano stopped and started putting the blades away. “Lisha. Lots of guys are gonna be at the ball. Invited. Ya know. If he’s there, he’s an innocent guest, ‘K?”

“Innocent like a virgin you mean?” said Alisha, lightly.

“Yeah,” said Dano, grinning naughtily. “Like you.” He punched Alisha on the shoulder. Slightly too hard.

“Hey!” Alisha shouted raising her sword in a slightly threatening manner, no-longer smiling.

Dano shook his head arrogantly and flung one arm outwards and away, releasing the blades towards the remaining pumpkin.

Alisha swung round and let herself go. A smashing of anguish released, pouring liquid out into the forest air, bright burning fire that smoked upwards into the sky and smothered the blades in a sickening stench.

Dano rushed towards her, furious, pulling his fist back and slamming it towards her grinning, annoying face. With a side-step she grabbed his arm and whipped it into a lock. Dano laughed and slapped her across the face, playfully as Alisha pushed hard and hit him full on the chin, crumbling over in hysterics as Dano stumbled to the ground in shock.

Mource placed an arm across Diego’s shoulders as they strolled back down the aisle of the church.

“I have given you the job of keeping your friends under control. Directing them, so to speak. Make sure Dano and Alisha do not act wild,” Diego nodded obediently. “Good. Let me see to the plan. I will

make sure anyone that stands in our way is removed. Quietly. I will tell you who to kill. You do the killing.”

Diego nodded again. “Serina?”

Mource pushed the church door open for Diego. “Possibly. Not yet.”

The door shuddered closed behind them.

A monk rose from the stalls as the chanting stumbled to a halt, ending on a mournful long held hum that descended and fell silent.

He pulled back his hood, the whiteness spreading cloying fingers that pushed apart the shadows and clutched at the walls. The Horseman glided up the aisle ignoring the quiet stillness of the worshippers and the sudden dearth of whispering, of thought.

With a terrible scratch, white claw marks etched across the black painting, tearing out the paper in angular strikes.

The Horseman passed through the doorway without a sound.

Dano and Alisha stopped rolling on the ground, eye to eye, catching a breathless moment.

“Getting this close to you could give a woman ideas,” said Alisha huskily. “Even about a slime ball like you.”

“I like you Alisha,” said Dano softly.

“Hah!” said Alisha scornfully and she pushed him unresisting to the ground and stood up, brushing the needles from her clothes. Casually she walked over to the swords lying on the ground. “You fuck every beautiful woman you see. I don’t need a fuck from you to know I’m beautiful.”

It was a dying whiteness.

Faint and pulsing within the gloom of the church. The musty columns gradually swirling with new darkness as the worshippers struggled to their feet and hurried, embarrassed, outside.

The monks stood aimlessly, some staring at the entrance, others up at the painting and the white claw marks. A whisper of paper fell like a feather from above, landing with infinite patience on the stone floor and resting, without movement.

One by one the monks faded away.

It is a monument to pain. A gigantic stone monolith without the corpses and decaying putridity of death, but a sarcophagus to the stagnation of humanity. To move within its walls is to fight against the natural order of things, to rail against the infinite slowness of the descent of time.

The air was thick with malevolence, creeping slowly out of its hiding place and scouring the stone for answers, looking for the thing that disturbed its slumber. The pulsation of mournful music echoed within its stone, a faint remembrance of the chanting, of humanity's struggle to grasp the unknown. Without the continual noise of life, the stone would sleep on.

Now awakened the darkness stirred.

The trees outside stretched their branches towards the sky, testing the ground with their roots and sucking on the dusty life around them. From within the depths the creatures crawled and struggled to the surface, sliding over crumbled stone and mottled dirt, pushing their legs over the edge and scuttling onto the ground to make their way out of the cracks and into the light.

Vines of twisting leaves, browned and dying, clutching at brickwork and the cracks between the mortar, crawling over the church and searching for salvation, aching to join the clouds in the sky. The stone wall a silent memorial to human passing, the grating metal gate swinging in the wind.

Something had changed time. There was movement in the end of all things, a timelessness had slipped away into the present and movement in motion was changing the gradual turn of the wheel.

Things that had lain undisturbed were stirring, searching, answers to questions that had lain dormant for centuries appeared at the periphery of vision blinded by the years.

The creaking groan of emerging suffering rose in the air and a cloud of birds, woken from their nightly sleep, rose from their perches and silently thrummed into the air, flapping hopelessly in a pack, spreading across the sky and evaporating. Individual purpose and channelling of direction separated the cloud, scattered the birds, emptying the night.

The black river of insects swept away from the ground, dispersed into the night.

The trees fell still. Air motionless. Clouds heavy over the church. The church door banged once. The wooden noise echoing distantly. Something was here.

The door to the Inn opened and Serina walked in, a slight smile on her lips.

It was raining.

Her maids waited outside, content to stand, to get wet.

The door shut on their blank faces.

The Horseman was seated in front of the fire, his back to the door and a pure glass of water on a table next to him. The old man sat with his chin in his hand, watching the Horseman suspiciously.

Serina glided over to the old man and wiped a gloved hand along his forehead, disturbing his fringe. He grunted, but continued to watch the Horseman, a slight twinkle in his watery eyes.

Serina came up behind the Horseman and wrapped an arm around his shoulder, putting her lips close to his ear.

Her heat warmed his face, her smell a slight undercurrent beneath the burning logs of the fire.

“Hello,” she said quietly.

The Horseman turned and smiled into her eyes.

“It is nice to see you again so soon,” he said simply.

Serina moved to the other side of the table and the Horseman swept to his feet, sliding around to gather a chair for her to sit.

Serina slowly removed her gloves, watching him as he sat back down.

“I see you have taken care, as I asked,” she said, her lips barely moving.

“It is a pleasure to do as you wish,” said the Horseman inclining his head. “My lady.”

Serina sent a glance towards the old man, who immediately leapt to his feet and scuttled off into the backroom and started clattering around with pans and cutlery.

“I am not a lady,” said Serina, sighing.

“For me, every woman is a lady.”

“And every man?”

“We are all born crying and turn to dust,” the Horseman stared into the distance carried on a wave of sadness.

“Even you?” asked Serina, blinking rapidly. “I picture you had a quiet birth.”

The Horseman reached out and took the glass of water into his hand, taking a sip, savouring the purity. Serina watched as he swallowed, her tongue flicking out briefly across her ruby lips.

“As quiet in birth as in life,” he said, placing the glass back exactly where it had stood before.

“You have had a quiet day?”

“I have met a few people. Spoken to a few people.”

“Are any of these ladies,” Serina asked with a soft politeness. “Or gentlemen?”

“They would not think so.”

The Horseman softly extended his peace, touching the edges of the room in quietitude, finding the essence of the walls, the floor.

With her there was a peace. It stole beneath his firmness, invading the intent to cure suffering, the desires to be fulfilled, to complete his purpose. It took the edge off his purpose.

She was a light of beauty and stillness, a gentle way that sat with his tone and speech and merged perfectly, forming patterns that entwine with the curves of vines bursting with the fullness of its fruit.

To place a hand upon her skin, is perfection.

“Do you feel at peace with your place in life?” he asked.

“You are asking if I regret who I have been, who I am?” Serina looked down at her white hands and the deep red nails, curving in the light.

“I am not judging you.”

“I do not wish to apologise for anything,” she said angrily and their gazes locked for an instant. “You have not seen what I have seen or felt what I have felt. You cannot judge me. You are different. I can sense it. Somewhere inside you is the belief that you have not received everything you deserve.”

The Horseman held his silence, a slight smile on his lips.

Serina stared at him. “We all feel that way, you know. No-one is content with what they have, or what they are.”

CHAPTER 13

The tavern had been lazily repaired. A quick nailing of planks to hold the shutters together and a temporary bar made of upturned barrels. A few drinkers were scattered in small groups around the tables, amongst the broken wood, shattered glass and hastily spread straw.

Alisha pushed her chair back and stomped her boots onto the table, crossing her legs arrogantly.

“This beer is absolute rubbish,” she said, with a quick grin.

“You’ve been coming here for years,” said Dano laughing. “Stop complaining.” He sat down next to her, slopping his beer onto the table. Mawk was slumped over his drink, staring at the froth in concentration.

“It is good that it is weak,” said Mawk, mockingly.

“Why?” asked Dano. “You think that we’ll need to think tonight Mawk? Don’t forget Mource has it all planned out.”

All three chuckled and exchanged knowing glances.

There were three young men in the corner, Mawk noticed. Talking closely to each other, their eyes flickering over the room every now and then, watching to see no-one was close enough to hear the content of their conversation.

Fairly well dressed. Too well dressed. Thrill seekers, come to enjoy the rough and tumble of a real down-to-earth dive. They’d heard of the violence wrought once and twice in this bar and wanted to witness what the poor people got up to. Slender, poppy blades tucked into their breeches. Knives that would snap with a twist, jam

in bone, shatter under a blow from a well crafted sword. Fools, easily parted from their lives.

Alone at the bar, two thick skulled labourers. Their implements leant against the corner next to the door. Cheap old things. Not to be taken away lightly, not without a fight and not for any worth but mirth.

Four serving girls, sitting, waiting at the table. Forced to work by their fathers. Or their widowed mothers. Desperately hoping that time would stand still and the busy night would not begin.

Two kids playing cards at a table. Youngsters, grown old through experience. With worn weapons and cold smiles.

The usual crowd.

Mawk knew most of them, their faces, their bodies, their posture and their style of fight. No threat. Nevertheless he sat with his back to the wall and glanced at the window. It wouldn't take much of a push to break open.

Alisha narrowed her eyes, following Mawk's glance. Still jittery. In the past he would have looked at this current crowd and looked only for weapons, angles of attack. Now he looked for escape. Not first though, last. At least he still had balls.

She was keeping an eye on the door. Waiting for one thing. The whiteness. Waiting for the dramatic entrance. Waiting to attack. She shifted her sword belt around and glanced at Dano. He nodded subtly.

He gets in the way, we take him. That's what he'd said. Alisha sighed to herself. Together, maybe they could do it.

Dano wanted to grab her and kiss her roughly and make her problems flutter away with a quick pounding. But he just smiled at her and sipped slowly at the rubbish beer.

The two of them had been close. Closer than they had been before. He'd felt her breath close on his eyelids, her heat against his lips, her softness crushed beneath his body. Only moments away

from doing it at last. The time would come, he was confident of that. But he wanted it to be right. Not some mistake because she was angry, or horny, or mean or careless. He wanted to wait until she saw what she was missing.

Diego swaggered through the doorway and over to their table, scanning the room briefly before dropping into the spare chair and picking up the pint they'd bought him.

"OK dudes. We've got our costumes, only we've gotta collect them off the wearers." He said looking at each one.

"Excellent. Who do we kill, man?" Dano said brightly.

Diego felt the cares and worries fall off like slop overflowing from a bucket. His guys, and girl, were ready. They'd recovered in their own way, minds now back on the job. All he had to do was tell them where and when.

Silently he handed out the scrolls to each of them.

Alisha leaned forward, excitedly. "What's with the secrecy, Deygo?"

"Mource has prepared these for us to read," said Diego ignoring her jibe. "You can read, Dano, right?"

"Yeah," said Dano downing his beer. "Funny."

"Each scroll will change you into your target," continued Diego, speaking with a low voice. "Check in the mirror, you'll recognise yourself so don't worry."

Alisha rolled her eyes and exchanged glances with Dano.

"Take their place," said Diego. "Take their invitation. Once at the ball make sure you have Stowgan in your sight. Mource will blow the fucker up. That's our signal."

"If there's anything left," muttered Dano.

"Lord Stowgan will not be an easy enemy to defeat," said Mawk carefully.

It was getting close. Not the unknown one, but the others, the rats in the sewers.

Lord Stowgan stood at the window, letting the fresh night air wash past his dried skin.

Tonight would be the night. He could sense the encroaching movement, the creeping movement amongst the undergrowth of houses, bricks and mortar, the humans crouched within their plans, around a table, plotting.

Their designs sprung from the ignorant innocence of the unwashed, unwanted and pathetic insignificant mortals. Oh, they did love to plan. A step here, a sign here, a direction, an action there. Step by step, like a child's game, waiting for the big bad man to turn around and sweep them up in his arms and crush them until their blood seeped from their broken bones.

Children.

He wasn't one for the small ones. Not enough blood. Why not wait. After all waiting was a gift, a morsel of pleasure that one had to garner from within the belly of infinity.

Why not take advantage of the one gift that he had, the one gift that took all others away and prevented anything from changing. In all these years.

But there was change.

Tonight the creatures would scuttle about in his shadow, searching for the light, running in all directions from his footsteps before crowding in and jabbing, jabbing point by point at his feet. And he could stamp them out or he could forgive and forget. Send them running into the hills, beyond the forest, away from his eyes and his men.

And through their scuttling came another creature. Not so small or insignificant. Perhaps something to challenge the years. End the years.

It was a thread of desire that was pulled with anxious, ancient fingers but which seemed to fade with every keen glance. That thing was sitting. Sitting drinking, talking. Continuing a life as if life was a choice, an option in this place. Perhaps only he could teach this thing what life was really like.

He turned away from the window and motioned to the two men standing at the door, at least he would keep up the pretence that they would surprise him at the ball.

“Ensure the shutters remain open. They must be allowed to enter here.”

The maids stood, unmoving, unseeing, outside the Inn. Their clothes almost transparent in the rain, lit briefly with each swing of the lantern hanging from the eaves.

Serina picked awkwardly at her food. She wasn't hungry.

“I feel that you have something to reveal. Something you dislike,” said the Horseman, passively.

“I feel so alone,” Serina dropped her fork and stared down at the plate. “There is something between us. I know there is. But my life is so lonely. I have not been able to trust and meeting you, a stranger...”

She dropped her head and closed her eyes.

The white roundness of the plate with its dark centre of twisted food burned into her retina.

“Sometimes the less we know about someone, the more we can trust them.” The Horseman shifted slightly in his seat, unhappiness swirled off her.

“But I know that you are the same,” Serina spoke without looking up. “The same as all the others. On the surface you appear to be different, to be above them,” she bit her lip. “But you are just the same.”

Lord Stowgan looked up the stairs to his private quarters and the room with the open shutter.

“Here on these stairs we will trap them. Have the others waiting outside, they can enter through the same window.”

He waved back through the doorway.

“Ensure the stairs are not lit.”

Serina stood by the fire, her back to the table, a slight smile on her lips.

“Of course we all have our past to reflect upon,” continued the Horseman, trying to get through to her. “It is what drives us to improve. Mistakes within ourselves can be corrected.”

Her face smoothed quickly and she suddenly looked sad.

“Everything seems so pointless sometimes.”

The Horseman rose and glided over to stand slightly behind her. He placed a hand on her shoulder, politely.

“We can all feel hopeless, depressed. But in your heart you are someone special. You must let that flower grow.”

Serina turned to face him. “Will you help me?”

Alisha crouched on the ground, bent over the opened scroll, peering in the darkness of an alleyway with only the light from either end where bustling streets pass by.

“Fuck,” she muttered to herself. “This had better work.”

She twisted the scroll around until she could see the letters in the light and started to read, strange guttural meaningless words. That cut through the air and raised the rubbish scattered on the ground and whipped it into a whirl around her, leaves and dirt scattered in the wind, the walls bending and stretching and reforming and the scroll glowing, blinding her, lighting up her face.

Then darkness again.

Alisha made her way towards the light and stepped into the street, dodging a couple of overweight women carrying overflowing bags. Her long blond hair flowing behind her.

Usually he would reside here. Especially on social occasions. When the noise of the party goes beneath the keep and dancing out into the courtyard drove him up to the seclusion and sanctuary of the tower room and its square, damp, darkened silence.

The ballroom was for visitors, in its festooned splendour, flags draped across lines that hung drooping over cascades of ribbons and silk, falling to tables spread lovingly across the black and white tiles, overspilling with food and gaudy cloth.

At times the multitude of voices and music piped shriekingly above the chatter would push too harshly into his consciousness and drive away his awareness, clasp the moment too closely to him, driving away all sense of anything else. At moments like that he would retreat to the tower.

There was not much here. A disused table, dusty from neglect, an old tablecloth folded in expectation but never used, spiders crawling within its folds. Leant against the corner was a rolled carpet, frayed at the edges and mottled with mildew. Somewhere water had found a way in and gathered in pockets within the arched ceiling and when it rained, the water dripped regularly and pooled between the cracks of the old flagstones.

It was the window that drew him here. The view across the valley and in the distance the entity crouched between the hills, a village overshadowed by the forest, sparkling with life. And blood.

Lord Stowgan ran a finger along the edge of the window-frame, an old grey, long-nailed finger that juddered with each imperfection in the wood. Splinters driving into the parchment skin but drawing no blood. Tonight was beautiful.

Rain driving at an angle across the valley. A sheet of impenetrable ribbons that reduced all sight to within just a short distance, even when light bobbed along the road below as carriages raced by.

Scuttling nature had settled onto the ground to evade the water, finding hiding places beneath the rocks and in the eaves of the castle.

He held out his hand to catch the drops and pressed the sheen of water against his face.

“Close the shutters,” he said softly. “Close the window and close the curtains. They must not be opened. It is vital that no-one can see that I am elsewhere. Let them try to come here. If they make it here, it will be their final resting place.”

A servant, dressed in ancient black, stepped into the room and bowed.

“Speak,” said Stowgan, distracted.

“Lady Revenna sends her deepest and sincerest apologies,” the servant began. Lord Stowgan snorted as the servant continued. “She will not be able to attend the ball, for she is most unwell.”

Every event the same. Some people needed to play games in order to feel important. Lady Revenna was one.

“Send a courier. Send her flowers,” said Stowgan, a slight smile playing on his rasping lips. “And chocolates. And a hamper from the feast. I will not have any guest escape from tonight’s festivities.”

Of all the times to develop such an impediment, thought Lady Revenna as she rolled her head, sweat lighting up her face. The ball was so soon and she really wasn’t feeling particularly well.

The physician, his rumpled brown bag half open, approached the bed quickly.

“Try not to move your ladyship...”

Lady Revenna waved a hand helplessly.

The door opened politely and a servant shuffled in holding an envelope, shortly followed by another carrying a hamper.

“My lady,” began the servant, glancing at the physician who nodded. “Lord Stowgan offers his condolences and has provided you with food from the feast, just prepared, fresh and perfect for you, my lady.”

“Be off,” said Lady Revenna, gasping. “I must rest now. I am feeling quite tired.” And not the least annoyed, she thought, closing her eyes.

One by one the servants and the physician left the room, removing themselves from their mistress.

Minutes passed as the room quietened from the earlier bustle of assistance and aid, medicine and hot soup provided for the patient. A light snoring sound began as Lady Revenna fell slowly into a slumber. And a dark shadow dropped from the ceiling.

Alisha. With the same features and hair as Lady Revenna.

Well, thought Alisha. This fuck-up spices things up a bit.

“The pain you have experienced has passed.” said the Horseman, quietly. “There is only the present and the future. Starting now, I want you to lighten!”

He pulled Serina by the hands and brought her face to face. “You are an amazing woman, but you haven’t learned to enjoy yourself.”

Serina smiled wanly.

The Horseman shook his head at her lack of enthusiasm and snapped his fingers. The old man staggered towards them, staring in horror at the violin that was suddenly in his hands.

With shaking hands and bleary eyes he started to play. He had never played before, but the music was exquisite, slow and beautiful. Each note a moment of celestial longing.

“Would you like to dance, Serina?”

The Horseman lifted one of her hands and kissed its back as if it were the petals of a fragile flower.

He stamped his foot and the music immediately became faster. A playful dancing melody that lifted up the gloom and sent the flames of the candles flickering outwards in shimmering flight.

With her face close to his, their eyes looming wide and round across their sight, the music carried them in swift patterns across the floor, feet gliding with an unseen understanding.

As if all the world began to dance, their hearts lifted, smiles breaking across long-lined faces. Even the old man cracked a grin, helpless in the moment.

Outside the Inn, the maids move to an uneasy rhythm. Boots stamping irregularly, moving in pairs, their heads on each other's shoulders. Splatters of water from spacious pools on the ground lifted with every step and stained their white legs.

"Ah. Music," said Lord Stowgan, pausing in a deserted corridor. "Playing the strings of love. Pleasure to the ears and unlocking the soul."

He clapped his hands.

In the darkened ballroom, the musicians were sleeping, tucked away on rickety chairs in the corner. Away from where the guests would frolic.

A sweeping staircase drives down from the balcony surrounding the ballroom, with only a few torches on the balustrade to lighten the vast cavern.

With a clap, a thousand lanterns appeared, sparking light that washed across the room sending angular shadows dancing to the

startled noises of the musicians as they started upright and grabbed their instruments, beginning to play in a frenzy.

Lord Stowgan drifted into view on the staircase and floated downwards. One of his courtiers rushed to the edge of the balcony, looking down with concern.

“Go back to your business,” said Lord Stowgan without turning around. “I simply feel like music right now.”

He began to spin, dancing as a feather on his own in the middle of the ballroom.

Serina and the Horseman slowed as a romantic waltz brought down the tempo. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sleepily relaxed. Excitement flashed across the Horseman’s eyes and he glanced quickly at the door, sensing the shuddering suspicion outside.

“I remember when I was a child,” he said quietly into her ear. “My parents would take me out to eat. The music there was so loud but for me it was freedom. The smell of the food and the incredible colours, the noise and the excitement as everyone drank.”

Serina sighed in response, closing her eyes.

“I lost myself,” he continued. “In the music, dancing until I fell asleep in my mother’s arms.”

“That sounds beautiful,” said Serina, smiling at him. “I can see you now, your face quiet, tired and peaceful in your sleep. I’m sure even then the women liked to dance with you.”

The Horseman shook his head slightly.

“I have always enjoyed my life and dancing with a beautiful woman is always a pleasure. But you move more sweetly and feel closer to me than any other.”

They stop moving, the music entwining onwards, rising in a subtle flowing river of sound.

Their lips met. A kiss. Sweetness. Precious.

The maids stopped, swaying slightly and separating from each other, turning to face the Inn. Blank expressions, eyes dull.

Serina thrust the Horseman away, turning her head quickly and stumbling over to a chair, leaning on its back. Her breath slight, rapid, desperate.

“Do not get close to me.”

The old man stopped playing.

She held up a hand, looking down at the table and the grain in the wood.

The Horseman didn't move. Still. Watching.

“I only hurt those that fall for me,” she said, holding her tone steady, without faltering. “They see my passion and mistake it for sincerity. They see the excitement in my eyes and mistake it for deeper feelings.”

The music had stopped.

Only the crackle of the candles, releasing their smoky sediment rising into the air and curling in the direction that the air took it. Up and away. Vanishing.

“I appear soft,” Serina turned, her eyes empty. “But I am built of ice. You are melting my resolve, but my soul is in a cage. I cannot have you.”

The door crashed open but the Horseman didn't flinch, all the heat between his eyes and her face.

The maids walked in, two by two, hands clasped in front and eyes down. Stopping and standing in a line. Waiting.

Serina glanced at them and sighed.

The Horseman moved. Once. A step. Choices.

Flowing towards the maids, his anger spreading, a direct line. Sharp. Quick. Emotion slipping into action as with one swipe the hand spraying sideways, feet moving quickly, blurring invisibly and

sending the shockwaves crashing through. Blood after blood. Their heads snapped back. Clumped on the floor, a row of deceit.

The old man, mouth open, eyes bulging as his heart was ripped out.

The chair. Splintered.

Serina.

He glided over to her and held her tightly. But she didn't move.

Lord Stowgan held up his hand. His musicians stopped and looked up, patiently.

"I must return."

Water blurred Serina's vision, her cheeks hot.

"You do not have to leave me," the Horseman kept his tone innocent, devoid of penalty.

"My father expects me to return."

"He would understand."

Serina shook her head.

"You do not know my father. He is hosting a ball tonight and I must attend."

"I will miss you," said the Horseman, simply.

Serina kissed him quickly and stepped backwards.

"Ride with me."

The old man pushed the door shut and turned around.

"I didn't know you could play the vi-ho-lin," a nobleman stepped out of the darkness, his long silk robes flowing silently to the ground and merging with the shadows.

"Being old don't make me stupid," snapped the old man, irritably. "He made me."

“He’s an interesting piece of meat, huh?” said the nobleman circling the old man without footfall.

“What I wanna know is where he got the fiddle from,” said the old man disinterested.

“Did you enjoy it?” the nobleman sneered.

“Fuck you,” hissed the old man pushing past and heading for the backroom. “I’m not a puppet.”

“Sometimes it feels that way,” said the nobleman, fading away.

Alisha stepped, foot by foot towards the bed. Lady Revenna was lying with her hands outstretched as if in welcome. One leg raised, curved at the knee, a slight arch of white beneath the sheets.

She is young, thought Alisha. Her life, a different life. Of clean sheets. White sheets and fresh flowers, gifts from Lords and invitations to special social events. Twenty years old. Yet experienced and courted no doubt. Perhaps a virgin. Who knew in this place.

Her family cared for her, lined the corridors with concern. She had eyes that sparkled with infectious joy. Although only with infection now, Alisha smiled and leaned over her sleeping form.

Her cheeks were bumpy. Covered in a layer of white powder, make-up even in bed, asleep. Bad skin beneath the powder. She could see traces of yellow around the eyes, beneath the colouring of the eye-liner. The eyebrows were drawn on. But some of her natural eyebrows remained beneath. Quite a beautiful arch.

Her chest rose and fell with each breath. A slight hesitation of the body, the illness catching her breath.

Alisha held the edge of the sheet delicately between finger and thumb, pulling it back with a slight movement, swiftly and without waking her. Such finery. Intricate weaving and threads of expensive material crisscrossing and glinting with specks of gold and silver. Spread across the soft swelling, the pressing whiteness of her skin,

thrusting apart the thick wrapped thread that held her bodice at the top.

Alisha held up her knife and turned it in the dimness. Until she caught the Lady's reflection, her face captured along its metal. And placed the edge hovering just above the throat, stroking the fine blond hairs.

She looked at the night-cap, the white cloth pulled over the hair. Hair that otherwise would be dressed in a wig. She reached forward with a gloved hand and grazed her finger along the forehead, pulling at the hair and pulling it out. A lock, curled over the shiny forehead. Brown. Hah!

So boring.

Mource had chosen the hairstyle of the Lady that she habitually wore, not realising that it covered a far more sombre, far less fetching natural colour. Idiot.

Alisha placed the knife carefully down on the side table, making only the slightest of scratching sounds.

She pulled off a glove and placed it down, picking up the knife and turning once again to the woman in the bed. Such a shame to spread red on the bed.

With a nick she split the first thread in two and separated the bodice. Letting the thread part and unravel, each strand tugging at the neatly sewn holes, falling apart like two sides of a leaf.

Once the Lady shifted, moaned slightly in her sleep. Perhaps she felt the cold as the air crept between her breasts.

Alisha grinned broadly, desperate to rip the clothes apart in one wrenching motion. But patience sat down on her shoulders with a deliberate tease. The strength, complete dominion over this woman of money and influence.

Just a moment and it would be hers.

The bodice split open, a cadaver's chest rent asunder and a shining purity heaving beneath. Alisha bent forward and kissed her

gently between the breasts. Glancing briefly at the nipples, red and extended in the cold. Not much there.

The moment had passed.

Alisha grabbed her by the throat, pressing a thumb deep into the larynx. Lady Revenna's eyes opened quickly, without understanding, shocked and still in a dream-sleep.

Alisha put her face close, examining Lady Revenna's eyes, looking up her nostrils, at her cheeks.

Everyone has their path. To climb these steps to a great bedroom and the four-poster bed. To slide your hand into your pocket and draw out a purse filled with heavy coins. To never have to wash, bend down or stretch. To never feel the blade in your hand as it sinks between bone.

Alisha twisted, lifting the woman up by the neck, dragging her in one quick motion across the bed, Lady Revenna's right foot trapping the sheet and sliding the bedclothes across in a hugging pile, and flinging her to the floor, watching her roll over and over, the sheet wrapping her foot.

With one quick step Alisha swept a leg in a swift arc, slamming a boot across the woman's chin, raising a bloody graze and sudden bruising across the pale, pretty face. Alisha grabbed the knife.

Lady Revenna stared at nothing else. The shining metal blade.

Alisha bent over her watching those eyes, terrified and transfixed. She put her mouth to the side of the shaking head.

"Take everything off."

The woman scrambled out of the sheets, upright and stripped with nervous fingers. Letting the clothes fall in a heap beneath her white nakedness.

Alisha beckoned with a single finger.

The slight woman trembling, stepped towards her and Alisha moved up to her, placing a gloved hand around her throat without

applying pressure. Lady Revenna stared at her own living reflection, watching her with darkened eyes as she was backed away and turned to stand, her back against the bedpost.

Alisha traced a naked finger down Lady Revenna's throat, her chest, over her narrow waist and into the hole in her stomach. Then down over her pubic hair and between her legs.

"Good bye," said Alisha, twisting her hips against the thin woman's waist, jamming her elbow into her neck and thrusting the woman swiftly downwards, slamming her arm sideways against her chin and crashing a knee into the back of her head. Snapping her neck.

The door burst open and the physician grunted, looking down in shock at the knife in his chest as Alisha strode towards the door, pulling out both her swords, her eyes glinting, moving on her own path.

Dano leaned out of the window of a carriage. The gravel beneath was freshly laid, a few feet away, the garden edge and the grass rising in a slight hill away from the house. And beyond that the wall that surrounded this plush mansion.

The carriage smelt funny. Maybe the horses had dropped their load already. Oh well, when you're this rich you've got servants to clean the shit up.

He grinned into the night and scratched his elbow. Where the fuck were they?

Mawk could smell the hay, a stench of fresh cut stalks and cloying dung mixed into the dirt and dampness of rain. Ahead the square shadow of the coach and the irrepressible Dano, the roundness of his head at the window. Only he looked like someone else.

A driver was sat behind the horses, Mawk could just make out the whip stretching up high above the coach and swaying slightly as the driver waited, patient but bored, paid to wait.

Laughter floated across the grounds, their targets walking along the crunching gravel, cloaks flapping, heads turned to face each other in happy conversation, top hats clutched in gloved hands. Steady young bouncing and carefree gaits of the idle rich.

The carriage could conceivably move should the horses be startled. Slow movements were necessary to get into place before the assault. Avoiding the wrong smell or the wrong noise although excitement and death could be smelt by the animal nostrils. If the coach is startled then they would take them on the move. Wait until the castle grounds are cleared. At present it was important that the driver remained an innocent at the front of the carriage. But things change.

The two men passed by.

Just a glimpse of their features. Much like his and Dano's of course. But still; different men. New men. No weapons or training. Probably fencing or pursuits of pleasure. The side-stance, legs separated, balance assured but no real flexibility, certainly any sideways movement would make them move like a crab.

Not for much longer. It meant nothing.

He glided out of the shadows and moved into their wake. Feet pressed firmly and patiently but quickly onto the gravel. Noiselessly.

The first target swung onto the foot step and reached into the carriage.

Mawk swept forward, wrist wrapping around the other's neck and claws slashing across the throat, the other arm pushing sinews and cloth into the mouth, claspings the head to his chest and moving backwards, keeping the body high and the dangling feet away from the ground.

He sank down on one knee and laid the body within the hay, shifting a bale slightly to hide, at least for the casual look, a lifeless corpse.

Inside the carriage Dano sat, an arm wrapped around the lolling passenger. Mawk pulled the coat politely over the blood stained chest.

“Driver!” yelled Dano with delight.

The nobleman dropped out of the back door to the Inn and hurried down the alleyway, his cloak swirling around his feet.

Seconds later Mource stepped out. Face to face the same.

She pulled the sword out and reached down to rip open the tunic of the servant crumpled on the floor. She bent forward and examined the wound. Angled to the right. Well he had been turning to run. Still, at that direction the sword might have passed the heart, although still probably caught an artery or vein. She could never remember which was which.

Alisha looked up. There were voices downstairs. All the rooms here were now occupied only by the deceased.

She sheathed her swords and stepped over the body. Quite a discussion going on by the sounds of it. The family. Worried. Apparently there was a ball to go to.

The carpet downstairs was thick and crimson. It felt like grass, spreading out beneath her soft black soles. First. The kitchen. If the family were truly noble then surely there were young men and weapons about – in the direction of the voices. But first make sure the rest of the floor is clear. Clear out the easy pickings and prevent future surprises.

The kitchen – meat cleavers and kitchen knives. In drawers or perhaps hanging for the easy grab.

She reached the kitchen door. Thick oak, wood with heavy handles and frames. A round door handle. She could hear a fire beyond and washing, cutlery or pans. Clanking. Clattering. No voices. One or two or more. She covered the handle with a gloved hand and

twisted with just enough force to stop at the first resistance. It gave easily. Well kept. Oiled.

Still holding the door tightly shut, she pulled hard upwards. Old doors and worn flagstones, sometimes a scrape and sometimes a draft between them. This time a draft.

And a silent opening.

Light, firelight and two backs, broad women's backs silhouetted in the firelight.

There were the weapons, well; kitchen implements. Behind the targets. One day, she thought, I might actually just might meet someone who has some fucking clue what's going to happen next.

Three, two, one and drop, she thought. Alisha eyed the frame of the metal pipe from which the huge forks and spoons hung. It would hold. She climbed onto the table, avoiding all the table's contents with careful feet. Reached up with one leg and straddled the pole for a moment before springing up and with perfect balance perched behind the innocents.

And drop. She landed behind them, her presence invisible, but the intent spreading, disturbing, perhaps the flow of air or a minute sound heard only by animals but sensed, the women crashing around in the sink, glanced at each other as Alisha took two quick steps sideways, drew a sword and swung once, jamming it straight and true. The blade impaling both in the throat. Red mixing with grey water.

"I'm not going," Rhianna flounced and turned her back on her family, stamping over to a chair and sitting down with a huff.

Lord Revenna gripped his whip tightly with scarlet gloves and turned to look at the nurse. "Do something. Say something would you."

He whirled and strode over to the fire. "Caspar, I presume you at least are ready."

His eldest son poked his head around the high back of the armchair and held up a book.

“I came prepared for all the fuss.”

“You jolly well do whatever you wish,” snapped Jake slapping his white gloves against the palm of his hand. “But keep us out of this, just say *you’re* sick.”

His youngest was beginning to sound like Caspar. Exasperated, spoilt and all due to his indulgence. Lord Revenna frowned. Usually it was Lady Revenna who spoke and admonished this rabble.

“I am getting sick and tired of...” he trailed off, staring at the doorway and the slender darkness that stood in it, twin swords hanging loosely, pointing slightly apart, tips just inches above the crimson carpet.

His mind went blank.

“Who are you?” said Jake shuffling backwards, looking back at his father.

“Huh?” Caspar leaned around the back of the chair again and froze.

Rhianna just stared from her chair, fingers picking at her nails as the darkness took two steps into the room and her mother’s face with cold eyes gazed into the fire.

The flames picked at the wood, blue and yellow. Brightness turning to smoke in an instant. Glowing red wood emitting heat. Blood red.

Their fear smelled of purification. Stagnation of a species, dwelling on glittering things. Minute taste in clothes, jewellery, houses, all that ownership passing in seconds with the heartbeat and the breath and the slowing of life.

Jake drew his sword and stumbled as a jabbing prevented him from moving, holding him solid in the stomach and he looked down at metal that seemed to protrude from his white curled shirt that even now was changing colour into the deep dark colour, but he couldn’t move. And whiteness spread with a sharpness and a flash

with hazy edges and the floor was hard against his face, a shock as he hit it.

Lord Revenna patted his waist, fingers searching for the sword hilt that he never usually touched. His foot clanged against the grate and the back of his legs singed hot.

Rhianna watched with widened gaze locked on her mother's eyes and choked. She couldn't swallow and that metal blade beneath her chin was really hurting. Until sudden darkness.

Caspar rose, sword sliding from hilt as the chair slammed against his knees and his head hit his arm, legs flailing and tumbling, ceiling and fire switching places, fingers scrabbling on the carpet, trying to bring his knees up.

Lord Revenna found the hilt and was twisted round from the bursting pain on his cheek and the blow that turned him to face the fire and the foot in his back thrust so that he staggered and grabbed the walls around the fireplace, hands pressed open, stopping his progress, not wanting to fall into the fire that spread across his back, hot wet painful fire.

She was pulling her sword out of his father's back as Caspar stood. His mother or whatever this black-clad *thing* was. Where was his sword? A few feet. He glanced back up. The blade passed right into his mouth. He could taste it. The metal of his blood and the metal of the blade. Briefly. That was all he had.

Alisha stood, barely out of breath. Letting the head slide from her sword. There. Quite a tally. Fucking village.

No decent men. No decent action. When had she last felt the sudden sharpness of energy flow into her arms and quicken her breath, the realisation that life hung on just one movement out of place. Except. Him.

She sat down in the middle of the family and placed her swords, grasped together on her lap, legs crossed. This time it wasn't enough.

Alisha stood in the small square room holding a candle in its candle holder. The flame was small, neat, emitting a slight glow, enough to light up the dresses hanging all around her. Each one bustling with brocade, ruffs and taffeta, threads of exquisite linen and the sheen of fine craftsmanship.

Hanging there the empty shells of a courtier. There was no-one to fix her hair or apply her wig. It had taken a long time to do it herself. Alisha rotated slowly on the spot with a satisfied smile. She had been a maid once, still remembered how to use her sewing fingers and how to dust a wig. But with these burnished gold mirrors and mournful candlelight it was impossible to see anything properly. Fantastic for the cutting of throats; not so good for the application of rouge.

Blue.

She moved forward entranced and lifted the dress from the rail, holding it up above her. It required a bustle, and would need strapping. She'd have to tie the strapping to the bedpost and wind herself in or something. There was a chance she would be a little late. Mource could go fuck himself; he knew that she was the most accomplished fighter in the group anyway. So he'd just have to wait.

Would he wait?

The blue shimmered with the translucence of a midnight pool, decorated with white lilies and reflecting the silver sparkle of a clear night sky. Flowing downwards with folds of velvet, heavy in her hand, which shook with adrenaline. Tonight was it.

There was a full length mirror by the bed. Alisha dragged it into the centre of the room and patted the front of her dress, then turned and stared at the result from the back. She looked a little overweight because the strapping wasn't terribly effective. It was a miracle it had worked at all. And the corset was one size too large anyway. As for the bustle. It didn't hang with the proper balance.

She stepped up close and twisted slightly at the buttons on her chest. Perhaps one or two undone. Let the threads take the strain. She'd need to breathe. A knife down the front would be enough to release her. But then the other bits and pieces too. This suddenly didn't seem to be such a good idea.

The coachman shifted uneasily on his seat and glanced for the hundredth time at the grand front door. The four horses murmured to themselves and snorted in the rain. Lord Revenna was going to be fashionably late. And one could only presume that Lady Revenna was the one making the fuss. Although he'd heard that she wasn't attending tonight due to illness.

The front door burst open and Lady Revenna swept down the steps causing the footmen to almost drop out of the carriage in haste.

"They will not listen," said Lady Revenna with that annoying high voice of hers. "Therefore I shall travel first and they shall follow later. I shall not wait any longer."

"As you wish," said the coachman puzzled. Not an expert in court etiquette, it was positively unusual for a lady to travel without company, although there would be the footmen of course.

Once she was onboard, he cried and cracked the whip, sending the coach rolling along the gravel and glanced back at the door, which hung forlornly open, swaying slightly in the wind and letting the rain fall on the marble tiles within.

Alisha settled back on the padded seat, spreading her dress about her, smoothing the creases and stroking the sleeves down her arms. The footmen sitting opposite looked politely out of the window, watching the night passing by.

The wheels rumbled through the body of the carriage, swaying from the occasional stone or twist in the road and every now and

then the whip would crack and the coachman would cry above the drumming of the rain and the grating of the wheels.

She could feel the floor of the carriage vibrate through her high-heeled shoes, her toes trapped in the narrow points and her heels uncomfortably pressed by the sharp sides of the shoes. She could hardly breathe, the corset pulling her lungs in and pushing up her breasts so that they felt as though in the grip of a particularly unimaginative lover.

It hurt the most beneath her arms, trapping flesh under there, pulling at her chest and neck. And the collar itched.

It didn't help that her swords banged against her ankles when she walked. Or that the knife dug into her thigh as she sat. She looked down at her white gloved hand, lace that swelled tightly over her calluses, stiffening her fingers, preventing touch or delicacy.

She looked up at the footmen. Young. Perhaps fourteen. Virgins. Or not. The servant classes would fornicate at an earlier age than the wealthy. Would they? She no longer remembered. If there wasn't so much complication underneath her skirts she'd have some fun with these boys. Tease them to a certain point. Watch for their little cheeks to glow red with embarrassment.

No-one could see inside the carriage.

She leant over on one side, having to support her ungainly body with an elbow, to look out of the window at the dark landscape that rolled and streamed by. The rain a diagonal sheet, constant and sparkling in the lantern light.

She sat back and beckoned to one of the footmen and coughed when he didn't notice.

The kid looked round. "Yes ma'am?"

"Come here boy," she said, with a sultry voice.

He looked at the other and leant forward, shifting on the seat.

"Closer," she said, showing her teeth.

He half rose from his seat and moved closer. Alisha put a gloved hand on his cheek and looked into his eyes. Nothing but innocence

there. She placed her other hand behind his head, moving him towards her bosom.

“Lovely boy,” she said mockingly as she gripped his head tightly, fingers searching scalp, feeling the bumps and shape of his skull. And twisted sharply, feeling the crack and the loose lifelessness. Letting the head fall, angling it to her chest, raising a leg and stroking the other boy’s thigh with her heel.

The footman was entranced with her eyes, unaware of his lolling companion. Dumbly aware of the pressure as it moved up his side and along his arm. He glanced down at her ankle as the dress fell away, tucking up around the knee. The heel smelt of leather and grit, and unwashed flesh.

She drove the heel up through the softness of his throat, kept pushing hard with her leg, pressing her hands against the back of the carriage as it penetrated the flesh and out flowed the blackness down his frothy front, pushing until it was jammed fully, her sole trapped against his chin.

For a moment she held herself rigid. Watching. His eyes stared back unmoving. The head shivered with the rolling of the carriage and the footman in her lap rolled sideways, looking up at the roof with empty eyes.

With a little sigh she pulled out her foot and shoved herself back on the seat. Better.

She’d have to tidy things up before they got to the castle.

CHAPTER 14

Gorse, rough grass ruffled in swathes down the hillside to the castle below. Across the valley the dark hillside rose to the horizon, a smattering of trees lining the top as clouds raced along its length. The castle walls and outbuildings were unlit, a watchful circle of bleakness around the light as the keep resplendent in flaming light towered above the darkness, a lantern within the darkness of night.

The Horseman stood, his whiteness flowing and unravelling in the wind, rustling with the softness of linen, his hood gathered in ruffles around his neck. A ghostly white on the dark night.

Serina stared at the back of his neck, glowing, shining in the rain. He had stood watching the castle for a while now. Patient. Unmoving.

Their coach waited on the road below.

It was cold and her rain-soaked clothes fell about her, pressing wetly against her skin. But she felt heated standing within his presence. She wanted to scream and grasp at him, throwing her hands around his shoulders and carrying them to the ground, to roll down the hillside squealing in delight.

But this was good-bye.

Their time together had been a short moment. An episode of tranquillity and dream in a long dirge of unpleasant sounds. He had made her smile. Once.

The maids were waiting below. Sitting, blank expressions, watchful eyes. Reproving. She could feel their eyes from within the coach looking up at them. Pain dwelling on her mind.

The music still sang in her chest, resounding through her head above the pain and the headache that throbbed its mindless anger between her eyes. A dwindling memory of better days, encapsulated in a brief second, trapped in a box with sides that darken and shift inwards, pressing down on pleasure until it winked out. A star in the sky, blanked away by an infinite power.

Was it love?

How could she love in this place. With her life spread before her, its clock-work repetition clicking onwards without respite. A shudder in the mechanism, jolting her from a mournful revelry. Hope kindled and then swamped with regret. Perhaps a moment's pleasure was an island within this vengeful sea. To be grasped and held onto with bony hands as her flesh was stripped away by the fires of her father's displeasure.

And what did this...*thing*...want? Was it a man? She had felt its arm, seen into its eyes. It had warm flesh and muscle beneath the soft linen and the eyes saw into her, capturing her life in a long moment of desire. His calmness stirred an anger, his constancy of direction, of purpose made her tremble with rage. Could she gain anything from him? Find a way to live, perhaps.

"Your father is a rich and powerful man," said the Horseman suddenly, continuing to look down at the castle.

"It is unwise for you to meet him," she said, concern in her voice.

"You really wish to keep me out of your life."

He said it like a statement. That calmness again. She wondered whether it had been her imagination that made her think he had been unsettled. All things before him seemed to be a puzzle to face, consider and solve. Except her. She tried to read his body language, but could see only softness. But when she looked into his eyes she saw confusion there, when they kissed.

She knew what she was. What she was capable of. There was no doubt in her mind that she didn't deserve.... anything. That he was

honourable or capable of bringing her happiness was not in doubt. That he was not perfect, nor could provide a life to cure her ills was not in question. She just didn't know whether she could let herself feel this. It was a magic. That could not be trusted.

She stepped forward and tucked a hand underneath his arm, sliding it around until they stood arm in arm, looking down at her father's house.

"It is better that he does not know about you," said Serina, quietly.

"Are you sure he doesn't know already?" he answered.

True, she thought. Her father watched her constantly. She was his only thought. Always his presence hovered over her, a darkness in her mind, his arms stretching out to hold her, pinning her to this life. Escape was not possible. Was it?

She hadn't even asked his name. Somehow that made things more complete. Simpler. There was a delicacy to their feelings, to their interaction that required...distance. Distance of thought and expression, a gap in the words and a passing in their touch. The air between them must be spread with the wind of love. Flowing and grasping at their hearts, tugging them onto one path, to float together as a natural thing, without recourse to deliberate, painstaking action.

Standing next to him, her thoughts fled, chased away by peace. The emptiness felt shallow and unfilled but wanting nothing. It set her heart racing but her breath slowed. Her vision sparkled with a newness but her senses slept. At one with him, but an uneasiness unsettled her, gnawing at the core of her senses. It was like sleeping in a cage of tigers.

She looked at his face, examining every line. He had cute ears. She reached up and traced a finger along the lobe. Feeling its density. She wanted to fold herself around him forever.

Within the castle walls lay the crowded flaming pyre of death, confusion, mayhem and exhaustion. The Horseman could feel the

fingers of fate spread out before him, clutching at the violence ahead with eagerness.

But standing here with Serina, the lines that swirled down the hillside and scrawled within the castle walls, drawing the men inside to the line and marching them to their ends, the lines spread before him with a distant charm. An easiness of thought that flowed from him and into the future without fear.

All the lines that came from without and carried Serina into his presence, coalesced at this moment, with her by his side, pressing her warmth against his arm and hanging her head against his shoulder, fingers tracing his ear, love looking at him with forlorn eyes.

How could he not stay within this fate. Drawn to love. Its magical presence surrounding them with its strength.

He turned to look at her, her open eyes, eye lashes dashed with droplets, her black hair golden in the rain.

If he held this future within an iron grip, clutching the lines drawn to him and held them so that nothing could escape, pressing his intent together, swamping them and grasping them so that it could not flow out; then perhaps they could be together.

“Introduce me,” said the Horseman.

“Oh! Come on!” said Serina in surprise. “Why do you wish to punish us both?”

“I am a charismatic man,” he said, half-knowingly. “There won’t be a problem.”

“He won’t like you,” said Serina, shaking her head and withdrawing her arm. “He will feel threatened. We have always been very close and he is very protective. You do not want him as your enemy.”

She felt like laughing hysterically. It was one of those conversations that made no real sense except in a surreal nightmare or in dreams of what could be. He was young, unsure and didn’t truly understand her or her family. Perhaps he was over-confident. He

certainly didn't seem to listen to her or try to understand what she was desperately trying to communicate to him.

"Why are you so interested in meeting him?" she asked, tiredly.

"Why are you so afraid of him?" he replied. "Surely he wouldn't hurt his own daughter."

She had been to his tower room. The guards would not normally allow anyone there, but she had been curious and they were under instructions to allow her the freedom she wished. She had some sway over her father's affections and to some extent got exactly what she wanted.

Her father was a frightening man, both in appearance and in demeanour. But within his presence she felt at peace, protected, home. He had never turned that anger on her, had allowed her to behave or misbehave as she wished. Had supported her and encouraged her in his own short brusque way. She wouldn't call it love or affection, but it was certainly a form of loyalty that made her feel comfortable in his presence.

The tower room was empty, discarded, uninteresting, except for the window. She knew he liked to look out over the land, enjoyed the height and the distant view. But she had never seen it for herself. This was his place and he didn't like visitors. Or trespassers.

Throwing open the shutters and the window was a release. Like unshackling her freedom and discarding it from the window, throwing away her desires, hopes and fears with one movement. It had been daytime and there was a dull grey sunlight that crept between the eaves and lit the woodlands below with a boring hue. She could see for a long way, the horses on the road, the people below her, small. Insignificant.

She recognised the tops of their heads. It became a game. Guessing their identity from the colour of their hair or the way they walk.

Nearly an hour passed with her leaning, arms crossed on the window ledge, neck beginning to ache as she peered out over the land. Until he came up. Gliding into the room without a sound and

standing behind her, the greying texture of his presence crawling up the back of her neck until she could stand it no longer and turned abruptly.

“I was just enjoying the view,” she had said, coyly.

“Yes,” Lord Stowgan had ignored her looks and pushed her aside to go to the window.

“And did you learn anything, Serina?” he had said, his back to her.

Only that whatever fascination this tower room held for her father, he was not going to share it with her.

“What do you think of these people when you look at them from up here?” she had asked, almost demanded.

“That from here they cannot touch me,” Lord Stowgan had answered, his voice strangely uncomfortable.

“But you’re not afraid of anything,” Serina had answered, challenging him with a slight tremble in her voice.

“I do not speak of fear. But of perspective. Below me and from this distance I can reach out and feel their hearts beating within their fragile bodies and crush them with a thought. But they cannot touch me. It is an analogy of my power, my dear, nothing high in philosophy or revealing of character, but a habit born of boredom.”

“Are you bored?”

“Aren’t we all?” he had turned away from the window with a smile that chilled her.

“I like it here,” She had said brightly. “I find it interesting. Seeing the people you see day by day but from here they appear...different. Like a dream.”

“There is only so much variation between each person. There are differences but within each form, only one true change between them,” Lord Stowgan had swept away from the window towards the steps leading downwards. “Each one inhabits a different body.”

“I am not very forgiving to those that hurt others,” the Horseman swept up onto his horse and waited patiently while Serina pulled up her dress and climbed onto hers.

“You are quite serious about that, aren’t you,” said Serina as they began to pick their way down the hill, letting the coach take the longer journey along the road.

“Yes. I am quite serious.”

Serina flicked her reins and gripped hard as her horse bolted forward and started to gallop down the hill.

“Follow me!” she cried, looking over her shoulder at the bemused Horseman.

“Come and meet my father.”

From the tower room they were specks on the hillside, moving swiftly down, arrows in the night. One black one white.

Lord Stowgan could reach forward and grip the tiny scrabbling specks and hold them between his finger and thumb, feeling it wriggling there, the speck of blackness and if he squeezed then it would crush them with just the faintest liquid splattering outwards.

He wanted to reach forward through the window and spread his arms each side, pressing back on the stone and reaching outwards, arms wide to receive them and press back until his elbows shuddered with such force that the brickwork shattered and cracked away and the tower was swept up in the maelstrom of his consciousness.

That beast and his daughter, riding together, she leads and he follows, leaving a trail of white across his retina, a line that raced down the hillside and into his heart.

He pulled the shutters closed with a bang and fastened them securely with angry tugs. As he swept towards the steps, his motion sent the table sliding across the stone, scuttering and juddering, swinging around on its axis, the corner creaking and cracking against the wall.

The steps downwards curved, a snails curve that entwined within itself, curbing down into the blackness, grey stone on the walls and blocks stretching up and down and round and round. He whirled through them, cloak spraying behind him and curling up and up.

He burst through the double doors to his state room with such fury that the wood shattered and he grasped a plank of splintered wood and pulled it apart with a thoughtless gesture allowing the wood to fall empty to the ground.

The twelve courtiers in the room, bent over maps and talking in hushed tones stood awaiting expectantly, their eyes blackened and watchful.

Lord Stowgan arrived in front of the first courtier and placed his mouth close to his face.

"Everything is prepared as I asked," he said, half statement and half probing.

"Yes Lord," said the courtier with an inclination of the head.

"Then I have some time for entertainment before the guests arrive," Stowgan looked sideways at the others in the room. "I will receive Serina and her...friend in the dining hall."

All the other courtiers nodded, held still by his presence.

Lord Stowgan reached forward with long nails and held his hand, butterfly movements in his fingers, tracing the air in front of the courtier's neck.

A switch of the briefest moment to remove this creature from his gaze. Swelling of feeling washing over him, crushing his gaze, turning his eyes to stone. Bearing down on the courtier before him, beating him to the ground with the pressure of his intent.

The room remained watching

The years rushed towards him with the weight of their emptiness, crowding in on him, time after time of experience, clouding his mind, filling him with a brimful of nothing. Coming to

this moment, as if waiting in line for the excitement to be passed out by an unfeeling god.

Time ticked away in the moment. Decisions washing by him without thought, scattered throughout his existence in that moment. The excitement washed over him and thrilled his soul.

He turned slowly, his hands coming down with infinite patience, his eyes still holding the courtier's gaze, holding the courtier's future in his long hard stare.

He swept from the room, rushing down the corridor to the dining room in haste.

The Horseman looked up at the keep and swallowed. Serina clattered around behind him, shouting gaily at the servants to tether their horse, gather her bridle and saddle, find water, comb them down. Lead them to her father.

Stonework rising imposing above him, aged stone and bristling nature curled amongst the manmade edifice. Rain falling on his hand. His face. Steps leading up to the keep and guards, armed, controlled anger and viciousness kept tightly in a box.

Harrying servants, moving all around, doing this and that. Their orders flowing around them, pushing and pulling at their consciousness. And inside. Darkness creeping outwards, gathering.

Lord Stowgan. Bent over his hatred. Gathering his hate to his bosom and clutching it as if empty without it. Hording as a man would his gold, clutched to his chest as a mountain of gold. The gold coins flailing, escaping his grasp, spinning on the floor in their splendour, out of his darkness and escaped, amongst the world in their freedom.

It washed over him. The hatred. The excitement.

The Horseman let it flow past and narrowed his eyes at the doorway. The entrance to this place. The place through which he would pass and then would see what he would see. Would converse

with the soul at the centre. Touch lightly at the edges of the hatred and feel the malevolence look back at him without blinking.

The Horseman slid down to the ground resting a hand on the horse's back. The coarse hair prickled under his skin, concern shuddering down the muscular frame. The horse turned its head and nuzzled at his shoulder, its quiet eyes reflecting concern back at him.

"I came here for this," whispered the Horseman, stroking the horse's back. "I am here for this."

Serina grabbed his hand and half danced up the steps to the keep, looking at him, at the servants following them, at the guards as they passed, at the overly decorated ballroom and the overflowing tables and the swirling steps that rose above it. And back at the Horseman.

The path lead through the centre of the ballroom and up the stairs, its flowing locks separating before his glance and carrying them forward, an unstoppable current, washing them towards Him.

The doors crashed apart and servants on either side bowed, head down, still. Waiting.

In the centre the table. At the end Lord Stowgan. A long table. A candelabra in the centre, silver plates laid out, one at the other end, one at the side and one in front of the Lord. Silver goblets too, and knives, forks, grapes on a plate. A butter dish. A simple basket with loaves cluttered inside.

Lord Stowgan standing up, robes falling sideways, downwards, brushing down his elegant aged form. His head raising and the chin protruding slightly as the mouth quivered. The black spots penetrating, his gaze flowing between them and clashing in the centre of the room. Two forces meeting with the full anger of their intensity, clashing with a noiseless crash of sword against sword.

Stowgan gestured for the servants to leave. Waiting for the door to click shut, echoing in the large space.

“Sit. Sit,” he said, watchfully. “Make yourself comfortable. Travelling on horseback is never enjoyable.”

The Horseman flowed over to the chair to the side and grating it backwards over the marble tiles, looking at Serina expectantly. Her face impassive as she looked between them, eyes flickering one to another, searching, questioning.

Serina moved over to the chair he offered and sat down, pulling off her gloves and laying them far too carefully next to her cutlery.

“I rather enjoy riding,” said the Horseman with an undercurrent of irony. “Especially without a saddle. A horse has such power and authority. One becomes close, attached to them.”

“I’ve never felt the need,” said Stowgan simply, sitting down suddenly.

The Horseman moved around the table and took his seat at the opposite end, folding his hands comfortably in his lap. Now all paths lead to this one point and everything held still.

“Following ones needs,” said the Horseman, pointedly. “Can lead to the dominance of all things, even of the people you love.”

“You love her then. My daughter?” Stowgan answered quickly.

“She is charming, sophisticated and an intelligent lady,” said the Horseman calmly. “I will profess my love to her in person and in private. But you will forgive me, Lord, for not doing so now.”

“Such compliments,” Stowgan chuckled. “Surely you must be close to marriage. And yet you refuse to answer my question.”

“Do not push him, father,” said Serina lightly. “We have only met recently.”

The Horseman inclined his head in agreement.

“You have a fine house for your family,” the Horseman said with a slight smile.

Lord Stowgan nodded back. “Thank you, sir, I have an extensive family.”

“You must be very proud.”

"They are dutiful to their father and protector."

"Duty can be honourable," said the Horseman, unconvinced.

"Do not doubt their loyalty," said Stowgan, an edge to his voice.

"I doubt nothing," said the Horseman holding the Lord's gaze. "I know all things."

"A bold claim for one so young," said Lord shaking his head. "Arrogance is an illness of youth, soon cured with the edge of a sword."

"A sword cannot touch the inside of a man," said the Horseman grinning. "Entrails and blood are the shell."

"Not an appropriate dinner conversation, I feel," said Lord Stowgan, looking at his daughter with glittering eyes.

Serina clapped her hands and the door opened to emit a line of servants and the first dish of the meal, a bold white plate with steaming soup simmering within.

"It is good to see such an understanding between father and daughter," said the Horseman, leaning forward to catch the scent of the soup.

Traces of steam, laden with herbs and a hint of vegetables, blended into the aroma that washed over him along with the quiet rustling of softened footsteps on the marble floor. The clink of each dish on the table. The stillness of Serina and Lord Stowgan. Waiting.

"We are very close," said Lord Stowgan once the servants had left. "Please, help yourself."

The Horseman picked up a spoon and swirled the light brown liquid, tracing the stems of thyme and lifting the cumin seeds to the surface. A strong mix for a simple dish. The taste of strength to overpower the emptiness of lives unused to the gentle taste of natural food.

Blood, swirling with its redness thickening in rivulets around the whiteness of the bowl, sturdy and unyielding in the centre, gathering

its darkening lifelessness as it died away from the body that bore it. A dish of life for the eaters of souls. Sucking from the living, the sustenance of the dead. A parable of nature, feeding on its young and tasting of its neighbour for the greedy survival of a species.

Perhaps no better than the desert dog pulling at the strands of meat on a carcass, legs scrabbling for purchase on the hard stony sand, kicking up clouds of strenuous effort, canines ripping into what had been straining sinews of desperate panic and escape.

Only filled with terror, every victim a human fear palpable on the lips of these immortal sinners. Draining them of their dignity, their strength, their character. Taking from them what they had sustained as precious and unique.

"Delicious soup, sir, a most unusually fine blend of strong spices," said the Horseman with a forced smile.

"You understand that as one gets older, one needs the stronger spices to bring flavour to the aged tongue," said Lord Stowgan, slipping delicately between rumpled lips.

"Time has a constant effect, even on you," said the Horseman. "One cannot escape the forces of nature."

Lord Stowgan nodded agreement. "Nature comes calling to all of us, no matter what we sacrifice. It all comes to earth and ashes."

"Nature has many faces," said the Horseman looking up slowly.

Lord Stowgan looked for a long time back at the pale face before him, the darkened eyes and the white skin above white shoulders. There was something strangely out of place.

The room echoed with the stillness of the table and its occupants. The occasional sound ringing out on marble floor and wide stone walls. The warmth that floated from the Horseman generated a still heat that hovered at the end of the table, a shuddering flower of patience, intensity and longing.

All around Lord Stowgan were the same objects, the same feelings and desires that he had always felt. And then something different was poised in the centre, a spider tugging at the webs he

had designed and laid out himself. An invader with a sinister purpose, out of his vision, his control. Clutching with those soft white hands around the neck of his daughter, threatening her a sweet sickly poison and a sudden death.

The force of the movement swept across the table and pressed down on him, a raging torrent of purpose that would sweep him from his chair and into the future emptiness. A void that darkened around his vision and suffocated his breathless lungs.

"My face has seen many things," Lord Stowgan musingly. "I have stared many a danger down and seen many a pitiful torture of the young, desperate to prove their love or satisfy their longing. Which is it for you, sir?"

"I have no longing," the Horseman said simply. "I walk my path and I hope that now that I have met Serina..." he looked briefly into Serina's eyes. "...we can walk some of it together. Only time will tell how long that path is."

"Very short," Lord Stowgan stood up. Serina glanced at him shocked.

"As you can imagine," continued Stowgan. "I have much preparation before tonight's celebrations and therefore I have to apologise and leave this meal early."

"Of course," said the Horseman, standing up.

Lord Stowgan swept around his chair and strode for the exit without looking back. "Until we meet again."

The Horseman watched him go with wide innocent eyes, as the darkness whirled away and left only emptiness behind.

CHAPTER 15

A ballroom. An entrancing ballroom.

Alisha strode down the steps, her skirts swishing and fluttering around her, her head held high, eyes staring straight ahead, allowing every gaze to drink in her poise and her out-thrust breasts.

Chattering clanging laughter, murmuring secrets and gaily enchanting conversation bouncing from wall to wall. Entrancing.

She arrived at the bottom and curtsied slightly to the footmen who raised their banners.

“Lady Revenna!” they cried as Alisha bustled past, pressing into the throng without hesitation, eyes glued to the central emptiness of the dancing area and the scattered inner core of the high class and the monied land owners. The occasional cry of ‘Lady Revenna’ passed unnoticed as she arrived at the centre and slowly rotated, eyes scanning the room for one luxurious pleasure-filled moment.

Colour; of gold and silver, diamonds and purple swathes of expensive ruinous cloth. Food, grapes and wine, goblets of gold slopping with dark delicious liquid, tainting ruby lips of pampered women.

Balcony. Steps. Shadowed balcony with watchful guards tucked away from the guests, scanning, looking for something. Just the usual guards?

Columns and alcoves, shadows of passages and doors away from the centre. More guards, in the clothing of guests. Huddled in groups, pairs or more, not enjoying themselves, not socialising but talking in uncomfortable hushed tones, trying too hard to be casual

and not drinking, not even holding a glass. Uncultured, unsubtle, Lord Stowgan's personal idiots.

Swords, not dress swords. Knives. Basic weapons. But probably well handled.

Archers. On the balcony. She could see their quills leaning against the banisters. If you looked, they were visible. Stowgan. By the stairs, with his closest, most important and valuable of guests. Some his advisors and allies. Others entertained for favour or to discern secrets. The politics of the elite.

In for a shock.

Target located, and there near the side of the ballroom, the pair of foolish young knaves, Mawk and Dano, all dressed up to look like a couple of fops. A perfect and most appropriate disguise. Ah a handsome captain. Diego along with his disguise of a charge, Lord so-and-so of somewhere. Useful to have a sword by his side and those trousers looked a little too cumbersome to be really just fabric. Somehow she thought they hid more than strapping thighs.

She caught his eye but betrayed no expression other than lady-like disdain and moved away, scanning the crowd for reddened cheeks and the handsomeness of youth.

"Lady Revenna!" said a likely looking man in tight silks. "You look astonishing tonight!"

Alisha allowed a smile as she flowed into his orbit and pressed her dress against his leg, leaning towards him so that her lips were near his face.

"I believe such beauty deserves a little poetry, don't you," she said in a piercing voice.

"Oh my lady, but of course," stammered the lad, unused to dealing with a woman in full flow. "Your lips are the colour..."

Alisha cut him off. "Oh not my lips. Goodness me, can your type never do more than compare body parts to fruit."

She leaned further forward so that her cleavage danced dangerously below his sightline.

“Step aside with me for a moment and show me the poetry of touch rather than sound,” she whispered in his ear, allowing her arm to wrap sinuously around his waist.

Diego watched as Alisha walked away, arm in arm with some young fool and sighed. Her eyes were sparkling with blood lust and he wondered how many had survived tonight’s activities at the home of Lady Revenna. Mawk also had her within sight and Diego gestured in her direction a little angrily. Mawk nodded and slipped through the crowd to follow her.

Alisha pinched the boy playfully as they stumbled down a corridor of plush carpets and long ruby tapestry. Finding an unlocked door, she twisted the handle and shoved open the door, smiling up at him with wide eyes. She held the door open and watched his back closely as he waltzed into the room; a study with a sturdy oak desk and walls lined with boring books.

She quickly moved in, shutting the door, plunging the room into darkness, wrapping an arm around his throat, claspng his chin and driving her knee sharply into the small of his back.

His body arched, suddenly blacking out with paralysis and the sharp pain rippling along his spine.

She grabbed his head with both gloved hands and twisted sharply, letting the corpse drop to the ground with a thud, breathing heavily, ears prickling in the darkness. Nothing.

“No more tonight,” said Mawk quietly from the darkness.

Alisha stiffened momentarily. Her back turned he could take her down with a swift blow to the head. Had she been so infused with lust that her senses were dulled to his entrance? No. He was just that good. Damn.

Face to face, though.

"I'm on your side," said Mawk quietly.

"For tonight," said Alisha, her voice quivering with tension.

"And for tomorrow," said Mawk, carefully. "You have no reason to fear me."

"No," said Alisha, turning and walking slowly to the door. I wonder where he is exactly, she thought.

"Everybody is ready. There are more guards than expected, but that should be no problem," Mawk said as Alisha opened the door and light flooded into the room.

They stood together on the balcony, looking down on the revellers below. Side by side in comfortable silence, shoulders lightly pressed together, the brush of clothing lightly warming each other's flesh.

Serina's cheeks had a slight redness, a mild undercolouring beneath the whiteness of her makeup. Her face flushed and her throat throbbing with each excitable swallow. She could feel the pulse in her forehead and the warmth rushing along her arms as her fingers gripped the balcony ever so tightly, fingers pressed white, seeing all the people below in a rush of colours and laughter.

The Horseman watched her occasionally, more interested in the fluttering of her eyelashes than the frivolity of the courtiers below. She had a passiveness now, a contentment that flowed on in a stream of sweetness, achingly drawing up her elegant neck, the pale skin and the pale hairs up to the deep blackness of her hair, over her forehead and up into the air to rejoice at the quiet joining.

"The music is..." the Horseman paused and leaned further over the balcony, searching for words. "Perfect."

Serina continued to watch, dazed, only half aware. "There is no music."

"I know," replied the Horseman simply. "But when I am by your side, I hear a melody that entrances me."

She kissed him lightly on the neck.

“My father was impressed,” she said.

The Horseman pressed fingertips to the cooling wetness of the kiss. “I can see why you were concerned, he is a demanding man.”

“Thank you for making the effort. I appreciate it,” said Serina sincerely.

The Horseman half bowed, eyes scanning the crowd. The patterns swirled beneath him, torrid and tumultuous, intermingling with joy, abandon and death.

Soldiers, wearing party outfits and casual expression, but swift anger behind their movements, sliding ungraciously amongst the guests, their hands straying to their weapons, their thoughts sharp and elemental. The guests, their hidden dreams, desires and anger festering within the corrupt heart of the laughter, tearing an edge of violence along the shrill keening of gossip and courting.

And deep in the heart, straying across empty marble floor and into the deeper crowds; Lord Stowgan, his shadow falling far over the hidden assassins as they crowd in, eager for the hunt, the kill, the satisfaction.

Dano pressed a hand against Diego’s arm.

“Hey, man,” he said under the noise of the crowd. “This party is just what I needed.” And he raised a glass towards the unamused boss.

“What *we* needed,” emphasised Diego, eyes flickering towards Stowgan. “With all the movement everything should go as Mource outlined.”

“Where is the shifty bugger?” grinned the foppish youth, Dano’s eyes glittering behind the facial mask.

“Disguise is one thing,” hissed Diego. “Pushing Mource too far is another and one you all will regret I’m sure.”

“Yeah, like we’d ever mean it,” said Dano happily, scanning the crowds. “He’s one of the courtiers ain’t he?”

“He went upstairs to make a count on the forces there,” said Diego, frowning to suppress his emotions.

“Cool. Glad someone’s working hard,” said Dano, downing his glass of wine.

Alisha paused in the doorway, in the emptiness of the rich fabrics, outlined by the light and casting a distinct shape on the floor inside the darkness.

“Keep it in,” said Mawk from inside the room.

Alisha turned but she couldn’t see his shape, only sense a presence away from the light.

“Sometimes what we do afterwards becomes so...” she halted, searching for words. “Huge in my mind that it’s like a wall that I can’t climb,” she tugged at her skirts, trying to straighten the bustle that had shifted around during her vicious assault.

“And I can climb...I can *fly* over anything,” she stopped and pushed in her bosom, tucking it beneath the harsh fabric.

Mawk laughed at the incongruity of the gesture and the weakness of her expression. She was a delightful woman, her flesh so soft but her bones so hard beneath it. Violence was all she seemed to be comfortable with. But that didn’t necessarily mean that it was right for her. Finding what was right for her could possibly be the hardest mission of all. And he wasn’t assigned to that particular doomed course of action.

“Of course,” he replied. “But when the obstacle is within yourself, then magic alone cannot fix it,” he sighed and stepped half into the light. “I sound too cold a philosopher, I apologise.”

Alisha shook her head briefly, staring determinedly down at the fabric of her gloves, tracing the pattern with her other hand.

“You search for the same thing that I do,” she said simply. “Perfection, or control or grasping at something that you cannot find at the bottom of a beer glass or within the arms of a woman.”

Mawk snorted. Surface posturing by someone who has on occasion shown intelligence.

“I search for nothing,” said Mawk, relaxing. “I have found my path, to move forward as I see fit, to set goals, to complete them and to move on. It is being with friends such as you and Dano that makes the path worth walking. The friendly chats and relaxing beers are part of that. It is not a deep solution that I seek, I am not looking for anything...certainly not trying to find myself.”

“Then you have given up,” she said looking up, searching for his eyes.

He clicked his tongue. “I am not the sort of person that habitually meditates on the inside of my head. I have a lot more important things to think about.”

Alisha moved swiftly forward until her face was inches from his. The uncomfortable strangeness of the facial disguise, looked blankly back but with Mawk’s body posture, the angle of the shoulders and the slightly raised hands at his side, one leg pushed forward, balanced, poised, coiled.

She looked closely into his eyes, trying to find his essence in the deep brownness.

“I would love to know what’s inside that head,” said Alisha reaching slowly up so as not to startle him and brushing the hair away from his ears, unable to feel the texture of his hair but tracing the firmness of the skull beneath her gloves.

“I am sure that there is nothing that would surprise you nor fascinate you for more than the snatching of a cobra,” said Mawk placing a hand on her stomach, the fingers rigid, elbow pulled tightly into his side, best to be precautions.

“It is not what interests you that I want,” she said, tilting her head on one side and looking at him from a different angle, trying to

imagine him in portrait, almost seeing Mawk's true face beneath the image that hovered in front of her.

The coldness steeped inside this man formed a buttress to the steeple of his essence. A sturdy building calm in its foundations and carefully built within the perfect context of the nature that surrounded it. Beautiful stonework, the art of the mason.

She pushed his head gently, feeling the energy pushing back, the solidity of his pose and the relaxed neck muscles that adjusted without thought against her efforts.

"I would like to suck out your calmness," she whispered into his ear. "And wrap it around my fears like wool against the coolness of winter snow."

"Alisha becomes the poet at last," Mawk said mockingly.

"You are everything that I try to be," she sighed into his ear. "But I can only revel in something more."

"I enjoy that too," he said pointedly.

"No," she said. "The torrents are mine, the shallows yours."

Mawk thrust past her, deliberately crashing past her shoulder. "Enough posturing, it is time we returned."

Alisha stood watching him until he was cut away by the edge of the door and vanished into the silence.

At the centre of her was a curled fire of black timbers and smouldering hellfire that she wished could be grasped and ground into salt to be scattered on the bones of all those around her. She was trembling, the dress shivering and rustling with her hanging pose.

Bloodshed awaited her in the ballroom.

She followed quickly after Mawk.

Mource pushed his head back and roared with laughter. The other men around the harpsichord slapped each other and clinked glasses

as a couple of women scuttled into the room searching after the noise.

The music room was stained with red wine on the carpet and even on the curtains, greasy stains on the keyboard and a collapsed glass lying discarded on the strings within the instrument. Paper of music lay scattered on the floor and books were lazily strewn off the shelves, broken open and unread. Most of the crowd were drunk.

Mource took another fake sip and smiled at the newcomers as they curtsied and giggling, introduced themselves to the largest and most heavily moustached men in the room.

Mock courtesy and ripening rude jokes spilled into the conversation as the men pushed further than they should dare in such company, buoyed by the ignorance of alcohol.

Enough. Mource strode out of the room, letting the wine glass fall and crack on the carpet, uncaring behind him.

The corridors were empty, the rooms filled with fools and the soldiers upstairs as planned. Stowgan was waiting and the time was drawing near.

Serina turned to the Horseman, her smile fading.

“My father is waiting. I must go and change and then join him.”

The Horseman nodded and placed a hand upon hers.

“I will see myself out,” he said with a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

She curtsied. “Goodbye,” and waltzed past him, reaching suddenly forward to kiss him briefly on the lips, her eyes drawing his as she passed by and then turned away to dash from the balcony.

Lord Stowgan allowed the conversation to spread around him, faint and inconsequential as the Horseman melted down the stairs, the white robes brushing against the dusty steps.

The room smelled of newness and change. And it wasn't just the Horseman that brought events to a sharp edge. There was something moving and shifting within his guest list, changed and uncommon that tugged at his awareness and caused his mind to stir.

The years melted away, washed by the newness and flooding into a crescendo of brightness that widened his eyes, scattering his gaze across the room seeking the new and finding only familiar faces, expressions, voices.

The Horseman. Emptiness, moving across the room, guests unconsciously stepping aside, smooth passage and the parting of a tidal insanity fostered by his own cracked hands. Sensing their minds, picking at their emotions gathered within his skin and clutched to from oceans of fear. Parting from the pureness that came directly towards him.

"Lord Stowgan," said the Horseman smiling.

Stowgan nodded, narrowing his eyes and trying to block out the brightness.

"I would like to attend the ball, with your permission, I have yet to spend any length of time with your daughter and..." said the Horseman as Lord Stowgan interrupted him with a wave of the hand.

"Fine, fine," he snapped looking away into the crowds. "Just don't bother me any more."

The Horseman bowed and backed smoothly away out of sight, taking a glass from the tray of a servant as he passed and disappeared from view.

Lord Stowgan turned to his captain.

"I am concerned. I think we need more men. Recent arrivals concern me," he said, a slight frown on his face.

"What do you suggest my lord?" said the captain, confused.

"Send a courier to Lord Hernetic's castle. Ask him to dispatch some of his soldiers here as soon as possible."

“Lord,” bowed the captain. “But will they arrive on time?” he asked hesitantly.

“We do not know when the attack will take place. It does not hurt to be cautious.” said Stowgan disinterested in continuing the pretence more than necessary. Lord Herneti had already paid for his weakness.

Serina stopped in the doorway to her room.

A black heavy curtain hung, separating the room down the middle, behind which was her expansive bed. And standing before her waiting, holding her evening clothes and accessories were the maids, calm eerie faces watching, waiting.

“Well really Serina,” said one of the maids expressionlessly. “We have been waiting you know.”

“We must get you ready immediately,” said another moving forward, watching her.

Serina felt herself move into the centre of the room as the door shut behind her. The darkness of the corners and the edges of the floor seeped into her consciousness as the maids approached with eager hands and tugged and pulled at the fabric and strings, bows and clasps of her dress.

So many faces moving around her, pale in the greying light, the dark eyes, pools of emptiness swimming before her above straight expressionless mouths and pressing hands. Her clothes falling away and the oppressive stuffiness of the air against her body. Then tugging and stretching over her skin, rough, sliding over tender flesh, tightening, stifling, surrounding her with the expensive smell of oldness and ancient clothing.

They stepped away and swayed slightly. Leaving her alone in the centre of the room, shadows reaching out and curling over their shoulders.

“You are nearly ready,” said one maid, her hands swinging slightly at her waist.

“He is waiting,” said another and all of them turned their heads, looking at the door, at nothing.

“Well hello,” said Alisha, her mouth inches from the Horseman’s ear. “I don’t believe that I have had the pleasure of your introduction.”

The Horseman turned slightly and looked into Lady Revenna’s eyes.

There is a silence that extends from the inside of all beings. The core of emptiness that should contain the warmth, lost to years of hunger for themselves. Turned the shell of their essence inside out, hunting for the eternal pleasures of life. And death.

The void at the centre of his gaze surrounded Alisha’s awareness and drew her deeper into the room and the music that echoed from the corner next to where they stood.

“Ah,” said the Horseman politely. “Lady...?”

“Lady Revenna,” said Alisha gaily, twirling around once.

“Delighted, Lady Revenna,” the Horseman said bowing. “May I offer you a dance?”

He held out a smooth white palm, curled slightly, the fingers pointing up towards the ceiling, beckoning, asking her to enter.

She dropped her gloved hand into his and allowed him to lead her towards the centre and the slow elegant movements of the other dancers. Pressed cheek to cheek they moved, sliding against each other, arms held together, hands unclasped.

“You have to be the perfect gentleman, dressed as you are in white,” said Alisha playfully.

“I prefer to behave well, to behave honourably,” he replied allowing the music to flow between them in perfect motion, feet stepping foot by foot to each beat by beat.

“Really?” Alisha giggled.

“Especially with a *Lady*,” emphasised the Horseman a grin breaking out on his face.

Alisha laughed and spun beneath his raised arm, allowing her skirts to mingle and spin, rising up in the oscillation.

“And yet your clothes are unusual sir,” Alisha said, slightly breathlessly. “I do like your style.”

“What you see from the outside,” said the Horseman carelessly. “Reflects my intentions, Lady Revenna.”

“And what about my intentions,” said Alisha, curtsying and allowing a swinging hand to brush across his front, pressing firmly in more than the natural movement would allow.

The Horseman spun with her in his grasp, raising a finger and placing it on her lips.

“I can see more than you would want me to see,” he said lightly.

Alisha swallowed and kept on dancing, the words bouncing around inside her head, empty of meaning and passed understanding, the music filling her mind with its incessant movement and the casual conversation losing importance with every step.

“Oh really, and what do you see handsome sir?” she stretched out her arm as they parted, fingers clasped and then pulled together in a whirlwind embrace.

“That you like to feel, sense. To be something. There is much longing in your eyes and the way you appear is only a tiny part of your desires.”

Alisha raised her eyebrows in mock surprise, the crowds swirling past her as they turned and swiftly moved across the black and white marble.

“You know, there’s a guy, a friend, with too much longing in his eyes. Perhaps we should get together,” she said.

“Is he here?” said the Horseman, pretending to look around the room. “I would rather not end this wonderful dance for anyone.”

Alisha glanced across at the young man that hid Dano within his body. As Dano looked across, his arm dangling along the bare shoulder of a very young girl.

“No. He left,” she said, her voice surprising her with its fragility. “With another woman.”

“You don’t feel anything?” the Horseman asked, genuine concern touching the edges of his voice.

“I haven’t felt anything for a long time,” Alisha’s honesty dropped like water from a broken bowl and she gripped her mouth shut, a flash of anger flickering behind the fake eyes.

“That does not necessarily have to be the case,” said the Horseman. Alisha laughed in his face and spun back, arching her back provocatively, allowing her front to stretch outrageously beneath the fabric, revealing what the dress was designed to reveal.

“Show me a different way,” she said laughing.

Dano had gone.

Quickly putting her gaze back on the man before her she allowed the music to carry her into the present, the whirling whiteness and the dark eyes, black and white, purity and honour. Or stupidity.

Who was this man? She wondered, beginning to search his face and scan over his body. She could feel the strength echoing throughout his body, rippling along the length of his arms and directing their movement in harmony that made her forget the steps, the swiftness of her uncomfortable shoes, the touch of her feet on the floor or the whistle of the air in her hair as she turned. He had eyes like no other.

A soldier of some kind. Trained. No that wasn’t right. She looked down at his hands. Soft. No edges or calluses, but fast and sharp, cutting the air with surety. He moved with the naturalness of an animal, but then she had made that comparison with Mawk and there was no comparison here.

She had seen him move, faster than she had seen anyone move. But there was nothing here to explain that. Unless another force was responsible. An explanation but not the right one, of that she was certain. There was a hunger in his movement that felt right, that she appreciated with a rich depth that resounded within her.

"I am the different way," he answered plainly.

"Oh you mean you don't do it the normal way. Yeah well, I've done it all the ways you can," Alisha pushed away the meaning, cutting it away. His hips moved, dipping and swaying to the pulse of the violin and the lute. A rich noise of fascinated excitement rose from the dancers and their audience, hands clapping, heads bowing and feet moving in concert to the shuffling heels of the musicians as they swayed together and played together.

Hands clasped away from their bodies and one hand resting on the hip of the other, they moved together along the line, partners before and after them, fingers pressed together over the cloth, her hand against the soft steel ribs of muscle above the hip bone, his hand lightly pressed against her side, feeling the hips push up and then away against his skin.

Alisha saw Diego move to the edge of the crowd, ostensibly watching all the dancers, but his eyes returned again and again to her, and her partner. And flickered over to Lord Stowgan and his pandering friends.

Dano wasn't back yet.

Diego watched the captain push away through the crowded spaces and slide out of the ballroom, out of the main entrance and into the night. He glanced over to the courtier Mource, who had manoeuvred to within touching distance of their target. And had looked full face into the captain's face as he passed.

Something was changing, something not expected but not entirely unprepared for. Mource was fully able to detect all sorts of movement and changes of plan and would notify them if such a

change were imminent. That was not the concern. Diego was worried that Alisha was not up to it after all.

Mawk had reported back with a sly whisper as he passed by and was now leaning casually against a column, surrounded by other friends and their foolish women, watchful but distant. Alisha had killed again. Diego didn't like to think of the number that may have been slaughtered this night and could only hope that news of the likely massacre at Lady Revenna's home would not reach here before they acted.

She was their best fighter along with Mawk, and it was her and those weapons of hers that were vital in taking down someone as proficient and well protected as Lord Stowgan.

Unfortunately along with her specialised skills and channelled aggression came the price of extreme mental instability. But he loved her all the same. If only she would come out of this evening alive. Somehow he feared for her safety on the knife-edge of her talent. Impetuous, quick to lose discipline and take out the heart of the nearest enemy rather than concentrate as instructed.

Thus far, however, that had not been the case.

Mource was heading his way.

Diego turned and headed towards the food, draped over the wooden tables, bowing under its weight.

He picked at some grapes, picked up a prawn and starting tugging at its legs.

"Additional problems, but nothing serious or immediate," said Mource through unmoving lips.

Dano pushed the girl onto the bed with a careless shove, laughing as he stumbled on her heel. She landed slightly winded and rolled over giggling, her legs running in mid-air, skirts falling apart and petticoat ruffles rustling against her stockings.

He undid his belt with a flourish and threw it dramatically onto the bed beside her.

“I will not need *this* sword,” he winked cheesily and ripped apart his tunic, stretching out his chest in a mock pose.

“Well, sir, what *will* you use, for I cannot see any alternative,” the girl spun over onto her front and rested her chin in her hands.

Dano dropped onto the bed next to her and laid a palm in the small of her back, pressing down slightly.

“On the menu tonight is a very special dish,” he said leaning over and planting a loud kiss on the top of her head. The wig smelt musty and dust got into his mouth.

Alisha grabbed hold of the Horseman and held him tightly, placing her head against his shoulders. There was no weapon under his robe, apart from the natural part of this beautiful example of a man of course, she smiled and allowed the music to spin her round and round.

The warmth from his body was not physical.

Her cheek felt flushed from the contact, the white robe pressed against her was smooth to the skin but she was warm with excitement and could feel no heat from him. Somehow the whiteness blinded her sense of touch, blending away all feeling of cold or warmth. If she placed a bare hand on his face, she wondered, would she feel warm skin or cold heartless flesh.

If he moved so well to the music and in combat, would he do so in bed?

“Change yourself and you can change the world,” said the Horseman, looking down at her head. “See the colours, Lady Revenna. Taste the world through another person’s eyes, through their happiness. Find a different way to need.”

Alisha raised her head, allowing space to separate them.

“Ugh,” she scowled. “You’re one of those.” She shook her head. “No thanks. I’ve wasted enough to know their life ain’t worth shit.

Listen man, this is serious shit this existence you know. You can't just go around converting people like you know what you're doing."

His eyes didn't change, his face still, the violin's keen sound echoing around the hall and into her blood.

"I like my soul just the way it is," she laughed. "And another thing. Keep your fuckin' mouth away from me or I'll cut your heart out you disgusting piece of shit."

She stepped away and folded her arms across her breasts as he came to a sudden halt in front of her, arms draped loosely at his sides, his chest rising and falling as if asleep. He's not even breathing heavily, the shit, she thought.

"There is a way out from your cage, Lady," the Horseman opened his hands peacefully as the dancers spun around them, heads turning watchfully, ears pricked to hear them over the din; in vain.

"You must find the door yourself."

Alisha frowned and pursed her lips petulantly.

"Look to the peace inside you and leave the anger to fall away as a flower dies in winter," the Horseman moved slightly closer. "When the spring comes, your beauty will stop the world from turning."

Alisha looked blankly at him. "Huh?"

The Horseman placed his hands on either side of her shoulders but she didn't notice, entranced by his still eyes.

"We have met recently," he said simply.

She could feel the room move around her like the shifting turn of a child's mobile or the light play of a puppet show. His words merged with the murmurings around her.

"Twice. We have met twice," the Horseman stepped past her and glided into the crowd, Alisha slowly turned to look for him but saw only the dancers going past and the wall of people at the edge of the dance floor.

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“No,” she said to herself. “I don’t think so. Not in this dress anyway.”

CHAPTER 16

The maids stood arrayed around her, clouding the room with their buzzing preparations, tying ribbons, knotting strings, pulling tight her waist and pushing straight her wig.

Serina stared directly ahead at the door. The closed oaken door and the iron plates across its centre and the iron bolts through its heart. Nightness wafted from the front of the room, stirring the air from the chilled draft of the cracks in the windows. Intensity shone from the maids, closely guarding their tasks and moving with the experience of millennia.

“So do you think he likes you,” said one of the maids, sliding a pin through Serina’s hair. “Really likes you?”

Serina pressed her lips together feeling the newness of the lipstick hot and stiff, sticking together and pulling apart with the gumminess of glue.

“Yes,” she replied without rancour. “I believe he does.”

The maids watched her or listened to her stillness with the same intensity they applied to their tasks, awareness prickled, interest piqued.

“Isn’t that fantastic,” the maid continued. “And so quickly too. You really must be charming.”

There was a picture of Lord Stowgan on the wall. Looking young and ravishing, peacocks at his feet and trees and grass stretching out behind him as if he had ever been a normal man. She wondered where the artist was, whether there was anything more than dust or if he walked the earth in another form.

Tonight the music was especially poignant, distant echoes of another magical evening under the stars, the natural sound of night birds in the distant woods. She could barely hear the lute but the violin rose high above the silence of the castle.

She wondered what the Horseman was doing, where he had gone, riding so swiftly into the night along the rain soaked roads or up the grassy hillside and into the forest. She hated the forest.

She had only been there once, so many years ago she couldn't count them. On horseback, with two friends and her loyal maids left behind, staring disconsolately after them as they gaily rode up the hill into the sunset that peered over the top of the valley and winked out into the night.

It had not been her idea, but she had been more disobedient and careless all that time before. Behaviour she came to regret, friends she came to regret and bodies her father had finally disposed of in his usual cleanly fashion.

The trees were too passive, too intelligent in their quietude. All sounds of laughter and speech were soaked up in their speechless impassivity. She could feel their anger at her passing, their disturbance of the ground on which leaves had fallen and the breaking of lower branches, the scuffing of roots pressed up and rolling across the ground.

"She will be even more charming with the right perfume and makeup. We must work, you know," another maid chastised the other, clicking her fingers impatiently for the perfume bottle.

"Yes," said the first maid smiling. "But he is soooo tasty, don't you think?"

Serina laughed. "You know I like him. You should have seen us dance."

"We were dancing too," said the maid calmly.

Serina reached out a hand while holding perfectly still.

"Yes. I know."

Alisha turned around and around and spun out of the dance, flying from her partner in a swirl of skirts, landing at the edge of the dance floor and stumbling to the table to grab a goblet of wine, letting the redness slop from one side to another and onto the white tablecloth.

Slightly dizzy and breathless she tipped the goblet back and let the redness fall down her throat, bitter and viscous, it immediately made her head swim and flushed her cheeks.

She dropped her hand, letting the goblet land on the table with a thump and leaned on that arm, her fingers curved over the based of the cup, looking down at the floor, allowing the room to fly around her.

"I search for nothing," Mawk had said in that room, between them, the answers lying hidden in the centre of the tugging conversation between them. She was always searching for something, she just wasn't sure what that thing was.

Somewhere in this room perhaps there was a man that could tell her, speak with his entrails or the blood spouting from his neck and his lips would whisper the words as he died and he would answer everything.

In death, a man has the purity of the earth. He becomes closest to that which he is to become, to join, to exist for the rest of time. The earth from which he must have sprung somehow, sometime. She wasn't sure of the details, just that inside that dullness was the truth.

If only she could find the right neck to wring it out.

Her eyes naturally scanned the room looking for those white robes and those knowing eyes. But she couldn't see him amongst the dancers or the crowded socialites.

Perhaps he only stayed to dance with her. She smiled slightly and leaned back, resting on the edge of the table, glad to take some weight off those annoying shoes. She really wanted to relieve the pressure from the backs of the heels and the arch of her foot hurt.

But what she really wanted to do was keep cutting until the floor ran red.

She blinked forcefully and turned away from the crowds, staring at the far wall thoughtfully. Death was close, she could feel it and almost yearned for that mistake, that slight close breath of the moving sword and the edge just that bit closer than expected.

Not the way to go. Deliberately or just outnumbered. She'd rather be beaten by a better swordsman, or woman. And that wasn't going to happen. Not tonight.

Her fingers were gripping the edge of the table which shook slightly from her strength.

Shit, she thought, if I have to wait one moment longer I'm going to scream until I pass out.

Serina walked lightly on her dancing shoes, bouncing her head slightly from side to side in time to the music as she walked, coming out onto the balcony above the tumultuous racket of chatter.

A quick look over the balcony and she couldn't bare to wait, music lofted high amongst the boring columns and called to her blood. She half walked and half skipped to the stairs and quickly skittered down, passing her gloved hand along the balustrade.

High long notes soared behind the hubbub in an indistinct and closely angular melody of mourning and longing. Behind it strummed the lute, each string picked out with the clarity of bone on bone.

She half-waltzed towards her father and his sycophantic, ancient and preposterous buffoons of friends. Animated in their speech they waved their hands ineffectually to gain her father's attention but his eyes stared into the far distance, his mind as ever floating high with the music.

"Where is he?" Lord Stowgan said without turning around.

"Gone," she said cheerily, spinning once and stopping with her arms wrapped around him, her head resting on his back.

His still, lean form was heavily firm beneath her weight, supporting her with timeless patience.

“As you wished,” she said dreamily.

“He asked to stay,” he said laughter in his voice.

Serina danced around him and placed a kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you.”

Lord Stowgan nodded, secretly delighted.

The Horseman watched Mource slip into the shadows along the wall of the ballroom, behind the columns.

A mass of journeys, twisting into a matted mass in the centre of the dance floor and bursting out in agony and frustration. And deep within them a cutting blackened line, straight as the arrow flies, thrusting deep into his heart and mind, angled for destruction.

If he reached out, then within the loose palm of his hand he could grasp at the blackened string and tug it towards himself, winding in the evil torment that shivered at the end, crouched and fearful, expectantly awaiting its demise. But within that one simple movement another coarsely glittering wonder, straying out from within the elements and crying for freedom.

Serina skipped up to him and curtsied, slyly looking up as she did so.

“May we dance?” she asked, her eyes glittering.

Dano whipped out a hand and caught the lamp as it sailed towards the floor, oil splattering the sides of the glass. His sweaty body rippled as he moved, pushing upwards while his attention momentarily switched to the lamp. The girl gasped.

Sweat was pooling between his legs, slickly troubling his skin and heating the moment, prickling his cheeks, making him sigh with

contentment. Everything was in that one action, that one simple movement that became a natural extension of his uncluttered mind. It didn't matter who it was.

He picked her up and keeping some form of contact, staggered over to the wall, pushing her roughly up, forcing her to press her palms against the wall for support.

Eye to eye, face facing the other, a world apart and in their own world. Gazes that fashion unwritten words, long looks of intended emotion, formulating passages of poetic yearning in a single blink.

Serina felt as though she were nestled within a warm cocoon of leaves and wrapped strongly in branches plucked from a heavy oak and placed with care by the Horseman in his love. His hands guided her in the dance, his body touching her and then moving apart as naturally as the water in a stream, parting around pebbles and returning together to babble down the hill, into the valley of a long meandering life.

Peace was rare. Contentment a feeling that echoed in far memory but felt unusually real and strangely precise in an uneven world of pressures and upsets. But here she gathered herself within the peace and allowed all the world to fall away from her shoulders and lifted her head above the clouds.

Floating from step to step, past courtiers and young soldiers, moving in their own tortured world. Crimes of hatred and passion etched into their steps with jerky uncontrolled anger that jostled at the edges of their smoothness.

She reached up as they moved and ran a finger along his forehead, tracing an eyebrow, finding the edge of his cheekbone and outlining the form of his chin. His face was soft but strong. There was time within that look and the angle of his head, yet youth stole over his features and crept quietly beneath the openness of his gaze. She kissed him fully on the lips.

The Horseman responded, allowing the kiss to develop and form a close, long togetherness of belonging. Their paths enmeshed, dashing towards the cliff edge.

The door crashed open and shuddered back a slight distance. Mource stood framed in the light as Dano turned grimacing.

“What?” he snapped without stopping.

Mource didn’t reply.

“Shit,” hissed Dano looking down at the girl whose head lolled on its neck, blood seeping from the corner of the mouth, eyes still and open.

“Alright,” he said. “Hang on.”

“Can we go somewhere quieter?” said the Horseman, kissing Serina fully on the lips.

She nodded with a wide smile and grabbed his hand, pulling him wildly towards the stairs.

Lord Stowgan moved further into the centre of the room. Carrying his courtiers with him as a group of carrion crows, circling and dissecting his every word.

His eyes flickered over each one, their height, their faces, their hands and their fear.

The music of the room whispered hidden fears crowding in on him and making the air thick with secrets. He could feel the sentences of everyone in the crowd, their mind-numbing self interest and boredom. Without meaning to they created the most banal of experiences, retreading every possible utterance and meaning that he had had the misfortune to understand.

Sometimes he could be surprised.

Alisha twisted under the hand of her partner and looked over at Mawk who pushed his woman away and then pulled her back in time to the music, a bored expression deep within his eyes.

One slight flicker of expression told her he was ready.

Mource, at the end of the room, heading towards Stowgan.

Dano. Entering from another angle, heading towards the staircase, fingers twitching at his elbow.

She danced closer to Stowgan as Mawk moved in too.

A few floors above them, Diego slid into an open window and disappeared into the room beyond.

Alisha stopped dancing. Time frozen. The eyes of her man, lost in the music and then suddenly aware, his body thumping against her rigid arm, a slight frown forming of discontentment as words of contrition rose slowly in the dulled mind of the simpleton.

She grabbed his head and kissed him, her tongue penetrating between those thin lips and thrusting down his throat making him gag. Her breasts were thrust hard against his chest as her hands slid down and grasped at the side of her dress, pulling in the cloth and jerking hard upwards, sliding around the bustle and tearing everything away with a wrench of sheer joy.

Mawk reached forward and held his girl's face gently, kissing her tenderly, waking the response of delighted innocent, until the blood began to seep out from his claws and the sharpness entered her senses, crushing in on her cheeks.

Lord Stowgan held up a hand, cutting the idiot off mid-sentence as strange cracked sounds struggled from the deep mournful tones of Mource just yards away, his hands weaving in front of him in symbols and patterns that Stowgan knew only too well.

Dano twisted, flicked his hands down and crouched against the banister, almost invisible from the ground, his circular blades poised as hawks standing at the edge of their cage door.

Mawk stepped away, allowing his girl to drop to the floor, limp.

Alisha wrapped her hands around the rough hewn hilts of each sword, the leather shape familiar despite the gloves, the weight perfection as she raised them smoothly out of the scabbards and stepped off her shoes in one movement, still holding the swords point downwards just simply shifting her shoulder down, bringing an arm across and cutting into the front of the man's neck. Metal slicing smoothly through sinew, opening the throat and letting the blood run free.

Lord Stowgan was half turned as the fire wrapped around him and washed outwards, the heated incendiary launching fiery rivulets up the backs and into the clothes of his courtiers around him. Carrying him into the air, smoke billowing out from the central core of white-hot heat, crashing into a pillar and falling, a staggered heap on the ground.

Alisha stepped forward, placing a bare foot on the mouth of the corpse and grinding it into the marble floor, her swords spinning at her sides without a thought.

"Shot," she muttered, her eyes narrowed trying to glean information from inside the smoky mess that Mource had made. She sensed the shadow of Mawk moving in to her right, gliding through the greyness of the cloudy darkness and heading for Mource's side.

She sighed and stepped off the corpse, relaxing into her stance. Every courtier, from man to woman within visual radius looked a bit pissed off. That's easily settled.

The sword travelled in a pure arc from front to back, a semicircle that emitted a pouring raging fire, burning outwards with the desire of pain and maiming anger. Licking at the edges of the circle, swamping the courtiers and turning growls into screams, glowers into wide-eyed terror.

Two moving either side of the staircase, guards, racing towards Mource, swords leaping from scabbards. Dano stepped down once for the angle and flicked a perfect motion. One. Two. Down.

Voices fading in the crowd as silent hurried escape became the first priority. The room emptying fast.

Alisha started to tear at her dress as the disguises melted away and they stepped out of ruffled trousers and extravagant tops until each one of them stood in the familiar black cloth. Alisha slammed the last of her accessories onto the ground impatiently. They all looked over where Lord Stowgan had fallen.

Diego stopped at the door, pressing palms to the wood, covered in a thin sheen of softness and splinters. Gently he pressed his ear to the door and waited. Laughter passed by and he inched the door open to look down the corridor. Serina and the Horseman ran out of sight. Interesting.

The Horseman turned the corner and stopped so suddenly that Serina nearly fell over.

“What?” she said, curiously.

The Horseman shook his head smiling.

“Nothing for us to worry about.”

Everyone held still.

Grabbing particles of smoky matter wafted across the floor of the ballroom, writhing up in sinuous patterns like greying entrails of dying flesh. Here and there a hand raised in supplication, or a head lolling in death rose from the smoke and then vanished in the slow moving rolling of time.

Dano stood on the staircase another set of blades in his hands, shoulders relaxed, a slight increase in his breathing betraying the slight tension in his bearing. His eyes narrowed as the smoke crept in beneath his eye lashes and threatened his vision.

He shuffled his feet slightly to spread his stance, his feet finding easy purchase on the mottled wooden stairs, toes curling at the edge

of the step, knees creaking slightly as he settled. He took a deep breath.

And let it out, controlled, releasing.

Beneath him, waist high in billowing greyness, Mource and Mawk stood facing away, watchful. Alisha moved a few steps to stand alongside them. She brought blade to blade together, sending a sparking grating sound echoing towards the ceiling.

Rising slowly, with patience, care and bedraggled amusement, Lord Stowgan stood up, brushed down his clothing slightly and moved his head from side to side like a snake.

Where was the other one?

He didn't need to look around him to know that he was alone, friends and associates had fled the scene and his guards were presumably amongst the burnt out corpses straggling along the ground in front of him. The rest were upstairs, pointlessly waiting in the tower.

Serina.

As far as he knew, this ridiculous crowd had nothing to do with that insolent idiot she had run off with. Hopefully he would be a match for, the leader, Diego, yes that was his name.

Nice little feint. Set up and later dispatch a traitor to leak the fake plans. A bit too elaborate for what was a simple full on frontal assault. He sighed inwardly. Only this upstart Mource would think this came even close to a good idea. As if this had ever been more than a slight amusement to Lord Stowgan. And now the laughter was over and the joke was wearing a little thin.

It was time that some people got to know how things really worked around here. That the occasional joker was a requirement in every court worth holding. That every slight deviation from the ever maddening norm was worth the odd thunderbolt in the ballroom. And then there came a time to finish it.

“Now the real party begins,” said Alisha, grinning from ear to ear.

Serina and the Horseman ran down the corridor, rushing towards the door to her bedroom, lit in the darkened corridor by one candle, flickering in a ghostly wind as they arrived.

Serina leapt into his arms and he turned around and around laughing.

“Is this your door ma’am,” he said in mock politeness.

Serina nodded happily.

The room was separated into filaments of white and black by the moonlight shafting through the half-open slatted windows. White streaks that rent jagged shapes across the dark floor boards and lit upon the maids curled against the walls and draped over the window sill.

The shutters shuddered in the wind and the black curtains were tugged outside, lashing as if chained on a leash.

The Horseman took two steps over the threshold and Serina jumped onto the floor and skipped to the curtain dividing the room. She paused and looked back at him.

“My love.”

The Horseman stood transfixed by the direction of the moment. Paused in the onset of time before allowing the clock to continue its infinite momentum. Every stroke another second towards the inevitable conclusion. If only he could hold it still. Clapsed to his breast, the breath of life gentle in his chest and her heart warmly embraced.

Serina stepped through the curtain.

The Horseman took a long look around the room, at the maids sleeping peacefully, their strands of hair over their mouths unmoving. No breath.

The curtain stirred slightly and the shutters rattled as fresh night air blew in and gathered around his cheeks lightly dusting away his fears. He stepped towards the curtain.

CHAPTER 17

Lord Stowgan moved into the centre of the room, glancing shortly at the blackened shape of the column into which he had crashed. Each step was a crunching testament to the death that lay around him, feet sliding on blood and squashing deadened flesh.

His cloak and robes merged in darkness. Seeping downwards to grasp with flowing entrails at the underlying matter beneath the smoke, merging and flowing outwards a darkened pattern that belonged in the heavens.

Dark as if stars were within his robes, twinkling from their infinite distance, watching and waiting from afar as events unfurled beneath them. His clothes become as night. Lord Stowgan smiled at the poetry of the motion and stopped walking, looking at the group with calm composure.

A few moments of enjoyment. The pure and visceral pleasure of action that makes the mind sharp and the skin burn with the fire of pleasure. And then over as soon as it began. How long had it been since he had really stepped into the night to hunt. To kill?

For centuries he had felt that it had become beneath him as if he could gain the pleasure second-hand from the reported exploits of his servants. But their stories were badly told and their intentions poorly executed. Never had he felt more alone than in this moment. And he wasn't sure that was a bad thing.

Diego burst through a door on the balcony, dropping the corpse of another soldier onto the floor.

“Your servants are all elsewhere, chasing shadows. You are on your own, Lord Stowgan.”

“Really,” said Stowgan without listening.

Diego ran down the steps and stopped beside Dano, blood red cheeks and a heaving chest from the exertion.

The old man stirred in his chair, blearily opening his eyes and looking across the dark and empty Inn. Catching sight of the violin lit in sharp relief by unrelenting whiteness of the moonlight, he muttered and stumbled over to it.

Grabbing the violin in two shaking hands he raised it above his head and brought it down with a crack on the table. The table where Serina and the Horseman had eaten. Had drank his wine and listened to that music. Music torn from his heart and floated out into the sky as if all his being had been turned inside out and shown to the entire world.

The Horseman looked down at Serina who lay, her head resting on his lap as he sat on her bed, the covers thrown back in anticipation.

Her black hair spread, washed over his whiteness, straggling down onto the white sheets, the spraying angst of a woman about to shed herself to the watchful eyes of a man.

Something covered the moon for an instant and darkness filled the space. Then brightness returned. A brief shadow that cast a lasting impression on the moment.

Diego was moving past.

Mource could feel the swords of Alisha moving too, raising horizontally. Without needing to turn he knew that Mawk would be sidling off into the shadows and smoke and that Dano would be aiming, and throwing.

With gathering force he reached up into the air.

Around his fingers he searched for the thickness, the crackling solidity that he needed to gather within himself. His skin flickered with sensation gathering and increasing in strength rapidly. Like scrabbling in the dark looking for something but in the moment it wasn't something unfamiliar it was a sensation of shape and movement that he recognised from years of experience and training. Slight, growing. Forming.

As if crashing at a rounded thickness above him and bringing it down into his hands before him, between his palms the heat spreading between them, tugged together from an unseen energy that spread outwards and almost threw him backwards, forcing him to strengthen his neck and tilt his head downwards in shuddering force and release.

Alisha cried out. Her arms shook as the fear welled up inside her and shuddered out from her emotional centre, anger breaking out into hate and forming rivulets of red hot terror that swirled and tore at her insides before expanding outwards and twisting down the sharp glittering blades, leaping outwards in eagerness to consume.

Fire. Extensive in its white-hot sharpness shot out from the twin blades extended and pointing at Lord Stowgan. Her arms shook with the force and the sheer weight that suddenly pushed and pulled at the blades forcing them up and down as if caught in a hurricane. But she held still.

Mawk bent closer to the floor, his feet picking carefully and quickly. Balance to the side, lean forward, and step over the shifting arm of the corpse on the floor, ignoring the eyes that turned to look up at him as the head shifted and he moved on into the smoke.

Diego whirled the iron bars in front of him out of habit, his legs pumping quickly, feet pushing hard at each step, propelling him with great speed and force towards his target at an angle to the flame as Mource's strength hit and Lord Stowgan shivered as if a building built of the strongest stone had been shattered by the plunging stroke of a battering ram. Lord Stowgan's feet ploughing backwards, shards

of marble raised by the movement and his head moving downwards as he withstood the onslaught and was engulfed to disappear in the lapping flames of Alisha's swords.

Alisha screamed in excitement, letting it all flow out; every last drop of her strength, will and intent formed into a lashing of energy that sent her heart beating into triple time and a pulse raise a pounding on her forehead, she shook her head from side to side, her arms aching from holding the swords horizontal, feeling the heat wash back at her, her target invisible against the burning brightness.

Dano had released. Arms perfectly angled, his stance perfectly balanced. Like in the woods. Only through smoke and fire. Timed as clockwork. From practice at Alisha's side. One, two three, release and the fire is gone. Only the blades in the air.

Diego saw the blades hurtle over his shoulder as the brightness winked out and smoke rose in a pillar of blackness swirling leaping up into the air thick impenetrable above the untouched form of their target, rapidly closing, only yards away from his iron.

Lord Stowgan reached up.

His eyes smarting from the smoke, his skin burning from the fire, his cloak ashes on the floor but the darkness that fell from his soul wrapped around him and cleansed him of the ashes and cleared him of the heat, dropping the fallout around him, gentle leaves of hatred felled by a grated hate.

And there in the air, suspended in time, light shining off the spinning edge, shards of light that spread as if from a glorious and evolving flower as he reached up and plucked the petals from the sky and grabbed Dano's blades.

Diego took his final step, foot planting firmly on clear marble just one and half feet from the target, the chain extending and the iron bar flailing outwards and spinning inwards. Chain at full extension, bar straight. Flight angled and perfect.

Lord Stowgan was no-longer in front of him.

It was a loving warmth.

Swelling from his throat as a romantic notion welled in Diego's tears and stifled his breath. A pounding on his head and shattered lines spread around his sight. Spots of red and misty darkness shifting across his vision and the pain in his throat. He couldn't swallow or breathe. His lungs burning, feet scuffling, knees bending.

Somehow he was on the floor.

One hand was on the cold marble floor that burnt at him from the heat of the cleared fire and slipped slightly with the sweat on his palm. The other hand was holding a leg. He was on his knees and off-balance but had no strength to stand and as he looked down at the black tiles beneath him it looked as though someone had died here.

Blood as thick as gravy was pooled on the tile. He spat on the floor and tried to swallow. His spit was red.

His head lolled and suddenly his eyes were inches from the blood. He could smell its wetness, the soft humanness of the liquid that should pump through his veins and bring life to his failing body.

His right arm collapsed.

His cheek in the blood. His left hand scrabbling across the ground. Weak.

He touched his throat. Something hard and metallic, sharp. A blade. Dano's blade in his throat. How deep?

This was it.

All he could see was the dark burnt clothing on somebody lying next to him. He felt so tired. The hours of running. Every sit-up and press-up, building up his muscles. The hours of practice. Swinging the bars and hitting the targets. Sparring with Dano. Dano. Would they get here on time. How much blood was there?

He opened his eyes. But he couldn't see. His eyes flickered with the effort. Maybe someone else will tell him how much blood was there. How much he had left.

Wind howled around the room in a frenzy. Curtain and gauze around the bed flapping in wild abandon, sheets ruffling and tearing at them as the Horseman slowly pulled at the strings that held Serina's bodice together.

In the darkness their eyes opened.

Narrow slits that glittered in the moonlight, their faces unmoving. Staring at nothing.

Maids gathered on the floor, piled in corners of the room. On the window-sill one stirred, head rotating and arms extending to drop onto the floor in a crouch, gradually standing tall, head turning to the curtain, unseeing eyes blankly looking beyond.

Mource spun in the air, his arms outstretched as an unseen hand picked him up and tossed him against a column, shattering half the stone and he fell to the ground in a pile of rubble and dust.

He raised his head angrily, frowning.

Alisha coiled into her fighting stance and paced quickly forward, one sword held outwards, the other dragging over the bodies of those she had already killed.

Diego was a lifeless corpse. Time for another one.

That bastard had moved fast. There was no doubt. But Diego had been incautious, had underestimated his opponent. She always knew he'd fuck up.

Mawk stilled his breath and sank down into a crab-like stance.

His head just above the smoke, eyes heavily watchful. Their target was moving slightly to the right, preparing for Alisha's advance and unaware of Mawk. But once he struck then that advantage would be over so it was all about timing. And Dano's next blade attack.

He would have to be in and out at just the right time, knowing Dano's intentions at this point the window of opportunity was rather small. But Alisha's first few attacks would be to size up the target's

defence and therefore rather cagey. Still, some blood could be drawn. Metaphorically of course.

Alisha stepped into the blow, her first sword plunging forwards, her second swinging at head height over the top. Out of the gloom, Mawk rose, taking quick steps towards them.

Lord Stowgan parried Alisha's first blade with the sharp edge of his hand and swayed slightly to allow the second to pass by him as Mawk slammed a fist forward and Dano's blades swirled into their proximity.

She was skilled, a true musician of the swords. Lord Stowgan wanted to grasp her in his hands and crush her skull with the love borne of terror. Her blood must boil and her skin be flailed from her as she writhes in infinite agony. But she was good.

The first attack had been easy but the second was a combination swung with ease, speaking of a deeper understanding of swordplay. He wasn't really interested. It was the sheer concentration of combat and the determination to commit acts of pain that interested him. She would make a good sacrifice to pain.

He sidestepped Mawk and grabbed Dano's blades again. Sometimes he didn't understand people. There were moments in life when to him the completely overwhelming obviousness of certain facts or matters of existence should be perfectly understood but due to an inordinate weakness of personality or an overriding patheticness of emotion, these humans were perfectly capable of missing the obvious. Like how many times does he need to catch these blades before the person throwing them realises that he can just catch them and thus such activity is completely and utterly pointless.

It must be some form of confidence. Inner belief that hides the fact that failure is something to confront and resolve rather than ignore and continue in the strange misunderstanding that sheer repetition can solve the unsolvable. It doesn't matter how you throw these things, I'm just going to catch them.

He grabbed Alisha's wrist with his free hand.

Her skin was pleasant to the touch. Warm. Unlike his wizened coldness. He twisted sharply. Good girl. She spun leg over body, avoiding the bone snap.

The explosion was a bit of a shock.

Dano had muttered a few unintelligible words and the blade that Lord Stowgan was holding burst into flames, burning as white hot and intense as that from Alisha's swords. They have a dangerous obsession with fire, thought the Lord with a smile as his hand was obliterated in the fire with a dangerously enjoyable thread of pain.

He spun out of the rather busy area and slapped a hand casually across Alisha's face. Watching the surprise as the pain spread across her cheek and her head snapped to the side, she rolled out of the way, gathering herself and standing a few yards away.

She was a firecracker. Emotion at the boil constantly and every thrust and strike was with the rhythm and pounding of sex. What pain had she suffered to become like this. Perhaps she enjoyed it. Humans. Unexpected and delightful.

The rebirth was almost as painful as the loss.

Pushing with all his willpower to form and coalesce the forming of his new hand. He stretched the fingers and felt them crack with freshness.

The humans looked suitable chastised.

She screamed, head thrown back, black hair spread like a waterfall of tangled blackness across the pillows, her hands scrabbling at the Horseman's back, nails scraping against white skin.

The sheets writhed around them, tearing in between limbs and straggling over the bed, tying up in a tangled mass with the gauze, ripped and torn from the posts of the bed.

Sweat and lust.

The curtain twitched and the maids moved in single file, hands moving still but curved, passing buttons and strings as their clothes fell.

Eyes intent.

Serina could feel the world falling, spinning and turning, pushing down on her shoulders and thrusting her hard against the board at the back of her head.

She grabbed at the sheets to feel the cloth. Grabbing at a bunch to gather into her hands and clutch at something real, with form and material. As the wetness inside her spread to her fingertips and exhausted her presence, penetrating her mind.

The maids slipped alongside her, naked flesh cold and dry against their sweat and heat. Leg and arms wrapped against arching bodies and lips pressed against cold and hot skin.

They joined her and joined with her.

Their minds cold and hotly heated in her head. Shredding through her thoughts with the rhythmic repetition of naked thought. Feelings coursed through her and spread from them, wrapping together in an emotional morass of dying sadness.

He was strong and intense. Love smiling from those heated eyes. Kisses smothering her face, body heavy upon her.

They joined in passion.

Fingers seeking areas and places that cried out to her. Sheets mixing with fingers, sweat mixing with blood. Teeth extending.

The snap of blood.

It washed across her, filling her completely.

Her entire world filled with the slopping liquid of remorse. Spreading through her veins, pattering at her mind with subtle words of torment and temptation. To drink to feed to live.

The agony extending from her mouth, sharp canines that pierced the slightest softness.

In this together they would seek their happiness. To merge as thought. As one. To find the one secret inside the pocket of safety, contentment and long living happiness.

The red mixed with the white, staining them, laying out their terror in gaudy colour. As they all moved and moved as one, teeth straining and jaws aching apart and devouring upon each other, jamming down with the strength of hungry living.

If he could move inside her become part of her, mix the essence that was his intent with the will and purpose of herself and her father. Lord Stowgan. His intent bore down on her a wet stiffness that engorged her and filled her world with the smell of his flesh.

She screamed and drove her head down onto his neck as he stood, legs smashing apart, feet curling up beneath her slender form and sending her spinning and crashing against the wall with a shattering crunch of flesh and bone against stone.

His blade buried deep in her throat.

The thin chain of glittering metallic death, stretched taut between life and the end of all things.

He moved his wrist slightly and the blade fell slightly before he flicked and the chain caught and the blade returned to his hand and Serina fell.

The maids rushed forward as one. Faces passive. Eyes unblinking. Catching her body. Looking back at the Horseman, for the first time, fearful.

She lies there.

In those creatures arms.

The path that ends at the wall. A dead-end.

From life to nothing, from living to dying. The natural cycle of the order of things, that he is and the thing that he will become.

For life that is within him will not survive for the time that is him. For he will outlast it. And bring only death to those that oppose it.

And this path has ended. As he saw it would end. There are many paths. She chose this one. And he ended it.

A tear fell down his cheek.

Glistening in the light that came into the room, lifting the room from the darkness of blood and shining fully on the water that fell from life itself. As the world cried.

Mource moved just a step.

The sharp spike of rock, torn from the column and lying across the rubble speared him through the body, penetrating him in the stomach and lancing through his writhing body as life drained away and blood fell away down the stiff stone.

Mawk stepped forward and Lord Stowgan stepped forward in a dance, arms raised and falling in an embrace, mouth falling to Mawk's neck and teeth falling and pushing deep into the soft skin, breaking the skin, drawing the blood, sinking deeper to take the life.

He let the body fall.

It is in the dance of the swords that Alisha felt the nature's longing fill her and lift her flying into the air, her head above the skies and the sun warm on her back.

The glittering dance of metal that sang with the striking sound of clashing metal on bone or metal against metal as she spun, and twisted and her blades whispered in the air and sang in the smoky chamber between the columns and above the corpses.

Legs straining with the effort, arms shaking with the strength, eyes careful, watchful patterns of light and striking, parrying, teasing and snapping forwards.

Stepping backwards as Dano switched knife from position to position circling watchfully. With one look they stepped together and Lord Stowgan shuddered backwards and upwards and forwards

above them, landing in a moment his hands grasping their heads and twisting and death.

The Horseman stepped through the curtain and the door welled outwards briefly, straining wood splitting and shattering outwards in a billowing bursting bellow of splinters.

He moved forwards, eyes empty. Heart lost. Face turning to metal, spikes moving outwards, eyes turning opaque white, hands curling, crushing hard down on the blade in his hand.

The journey was long.

To walk from the room. To leave her there. And walk down the corridors, stairs and through rooms in this place.

His bare feet on the caressing carpet, white robes swishing lightly around him. Walls passing. Paintings judging him, expressions of contempt and hatred.

The blade cut into his hand.

Every step a memory.

She had been the lightness in this place, had lifted him away from the misery and sounds of darkness that drifted around him every step. All that was left was the emptiness that surrounded him and hung like a pall of decay, exuding from the decaying flesh that walked here.

There had been a chance, a possibility however small that he had kept close to himself, caught that magic of a butterfly in his palm.

Released into the air and burnt by the sudden flame.

His steps hardened and his walk intensified. Firmness in his step. Concentration in his walk and determination in his stride.

Shoulders thrust back, head raising, eyes staring white, cold hot white.

The ballroom was now host to the silent crowd of courtiers standing looking around them in awe at the crushed stone, blackened ashes and piles of corpses, arms raised in shock.

Lord Stowgan stood, watching the balcony, waiting. Serina was gone.

Something was coming towards them, pacing with intent. A guest to join them and the party to end. The frivolity, the years of pleasure at the pain of others.

Soon there would be only him. And me.

A pale shadow, shifting shape of whiteness blurred vision and curved like a hawk over the balcony, staring eyes.

The Horseman watched him.

The maids clutched at her. Held her close to their bodies for some kind of warmth that only they understood.

Then their eyes widened and they leapt backwards mouths opening in a silent scream.

Serina's body was consumed. A white blaze that left nothing.

The Horseman glided down the stairs.

Lord Stowgan shuddered. Serina.

The Horseman allowed the chain to fall and the blade to skitter noisily across each step.

The scratching dragging sound etching deep into the silent courtiers' tableau.

He reached the bottom of the stairs and continued to walk across the bodies and across the floor. Stopping to crouch and rest a hand on Alisha.

"You cannot love," he said.

They circled him.

Crowded in on him.

Their paths gathered into one, ending here.

They each saw him. Watched him. Saw his movements and his face. Saw the peace and saw nothing. Felt nothing.

Within them only the emptiness of hate. An emotion that raged within the void, cursing at the walls and the depth of the well. Lapping at the edges and filling all that it could find. Clearing away anything else that could have been.

In one move they would come, a crowded surge of death to die.

Lord Stowgan behind them.

They came.

Running forward, mouths arching, teeth spreading, eyes narrowing. Arms reaching. Fingers trying to tear and grab and inflict hatred. To press on something, their emotion, and search for the release from the relentless life.

He sank, the blade whirled. They died.

Consumed by the brightness.

He stood.

"I am the end," he said.

